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EXILE FROM XANADU



LAN WRIGHT

First Book Publication

STAR WRECKED—STAR CROSSED

Sc

Regan's last waking memory was of the clamor of alarm bells—a sound that lasted a bare second before it dissolved and was lost in a holocaust of roaring noise and flame. He never did recall the reflex action that flung his screaming body towards the survival capsule.

When he awoke at last, there was nothing but blackness, yet the pain was gone. His body was compressed and comforted in an all-embracing nest of yielding softness that was like a vast mother-womb, so close did it enfold him. He moved slightly, and at once a voice said, "Can you hear me?" In a panic, Regan tried to open his eyes, but could not. With dread, he lay very still, waiting. For the voice was not human. . . .

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Martin Regan

An accident had made him into a freak with prosthetic limbs and alien eyes.

Manuel Cabrera

He possessed the secret for the survival of mankind, but he did not live to share its wonder.

Cabrera

Old in wisdom and in the ways of political intrigue, his concern was for the fate of humankind. He knew everything—except the answers.

Giselle Cabrera

Beautiful and stately, she was burdened with knowledge that she could entrust to no one.

Arfon Plender

He held the key to the mystery, but how could he help them—dead?

Armand and Carlo Cabrera

They used Regan's life as a pawn against their enemies—they said it was in the interest of mankind.

EXILE FROM KANADU

LAN WRIGHT

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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New York, N.Y. 10036

EXILE FROM XANADU

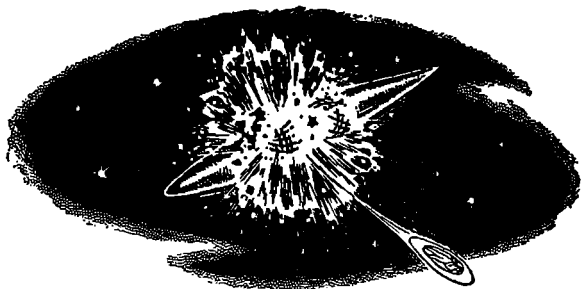
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THE GOLDEN PEOPLE

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I

“**Y**OU MUST fasten your seat harness for takeoff, sir.”

The attendant's voice—a young woman's—forced its way into Regan's consciousness, dragging him back from his reverie; the tone of it implied that she wasn't used to repeating herself. Regan glanced up at her tight-lipped face with its cold expression of irritation that said, “Stupid colonial,” as plainly as if she had spoken out loud.

“Oh, yes. Of course.” His hands fumbled hastily at the safety harness which would hold him securely in its grip for the short duration of the journey to the orbit station. In his hurry to comply he made a mess of it, and the young woman had to lean down to correct his mistakes.

Regan was aware of the other passengers watching his discomfiture, and he wanted to say, “This is the hundreth ferry jump I've made—not the first.” But, of course, it would do no good.

On the other side of the catwalk his gaze met the twinkling brown eyes of his nearest neighbor, a plump man with a bald head and a fleshy mouth that spoke of its owner's soft living and heavy indulgence. The man smiled at him and shrugged as well as his own harness would allow.

“It happens.”

Regan grinned tightly in reply. Yes, it happened, but did the wretched girl have to make such a picnic of it? Stupid colonial! He looked up as she snapped the final clip into place with an unnecessary jerk, and opened his mouth to say, "Thank you," but she had turned away along the catwalk with a founce of her lithe body that told clearly what she thought of ignorant passengers who didn't know enough to come in out of the rain—or to fasten their safety harness.

Regan relaxed and listened to the familiar build up of sounds as the ferry prepared to lift from the pad. The upward movement came at last, gently, like the slow pressure of a giant hand, but never more than that. The slow increase of acceleration wasn't enough to cause more than the slightest discomfort.

The berthing at the orbit station was just as uneventful, and as he went through the lock with the other passengers, Regan smiled slightly as he realized for the hundredth time that he had come ten thousand miles out from a planet and he hadn't yet seen a star. The formalities of the quarantine control and the travel bureau passed quickly and efficiently. His travel documents gathered a few more stamps before he was directed across the vast central hall of the orbit station to the embarkation port for the Ferroval cruiser.

He felt almost thankful as he crossed the short distance between the station and the ship, for the Ferroval cruiser was a colonial vessel, built and crewed by Ferroval-born Terrans. The stiffness of Earth fell away like an unwanted cloak; the cold, barely concealed impatience that was the built-in trademark of the upper class Terran was behind him now, and he could relax in the slower, more friendly tempo of the ship's life. Even Terrans outward bound from Earth would relax a little as he knew from past experience, and by the time the nine-day trip was over they would have lost their starchy veneer and descended to the more friendly level of colonial life.

Inside the entry port an officer compared Regan's credentials with a printed list, handed them back with a smile, and said, "Cabin Seventy-three, sir. You are sharing it with a Señor Cabrera."

"Thank you." Regan tucked the dockets into his pocket and followed the blue-clad steward along the gray tube that was the ship's main corridor. The man halted before a bleak

sliding door that had the number seventy-three marked in white upon its gray surface.

"Your luggage will be along shortly, sir."

Regan nodded, "Thank you." After the awkwardness aboard the ferry it was good to be back aboard ship and in an atmosphere with which he was familiar. He slid the door back and stepped into the small oblong room that would be his home for the next nine days, and as he entered a figure straightened up from the bottom berth. Regan gazed in mild surprise at the plump face of the man who had smiled at him in the ferry.

"Ah, Señor Regan!" The fat lips parted in a moist smile. "I regret I have beaten you to it."

Regan blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Cabrera—Manuel Cabrera."

"Oh, yes. Of course. The—er—officer told me." Regan smiled. "You were saying?"

"The superstitions of space, Señor Regan." Cabrera spread his hand towards the bottom berth. "I have beaten you to it—I have the bottom berth."

"Oh, I see." Daylight dawned and Regan laughed out loud. "I'm not that superstitious. You are welcome to the bottom berth, Señor."

"Then we are both happy," smiled Cabrera, and turned again to his arrangement of the berth.

Regan wondered idly how such an idea had been born that it was lucky to have the bottom berth. Probably because it was easier to get to the escape capsule if there was trouble on the ship. It didn't happen often but there had been cases where a starship had been so badly damaged that the survival capsules had been shot off into space, and, when you dived for your berth, you dived into a ready-made rescue unit that closed around you like a cocoon, and was ejected violently as the danger level reached a certain critical point.

If trouble came fast, the survival capsule would see you through, but if you were too slow in reaching it—you were dead. In theory it was easier to hit the bottom berth than the top, and that—as far as Regan could see—was the foundation for the fat man's superstition, that and the fact that Cabrera was probably too lazy to hoist his bulk the few feet upward necessary to reach the top.

The door buzzer sounded, light and muted, and Regan

slid it open to find the steward holding his one light traveling case. He offered the man a tip and closed the door again.

Cabrera straightened from his berth and waved a plump hand towards the top one. "I will leave the way clear, Señor," he said. "No doubt you have things to unpack."

"A few," agreed Regan. "If you've finished?"

"Of course." Cabrera seated himself in one of the two easy chairs, and produced a large, black cigar. He lit it and puffed the pungent aroma of a sweet smelling, off-world tobacco across the cabin. The size and scent told Regan that it was probably very expensive.

Cabrera smiled as he saw Regan glance at it. "My last before we reach Ferroval, Señor Regan. Will you join me?"

"Thank you. No."

"It is your loss. These are from Kleebor—"

"The Paradise Leaf?" Regan's eyebrows lifted in surprise, and his former valuation of expensive was multiplied a hundred times to priceless.

"The good things of life are expensive," said Cabrera, "because they make life worth living. Money, as an old philosopher once said, has no use save to ease the road along which we must travel."

On every trip, thought Regan, there had to be at least one amateur philosopher. Aloud, he said, "Another philosopher declared that the manner of our living was more important than the possessions we collected."

"If he said that, he lived in poverty and died a martyr. He was not a philosopher—he was a fool." Cabrera blew another cloud of pungent smoke across the cabin. "Tell me, Señor Regan, did you enjoy your stay on Earth?"

"No," said Regan shortly.

"My planet is not a pleasant one for colonials. It has many faults which are inexcusable and can only be cured by making it compulsory for every one of its people to spend a year traveling around the colony worlds. Only then will there be any true understanding. We are too insular, Señor Regan, too easy to see the faults of others while we ignore our own. That attendant on the ferry is a case in point. Her attitude was inexcusable and yet it is one that could easily be altered by transferring her to the starships for a year or two. Tell me, Señor, are you traveling on business?"

The question came so suddenly and unexpectedly that Regan replied before he realized it.

"Yes, I am an agent for the Universal Export Agency." He then cursed himself for falling into Cabrera's well laid trap. The man's attitude annoyed him beyond measure, and, under other circumstances, he would have done anything to avoid passing on details of his personal business.

He looked quickly at the fat man, but Cabrera was busy examining the glowing end of his cigar, apparently unconcerned by Regan's reaction.

"A company with a fine record *Señor*. You should be proud to work for them. I have had many dealings with them in the past."

From the gray bulkhead the intercom unit announced, "Flight departure imminent. Ship's standing regulations are now in force. Passengers are requested to comply with the conditions of travel with which they were provided when making their reservations."

Cabrera sighed and took a long pull at the cigar. "Such a pity. Perhaps if the captain knew that I had another half hour of enjoyment he would postpone the departure." Idly, he pushed the still smoking butt into the waste disposer. "You are staying on Ferroval, *Señor*?"

Regan shook his head, his attention still on the chore of unpacking his few light belongings. "No, I shall take ship for Janosir as soon as it can be arranged."

"Of course. Your company headquarters."

"And you?"

Cabrera shrugged. "My movements are fluid. Ferroval is a good world. Perhaps I shall stay there for a short while. It will be pleasant to rest after the speed of my own planet. You will admit, *Señor Regan*, that a long stay on Earth is hardly a rest cure."

In other words, thought Regan, mind your own damned business. Aloud, he said, "No. I was glad to leave." He turned away from his berth, satisfied that his small array of clothing and personal effects were safely stowed. All he wanted now was to get away from Cabrera for a short while. The man was too demanding to be pleasant, and Regan disliked the way in which he managed to worm information from him, without giving away the slightest hint of his own business.

"I think I will have some food," he told Cabrera. And then, reluctantly, "Will you join me?"

Cabrera shook his head. "Thank you, no, *Señor*. I dined before the ferry left Earth."

Regan nodded. "All right. I'll see you later."

He left the cabin with an over-riding thought in his mind. Cabrera was scared to leave the proximity of his berth for any length of time. His tale of the "superstitions of space" had nothing to do with it; the plain fact was that the plump little Terran would be anchored as close to the cabin as circumstances would allow for the whole of the trip to Ferroval—and Regan had a small bet with himself that Cabrera would have his meals served there too.

Apart from his desire to stay in the cabin Manuel Cabrera was a pleasant companion. True, he was secretive about himself, but he had a vast fund of knowledge and reminiscences. He could talk well and with a Latin eloquence that was both descriptive and entertaining. His carefully groomed hands were as eloquent as his tongue, and Regan found himself liking the man despite his early reservations.

His one regular excursion from the cabin, his self-appointed prison, was during the early morning, ship time.

"The best thing in the world, *Señor* Regan, is to begin the day refreshed, and that is something that no amount of sleep, on its own, can accomplish."

And promptly at eight hundred ship time he left the cabin to spend twenty minutes under the hard, cold jets of the needle shower, while Regan rose, dressed, and embarked upon a more sedate and less vicious form of preparation for the day ahead.

The morning of the fourth day was no exception.

II

REGAN'S LAST waking memory was of the clamor of alarm bells—a sound that lasted a bare second before it dissolved and was lost in a holocaust of roaring noise and flame. He never did recall the reflex action that flung his screaming body towards the bunk that was also the survival capsule. He was unconscious from shock and pain as it closed around his seared and tortured body, and then threw itself clear of the exploding mass of metal that had been, bare seconds

before, a sleek and shining product of human ingenuity. He was saved the body-wrenching shock of transversion from hyper to normal space; and, apart from brief, pain-wracked moments of semi-conscious delirium, he knew nothing of the long hours that his capsule nurtured the dim spark of life in him while it sent forth its micro-second call for aid.

The blackness was still with Regan when he awoke at last, but the pain was not. His body was compressed and comforted in an all-embracing nest of yielding softness that was like a vast mother-womb, so close did it enfold him. There was peace and clean air around him, and a nondescript something that spelt *Hospital* in large letters. This fact alone was enough to calm him in his waking panic. He was alive. He was in good hands. He was being cared for—that was sufficient.

He moved slightly, tentatively, and at once a voice said, "Can you hear me?"

His mouth was dry and his jaw seemed to be confined by whatever enveloped the rest of his body. He managed a weak, muffled, "Yes," and the sound echoed in his ears like a whisper from the grave.

"Good." The voice was not human, the fact registered at once. There were sibilants and gutturals in the few words he had heard that placed it as being of non-human origin. "You have been in a bad accident, but you are safe and being well cared for. Your body has been badly damaged but that can be repaired. Indeed, those repairs are already in hand. You are on the planet Lichar, and we will return you to your own people as soon as that is possible. Do you understand?"

Regan managed a husky, "Yes."

"Good. You will sleep now, and when you awaken next you will feel stronger."

Whatever it was hit him like a falling tree. He was back in a world of mental blackness before he realized it, and his awakening was so rapid that he might have been asleep for barely a second.

This time it was much better. The haziness was gone and some of the feeling was back in his body—enough so that he still felt pain and discomfort. A dull ache spread from his shoulders and his hips right through his arms and legs, and there was a lightness about his limbs that was quite

unnerving. He tried to move them—there was no response—except that a voice said, “Good, you are awake. Do you feel stronger?”

“Yes.” Even to himself Regan’s voice sounded better.

“Strong enough to talk a little?”

“Yes—yes, I think so.”

“That is well. First, we have notified your survival to the Terran authorities on Kleinewelt—that is the nearest Terran world. They will send a vessel for you as soon as we think you are well enough to be moved. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“We have given details of your identity so that your family can be informed. In the meantime, until you are well enough to be moved, it has been agreed that we should look after you as best we can. Later, your own medical specialists can complete the task of getting you properly well.”

“I see.”

“And now, I will leave you to rest naturally. There will only be sleep drugs for you if you find too much pain. If you want anything I shall be here, watching you.”

“One thing,” Regan’s lips were dry and his head was cold.

“One thing—my eyes.”

“You will be able to see again. Do not worry.”

The Licharians were methane breathers of a heavy gravity world, and their only contact with the Terran-dominated portion of the galaxy was for trading purposes. Apart, the two races had nothing in common, no single point of contact—there was nothing for them to fight about, no dispute and no agreement beyond that point where trade was profitable to them both. Planets which were of interest to one race were of no use to the other, and trade between them was limited to such mineral requirements as each one could produce that the other could not. Therefore, Regan decided, there was no Licharian seated beside him waiting for each movement of his wrecked and shattered body. In all probability he was in a sealed chamber, nurtured and cosseted by remote control, with a large-eyed, hard-skinned alien looking at him through a thick, plastic window, and talking to him through an intercom unit.

The information, as such, was unimportant. What was important so far as Regan was concerned, was the fact that he was capable of remembering and collating his recollections

to form a coherent pattern of his environment. At least his mind was clear and undamaged, whatever his physical state might be.

Once more he slept, this time a deep and natural sleep unaided by whatever drug had previously been used to plunge him into the dark abyss that seemed more like death than sleep. Regan slept and dreamed, and his mind gave up its fears and its subconscious knowledge, while his body shuddered and cried out. He awoke with the coldness of fear upon him, and with the despair of realization in his mind.

The sibilant Licharian voice said, "You have slept well. How do you feel?"

Regan drew a long, shuddering breath. "How many others have been rescued?"

There was a long silence while the alien considered the question. Rather, thought Regan, he was considering the effect of his answer on the mind of a broken and shattered being. "How many?" he insisted.

"None. You are the only one of which we know."

He felt his body tremble under the urgency of the new question that he needed to ask. "Tell me, how did you know what to tell the Terran authorities about my survival?"

"Why, from your belongings."

"My belongings?"

"Yes, there were carefully stored in compartments of the capsule."

"Then—" Regan gulped as the implication of his thoughts grew clearer. "Then you were able to tell them who I was?"

"Of course."

Regan recalled once more the shrill clamor of the alarm, the sudden screaming agony of pain that hit his body, the desperate reaction that had sent him leaping for the survival capsule—it had been the bottom berth. Dully, he said, "You told them my name was—was Manuel Cabrera!"

"That is so. No doubt your family will be glad to know that you are alive."

"Listen, there has been a mistake. . . . I—I am not Cabrera. My name is Regan—Martin Regan. You see, Cabrera had the bottom berth, and he was out of the cabin when—when it happened. I just threw myself into the nearest capsule." The words rushed from his mouth. "You must tell

them before his relatives are notified. It will be terrible if they think that he is still alive."

"Quietly, quietly! You must not excite yourself." There was a pause. "I will pass on what you say, but it may not be so easy to rectify the error—we shall have to see what can be done."

"What—what do you mean?"

"You see, you have been here for many weeks—almost two hundred Terran days. The news of your rescue was passed at the beginning, and the family of Manuel Cabrera will already have been told."

Regan lay stunned! Over six months had passed! He had thought that only a few days had elapsed, and now an alien voice had broken the illusion. For six months Martin Regan had been dead to the galaxy outside, and Manuel Cabrera had lived on in the minds of his friends and relatives. The superstition that Cabrera had possessed had not been enough to save him—but it had prolonged his life in the minds of others. A few pieces of paper, a few private possessions, these had been the trappings of identity that had buried Martin Regan and had kept alive the memory of Manuel Cabrera.

And now, Regan was reborn and Cabrera was buried.

III

THE HOURS passed in dark solitude except for the ministrations to his broken body that the Licharians managed to perform by remote control.

Gradually, he learned things. As he grew stronger he carried on short conversations with the unseen Licharians, and from each he gleaned a piece of information. At first he thought he was gaining knowledge by virtue of his own cunningly contrived questions, but as time passed he realized that the information was fed to him in easily assimilated doses which finally built up to an overall picture of frightening proportions. By the time his knowledge was complete, his mind had already prepared itself for the worst, and over the days and weeks the picture was created piece by piece much as he had already anticipated.

His face was a blind, fleshless mask without ears, eyes or nose. Both hands were gone, and so were his legs below

the knees. The back part of his body was a one hundred percent mass of third degree burns, but the front had been partially saved by the fact that he was already leaping for the survival capsule when the blast hit him. Another fraction of a second and Martin Regan wouldn't have been alive to talk about it. The capsule had nursed him and protected him for five days until he had been picked up by a Licharian ship. His life had been saved, and now came the months of rehabilitation and rebuilding that would see him fit and whole again.

Regan knew that he had been too far away from surgeons of his own race for them to have done him any good at all—and the aliens had been forced by circumstances to do what they could for his shattered body. They had been forced to improvise, and their surgeons had adapted and grafted, cut, shaped, strengthened, rebuilding on the slenderest of foundations a new body with new limbs. In the protective womb of the small cell that was his immediate world Regan waited and grew strong.

The weeks passed, bringing nearer the time when he was well enough to be taken from the planet Lichar, and when at last the day arrived Regan surprised even himself at the depths of his emotions as he felt himself being lifted by space-suited figures, and eased gently into an airtight stretcher for removal to the ship.

In later years Regan did his best to forget about the weeks and months that followed. He lost count of the number of trips he made to operating rooms first on Kleinewelt and later on Ferroval—his original destination. He couldn't count the days spent floating in nutrient baths while his body was reborn with agonizing slowness. On Lichar the surgeons had worked on him with excessive gentleness because of their lack of knowledge regarding the human body. Members of his own race were not so kind because they knew how much pain one body could tolerate. As a result, Regan suffered more pain and discomfort at the hands of his own race than ever he had done at the hands of the Licharians.

Early on, after his transfer to Ferroval, the surgeon in charge of his case had said, with careful nonchalance, "You won't be quite normal physically, you must realize that. The Licharians did a very remarkable job on you with the

knowledge at their disposal. They had to use resources which were—to be blunt—very limited, and there are certain anomalies from the Terran norm which we shall not be able to correct after such a long time.”

In the blindness of his world Regan chuckled coldly. “I’ve had plenty of time to think about it, Doctor,” he replied. “They could hardly rebuild bone and muscle, arms and legs without the basic material to work with. What did they use? String and wire?”

The doctor laughed. “Not exactly. They adapted some of their own prosthetic material in the reconstitution of your limbs. They adapted neural connections between the nerve ends of your—ah—extremities—”

“Stumps,” Regan corrected him brutally. “I’m adjusted to the facts of life, Doctor.”

“All right then—stumps. In point of fact, although you will be able to feel and use your arms and legs just as if they were your own, your blood circulation ceases once the prosthetic material begins. We have examined the neural linkages in the operating theatre and we’re pretty confident from your reactions that they will be as sensitive and flexible as were your own.”

“You mean I’ll be able to walk, run, live a normal life.”

“That’s it. In fact your new limbs will probably have more endurance than the old ones because they are not tied in with your blood stream and nervous system. You will walk and run by remote control, rather like having someone else do all the work for you.”

“Look, Doctor. I know I’m lucky to be alive,” snapped Regan, stifling the panic which threatened to rise up and overwhelm him. “The Licharians have experimented, and neither you nor they know what the result will be. Right?”

“That is substantially correct.”

“All right. When shall I know the worst?”

“Not for some weeks, I’m afraid.”

There was little comfort for Regan in this pronouncement. What did comfort and reassure him were the messages and tape letters that came to him from time to time from his family and friends on Caledon—his home world. It was pleasant to lie down and listen to their familiar voices, or to hear the written messages read to him by a doctor or nurse. There were, too, messages of good will from people he

couldn't place—men and women whose familiarities were warm and pleasant but whose names he couldn't fit into the pattern of his former life. He puzzled over some of them, trying to fill the apparent gaps in his memory, and at odd, frightening moments of depression he wondered if perhaps his mind had been affected by the ordeal through which he had passed. From this fear alone he protected himself by refusing to admit to the doctors that there might possibly be anything wrong.

His greatest thrill was the first dim light that filtered through his new eyes on the occasion when the bandages were first lifted in a darkened room. There were no shapes, only a dim, gray, light—but the thin light of hope was re-born. As the days ran into weeks the light grew stronger and faint outlines appeared; the flesh and muscles knitted more firmly and grew stronger under the impress of remedial exercises. The old combined with the new, and at last Martin Regan took his first tottering steps.

As he sat in a chair on the hospital grounds Regan could feel the heat of the Ferroval sun warmly upon him. There was the smell of clean earth and the tang of strange scents in his nostrils. His eyes, still heavily shaded and protected, were growing stronger, that much he could tell from their agility beneath the new grafted lids that fluttered as delicately as had the old.

A step near at hand caught his attention, and he turned towards the sound.

"Ah, you are awake." He recognized the voice of Lippman, the head surgeon. "I thought you might be dozing. We are going to remove the bandages and shades entirely today, Regan. This will be the final test of your sight."

Regan felt his heart turn over and his stomach tighten with sudden fear. He lifted himself awkwardly from the chair and linked his arm through Lippman's. The walk to the hospital and up the one flight of stairs to his room felt like the final walk of a condemned man. He sat in a chair and relaxed as well as he could.

Lippman's calm voice said, "Close the blinds, Nurse," and Regan heard the whine of the tiny motor that slid the shades across the wide frame of the window. Even the grayness was gone now. He felt Lippman's hand easing the coverings from his head, and the tightness of their fastenings

was relieved as the doctor drew them aside. They fell way, leaving the flesh cold to the air, and he sat quiet, stunned and puzzled while his eyelids fluttered helplessly in agonizing darkness.

"Half an inch of blind, nurse," said Lippman quietly, and Regan heard the tiny whine of the motor which was cut off instantly; his stomach knotted with tension.

The darkness lifted slightly, and his heart leapt as the grayness returned, stronger than it had been before. Shapes appeared that he could not identify, but there was light where previously there had been nothing.

"It's better than it was," he said huskily.

"Good." He heard Lippman let out his breath in a long sigh of relief. "Good. Now give it a minute and we'll raise the blind a little more. Blink your eyes hard, move them around. That's it."

The light grew stronger yet, and the shapes clearer. The tension that he had so recently relaxed was knotting his muscles again as his newborn eyes relayed messages to his brain—strange, terrible messages of a sharp, gray world that swam more clearly into his vision as the seconds passed—a world that was too bright for the small amount of light that crept through the fractionally raised autobind. It was a world of blackness that was too light—and that alone was a frightening contradiction of terms—the lines were too sharp, too harsh, almost stereoscopic in their intensity. He shut his eyes against a brilliance that should not be there, and laid his head back against the chair.

"It—it's gray," he stammered at last.

He saw and felt the bulky form of Lippman move nearer. "What?"

"Everything is gray." Regan opened his eyes fractionally and saw the looming white-clothed figure bending over him, bald-headed and grim-faced.

"Let the blind up a little more," ordered Lippman, and on the edge of Regan's vision a gray figure moved and allowed the blind to rise another inch.

He winced with pain, closing his eyes and turning his head away from the source of light as its brilliance lanced through him. There was light and life that he had never imagined before. The gray vanished in the firelight of coruscating color that crept through the narrow slit of the un-

covered window. The whole room took on a fantastic sharpness such as he had never known in the days when his own eyes performed their duties.

"Shut it," rapped Lippman, and the brilliance vanished from Regan's tortured lids. "It is early yet," said the doctor. "You must remember that these are alien organs and will pass alien messages to your brain until you learn to adjust. The main thing is—you can see proper images?"

Regan nodded, speechless from an unnamed fear.

"Good. We will fit you with darkened contact lenses to make things easier during the period of readjustment. It will come slowly, but the important thing is that the Licharian surgeons were right—you can see."

"Yes." Regan chuckled coldly, and felt the sweat beading his forehead. "Yes, of course. They were right, and I can see."

"We will let you rest now. If you want the blind raised again you can call for the nurse."

Regan heard the door close behind their departing figures, and he relaxed, preparing himself for another excursion into the gray, terrible world that he had seen bare minutes earlier. The room, he knew, should be in absolute darkness with the blinds in position, but the grayness through his lids told him that there was light for him to see by. He opened his eyes.

It was as bright as day, but there was no color—only a thousand variations of black and gray so sharp that an artist might have cut them with a knife. Instinctively he knew that the room was in blackness to a normal human, but the odd combination of human nerves and alien organs had produced a hybrid that was frightening in its implications. There was horror in the prospect of full daylight, and he wondered what the full light of the noonday sun might do to him.

Panic seeped through him, and he heard a slight whimper break from his trembling lips. He reached out to the table beside his chair, anxious to grip some concrete object that would help him retain his precarious hold on reality. The plastic coolness of its smooth top soothed him momentarily, and his alien, prosthetic fingers clutched it gratefully, savoring the solidity of a man made object.

And then the panic returned.

The plastic crumpled like paper under his frantic grasp—

there was a horrible crackling and breaking as his right hand gripped the half-inch-thick sheet of plastic that was the table top, and reduced it to a mass of broken, shattered shards.

Regan lay trembling and sobbing under the impact of a new and terrible horror. Under the stress of his human emotions his alien muscles had, for the first time, revealed their full power. In a daze Regan sat in his chair in the darkened room and wondered just how human he was now.

IV

THE NEED to cover up the real cause of the broken table was almost automatic—it was a reaction that Regan recognized as being an integral part of his new personality. He explained to Lippman how he had blundered about in the darkened room, knocking the table over so that one corner of it splintered against the floor.

“Probably a weakness in the material,” was his nonchalant dismissal of Lippman’s mild surprise.

The darkened contact lenses came to make his life more bearable, and with their help Regan found that he had a great deal more control over his sight than he had before. He could regulate and balance the amount of light his eyes received almost as if he was turning off a mental light switch. In almost complete darkness he could read a book without strain, and in blinding sunshine he could reduce the influx of light rays to a bearable minimum.

With returning mobility came restlessness. He had been an invalid and under medical care for almost two years, and he recognized the need for a return to normal life as soon as it was practicable. The need was recognized, too, by Lippman and the other doctors who were part of his world, and the situation built to a climax over a period of several weeks. Thus, Regan wasn’t in the least surprised when Lippman joined him on the hospital grounds one morning, and announced, “We think that you are fit enough to leave here, Regan.”

Oddly, Regan didn’t feel excited. There was too much that was fresh in the prospect of walking out into the world again. The hospital had become his world almost as if he had known no other. Outside were people who would stare,

places that would be strange, a future that was uncertain and even frightening.

"We have been making the necessary arrangements for some time," went on Lippman, seating himself in a chair beside Regan. "You have probably known for some weeks that you are fit and well—as fit and as well as we can make you. You can leave here and live a normal life again. You can walk, run, jump, see as well as you could before—" Regan laughed coldly to himself "—in every respect that matters except that of physical appearance. In fact, you are as well as you have been in your whole life, surprising as that may seem."

"I'm fitter than I ever was," agreed Regan with a sour chuckle. "Only I don't look so good."

"You have been a very lucky man," Lippman admonished gently.

Regan nodded. "I know it. Forgive my cynicism, Lippman, I owe you a lot." He glanced quickly at the doctor. "When do I leave?"

"Within the hour."

"So soon?" Regan's hairless brows lifted in surprise. "But—"

"We felt that it would be best for psychological reasons." Lippman rose from his seat. "I have already arranged for your belongings to be packed. If you will come along to my office I will introduce you to your escort back into the world of man."

Dazed, Regan rose and followed Lippman across the smooth lawns towards the main building. The shock of this sudden turn of events was almost psychic in its severity. He had known that it was coming, indeed it had been evident for some time, but he hadn't expected it to be so brutal in its timing and rapidity.

They reached the main building and walked along the white, aseptic corridor to Lippman's office. The doctor opened the door and ushered Regan inside.

From a chair in one corner of the room rose a slim, dark man who smiled and bowed slightly as Regan entered.

"This is Mr. Shay Doon," said Lippman. "He is an agent of the insurance company which has been handling your affairs since the—ah—accident. Mr. Doon, this is Mr. Regan."

Regan nodded and shook hands, careful, despite his bewilderment, not to break the man's hand with his grasp.

"I am pleased to meet you," said Doon, brightly. "You are our most famous customer, Mr. Regan."

"Indeed?"

"Of course. You've been worth thousands to us in publicity. You know 'The Man Who Could Not Die.'"

"What?"

"Because of your InterGalactic All-Purpose Policy."

"Oh, I see." Regan took an instant dislike to the bright young man with the too white teeth, and as he glanced at Lippman he had a shrewd suspicion that the doctor shared his view.

"Mr. Doon will act as your escort back to a normal life," said Lippman. "The company offered his services, and it seemed to be a good idea that you should take advantage of their offer." He held out his hand to Regan. "I do not like long farewells, Regan, and in your case you have become something of an institution within my professional orbit. I shall miss you."

Regan took the proffered hand. "This is all so quick—"

"We think it is best."

"I bow to your judgment. Thank you—for my life."

"You should thank an unknown alien for that, Regan. I only finished what they began."

The sun was hot upon Regan's head as he walked across the wide expanse of lawn in front of the main hospital building. Beside him Doon chattered brightly and inconsequentially, his words making no impression on Regan's dazed mind. At last he was going back into the living world.

"When you're ready," said Doon, "I have a 'copter waiting." Even through his alien eyes Ferroval looked good to Regan as the 'copter sped them high above the vivid green landscape. People said that it was the nearest thing to Earth, before the rise of the great city states which now covered four-fifths of the Terran landscape. Ferroval had great open areas of virgin country forests and mountains and rivers that gleamed and glittered beneath the Ferroval sun. There were cities and towns and villages, but they were small as yet and it would be centuries before the planet even threatened to approach the mechanized monstrosity with the hard, sophisticated veneer that was Earth.

On Ferroval a man could still dig in the soil and not be laughed at; he could climb the mountains, walk the virgin

forests and swim in clear, cold, tumbling rivers. Ferroval, they said, was as Earth had been, once, long ago, and to Regan at this moment it was a wonderful sight.

The hospital, he knew, was several miles out in the country from the main city of Carvill, and the 'copter covered the distance in a little over half an hour. Doon kept up a running commentary of chatter that made little impression on Regan as he looked eagerly down on the passing scene. He grunted appropriate replies from time to time, but the main stream of the man's patter passed unheeded.

As they came in to a landing on the 'copter roof of a large building, Doon said, "We have arranged for you to have a suite in this hotel, the Waverley, Regan. All expenses paid for one month. In that time, no doubt, you will be able to decide what you wish to do."

Regan turned and looked at him balefully though his dark lenses. "What would you do, Mr. Doon, if you had not seen your home world and your family for over two years? Would you sit around in some plush hotel suite deciding what to do?"

"Really—"

"Instead of spashing money around on this damned suite," Regan continued coldly, "you can reallocate it to booking me a berth on the first ship out of here to Caledon or at least in that general direction."

Regan slid the 'copter door open and stepped through it down on the rooftop before Doon could object further. The insurance man followed him out, protesting bitterly in a sharp, petulant tone that Regan was being absurdly high handed. "After all we've done for you, Regan, the least you can do is to co-operate for a few days—"

"Which suite have you booked for me?" interrupted Regan.

"Number eighty-seven."

"Have you the key?"

"Of course, but—"

"Then let me have it. After that you can climb back in that 'copter and go back to your office or wherever you're supposed to go at this time of day."

Doon gaped at him in mingled horror and astonishment. "Now, see here—"

"The key," snapped Regan.

Reluctantly, Doon reached into his jerkin pocket and

brought forth an ornamental key ring with three bright, new electronic keys attached to it.

"But what shall I tell my chief?" he wailed as Regan took them.

"Tell him what you damned well like. Tell him I want to be left alone. Tell him—what you please." Regan turned abruptly and headed across the roof towards the elevator.

Number eighty-seven was a penthouse suite on the far side of the hotel block, away from the 'copter roof, and it was clearly one of the choice suites available. The thickness of the carpet in the corridor outside, and the simple but expensive fittings and paintings on the walls suggested an even greater degree of luxury behind the plain door with the number eighty-seven.

As he operated the lock Regan was half prepared for the sybaritic luxury which greeted him. The entrance hall was wide and thickly carpeted with two expensive tridiviews on the walls. There were fresh flowers in graceful ornamental vases, and he smiled to himself in appreciation as he passed through into the lounge—where he found three men waiting for him.

V

FOR MANY weeks there had been a nagging something at the back of Regan's mind, something that he couldn't express in words. He had thought perhaps that it was some mental aftereffect of all that he had been through. He knew himself to be a tougher man than he had been before the explosion of the Ferroval cruiser. His new mental approach was a part of all this—or so he had assumed—but now he knew that he was wrong. He knew it because of the three men who sat quietly in that wide, luxurious room and waited for him to come to them.

Two of them were young, well dressed, with an air of elegance that was belied by an athletic bulkiness. The younger of the pair was blond, white-skinned and blue-eyed—a Terran; the second was older, probably in his late thirties, black-skinned with black hair and a thin, quixotic moustache that was a hundred years out of date.

All of this Regan took in at a glance, and immediately his attention turned to the third man—the only one of the

three who really meant anything in the frozen tableau created by his entrance. He was old and gray, and his body had already begun to slump with the burden of his years, his face was dark and heavily lined, with a neat beard, and moustache that was even more antediluvian than the moustache of his younger companion. His clothes were dark and unobtrusive, as if he wished to lose himself in a gray world that lacked any color, but by their very somberness they made his presence as conspicuous as if he had gone naked. He looked, thought Regan, as if he had stepped from a family portrait that was two hundred years old.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Regan said quietly as he felt an unfamiliar tingle chill his nerves.

The old man stirred slightly and looked at him from piercing, heavily-browed, gray eyes.

"That is an odd greeting for members of the family," he said in a thin, high voice. "I am sure your cousins are flattered to be called gentlemen, but I am too old for flattery—for games."

Regan felt the tingle grow stonger; he felt as if he were in a play which had been rehearsed and rehearsed a dozen times before. The reflex reply was automatic as he said, calmly, "I think you have made some mistake."

"Come, Manuel. Enough of this foolishness," the thin voice was sharp with annoyance. "It is two years since we met. I had expected something better for your father after all that you have been through."

Regan sat down carefully in a chair and tried to steady himself. The old horror that he had known eighteen Terran months ago on the planet Lichar was with him again. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words would not come; there was only one thought at the back of his mind—they had not believed him when he had denied the identity of Manuel Cabrera.

"You are to be complimented on your efforts to cover your identity," said the old man. "It was unfortunate that you were not entirely successful, but that was not your fault—six months was too long for the news to get around. I may say that we have had a good deal of difficulty in protecting your existence, but," he chuckled harshly, "we have managed."

Suddenly, everything fell into place for Regan, and there was despair in the knowledge.

Dully, he said, "I wondered at all the odd people who kept cropping up in my mail and on the tapes I received."

Again there was the harsh, rasping chuckle and the old man replied, "We thought that you would respond to such an approach. After all, we dared not visit you before, it would have been too dangerous, until we were sure of your complete recovery. Once that was assured we made ourselves ready to get you away from Ferroval with the utmost speed."

Regan started to laugh gently to himself, his shoulders shaking slowly in a rhythm that grew more violent as the threat of hysteria grew stronger.

"Manuel, this is insufferable," snapped the old man. "I had thought that you would be strong enough to bear your tribulations with at least a semblance of the strength which you have inherited."

Regan controlled himself with a vast effort, but the hysteria still bubbled in his stomach and threatened to break forth again as he said, "My inheritance is clearly lacking something, Mr. Cabrera. The plain truth of the matter is, as I have said before, that my name is Martin Regan—your son, Manuel, died in the explosion of the Ferroval cruiser."

The silence was broken only by the rustle of cloth as the black-skinned man rose slowly from his chair.

"I thought," said Regan desperately, "that I had made it clear."

"It was Manuel's capsule that was picked up," snarled the black man.

"Carlo, be silent." The old man leaned forward in his seat, his eyes slightly narrowed, and his face even grayer than it had been before. "We received some of your belongings."

"Manuel's belongings," interrupted Regan.

"But—this cannot be! All these months of waiting." The voice was a thin whisper and the eyes slid away from Regan's face as their owner tried to assimilate his own thoughts. "The accident—your memory has been affected."

"Did the doctors indicate that?" asked Regan gently.

"No, no. Of course not. There must be an explanation." The gray eyes returned to Regan's face, harder than before, and with anger written plain in their depths. "If you are joking with us, Manuel—"

"I told you," insisted Regan gently. "I am sorry for the error, but Manuel is dead. He was not in the cabin when the—the accident occurred. I was, and I dived into the nearest escape capsule. It was the one that Manuel should have occupied had he been there, and if I hadn't made it when I did then I would not be here talking to you now. Mr. Cabrera, I am sorry, but I thought that it had all been cleared up. No one said that there would be any trouble. Look, even the insurance company knows I am Martin Regan."

"Of course they would say so," snapped the black man. "Your father owns it."

The statement stopped Regan in his tracks, and it was moments before he could say, "He is not my father—I told you."

"You are quite serious," the old man said. "Yes, I can read it in your face. No one would be so cruel as to prolong a jest to this unseemly length." One large tear slid down the pattern of creases that formed the right cheek, but that was all the sign he gave that eighteen months of believing had been shattered in less than five minutes—that the son he believed to be alive had been dead for two years.

"I am sorry," said Regan simply.

A silence stretched out into minutes as the old man sat quiet and still, alone with his grief—a grief that had come twice over the same lost son. The blond youngster sat and watched Regan with bleak, blue eyes, and the dark-skinned man paced restlessly behind the old man's chair.

Regan stirred at last and rose to his feet. The visit had been too prolonged for any good that it could now do, and he wanted to be alone with his thoughts to plan and to decide what he should do.

"I do not wish to appear rude, Mr. Cabrera," he said, "but I am anxious to be alone. This is my first day of freedom for almost two years. I want to think and plan how I may get to my home world of Caledon. I, too, have friends and relatives."

"Be quiet," said the blond youngster coldly.

Regan gaped at him, shocked at the hostility of the words as much as by the fact that these were the first sounds uttered by the man since the odd conversation had first begun.

"Softly, Armand, softly," The old man came alive again with a slow, quiet movement of one hand "Señor Regan has as much right to his privacy as we have to our grief." The gray eyes turned again on Regan, and they were as unemotional as they had been before. "There is only one problem now, and that problem belongs to Señor Regan."

Regan shrugged and grinned. "I have no problems."

"Indeed you have," said the thin, high voice. "Señor Regan, you may convince me, and others of my family, that you are not one of us, but there are others who might be more difficult to convince."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. You don't understand the trouble we have gone to over the past months guarding and protecting you because we thought you were one of us. You do not know that five men have died in an attempt to capture your person and in efforts to protect it. You cannot know the amount of money that has been spent in trying to convince people that you are what, in truth, you are—that you are Martin Regan and not Manuel Cabrera." The old man leaned forward in his chair. "I doubt if you would believe me if I told you that, should you remain on this planet for more than a few hours, then you stand a very good chance of being killed or kidnaped—most probably the latter since the former will come later, when your kidnapers find that you are not Manuel Cabrera."

"You're mad!"

"If we walk out of that door, Señor Regan, and leave you as you would seem to wish, then I can guarantee that you will be dead in a very short while."

VI

THE WORDS were spoken coldly, and with a complete lack of emotion. The old man showed plainly that the fate which might befall Regan did not particularly concern him. Regan was caught up in a web of intrigue through no fault of his own, but his presence in that web could not effect the ultimate unraveling of its fine meshed strands. Cabrera didn't care whether he lived or died.

Regan shivered despite his immediate conviction that what the old man had said was ridiculous; it had to be ridicu-

lous, and he voiced the thought aloud with studied but unconvincing deprecation.

"Nonsense. Who would risk their own life just to kill me?"

"Not you, but my son, Manuel." The brilliant old eyes flickered, and a lined, brown hand waved at the dark figure of the black man. "Tell him our thoughts, Carlo."

Carlo smiled. "Regan, do you really think that the Ferroval cruiser exploded accidentally?"

Regan said nothing.

"It didn't—of that we are sure. It was destroyed at the one time when Manuel was not in his cabin, and it was arranged by someone who was well acquainted with Manuel's habits. This was his Achilles' heel, his desire to take a stroll every morning at eight o'clock. Oh, yes—" he waved away Regan's attempted interruption, "we know just when it happened. Someone else knew and made suitable arrangements."

"But if you knew that this might happen—"

"We knew," snapped the blond youngster. "Manuel laid a dozen false trails, and still they found him."

"He should not have used his own name," said Regan grimly.

"Why not?" countered Carlo. "Would it not be a good piece of double bluff? Would anyone expect Manuel Cabrera to travel under his own name if he was trying to keep the fact a secret?"

Regan shrugged. Much good the double bluff had done to the dead, blasted person of Manuel Cabrera. "Who are 'they'?" he asked suddenly.

"It does not concern you."

"It does if 'they' are going to kill me," retorted Regan.

Carlo ignored the comment. "I have established the scene for you, Regan. Manuel Cabrera had to die, and sixty-eight others died with him—that is the measure of his importance. Later, he was alive again through some trick of mistaken identity because someone made an error in checking. An attempt was made to correct that error, but the end result of it all was merely to convince us—and others—that you were, in fact, Manuel Cabrera."

"But I'm not," insisted Regan.

"Can you prove it?"

"Of course I can."

"How?" sneered Carlo. "Without finger prints or retina patterns? With no birth marks left on your body after the burning and the grafting? Even your bodily measurements will be different from those that you possessed before the accident." He shook his head. "You have only convinced us of your true identity because Manuel would have no reason to hide from us. But he would have reason to hide from others—and their reactions would be very different."

Regan wondered blindly if he were in the midst of some too realistic nightmare. Wasn't it enough that he had almost died in the holocaust of the Ferroval cruiser? That he had suffered two years of something akin to civilized torture just to be able to take his place again in the living universe? All he had wanted was to get back to Caledon and pick up the threads of his life again—perhaps to settle down from his previous life as an interplanetary trading agent: to leave behind the world that he carried with him in one small hand case, and take up roots again on a planet that was home and not just a hotel in space peopled by strangers. And now?

"If all that you say is true," he looked across at the old man, "what do you suggest that I do?"

The blond youngster laughed harshly. "If you are killed then at least we shall have one less worry on our hands, Regan. If you live—"

"Gently, Armand," broke in old Cabrera. "This thing needs to be thought about. It has come too quickly for us to consider all the implications in proper detail. Carlo, how long shall he be safe here?"

"I think for another four hours. Our security should be tight for at least that period of time."

"And by then we shall be off planet." The old man nodded.

"But if we leave him," began Armand.

"They will know for sure that he is not Manuel. You are a fool, Armand." Cabrera sat straighter in his chair. "And in that fact lies the answer to our immediate dilemma. Mr. Regan, I think that you had better come with us, for if you do that then there will still be doubt in the minds of those who wish to make sure of my dear son's death, and in that fact may lie something to our advantage."

"Why should I help you?" snapped Regan.

Carlo chuckled in the background. "If we leave you alone here you will very soon find out why."

Regan slumped a little in his chair, and ran a hand through the gray scrub of his hair. There was a tremor of very real fear within him, and the certain knowledge that he was unwittingly involved in something that could mean life or death to him—a choice he had escaped from too recently for the memory of the struggle not to be deeply written on his mind.

"All right. I will come with you. But where does it end for me?"

Cabrera laughed gently and grimly. "If we could know what lies ten minutes in the future, Señor Regan, we should all be wiser and richer men than we are at present. We might even escape death itself, and that is a goal greatly to be desired by all men. Do you not agree?"

The final shaft went home, and Regan pursed his lips in dumb acceptance of his position. It meant that if he went with Cabrera then he would live. If he did not—well . . .

"Call in the 'copter, Carlo," ordered Cabrera. "Let us leave."

The dark man took a tiny communicator set from an inner pocket and whispered a rapid code sentence into it that was lost to Regan's ears. Cabrera rose unsteadily to his feet and took the arm of Armand for support. Carlo motioned Regan to follow the slow moving couple, and brought up the rear himself as the group left the apartment which had been home to Regan for just thirty minutes.

In the corridor at strategic corners were men whom Regan had not seen before; they guarded the approaches to the apartment and the stairway to the 'copter roof with eagle eyes and a vigilance that was disturbing in its thoroughness. Regan knew what Carlo had meant when he said that security was tight, and he wondered dazedly what sort of resources these men had at their disposal. The old man owned the insurance company that employed Doon, so Carlo had said, and there had been guards to watch over him all the long time he was convalescing. There were more guards here, and on the roof a giant 'copter with more men to fly it and to guard its occupants. Cabrera was a big man in his own circle—a circle which seemed to have a vast circumference.

For almost an hour they headed south, out into the open lands, away from the city. After some initial tension Regan

relaxed and even managed to doze a little, lulled by the all-pervading hum around him. He nestled in a cocoon of sound that numbed his mind into sleep—a sleep that wasn't broken as the motor cut out leaving him in an oasis of silence. The silence was interrupted by the burst of angry voices raised around him, and Regan awoke with a start to hear the pilot shout, "The engines are dead, sir. There is no power."

The powerful figure of Carlo pushed past his seat, and Regan sat bolt upright, his body taut with the sudden panic around him that was transmitted to his own being.

"Switch to emergency," called Carlo.

"The power unit is dead."

"Dammit, man, it can't be."

Carlo turned towards them, his black eyes brilliant with rage. "We shall have to land."

"Can't we make the ship?" called Armand.

"No, it is nearly thirty minutes away."

"But if we land we shall be at their mercy."

"We shall have to land," came the piping voice of the old man. His tone was clear and cold, and he alone seemed to have retained his calmness; for that alone Regan admired him. "Carlo, we must take our chances on the ground. If we do not arrive within the hour there will be forces from the ship to look for us."

"But they will have no time," said Carlo. "This has taken place at a pre-arranged spot, that much is sure."

"Then you will have to make time," snapped Regan suddenly, and he saw the old face swivel to look at him approvingly.

"Regan is right," said the old man. "Swing the 'copter away to the west."

The 'copter banked away to the west, and the wind whistled eerily around the hull. The men fell silent and all eyes were fixed on the low hills ahead of the 'copter while the pilot wrestled with the controls and fought to retain height for as long as possible.

"If we can clear them," breathed Armand at Regan's back.

"No, they are too far off," said Carlo. "We shall hit the lower slopes."

"Do you see any trees or woods?" called the old man.

"Not yet. We are too far off."

"I do," said Regan abruptly. "Away to the left—a large forest area."

"Good. Can you see it, Carlo?"

"Yes, I've got it. About four miles. Pilot, can we make it?"

"I will try but I think we shall be short."

"If we can get to cover," said Cabrera, "then they will have to flush us out, and if it takes them too long then our own parties from the ship will be out looking for us."

The pilot's judgment was correct, that much was clear as the 'copter moved towards the dark forest area, losing height as it did so. They were still a mile short of cover when they hit the ground—a smooth landing in an area of scrub land that did not have any hidden ditches. The port landing gear broke under the shock of impact, but the main body of the craft was undamaged.

They climbed out through the main hatch and dropped to knee deep grass and scrub.

"Too short, too short," muttered Carlo angrily. "We shan't make it in less than twenty minutes through this country. They will have 'copters on to us by then."

"We'll make it quicker if I carry you, Cabrera," said Regan, and there was a shocked silence from the other men.

"You are insolent," snapped Armand.

"And you are a fool!"

"He is right," said the high whisper of the old man. "We must hurry and I shall hold you back. Therefore, I must be carried."

"Then I will do it," retorted Armand.

Regan flexed his prosthetic muscles, and exulted for the first time in the knowledge that in this, at least, he was superior to other men. He said nothing, but reached down and gathered the thin body of the old man into his arms. He headed across the scrub land towards the shelter of the trees, and the others followed, Armand and Carlo close by, the pilot and the other four men bringing up the rear.

Regan's heart was thumping and his lungs worked to pump more air into his straining body, but his arms and legs moved rapidly, untiring and effortless. Even with his burden, Regan outpaced the others, and he could hear them toiling yards behind him as he broke through the first trees and moved deeper into the protecting darkness.

He paused and set the old man down. The rest came

panting up to join them, and Carlo dropped on his back onto a grass-covered mound.

"Just in time," he muttered, panting with the effort of his exertions. "I heard the sounds of a 'copter a moment ago."

"Then we must move deeper," said Cabrera. "They will not see us through the trees."

"But they will have the 'copter to guide them," said Regan coldly. "They will guess where we are headed."

He reached down and lifted the old man from the ground. There was a sense of power in being able to do it, a feeling of superiority over Carlo and Armand—even over the old man, for without Regan's strong arms they could have been caught in the open, naked to the view of their pursuers—and Regan had a good idea that they knew it.

They moved more slowly now, threading their way through trees that grew more thickly as they walked, through undergrowth that made walking difficult. Over the treetops the hum and buzz of more than one 'copter reached them clearly, but here, with the forest silence around them, they seemed to be cut off from the world beyond. Regan still headed the group, the old man a feather weight in his arms, while the shadows deepened around them as the dusk came down. To Regan the dusk was no obstacle, and he knew that he had a great advantage over the others when Carlo called, "Regan, we must stop. We can't go blundering around in this darkness any longer."

"All right." Regan halted and laid the old man down. He waited for the others to catch up to him, and as they did so he could see how greatly the struggle through the trees had affected them. They were all dirty and disheveled, their clothes torn and stained by the trees and foliage.

"What do we do now?" asked Armand.

"We wait," snapped Regan. "They must come to us."

"Your opinion is of no value," broke in Armand angrily. "You are here by virtue of Señor Cabrera's patronage."

"Oh, no. I'm here because you dare not leave me behind," Regan interrupted sharply. "Cabrera, you were right when you said that they would know I was not Manuel Cabrera if you left me behind. I have had time to think about it recently, and I have reached a very interesting conclusion."

"And what is that?" asked the old man, softly.

"For some reason you have to keep Manuel Cabrera alive.

For that reason alone you dared not leave. You had to take me with you because you could do nothing else."

There was a dead silence.

"What would have happened, Cabrera, if I had decided to stay?"

The only reply was a dry chuckle from the thin, gray lips.

VII

THE 'COPTER noises had long since faded, and only the night sounds of the forest vied with the heavy breathing of the exhausted men around him. Regan felt the frustration of his position breed irritation within him, but he knew there was nothing he could do. If he had refused to accompany Cabrera voluntarily, then he would have been removed by force. The old man's reactions to his questions had been answer enough, requiring no spoken word to elaborate their meaning.

"The ship parties should be looking for us now," said Carlo.

"They will be too late," said the old man. "Which way is the wind blowing."

"The wind?" Regan felt Carlo stir uneasily beside him.

"There will be stun gas through these trees or I miss my guess."

"If they are so prepared," put in Armand.

"Of course they will be prepared. Armand you are a fool. We have managed temporarily to avoid them, but if they are sufficiently determined they will take us—and soon."

Silence followed the old man's pronouncement, and the uneasy murmuring of two of the other men reached Regan's ears.

"I was ill advised to make this journey," remarked Cabrera, almost to himself. "It has rendered me vulnerable."

"You did not know that I was not Manuel," broke in Regan, rising to his feet. "Any father would have rendered himself vulnerable to aid his son."

"You credit me with more love than I possess."

"Cabrera, I'm going back along the track to try and stop them. Tell one of your men to give me a gun—preferably a needle weapon which is silent." Regan had made the decision quickly and coldly, as the only logical thing to be done. The others might be forced to sit around by their physical limitations, but he could see and move with a facility that

was denied to them, and he knew that his one chance lay in the advantages of sight and surprise that he would have over his pursuers.

"You're mad," snapped Armand.

"No, just careful. I'm not going to sit around and wait for them to pick me up in an unconscious heap, Armand. If they do that, and if Cabrera is right, then I'll be dead before long." He shook his head, a movement unseen by the others in the blackness. "I'll take a chance—with Cabrera's permission."

There was a long pause, and then Carlo said, slowly, "Here, take mine, Regan. It is a needle gun—it will not betray you. It is lethal at five hundred meters, and it has two hundred missiles."

Regan took the proffered weapon and weighed it in his hand. It was small, light, and it fitted neatly into his palm.

He turned and headed away, back along the route which they had so recently taken. A hundred yards away he paused and slid the dark contact lenses from his eyes. The light brightened around him, and his vision was clear for almost fifty yards through the dark shapes of the trees—the whole area was as clear around him as if it were midday.

He left the track and circled around the path they had taken, and went back along the forest trails towards the point where they had entered the woods. He was still better than a hundred yards from the forest edge when the first blundering sounds reached his ears, and he dropped for cover behind a fallen tree, his probing eyes seeking movement ahead of him. When they came into sight it was with the careful progression of men who were wearing night glasses of limited range. They were men unsure of their position, who expected trouble to blast them from the trees at any moment. Regan judged that he could see at least thirty yards more than the pursuers, and he was at least five hundred yards from Cabrera's group. There was a little wind, but its direction was indeterminate, and if he judged the position rightly the group would advance until they met some form of opposition, and let the stun gas go in that direction—always assuming that Cabrera was right in his assessment of the situation. For all the old man's great age Regan trusted his judgment.

The first men were in clear sight now, dark figures among the trees yet clearly visible to Regan's alien eyes. They were

well armed, carrying their weapons ready for instant use. Regan settled into a comfortable position with the tree trunk as his shelter and arm rest. The advancing men were approaching at an oblique angle, spread out in a line that would not encompass his hiding place providing it didn't swing towards him once he started to attack them. He drew a bead with the auto-sight on the man nearest to him, and pressed the button unemotionally.

Even as he knew his shot was a success, Regan realized that he had made an error. The man nearer to him turned instantly and flung himself to cover before Regan could draw a bead on him. Somehow, he knew the direction from which the attack had been made, and now Regan's position was in danger.

Then, suddenly from the trees to the right a man broke cover passing into full view, another followed, and then another. Men ran, stumbling through the undergrowth, but it was the movement of flight not of pursuit, and Regan knew that Cabrera's men could not be far behind. He switched the needle gun to auto-fire and pumped silent death towards the running figures. Two of them fell and lay still, the third fell and writhed, crawling desperately for the shelter of a small bush. In his excitement Regan rose from cover, pumping fire towards the crippled target until it lay still. So intense was his concentration that he almost missed the two men who broke cover barely twenty yards away from him; he turned, firing as he did so, and watched with fascinated horror as one of them drew back his right arm and threw a small, round object towards his now open position. Desperately, he threw himself to the right, diving behind a tree, and the last thing he heard was the deadly thump as the grenade hit the ground bare yards from where he lay.

Too many times, thought Regan, have I awakened like this.

It was like returning from a grave—every inch of his being concentrated on dragging himself back from some black pit of non-existence that sought to hold him in its grasp.

At first, there was the returning horror of the exploding ship, but his mind told him that the incident was past. The Licharians, the hospital, the blindness, the pain—all were remembered and rejected until, at last, the slow, reeling picture of the dark forest gyrated hazily through his mind.

His consciousness bore a frightening horror of blindness, and when he opened his eyes it was quickly, and with fear in the instinctive movement. Light dazzled him, so bright that it struck with the force of almost physical pain, and he shut them again quickly but with a mind that leaped with thankfulness.

Close at hand he heard a movement, and the soft, old voice of Cabrera said, "Are you awake, Regan?"

"Yes." He opened his eyes again, more slowly, allowing them to adjust so that the light was soft and normal. "Yes. I am awake."

He looked around, taking in the sybaritic surroundings of the room in which he lay. All around were soft furnishings of exquisite splendor, soft colors, luxurious ornamentation. Every line and every curve indicated a luxury that he had only read about, of wealth beyond the dreams of ordinary men.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"Aboard the ship which we were originally headed for." Cabrera sat a little away from him in the vast comfort of an easy chair.

Regan looked around and marveled. "A ship?" he queried. "A ship—like this?" He swung his feet from the divan on which he was lying, and through his head reeled a little with the movement it was not enough to disturb the wonder in his mind.

Cabrera chuckled. "One of the advantages of my wealth, Regan. How do you feel?"

"Well, enough. What happened?"

"You were caught by an explosion. We found you after the fight was over and the battle won. My physician assures me that you are unharmed—a little dazed perhaps, but that is all." Cabrera was silent for a minute. "I think we might have found things difficult but for your efforts, Regan. Why did you do it?"

"I told you—self-preservation. I have seen too much of death to wish to die without a fight."

"You have spread too much death today to be frightened by it. You fascinate me, Regan. Two years ago you were just another poor man with a good job, content to live his life in obscurity. I would guess that violence frightened you,

that you were a timid man, a man of peace who abided by the law and went in fear of flamboyance."

Regan stared at him.

"And now you have emerged as a man without emotion, a killer with an overwhelming desire to survive, whatever the cost."

"Isn't that the desire of all men?"

"No. It is a desire forced upon them by circumstances. No man becomes ruthless unless he has to." Cabrera laughed. "I know that from experience, Regan. I think that once, many years ago, I was like you, and I changed even as you have changed through a desire to survive in a world that fights man's survival. A man who is not important has nothing to fear, and with that lack of fear he seeks the dark corners, the quiet alleys of existence where no one notices him because he is merely one of a crowd.

"Sometimes—with perhaps one man in a thousand—he is forced from his comfortable nook and he becomes important because of some factor of wealth or knowledge or position, and once he becomes important he finds it necessary to fight for his survival for his importance is a matter of relativity. He is important alive, but he could be just as important when he is dead." The dark, old eyes bored into Regan's with the implacability and coldness of deep space.

Regan shivered a trifle as he realized that Cabrera's words had mirrored his own unspoken thoughts. The old man had laid bare his weakness with a frightening efficiency; whatever illusions he may have harbored were gone now, forever. He looked around again at the luxury of the cabin where he sat, and he knew what Cabrera meant. For a man to own all this—to be this powerful . . .

"Who are you, Cabrera?" he demanded. "What are you, that you can command my life in this manner?"

The old man smiled and shook his head. "I live as God has ordained that I live—and I shall die when He decides that my usefulness is over. I command no one, Regan, destiny shapes its heroes and its villains, and a man can only act as his conscience dictates. Does it surprise you that I should believe in God?"

"A man's beliefs are his own."

"No." The old man shook his head vehemently. "A man's beliefs can shape the universe—they are not his own. That

is the error of fools, of men who cannot see beyond their own limited horizon. That is why you are alive and my son is dead—destiny picked you to step into the arena, and God had decided Manuel's time had come. These are the factors which command your life and mine; what we do is forced upon us, and the actions we perform may affect the universe forever from this day forward."

Cabrera rose slowly to his feet, a bent and ancient figure, his hands clasping an old, blackened stick to support his frail form.

"Rest now, Regan. We have talked enough. It is enough for you to know that we are headed for Earth."

"But—"

"I know. Caledon is your home, but I fear you would not live to see it under present circumstances." Cabrera paused at the cabin door. "Earth is your destiny, Regan. Caledon and peace are your goal—remember that, and you may live to be as old as I."

VIII

AND SO, AFTER more than two years, Regan came back to Earth.

On the last day on Cabrera's spaceship, they dined as usual, but the old man was preoccupied. He ate quietly, and the others fell in with his mood. The brandy came at last, then the cigars, and as they were lighting them, Cabrera said, "Have you thought about your stay on Earth, Regan?"

Regan rolled the large glass between his hands, studying the amber liquid, and swirling it so that it glittered in the light from the chandelier. He found it hard to believe that he was in a spaceship, sweeping at superlight speeds through the deeps of space.

"No," he said after a moment of thought. "No, I was leaving it all to you, Cabrera."

"Are you not curious?"

"Curiosity benefits no one." Regan sipped the brandy. "No, I am not curious. I've decided that, in some way which you have not revealed, I may be useful to you. I know too, that you can be useful to me—you will keep me alive. It seems a fair bargain."

Cabrera chuckled drily. "You are becoming more of a philosopher as time passes." He sucked a red glow to the tip of the cigar, and then blew the smoke up into the air so that it billowed around the chandelier. "Tell me, Regan, what are you thinking?"

Regan looked down the length of the table at the dark, old eyes in the brown, wrinkled face. What was he thinking? He had tried to picture Manuel Cabrera in these surroundings, and he could not do it. The man who had shared his cabin for those brief days so many months ago, was as out of place as a black spade in a hand of diamonds. He had played the part of an amiable, rich dilettante—the sort of man whose death would not bring tears to the eyes of the old man seated opposite him; a smile of regret, perhaps, but tears—no. And yet of the three—Armand, Carlo and Manuel, it was the dead man who had been closest to the remote, austere Terran.

"I think," he said slowly, "that your son was killed in an attempt to destroy you."

The calm atmosphere of the dinner table was gone in an instant. Carlo sat straight up in his chair, his eyes coldly upon Regan. Armand muttered under his breath, his lips a thin line of anger. Only Cabrera seemed unmoved.

"I think, too," went on Regan, "that while it is thought that Manuel Cabrera is alive, then your position is safe—though I have not yet been able to decide what that position is. You are a powerful man, Cabrera, but your power is not known to little people like me. I could have lived and died without ever knowing of your existence, if I had not had the ill fortune to share a cabin with your son."

"You speak too much," said Armand, half rising from his seat.

"Be still," said the old man. "A few days ago, Regan, you were a babe in a new world who wanted only to flee to the mother bosom of your planet, there to hide yourself. Now, barely seven days later, you are a killer of men whom you have never seen, you have developed a fatalistic philosophy which, I suspect, you never had before, and—most important of all—you have started to think."

Regan shook his head decisively. "No, I am doing only one thing, Cabrera, the one thing that I learned to do well in the past two years—I am surviving."

"Then you have solved the secret of the ages," Cabrera told him, his old eyes twinkling slightly. "Personal survival, Regan, is important only to the individual whom it directly concerns. It is the survival of the race which must be the goal of the masses."

"Your status belies that, Cabrera."

"No. My status is the symbol which shows what importance I attach to the survival of mankind. Were it otherwise I might have taken myself off to some remote backwater and stagnated till death claimed me."

"Maybe, for you, survival and stagnation are incompatible."

"You question us too much," snapped Armand, angrily. "You live by our patronage, Regan, and you would do well to remember it."

"And you," replied Regan equably, "would do well to remember that I am as important to you as you are to me. Possibly," he smiled coldly at the younger man, "possibly I am even more important to you than you are to me."

"That can easily be tested." Armand's voice was brittle with dislike.

"Enough," said the old man. "Tomorrow we reach Xanadu. Time enough, then, to worry about the future."

The next morning, as the ship swung in orbit round the Earth, they took a smaller vessel down through the atmosphere, through the filmy curtain of clouds and into the daylight portion of the planet.

They plunged out of a jet black sky into the blue globe of the world as it lay beneath them, and the blackness of space gave way to the brilliant sky and sun of Earth. From his seat in the small, comfortable cabin Regan looked down on the spreading panorama of the city world that Earth had become over the centuries. The vast masses of the continents and the silver blue of the seas were the only things that had not changed in ten thousand thousand years. Except for minor details they were as they had been for myriads of Terran years. But now, the vast, spreading surge of population had enveloped the land masses in an all-embracing coverlet of brick, and steel, and concrete and plastic. Only here and there did the high peaks of the Andes, the Himalayas, the Alps and the Caucasus mountains raise their heads proudly above a world ravaged and plundered by

the forty billions of her own creation. The exploding population had long since taken possession of the last of the open spaces, and only the illimitable reaches of the heavens offered relief for a planet that was bursting at the seams and sated by its own abundance.

Regan had always disliked Earth. Now he loathed it with an intensity that surprised even him. His previous visits he remembered without pleasure, for in the past he had been an outworlder, an alien almost, who came to Earth to trade, to make his money from the need of its race to buy from other planets. The economics of necessity had been a closed book to Regan; he had known only that Terrans had to buy, and that he had what they needed. And Terrans wanted things greedily; they were brash and demanding, insulting in their treatment of outworlders—'colonials'—runaways from the hard, crowded life that was Earth at its busy worst.

Regan had known, vaguely, that there was jealousy at the back of that attitude—jealousy of the open spaces that he could enjoy on Caledon, jealousy of new planets with new people and vast, unspoiled landscapes that they—the Terrans—could see only by proxy.

In the past Regan had not enjoyed his visits; this one he hated.

Their ship came in low across the wide reaches of the Pacific Ocean, and ahead of them the long coastline of the South American continent stretched to the north and south. The peaks of the Andes showed in the distance, white-topped and cloud-rimmed, with the sun picking them out clearly despite the distance.

In the seat opposite Regan sat Cabrera, his hands folded across the top of his walking cane, his head craning to see the approaching continent out of the viewport ahead.

Abruptly, Regan leaned across. "What is Xanadu?" he asked.

Cabrera smiled but did not turn his head. "It is home," he answered simply.

Regan thought of Caledon and said no more.

Below the speeding ship the coastline passed, and with it the sea. They were low enough now to make out the sea farms of the coast, with their jutting breakwaters, and the dull, dark-colored patchwork quilt of the cultivated areas. Over the coast, the city state rose in all its artificial splendor

—the high, skyscraper buildings reaching their fingers to the sky through the spindly, fairy-webbed lacework of the high roads and the freight lines. The gleaming white areas of 'copter landing fields showed as chess board squares high in the caverns between the lifting spires, and below them, Regan knew, was only the oppression of too tall buildings that shut the sun from the lower city reaches, and that oppression was only relieved by an artificial daylight where night would otherwise rule.

The sun gleamed on the spires and windows, shafting up in glittering, diamond-like reflections that were gone in a micro-second as the vessel headed on over the city towards the high peaks.

Regan felt anticipation, and saw it reflected in the attitude of the old man as the mountains loomed ahead. He sat more tensely in his seat, his old eyes searching the way ahead as if for some lost treasure that only he knew about. He had the look of a man who had been away from home too long, and was now on its threshold. Regan envied him, and turned away to gaze in revulsion at the spawning horror of an over-populated world that was spread like some malignant growth over the land beneath.

The mountains loomed and broke before them. The maze of buildings petered out on the lower slopes and only the high, luxurious ambitions of the wealthy, spoiled the higher slopes of their virginity. Here and there, a small clutter of buildings revealed the place where some rich Terran had attempted to lift himself above the level of his fellows and establish himself in lonely seclusion on the slopes of the high peaks.

There came a break in the mountains, and the small ship headed for it, lifting in its flight path as the pilot headed for the pass between the peaks. The rock closed in around and on either side of them, snow-covered, white and virginal, for here was man unable to establish a foothold of any permanence. The valley floor lifted close beneath them, and then fell away. The rock faces were gone and ahead was only open sky with more peaks in the far distance. Before them lay Xanadu.

There was a wide valley with green grass and trees, the countryside was wild and open, and Regan saw, with eyes that refused to believe, herds of animals grazing on the grassy

slopes of the lower hills. There was color and life and light—such color as he never seen in his whole life before. On Caledon, his home, the grass was not so lush and green; on Caledon, the sky was not so blue, nor the trees so tall. Beside this lush valley, Caledon was dull and drear, a wild place with an alien taint that offended the eyes after this Terran paradise.

"I never knew that there were any places like this left on Earth," breathed Regan.

The old man stirred and smiled across at him. "There are a few," he said, "perhaps fifty in the whole world, owned by men who have managed to survive against the encroachment of the city state. I am one of the lucky ones, and this is my reason for surviving — this is what makes the struggle worthwhile." He looked away from Regan out of the view-port at the land over which the ship was skimming, barely one hundred feet above the green surface. "In all the universe, Regan, there are few places like this, and all of them are here, on Earth."

Regan looked down and marveled. He had seen films of Earth as it had been once, long ago. There had been wide areas of virgin land, wild and open to the sun, vast herds of animals which grazed and fought and lived and died—until man destroyed them. But in those artificial documentaries there had been one thing missing that no artificial process could ever have duplicated—reality! But this was the reality of which history spoke. This was the reality which Terrans had lost—most of them. This was the reality that all of them sought to regain. No wonder Cabrera had been moved to excitement at his return here, no wonder he had spoken the name of Xanadu with such reverence.

Regan looked down, and as he looked the ache for Caledon was gone and was replaced by a different ache. If this was Earth, then this was where he belonged.

IX

THE CRAFT slid down to a landing in the shadow of the hills, and, from a small group of buildings away to one side of the landing area, men came to tend the ship and to supervise their disembarkation. Two ground cars were ready

for them, and into one went Cabrera and Armand, while Regan and Carlo followed in the second.

The road was narrow and winding, and quite out of character with the sleek bodies of the vehicles that slid noiselessly over the white, smooth surface. Their route led through thickly wooded slopes and along the sides of wide, grassy meadows, and they headed towards the central point of the large valley. Around them loomed the high peaks of the Southern Andes, their snow-covered slopes seeming to touch the sky above them.

The car with Cabrera in it stopped before them on the crest of the rise, and the old man climbed stiffly from his seat to stand at the roadside and look down on the scene before him. Regan and Carlo joined him as he stood there, one hand clutching his cane, the other resting in the crook of Armand's elbow.

"What do you think of it, Regan?" he asked, his high, ancient voice trembling with pleasure.

Regan looked at it with his alien eyes, and allowed the beauty of it all to flow over him. "I have never seen anything like it in my whole life."

"Nor will you again," said Carlo from beside him. "I never knew a human who was not moved by his first sight of Xanadu—nor an alien for that matter."

They got back into the cars, and continued down into the small valley.

Cabrera's house, Regan saw, was old. The vast stone walls had the age of centuries upon them; they seemed as solid as the mountains that were in the background; as permanent as the bright sun high in the heavens. They smelt of age and history—and power.

If any one thing that he had seen told Regan of Cabrera's power it was this small, quiet valley, with its peace and content, its beauty and its solitude. Regan thought of the army of people that were necessary to run it; he thought of the giant ship with its crew that had brought him to Earth; but above all he wondered at Cabrera's power that could command such a place as this on a planet where privacy and peace were the prerogative of but a tiny few.

The web of intrigue must be vast indeed if a person such as Cabrera could be persuaded to leave a place like Xanadu to travel half across the galaxy.

Regan looked on Xanadu and marveled.

Once inside the vast entrance hall with its paneled splendor, Cabrera said, "I shall rest for awhile, Regan. This house is yours while you are here. Later, you shall meet the rest of the family." The dark, old eyes turned on him coldly. "And, Regan, while you are here your name will be Manuel Cabrera."

Regan eyed him blankly. The suddenness of the order had taken him completely by surprise. "What game are you playing, Cabrera?" he demanded.

"Mine—and yours," replied the old man. "Only Armand, Carlo and myself know that you are not my son. For the moment I want it to remain that way. It is as much for your own protection as for my benefit."

"Why did you not tell me this before?"

"I dislike the use of force in any circumstances. It suited me better that you come to Xanadu willingly."

"I could break you in half with one hand," snarled Regan.

"I doubt if you will," Cabrera said calmly. "Believe me, I have your interests at heart."

"What of the ship's crew? They know already."

"No. If you will think back we were all very careful not to mention your name when there was the possibility of anyone being within earshot." The old man smiled. "You are still too naïve, but that will pass. Rest now, and this evening you will meet your other—relatives."

Regan knew that he had little choice in the matter.

He was shown to a room by a short, dark servant in a light, semi-formal uniform of blue, and he unpacked his few belongings before relaxing on his bed. He dozed lightly for an hour or two, and when he awoke dusk was already darkening the sky outside the window. He got up, showered and freshened himself, and dressed in a dark, well fitting suit that had been laid out for him by the dark-skinned servant. By now it was quite dark, and the lights of the house streamed out across the wide lawn. Regan looked at the darkened vista of landscape and wondered what he should do.

Cabrera wanted him on Earth—and wanted him there as Manuel Cabrera. Why? The ghost of a man two years dead had to be very important if his own father wished to continue the illusion of his son's life. There were too many questions and too few answers in the whole peculiar situation to suit

Regan. His own mental interpretation could proceed only so far before it came to a full stop against a blank wall of enquiry that yielded nothing. Of late, he had noticed, he had been thinking more clearly and far more rapidly than he had ever done in his life before; it seemed that the stress of his position had heightened his powers of thought and deduction, but not, it appeared, sufficiently for him to be able to see round the end of a hypothetical wall.

He could see only two things.

First, Cabrera was in conflict with some group who wanted Manuel Cabrera dead.

Second, Manuel Cabrera was important because of something he knew or possessed. Possessed? Regan realized that it was hardly likely that Manuel had possessed anything, such was the manner of his death.

Even as the thought was born the third point flashed into his mind. He had been rescued by Manuel's capsule—therefore Manuel's belongings had been rescued with him, and that was doubly proved by the fact of the wrong identification. Therefore the situation was just the same as it had been two years ago when Manuel had left Earth on some mysterious mission which had ended with his murder.

And if that were so—

A knock at the door interrupted Regan's reverie. He shook his head in disgust, realizing that he could not take his line of thought any further without more information than he possessed at present. He crossed to the door and opened it.

Outside the dark figure of Carlo smiled at him sardonically. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." Regan stood aside and closed the door as the black man entered. "What do you want?"

"There will be about twenty people at the table tonight, Manuel—"

Regan glanced at him in surprise, but was rewarded only by a saturnine smile.

"—most of them you will already know. Your mother, your sister, Giselle, and your cousins, Roberto, Pasquale, Simon, Anita and Consuela. There will be your uncle, Pedro, his wife, Pilar, and your widowed aunt, Felicia—your uncle Peyrol died six years ago.

"I'll take it as it comes," interrupted Regan. "I'll not even be able to remember the names."

"You'd better," snapped Carlo, "or you may be a dead man sooner than you expect." From a pocket in his black jerkin he drew forth a small packet of color photos which he handed to Regan. "You have an hour before dinner to study them. I will call for you and escort you. And remember," he crossed to the door and paused with one hand on the handle, "the whole family has gathered to welcome you back, Manuel. Show your gratitude and your emotion by keeping as silent as is possible under the circumstances. No one will blame you."

He left the room and closed the door behind him, leaving Regan with more problems than he had ever faced before.

X

BY THE TIME Carlo knocked on the door for the second time, Regan had studied and memorized the faces of the fifteen photos, and learned almost by heart the brief biographical details that Carlo had scribbled on the back of each.

They walked along the high, brightly lit corridor towards the wide, curved stairway that led down to the ground floor, and Regan felt the tension pulling at him for some reason that he could not explain. Why should he be so troubled? These were not his people, not his family. There was no one among them to whom he owed anything, no one whom he even knew, save by courtesy of a small color print.

"Nervous?" asked Carlo.

"No. Should I be?" Regan fiddled with his dark glasses and hoped that his appearance would not cause too much comment.

They went slowly down the stairway, and crossed the wide, paneled hall. A servant bowed slightly and pushed open the great double doors that led through to a great dining room. Beyond was light and color, gleaming crystal and glass, bright silver and darkened woodwork. There were women in brilliant dresses, men in somber black, and from the gathering he could pick out the old, stooped form of Cabrera, still with his walking cane, approaching him across the thickly carpeted floor. Beside him was an old lady, gray-haired and austere, leaning on the old man's arm, yet walking with a firm, upright stance as they approached.

The old couple stopped two yards away, and Regan felt

an unreasoning panic rise within him. Surely they had not gone so far as to deceive this old woman that here was her lost son whom she had thought was dead? His eyes met hers across the intervening space as though drawn by a magnet. They were old and gray, nestling in the brown wrinkles of her face, yet bright and alert. As he met them with his own gaze Regan felt the panic fall away; there was knowledge in them that was far more important to him than the tears of welcome that he had half expected. The thin, old lips below them trembled slightly, but the eyes were bright and diamond hard, giving him the message that he so badly needed to be told.

She knew that he was not Manuel.

Even as the relief flooded through him she released the old man's arm and crossed to him, lifting her arms and her face to him in an all embracing gesture.

"My son."

Regan embraced her gently, and said nothing.

Behind the old couple a tall, statuesque girl with long, dark hair, offsetting a plain, white dress, moved to greet him. Her skin was creamy white and flawless, her features strong and regular, yet with a beauty that had its origin in centuries of breeding. Her eyes were deep violet and they met Regan's impassively, set in a face that was cold and devoid of emotion. There was no message for him there.

She drew near and lifted her face for him to kiss.

"Manuell"

"Giselle!" Regan brushed her cheek with his lips, and felt the cool scent of her in his nostrils. As she stood back he looked at her and wondered how she was still unmarried at thirty-five. Her beauty alone would have made her sought after by the richest men in the universe; her wealth would have attracted all others.

There followed a charade in which he played his part with the ease of an automaton; the cheeks of women were offered to him to brush with his own hairless, baby skin; the clasp of hands from men who held his prosthetic limb gingerly, as if expecting that it would come away from his arm if they gripped too hard. And when it was over and the platitudes and greetings done, Carlo led him to the crowded table and seated him beside Armand. At the head of the table sat the old man with Giselle on his left hand and Regan to

his right. Thus protected, Regan had only brief comments to make, and these he made with an ease that surprised him, though when the vast meal was over he could not recall one word of the conversation that eddied around him.

The main meal ended and the women rose from the table. Regan felt, not for the first time, as if he was centuries back in the past, with the old world courtesies of the dead years holding him in their grasp. The old lady rose at the other end of the table, and called to him along its vast length.

"Manuel. It would please me if you would take me to my room."

Regan bowed and walked the length of the table to offer his arm. A servant opened the doors and together, moving slowly, they left the room. Her grip on his arm was light but firm; her step was sure, and there was no frailty about her despite her age. Regan wanted to speak, but he could not, and the silence of the old lady shackled his tongue. They climbed the wide stairs and went along the paneled corridor towards the far west wing of the building. She paused before a door and released his arm.

"Please, come in, Manuel. I would like to speak with you."

The room behind the door was only the first of what turned out to be a private three-room suite, and beyond it a bright wood fire burned in an old fashioned grate, warming the neat, austere lounge that had none of the comfort of the rest of the house.

"This is my home," she told him. "This is where I keep those things that are precious to me. To the old, it is the old things that are most important. There are memories far more important than dreams. Dreams are for the young, memories are for the old." The bright eyes swiveled on him suddenly. "They tell me that your name is Regan."

"That is true. Martin Regan."

"You were the last to see my—my son alive."

"That, too, is true."

She turned away, nodding slowly. "It is sad to lose one's only son, Señor Regan. It is doubly sad to lose him twice."

"I am sorry."

"You should not be. You are alive, and that is good. Too many people die by violence these days. Where is your home?"

"Caledon."

She nodded. "I have heard of it. They tell me it is a lovely world."

"So I thought until first I saw this valley."

"To all men Earth is beautiful."

Regan shook his head. "No. It is ugly. I am an out-worlder and Earth is ugly and hateful. It is a cruel, hard world that demands and demands and gives little in return. I hated Earth until I saw Xanadu, and then I knew what Earth had been like centuries ago, and I don't hate it any more—I only hate what it has become."

"Yet you have a family on Caledon?"

"Yes, my parents live there and my relatives."

"You are married?"

"No."

The old lady poked at the wood fire with a poker. "I do not understand what is happening. My husband has his secrets even from me. I know only that the family must come first, and that you are aiding us by your presence here. For that I must thank you, *señor*. Without the family this valley would not exist—think of that, and perhaps you will realize why we fight to keep it." She turned away from the fire and sat down in an ancient, high-backed rocking chair. "And now, Señor Regan, I am tired. This has been a sad day for me. I hope that I never see its like again."

"Of course. I will leave you now. Good night, *señora*, and—I am sorry."

He went out of the small hot room, and found Giselle waiting for him in the outer room.

They stood for several long seconds looking at each other, and Regan had only one thought in his mind. There were now five people who knew that he was not Manuel Cabrera—and the odds were mounting against him.

At last she turned to the door and Regan followed her into the corridor. Silently, they walked back to the head of the stairs, and as they paused before descending, the girl said coldly, "I knew that you were not Manuel the moment you greeted me."

"How?"

"Carlo should have told you." A ghost of a smile twisted her perfect mouth. "Manuel never kissed me in his whole life."

She led him down the stairway and paused in the entrance hall.

"They are waiting for you to join them."

Regan studied her thoughtfully. "And you?"

"I will join the other women." She smiled more widely, the first real sign of emotion that Regan had seen her display, but it was a mocking, half-derisive smile. "Don't worry. If my father wishes it, then your secret is safe with me."

Regan watched her go through another door at the far side of the entrance hall, and then he went back into the dining room.

The men were gathered around one end of the great table, clear now of the dirty plates and the white linen. There were only large brandy glasses, ash trays and the heavy, pungent odor of tobacco.

"Ah, Manuel," called the old man. "Is your mother resting?"

"She was tired by the excitement of the day," said Regan.

"Of course."

From beside old Cabrera the thin, slight figure of his "cousin," Simon, rose to his feet. "Come, Manuel, sit by your father."

"Thank you, Cousin." Regan walked around the table and took the proffered chair.

"You have changed greatly since last we saw you," Simon pulled another chair nearer to the group. "We have heard briefly of your experiences. You are lucky to be alive, Manuel."

Regan looked at Carlo, but the black man avoided his glance.

"Even your voice has changed," said Simon.

"Even my voice, Cousin," agreed Regan equably. "I have to thank the Licharians for my life and such faculties as I still possess. I would be dead—or worse."

"What could be worse than death, nephew?" Pedro Cabrera, his uncle, was a younger version of the old man, his hair still jet black, but his face leathery with age.

"Blindness, no arms or legs, no face, no ears—nothing but a mind trapped in a body which will not die."

Silence greeted him, and he could see Carlo glaring at him across the table. Perhaps this was more than Manuel would have said. Regan poured himself a brandy from the decanter and felt an overpowering urge to finish the pantomime once and for all, here and now.

"I think," said Carlo, "that Manuel would prefer to forget his experiences for now."

"He is of the family," said Pedro sharply. "He knows what is in our minds."

"Uncle Pedro—"

"Carlo, we know nothing," snapped the older man. He turned to the bent figure of the old man seated stonily at the head of the table. "Brother, tell us, do you know what happened to the carrier that Manuel had with him?"

Regan turned his head slowly and gazed bleakly at Carlo. His dark face was set in rigid lines, the eyes bleak and expressionless, and Regan knew with sudden grim delight that Pedro had spoken out of turn.

"We know nothing," said the high voice of Cabrera.

"But everything was with you when the capsule was hurled clear of the ship," insisted Pedro, his attention turning again on Regan. "That much we know because everything was returned to us—everything that is—"

"Except the carrier," finished Regan softly. He strove to keep the exultation from his face and tone. "That being so—" he let the implication hang in the air.

"We must assume that it is in other hands," said Pedro icily.

A chair whispered on the thick carpet, and Cabrera was on his feet, leaning on the ever-present walking cane that was his third and strongest leg. "There has been enough of speculation, Pedro," he said. "We have had a long and trying day. This discussion leads us nowhere."

The others rose too. Carlo stepped near to Regan and smiled at him, a smile denied by the coldness of his eyes.

"Come, Cousin. I will see you to your room."

Not a word was spoken as they mounted the staircase and walked along the gallery that led to Regan's room.

"You should not be too clever, Cousin," said Carlo, softly. "Uncle Pedro was wrong to precipitate the matter, and you were wrong to take advantage of his lapse."

Regan smiled disarmingly. "I went where the wind of conversation led me."

"There is such a thing as too much knowledge."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, Cousin, warning you is all." Carlo eyed him somberly. "There may come a time, if you persist in being clever,

when we may have to reconsider your position, and that consideration might not be to your advantage. And now—good night, Cousin.”

XI

REGAN CLOSED the door behind him, and locked it. The action was a reflex one, and he didn't realize he had done it until he walked away.

Sitting by the window, he looked out across the darkened lawn. He took off his dark glasses and allowed his vision to open up the landscape beyond the wide garden. The trees hid the near distant view, but beyond them, high and gleaming in the moonlight, rose the mountains. They were all of twenty miles away, but they were as clear to him as if it had been broad daylight.

The belongings of Manuel Cabrera had been returned to his family. Regan had known that already, and had not been surprised. It had been a careless move by Pedro Cabrera to reveal the fact that something was missing when the family had received those belongings—careless, but unavoidable because of his ignorance.

A carrier!

Regan thought of the first conversation he had had with the old man; he thought of the difficulties which Manuel had encountered in trying to leave Earth on some mysterious mission—a mission which had involved the innocent person of Regan within its toils. A carrier! That could mean papers, documents, records—which were now in the hands of some unknown agency inimical to the Cabrera family. There still remained one question to which he could not even begin to guess the answer. What possible use was he to Cabrera? Did it really matter whether Manuel was alive or dead? To the old man, obviously, it did; and if it mattered to him then it mattered to others.

Regan shuddered slightly.

He left the window and took off his jacket. On the bed lay his night clothes, neatly laid out by the unnamed servant. The sheets were folded back, and on the white pillow lay a small, black box. Regan felt apprehension tingle his spine, and his first thought was to throw it out of the window before it blasted him to oblivion. He bent nearer and saw

that there was a short lead running from it which ended in a tiny earplug. Thoughtfully, moving slowly, he lifted the lid and found that the box contained a wire recorder and an envelope.

He lifted the envelope and weighed it in his hand; it was slim, yet well filled, and when he slit it open he found that it contained ten one thousand credit notes, brand new and with the telltale sliver of metal gleaming slightly where it was bonded to the blue and gray printed paper.

Even more slowly he reached for the tiny earplug and examined it closely. It was of a common type which he had seen before, with a built in switch that would operate the recorder as soon as he put it to his ear. Well, there was only one way of finding out what it contained. Carefully, he pushed the plug into his ear, and at once the thin, hair wire began to move across the recording head.

"Regan! Yes, I know your name." The voice was tinny, thin, a mechanical whisper that was completely unidentifiable. "Regan, listen carefully. This spool is self erasing and you have only one chance to hear what I have to say. You are in danger here because old Cabrera needs you to recover what is lost to him. You are the bait which he must use if he is to recover this thing of which I speak."

The carrier, thought Regan, bleakly.

"Your one chance is to leave here as soon as possible. If it is not yet midnight when you hear this, then go tonight. If it is later then wait and go tomorrow."

Regan glanced at the clock by the door. It was eleven-thirty.

"You will head for the mountains by the road which leads from the landing field. The distance is fourteen miles and you must do it by four in the morning. The road peters out short of the mountains, and from the end of it you will see a pass that rises between the peaks. The climb from there to the head of the pass will take you three hours. You must be there by seven. Two miles through the pass you will come to a small stream that issues from the side of the mountain on the left of your path, and by that stream you will find a one-man 'copter which you can use for the rest of your journey down to the coastal area. Your course is pre-set for the landing area Santiago two-one-nine,

and the 'copter is registered from there. After that you are on your own."

I'm on my own now, thought Regan.

"There is money in the envelope which will take you home to Caledon—if you can make it. This is your affair. If you go tonight and fall behind the schedule I have set out—if you cannot reach the end of the road by four-thirty at the latest—then turn back and try again tomorrow. If you see anyone or anyone sees you on the return then say that you could not sleep and went for a walk. And remember, there are spy screens guarding this valley, and you will not be safe off the ground until you are through the pass and by the stream I spoke of. Place this box in the top drawer of the bureau by the bed and it will be collected later.

"And now, good-bye. Your life is in your own hands."

The wire spun to an end and slid from the spool with a click as the force of the motor pulled it from its moorings. Regan removed the earpiece and laid it in the box. A glance at the clock told him that it was just after eleven-thirty, and his wristwatch confirmed this.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and wondered what he should do. There was too much truth in what the wire had told him for him to ignore it entirely. There was truth in the desire of the old man to use him for his own ends; there was truth in the knowledge that something had been lost which Cabrera wanted to recover; there was truth in the subterfuge of Regan's own concealed identity; and there had been truth in Carlo's warning barely ten minutes earlier.

Yet still he hesitated.

Clearly, someone wanted him out of the way, and Regan was stubborn enough not to give way to his own desire for freedom just on the spur of the moment. And yet his stubbornness might be misplaced. The old man had indicated more than once what would have happened had Regan not agreed to accompany him voluntarily, and that, alone, could be reason enough for him to leave Xanadu with all possible speed. The reason for going was clear; the means of going were to hand.

Regan felt a sudden claustrophobic desire to get away from the house and from Cabrera. Once in the city state he could get in touch with either the Terran representative of his firm or with the Caledon diplomatic service. In a few days his

troubles would be over, and there would be nothing that anyone could do about it. He stuffed the money into his jerkin pocket, slid out of the neat, dark trousers of his evening suit and dressed himself in the heavier, more serviceable clothing that hung in a cupboard to one side of the bed. For a moment he hesitated. There was nothing he wished to take with him—no belongings that he could call his own. The clothes he wore had been provided by Cabrera, the watch on his wrist had been a present from Armand when they had given him his wardrobe of clothes aboard the ship from Ferroval. No, there was nothing that he could truly call his own.

The gallery outside his room was still well lit. Probably there would be servants about still clearing up the remains of the dinner. He crossed to the window and looked out. His room was on the first floor of the house and about thirty yards from the main entrance. The moon was behind the house and casting long shadows across the wide lawn. He would be in darkness to normal eyes.

Away to the left, out the window, the bulking curve of the corner buttress, with a black downpipe in the corner, beckoned him. Surely and quickly, Regan swung his body along the window ledge and reached for a stone outcropping that ran along the front of the house and about two feet below his present position. His arms ached a little above the prosthetic elbows, but the fingers gripped hard and surely. The ivy rustled slightly as his body brushed it, but except for that there was no sound of his passing. The stone ledge ended, and the down pipe was within his reach. Thirty seconds more and the ground was firm beneath his feet.

The time was eleven-forty-seven, and Regan wasn't even breathing hard.

XII

THE GOLDEN fingers of the dawn were brushing the very tops of the mountains as Regan paused at the end of the white road which stretched far behind him, back towards the landing field. His body ached slightly, and his mouth was dry, but the cool night air had an exhilarating effect on him that washed away any weariness he might have felt.

Before him the way led up, steeper now, pointing to the

black orifice of the pass between the peaks where he was headed. It was three-thirty, and it would be dawn in another half hour. He stretched his back muscles and moved on up the slope.

It was just after six when he reached the head of the pass and began the slow descent on the other side. The mountain air was cold in the early morning, but there was no breeze and everything was clean and sweet. He had well over an hour and a half to play with, and already, just ahead, he could hear the tinkling of fast-running water against the rocks.

The stream was small and clear, bubbling over the rocks and foaming at the base of the larger boulders. It was ice cold and Regan quenched his thirst and bathed his face in it before looking around for the 'copter. It was not far away, half hidden under an overhang of rock, yet clearly visible to anyone who was looking for it. He strapped himself into the single harness seat, and swung the tiny control panel into position in front of him. Below him the valley floor fell away, and the whole vista of the mountains opened up as he rose to gain height. The vision of the coastal plain that he had seen only the day before, spread ahead of him, this time in reverse, with the sea a gray mantle far off in the distance, while nearer to him the plague covering of the city state blotted the ground from view.

Regan set the controls for landing area Santiago Two-One-Nine, as he had been ordered, and sat back while the tiny machine flew itself.

It was ten minutes to eight when the 'copter steadied in its flight, slowed, and then swooped down to the lifting spires of the city. The high roads came up to meet him, the freight traffic black upon them, and moving fast. Within his view were five landing areas, and the 'copter knew just which one it wanted. It slanted down, pirouetted in the air, and dropped neatly and safely into the corner reserved for one-man craft.

And now, thought Regan, I have to think for myself.

He realized that he hadn't slept for almost thirty hours, and now that he was safe in the Santiago district, his most pressing need was for a meal and several hours of sound sleep.

He took the registration key from the 'copter and went

slowly across to the office. A bored, black-skinned clerk checked it against an autolist and handed him a hundred credit note. Regan chuckled to himself in surprise as someone else's deposit went into his pocket.

As he turned away from the office he felt no surprise when he saw the two men close behind him. Rather it was a confirmation of a nagging doubt that had been at the back of his mind ever since the previous night.

"We have been expecting you, *señor*," said the taller of the two, with a slight smile.

"And I," said Regan slowly, "am not greatly surprised to find you waiting for me."

"Then we are all satisfied." The man gestured easily with his right hand while his left remained ostentatiously in his jerkin pocket. "If you please."

Regan bowed slightly, and walked toward a row of escalators that led down from the 'copter roof. For an instant he braced himself to jump into furious action, but he noticed that the second man—a short, tubby South American—stayed well back and out of immediate reach. The plan was obvious. If Regan had tried to jump the man nearest to him and succeeded, he would have little chance against a second opponent standing some ten yards away out of reach and out of immediate contact. They were a competent pair, of that he was sure.

They went down the escalator to the topmost pedestrian route, and then took the twenty mile band of the moving road northwards and out of the Santiago district. They traveled for almost an hour while people came and went around them, while crowds gathered and thinned—and always the second man stayed just too far off. They left the roller road, and took another elevator upwards, high into the gleaming spires and the high roads of the freight lanes. There, in a quiet loading bay, the tall, young man ordered Regan into the cab of a giant goods transporter that stood ready and waiting for them. The second man climbed up behind them. The great vehicle was on manual control and the young man handled the bulk of it with expert ease as he swung it out of the bay and on to the wide, slow lane of the high road.

Northwards they went again, slipping from lane to lane until they were roaring at top speed along the fast outer

band, and still the direction was northwards. The driver switched the controls to automatic and relaxed in the seat beside Regan.

"Will this trip take long?" Regan asked abruptly.

"Three hours."

"Then I will sleep. Wake me before we arrive."

Regan settled himself into the seat as comfortably as he could, and ignored his two companions. He was feeling tired and dispirited, and the long night without sleep, followed by this—this fiasco, had brought on weariness and depression. He needed rest before he threw himself into action to extricate himself from the mess he had gotten himself into. The monotonous roar of great motors was only partly shielded from his ears, but it had the effect of lulling him into a deep and dreamless sleep, from which he awoke three hours later dry-mouthed but refreshed.

The young man's hand had shaken him gently, and as he eased his cramped body from its position of sleep, Regan asked, "We have arrived?"

"In a few minutes."

A four-man 'copter was waiting for them, and the tall, young man took the pilot's seat, motioning Regan to sit beside him. Still the fat man stayed well to the rear and said nothing.

"No blindfolds?" queried Regan as the machine moved to its takeoff position.

The young man chuckled appreciatively. "You have been reading too many stories, *señor*. Would you really be able to find your way back from our destination on the basis of knowing that this is San Felipe Three-Seven-Four?"

Regan smiled. "No," he admitted.

As they landed Regan turned himself from contemplation of his new prison to a series of rapid, all-seeing glances around the 'copter roof. If he were to escape—should the chance present itself—then this would be the only way by which he could leave. Ground flight was right out of the question, even if he knew anything about mountain climbing. There were several 'copters standing in the shadow of the great hangars, and among them Regan spotted two that he could fly himself without any difficulty should the chance come to him.

The house below the 'copter roof was light and modern

and airy, but somehow it was overshadowed by the great brooding peak above it. Unseen though it was, the mountain overawed the house and all within it.

The two men shepherded Regan into a vast lounge, one wall of which was all glass. Beyond the glass a small flower garden added color to the room, and beyond the garden the mountain slope fell away, down and down, sheer and precipitous, to the upper levels of the city state that blurred in the midday haze far below.

"You will wait here," said the young man, and abruptly Regan was alone.

For an instant he thought of trying immediate flight, but he put the idea aside as impracticable for the moment. He crossed to the vast window and looked out of it at the immense scene before him, imagining, as he did so, how the owner of this place might stand or sit for hour upon hour, brooding on his wealth and power—brooding on his superiority over his fellow men who bred and spawned, lived and died, in the gleaming prison of their own making far below this false aerie.

From behind him a door whispered open, but Regan didn't bother to turn round.

"Good day, *señor*." The voice was deep and sonorous; it commanded a respect that Regan was not prepared to give.

He stifled the urge to turn round, and kept his position in front of the window. Quietly, he remarked, "You must be a very unhappy man, *señor*."

"I do not understand."

"You need this vast window to remind you that you have escaped from the world out there. But does it tell you that you will die one day, just as those over whom you have power will die?"

"You are insolent."

Regan smiled and counted the first round to himself as he turned to face the other man. He was big, an athlete once perhaps, but now his heavily muscled body was running to unhealthy fat with a paunch that could not be concealed by the perfect cut of his immaculate white suit. The face was dark-skinned and heavily jeweled, with deep, black eyes that gleamed through pudgy rolls of fat, above a large, hooked nose that only accentuated the cruelty of the overall impression.

"Insolence is relative," Regan retorted idly. "I might think that you are insolent for daring to remove me against my will. What is your name?"

"I am called Malatest." The man eased his heavy body into a chair and waved Regan to another. "Just why did you leave Xanadu, Señor Cabrera?"

XIII

REGAN SAT astounded.

For an instant he wondered if his ears were playing him tricks. Malatest sat and regarded him, brooding and serious, and Regan had to convince himself that he had not been mistaken. Why did he leave Xanadu? He felt an insane desire to laugh, and for once he was quite at a loss for words.

"I am puzzled," said Malatest. "Two years away from your family and you leave within the day on a wild goose chase that was so transparent that I laughed when it was suggested to me." He leaned forward in his seat. "Why did you leave Xanadu?"

Regan sat quiet.

"I find your attitude ridiculous," snapped Malatest.

"And I find yours ludicrous."

"Señor Cabrera, your life is in my hands. Once you have opened the carrier I can kill you and that would be the end of the family Cabrera. You know that, yet you walk into a trap that was so transparently obvious that I am at a loss to know how it reaped success."

So, Malatest had the carrier. That was another piece of information that Regan could store away. And it hadn't been opened. Slowly, the pieces fell into place.

Regan knew enough about personal carriers to realize that the one that Manuel Cabrera had been using would be one of the latest type, geared to his person in such a manner that no one but the owner could open it without destroying the contents so utterly that they would be of no use to anyone. There were methods of opening them, so Regan had heard, but they were long and costly operations requiring scientific and technical skill of an extremely high degree—and then success could not be guaranteed.

No wonder the person of Manuel Cabrera was so important.

"Have you nothing to say?" demanded Malatest.

For an instant Regan was tempted to say, "I am not Cabrera," but he bit the words back. He couldn't prove it, and in the unlikely event of him being believed he would at once cease to be important to the brooding man before him. And once his apparent importance was gone . . .

"You must have an efficient organization within the walls of Xanadu," he said at last.

Malatest shrugged deprecatingly.

"And do you imagine that I will open the carrier for you without some guarantee of my personal safety?"

Malatest chuckled. "You are in no position to ask for guarantees, Cabrera. All I want are the contents of that carrier. With them I have the family Cabrera within the palm of my hand—that is why we have waited so long, over two years, to bring you and the carrier together." He rose to his feet. "I can wait a little longer. You may stay here and admire the view. I expect the carrier to arrive early tomorrow, and when it comes we will talk again."

He walked heavily from the room, and the door closed behind him. Bare seconds later it opened again, and a servant came in carrying a large, covered tray which he set on a table before bowing and going out again. Regan crossed to the table and lifted the cover. At least they didn't intend him to starve.

He sat down and ate with relish, realizing that more than twelve hours had passed since his last meal at Xanadu.

Xanadu!

The tangled web of his position had grown worse these last few minutes. Malatest had organized his removal from Xanadu—and then asked him why he had left. Malatest thought he was Manuel Cabrera—yet the person who had planted the recorder in his room had known that he was not. The unknown voice on the tape had wanted him in Malatest's hands—yet Malatest himself had been kept in the dark. But why? If Malatest didn't know his real identity then he would go ahead and make him open the carrier—and if that happened then the contents would be destroyed—Regan sat bolt upright in his chair—which was exactly what Cabrera wanted.

Pedro and the others at the dinner party had jumped the gun because of their own ignorance, but the old man had

known what he was doing all along. He'd had a week aboard the ship from Ferroval to sort it out, and by the time they reached Xanadu he had put his plan into operation straight away. Force Regan away from Xanadu, tip off the opposition, and at one stroke he would remove both causes of his own personal embarrassment.

Regan cursed himself for falling into such a trap so easily. Yet he had to admire the ingenuity with which old Cabrera had handled the situation.

One thing was sure; old Cabrera had no use for him—except in so far as Regan could accomplish the old man's aims. Malatest would have no use for him once he knew how unimportant was the man who was his prisoner.

He slept again, more comfortably this time, and when he awoke darkness had fallen. He rose from the divan, and through the great window he could see the glittering, fairy lights of the city state far below; there were acre upon acre of pinpoint stars, gleaming and winking, spreading out towards the far horizon where they merged with the distance so that even Regan's alien eyes could not separate them one from another. His sleep had refreshed him; his confidence was greater than it had ever been, and the night was his ally.

His watch told him that it was eight in the evening. The city state would be waking to its night hours of pleasure and entertainment.

Tomorrow, Malatest had said, would see the arrival of the carrier—and tomorrow night would be too late.

Regan turned from the window and crossed to the door. Not unexpectedly it was locked from the other side. He smiled to himself and took the handle in both hands, twisting hard in both directions alternately, working with all his strength to exert unequal stresses and strains upon the mechanism. The tension was hard on his upper arms, but the lower, false forearms took the power he thrust out and transmitted it effortlessly into sheer strength. The lock creaked, gave a little, creaked again, and twisted itself to ruins with a metallic grating that made Regan wince with apprehension.

Beyond the door the corridor was empty, and he paused for a brief second, his ears straining for any sound that someone might be coming to investigate the noise of the

shattered lock. No one came.

The dark glasses went into his jerkin pocket as he stepped out of the room, and already there were voices raised close at hand—Malatest's stentorian tones ringing above the rest. The way to the 'copter roof lay to the left and Regan headed in that direction silently and fast. He got to the first corner when Malatest appeared—and with him were the two men who had escorted Regan from Santiago earlier that day.

The darkened corridor was lit only by a torch carried by the tall, young man, and Regan saw them long before they spotted him. Their one impression could only have been of a fast moving form which hit them out of the darkness with the speed and violence of a leaping cat. The young man tried to get at a weapon in his jerkin pocket, and he screamed in agony as Regan smashed his upper arm with one ironhard fist. The fat South American backed off a yard and tried to move faster than Regan. He failed, and went silently to the ground, his skull fractured and bleeding under the sheer ferocity of Regan's attack.

Malatest never had a chance. The brief seconds gained for him by his two henchmen sealed his own fate, for he managed to draw a needle gun from his pocket, and was struggling to take a steady aim in pitch darkness when Regan hit him from the rear. The side of one hand caught him across the back of the neck, and the sharp, ugly snap told Regan that Malatest was no more.

The corridor lay open before him, and at the far end was the door and stairway which led to the 'copter roof. He headed for the nearer of the two craft that he had picked out, and climbed into the cabin. He hit the starter button and let out a deep breath of relief as the motor throbbed into life behind him. He wheeled the machine out of the hangar and across to the center of the takeoff area.

He relaxed at the control, flying the machine manually and erratically, uncertain in the flush of his success where he should head for or what he should do. Before him lay the district of San Felipe with its sheltering crowds; above him lay the clear night sky. He looked up at it, seeking out familiar stars among the timeless constellations, and tasting the freedom of his position.

And then—he saw the ship.

XIV

IT SHOWED only as a great, black blotch against the sky, a hole in space blanketing the stars beyond it. It was low, far lower than any vessel of its size had any right to be, unless it was on some special mission in the immediate neighborhood, and Regan realized grimly and hopelessly that it was. It had to be heading for the now darkened roof of Malatest's castle; probably it brought the carrier which was the cause of so much trouble and so much death; perhaps . . .

Instinctively, Regan swung the 'copter away on another course, heading he knew not where, but anxious to get out of the immediate area of anything which might threaten his new found freedom. He looked up again. The ship was moving with him.

Timing its dive to a fraction, the dark craft swept down on him, and before he had time to act the motor cut out behind him, and only the whine of the rotors relieved the sudden silence. The 'copter fell away and slid sideways. Regan wrestled with the controls with a desperation born of fear, and his heart pounded with horror as the ground rushed up to meet him. He didn't see the sudden swoop of the ship above him, nor the cascading snare of the magnetic grapples that plummeted around the 'copter. There was a frightening clang as the body of the machine was enveloped in the metallic web that issued, spiderlike, from the belly of the ship. The idly spinning rotors thrashed themselves to pieces in a second, and the 'copter hung motionless, swaying slightly, in a vast silence with only the rush of air and the creaking of metal to add eerie sound effects to Regan's hopelessness.

The ground fell away as the ship climbed in altitude. The dark body came down upon him as the vessel drew its captive into its own great hull. There was a muffled clamor as the grappling unit drew the 'copter into its resting place, and the light from outside the ship faded as the cargo hatch slid into place beneath. Regan sat still and waited. The grapple set the 'copter gently down on the now solid deck, and then fell away as the power was cut off. The 'copter lurched, groaned, and settled at a canting angle.

Desperation made Regan move swiftly from his seat. He slid open the 'copter door and jumped down to the metal

deck; the lights were dim around him, and to one side he could see a ladder leading up to a door set high above. Away to the left a great pair of double doors led through to another cargo hatch, and he knew well that they would be firmly closed. His one way out lay through the door at the top of the ladder. His one way . . . and he knew that it was no chance at all.

He took the stairs two at a time, and he was only halfway up them when the door slid open and two figures stood illuminated by the glare from the corridor beyond. Regan stopped in mid-flight, and the two men stood looking at him from above—a frozen tableau of surprise—each trying to assimilate what his eyes told him to be true.

“Carlo!” whispered Regan blankly.

The black man stepped forward and looked down at him with eyes that were blank with surprise beneath brows high lifted. Yet even the surprise could not shake him utterly.

“You!” His voice mirrored his astonishment, yet his mind was still in control. “What the devil—”

“What the hell are you doing here?” snarled Regan.

“You—you escaped?”

“How did you know I was a prisoner? How did you know where to look for me?” The pent up fear that had been with Regan since the minute he had spotted the black bulk of the ship, slid from him in an overwhelming rush of fury. This was the last thing he had expected, but now that he was faced with it he recalled his conclusions back in Malatest’s castle. The old man was here to reap his reward for the duplicity he had displayed; how, Regan didn’t know, nor, in his blind rage did he stop to wonder.

He mounted the rest of the stairway in four great leaps, and Carlo gave ground before him. The other man was a white-faced crew member in officer’s uniform, who stood aside, cringing almost from the violence written in every line and in every muscle of Regan’s body.

“Don’t be too hasty, Cousin,” snapped Carlo. He stood his ground with a solidity that slowed Regan in his tracks. “We came here to take you out, but it seems our rescue wasn’t necessary.”

The words jolted Regan to some semblance of sanity. He recalled the surprise in Carlo’s eyes as they had looked at each other across half the length of the stairway. Yet, should

he not have looked surprised? The last person he would have expected to see away from Malatest's domain would have been Regan.

"Your—father will wish to see you," said Carlo quietly.

"The old man? Is he here?"

"Yes." Carlo smiled thinly. "He is very angry."

"He'll be angrier still when he knows that I am here."

Carlo shrugged helplessly. "I cannot tell you all that has passed and led us here. I doubt that you would believe me anyway. Come, we will go to old Cabrera."

Reluctantly, Regan followed Carlo along the brightly lit corridor of the ship. Now that his anger had faded a little he knew that there were too many questions that had to be asked, too many inconsistencies. There was an unreal air of confidence that made him bleakly suspicious of the family Cabrera; and yet, why should they have appeared on the scene in this manner if all the old man had wanted was to see the carrier destroyed? There was no profit in his being so precipitous. All he had needed to do was to sit back and wait. True, Regan might have been killed, but the stakes were clearly so high that the death of one such interloper—albeit unwitting—would hardly have caused the family Cabrera much lost sleep.

The corridor divided, and Carlo took the right branch. Some ten yards along it ended in a large metal door which slid open on silent bearings as they approached. Carlo stepped through and paused with Regan standing behind him and in the shadow of the entrance.

"I have a surprise for you, Uncle, and for you, Armand." He stood aside and allowed Regan to enter the cabin.

The old man sat at a desk on the far side, and Armand stood to one side. They both looked from Carlo to Regan, and the surprise that Carlo had earlier shown was repeated on their faces as Regan stood looking at them with grim anger.

"Regan!" The old man was the first to speak. The surprise was replaced by an expression of relief that spread across his creased, weathered face—a relief that was so obvious and so genuine that Regan felt only confusion where moments earlier there had been only anger.

"Sit down, sit down. I feared that you were dead."

"And the carrier destroyed?" Regan sat down beside the

desk. He saw Armand and Carlo exchange glances that could only be described as sheepish, and the whole atmosphere within the cabin was totally different than the reception he had expected.

"Yes," agreed Cabrera, "and the carrier destroyed."

"Then you are doubly disappointed. I have not seen the carrier."

The old man sighed, his eyes fluttered and looked away from Regan with every sign of acute embarrassment. "I owe you the most heartfelt apology that I can offer on behalf of the family, Regan. This was none of my doing, though, when you left Xanadu, I knew exactly what was to happen."

"I doubt that you were surprised."

"I was surprised that any kin of mine could so easily sully the honor which the family Cabrera possesses." The words were bitten out with a sudden scorn as the old eyes turned in utter contempt on the sheepish figures of Armand and Carlo. "Regan, this plan was suggested to me by my nephews while we were on route from Ferroval to Earth. They put it forward as being the only means to ensure the destruction of Manuel's carrier. I would not agree to it since I knew that its success could only result in your death."

Regan looked in amazement at the other two.

"Once we had arrived at Xanadu they took it upon themselves to put into operation this—this wretched scheme which I had already vetoed. They did it without my knowledge, and, once I heard of it, I took such steps as were necessary to put right the wrong which they had done you."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"The watch which I gave to you," said Armand wearily, "it is also a direction indicator. We knew exactly where you were from the moment you left Xanadu."

"I see."

"Regan," said the old man, "I asked you once if you were surprised that I should believe in God. I ask you now to believe that, as God is my witness, I would have done you no such wrong as you have suffered. My fear was that I might be too late."

"You reckoned without me," snapped Regan. "Did you know that Malatest was your opponent?"

"Malatest is nothing," said Carlo. "He is a known quantity to us—an agent of the colony worlds who believed that he

was operating in secret behind a commercial façade. It was not hard to fool him with our scheme." The black man turned, suddenly, away from him. "I, too, would offer my apologies, Regan. I was too anxious to see the carrier destroyed before some scientific idiot found a way to open it."

"The castle was in darkness when we arrived," said the old man, a question plain in his voice.

"Dead men lie better in the dark," retorted Regan.

"Malatest?"

"Among others. His neck is broken."

"A pity, he was but a pawn in the game," said Cabrera. "If I could have tamed him with my presence, we might have turned this sorry business to some advantage."

Regan sat quietly and considered what he learned. He had no reason not to believe the old man, and, now that he thought about it, the scheme smelled more strongly of Armand and Carlo. It was such a thing as they would have done, coldly and with considered implication. To them, Regan was not important, but to the old man he was another human being—someone who found himself embroiled in a situation that was not of his own making. No, old Cabrera could never have been party to it.

Regan pursed his lips and his anger faded; even his two "cousins" were safe from his vengeance now, and only the dead and injured in Malatest's aerie testified to the failure of their ideas.

"What now?" he asked.

"We go to Xanadu," said the old man.

"And then?"

"The future will need to be thought about." The old eyes looked at him steadily. "For the moment—will you be my son once more?"

Regan looked at Carlo, and the black man nodded slightly and reassuringly. He had acted in defiance of his uncle's wishes—but he would not do so again.

"All right," agreed Regan, "but on one condition."

"If it is within my power."

"Just now Carlo mentioned the colony worlds," said Regan. "A slip that I would have thought him incapable of making. I want to know how they are concerned in this matter; I want to know the whole story—what I am involved in, whom you are fighting." He gazed bleakly at the old man. "You

owe me something, Cabrera, and this shall be your payment."

"It is none of your affair," snapped Armand.

"It nearly cost me my life—no thanks to you."

"This is a family matter, Uncle," protested Carlo. "We cannot trust an outsider."

"I think this man is as much like my son as makes no matter. I do not think he will betray our trust."

"But, Uncle—"

"Be silent." The old man looked somberly at Regan. "Knowledge can be a dangerous thing—a possession which one may regret once one has obtained it. Are you sure that you desire such danger?"

"Knowledge can save lives," Regan retorted. "It can save mine in the future, if I have it."

The old man looked at the desk before him, considering the request. "We shall be back at Xanadu within two hours," he said quietly. "It will be almost midnight." He was silent for a long minute. "I will sleep on it, Regan. Tomorrow, we will talk again."

XV

AS A HOMECOMING it had its disadvantages. The family was still waiting for them when the ship reached Xanadu, and Regan had to play his part of Manuel Cabrera with a solemnity that he found distasteful.

He went up to the room he had left twenty-four hours earlier. The bed was soft under his body, and he realized for the first time just how much had been taken out of him by his exertions of the past hours. He wondered how much Giselle knew—and how much she guessed.

He slept deeply and late; he didn't wake until the sun was high in the sky, and the hands of the wall clock showed the hour was almost ten. There was little doubt in his mind that Cabrera would tell him what he wanted to know. And once he had that knowledge—Regan had made no plans, indeed without knowing more, planning was quite out of the question, but he was grimly sure that there would be something that he could turn to his own advantage.

He was the last to take breakfast in the wide, sunny dining room, and Carlo and Armand had waited for him

with ill-concealed impatience while he ate leisurely and hugely from the food which was available.

When he finished, Carlo said, "Come. My uncle waits for us in his study."

As they entered Cabrera looked up from his desk and laid aside the sheaf of documents which he had been reading.

"You have slept late." The old man waved to a chair—one of four which circled the desk. "That is good. Please, sit here."

"Is there any point in my sitting down?" asked Regan, standing his ground just within the door.

"You are too sensitive, brother." Regan turned his head in surprise, and saw the slim form of Giselle rise from a shadowed corner. She was dressed in riding clothes and her hair hung loosely around her shoulders.

"Is this a joke, Cabrera?" demanded Regan.

"Gently, gently." The old man waved a brown, withered hand. "As Giselle has said, you are too sensitive, Regan. I have slept on your request, and I think that you have earned an explanation."

Regan relaxed; he crossed the short space of heavily carpeted floor and took the seat offered to him. Giselle sauntered across and sat next to him. Armand and Carlo sat beyond her.

"Before I begin," the dark, old eyes bored into Regan's with a cold implacability that was almost hypnotic, "I would warn you once again that knowledge can be dangerous."

Regan said nothing.

"What can you hope to gain?" asked Cabrera.

"Power," retorted Regan.

Cabrera sighed and nodded. "So be it. Regan, what do you think of Earth?"

"Until I saw Xanadu I hated it."

"And so do I—all of it—except Xanadu." He swiveled his chair so that he could look out of the window. "Once, long ago, most of Earth was like this, until the human race despoiled it. Have you heard of Malthus?"

Regan shook his head.

"Malthus was a philosopher who, centuries ago, foresaw the population explosion which was to come. He saw it and warned of it, but no one heeded him until it was too late."

"I read history in college," said Regan shortly. And indeed he had. As the old man spoke he recalled old lessons and old

facts that had been long forgotten; he remembered the wars that had served only to decrease the spread of population. And as the plague of Man had spread, only space flight and new planets had served as a safety valve against a final, utter collapse of civilization through economic shortages. He had read of the riots that had swept the continents when population control had at last been rigidly enforced, and the population stabilized—as far as was possible—at forty billions who eked out a bare existence from the sea farms—the untold cubic miles of ocean that was all that stood between them and death by starvation.

And still the human race had expanded—outwards through the nearer stars, the distances spanned by great fleets of ships who served, in turn, to spread the growing might of Man across strange worlds and alien planets.

The old man's voice droned on, as he painted the picture in Regan's mind of a growing monster that could only be controlled by laws and repressions, by a semi-dictatorial policy which allowed of only one end—and that end was a Universe controlled by Earth herself.

All the seeking for new planets, the race to colonize them, the hard, back-breaking work to fit them for habitation by Man, had only one end in view—to make them fit to produce food and raw materials for the every-hungry maw of the mother world.

"The human race is greedy, Regan," said Cabrera, "and there are none more greedy in the universe than we of Earth. The output and production of two score worlds has only one end in view—the needs of Earth. And Earth becomes more demanding with each passing day. Is that why you dislike Earth? Is that why you dislike its people? They take and demand, and take again. They take because they believe it is their right to take. They found the colony worlds, and they sent forth their emigrants to take possession of them. In return, those planets shall pour forth their lifeblood that Earth may continue to live in its present squalor and degradation.

"One thing has not been thought of, Regan—at least, not by the men who govern this unhappy planet. The colony worlds have dreams and ambitions of their own, and these will not be realized while they are battered on by a vampire which drains them of all they need themselves. Already,

there is a harsh resentment. Tell me, is Earth still loved on Caledon?"

Wordlessly, Regan shook his head.

"No, not on Caledon, nor on Ferroval, nor on any world that is more than one generation removed from her. The movement is growing against Earth, Regan, and one day it will be turned from thoughts into deeds. One day the supplies are going to fall off; the great fleets will start to return half empty, the economy of a colony world is going to mean more than the appetite of Earth. And when that day comes—" the old voice trailed off in a whisper of dread anticipation.

Regan realized that he had been sitting with tensed muscles for almost an hour. He relaxed slowly. "If you see this, why don't others?"

"Some do—some who, like me, fear for the future of our race. And some of us are prepared to act, to do something that may stave off the final collapse of human civilization, for that is what will happen if there is conflict between Earth and the colony worlds. One thing is sure—neither will survive without the other."

"The collapse of the human race has been talked of for many centuries," Regan said. "Isn't it possible that this crisis you foresee will be little different from all the others?"

The old man's eyes flickered at him, and Regan read briefly a message of stark despair within their ancient depths that shocked him beyond measure.

"Yes, it will be very different."

Regan glanced sideways at Carlo, but the black man's face was cold and dead.

"Over the past twenty years," went on Cabrera, "there has been emerging a crucial factor—a small one at the moment, one which is neither generally known nor generally accepted. The Central Government has received reports, but these, like most things which are detrimental to bureaucracy, have been shelved, lost, hidden under a mass of documentation."

"And that factor is?"

The old man sighed. "The Earth has become a city state. Regan, the open lands are gone forever unless the state is broken. The green fields and the woods, the forests and the flowers and the grass—these are no more, except here in Xanadu, and a few other such places. What happens when

the ecological balance of a world is destroyed and distorted beyond recognition?"

Regan felt a tremor of unease as he shook his head.

"I will tell you as much as I already know, and much that I fear. First, there has been a loss of one-fifth of one percent in the oxygen content in the Terran atmosphere during the last twenty years—a small figure, I agree, but one which is growing faster as time passes. I have had estimates based on scientific investigations from reputable physicists that the figure will accelerate four times within the next five years."

"And the Terran Government knows about this?" said Regan, aghast. "And they do nothing?"

The old man shrugged. "There is talk of producing oxygen by artificial means to reinforce the output from natural sources—the sea farms and the few wild areas like Xanadu."

Regan nodded grimly. He could well imagine the fumbling efforts that would be the result of bureaucracy trying to right its own wrongs.

"Go on," he said.

"The second factor is the humidity which is dropping because of the success of climatic control. No one wants rain any more, except in small amounts to clean the city spires during the night hours. In any event, the rainfall of olden times would not be sufficient to supply all our needs and to fill the reservoirs. The sea provides all the water we want, and the loss of rain affects the humidity, the loss of humidity affects the cloud formations, and end result is an overall rise in temperature of about a half a degree which cannot be reconciled with any other known factor affecting local and planetary temperatures. The atmosphere, Regan, is drying up thanks to human interference.

"The third, and perhaps the most disturbing factor, is the change wrought on the average Terran as a result of the enforced artificial diet to which he has been subjected during the past ten decades. Only about one person in a hundred eats food that has been produced naturally, the rest are stuffed with synthetics, vitamins, minerals, proteins—all that is necessary to sustain life, yet none of it containing the elements of life itself. For years this planet has been unable to import sufficient foodstuffs to maintain its whole population. It

has had to resort to the artificial methods of production and to the meager output of the sea farms.

"One day, despite all our efforts and all our knowledge, there will be an epidemic of some disease that we had thought was dead—some mutated virus that cannot be fought by the diet and the health of the average Terran." The old man paused and shook his head. "It is a matter of knowledge born of the dead years, that nature fights back—and when that happens we see her in her bitterest and most terrible attire. Man's conquest of her can, at best, be only temporary—an uneasy balance that can be upset by a straw blown in the wind. And in that mythical straw lie the seeds of our own destruction."

"The colony worlds know all this?" asked Regan.

"Yes," admitted Cabrera. "Those that hate us know of it all too well."

"And they will do nothing?"

"No, they wait only to feast upon the corpse that will remain. They may wait ten years, twenty, fifty, but they know that it will happen eventually, and they buy their time by acceding to Earth's demands for food and raw materials; they gamble their present economy for a future in which Earth's domination will be broken and dead, when the city state will collapse and the riches that are crowded on this planet will fall into their hands because there will be no one to stop them." The dark, old eyes stared unwinkingly at Regan. "And yet I think they have miscalculated."

"How?"

"This thing for which they wait will be slow to come, and when at last it does Earth will be strong and will realize the fate that awaits her. She will demand more help from the colony worlds, more food, more raw materials. She will demand the evacuation of large portions of her population so that there can be a tearing down of the city state, and a return to the old days of the open lands, of green and growing things, of wide fields and tall trees. But," the old voice dropped to a whisper, "it will be too late."

Regan felt an ice cold wind blowing through him, sending shudders along his muscles as if he were sitting in an icy room.

"There will be war," he said. "The colony worlds won't take any more."

Cabrera nodded silently.

"And if there is a war it will be the end of mankind."

Again Cabrera nodded.

Regan rose stiffly from his chair and turned towards the window. The noonday sun shone bright and clear upon the green vista of Xanadu, but for him it might have been mid-winter. He chuckled slightly to himself and missed the frown of surprise from Carlo, and the quick, hard stare of Giselle. He had asked—and he had been answered. He recalled his thoughts of the previous night; he thought of his insistence to be told what he was involved in—his idea that he might learn something to his own personal advantage.

And all he had obtained was a preview to the death of mankind—one way or another.

XVI

WHEN HE turned back from the window they were all watching him—Carlo and the old man coldly, Giselle with her violet eyes that seemed to be laughing mockingly from her austere face, and Armand with a hard, tight smile on his thin features.

"You were warned last night, Regan," said Armand. "Yet you insisted. Do you think that this knowledge is of use to you?"

Regan ignored the sarcasm. "Just how was Manuel involved in all this?" he asked.

"He believed that he had the answer," replied Carlo.

"And what is the answer?"

"We never knew. He would not confide in us."

"Strange of him to mistrust his cousins," taunted Regan.

"He would not even trust his own father," said the old man, and there was in his voice a slight admonition for Regan that didn't go unnoticed.

"You did not know him," said Carlo. "Underneath that easy, happy façade with which he faced the world, was a hard man, a man who knew what he wanted, Regan, who knew where he was going. He had a brilliant mind, cold and analytical—and he treated the rest of the family as nonentities, unworthy even of consideration."

"He was killed because someone didn't want him to find the answer." Regan stared bleakly at Carlo.

"Yes."

"And the answer may lie in his missing carrier."

"Almost certainly."

"And that is why Malatest and the colony worlds want to get hold of it so badly."

"No," said Cabrera. "They wanted it destroyed along with my son. They came by its possession purely accidentally, as a direct result of your survival. Now that they have it they want to know what they might be up against with Manuel still alive."

Regan walked slowly across the room, his head sunk in thought. The picture was growing clearer as his questions were answered, the façade was being stripped away and the ugly scene beneath was being laid bare.

"Which is why you want Manuel alive. If he is alive, then his carrier is very important to those who have it, because they can learn from it just what his secrets were."

"If they can open it," added Armand.

"And they may not try to do that while there is a chance of them bringing together Manuel and his carrier." Regan cocked an eye at Carlo. "Can they open it without Manuel's presence? I have heard that there are ways."

"It is possible," admitted Carlo, "though the danger of utter destruction is very great. It is a risk that they would be loath to take unless they were forced to it."

"And they would be forced to it if Manuel were dead." Regan nodded. "And all of this was why I was sent off on a wild goose chase. You wanted the carrier destroyed as quickly as possible, before the secret of my identity got out."

Carlo nodded.

Regan sat down again. The vision was building up inside his mind of a man with a dream that he would not share with anyone. A man who saw himself as a knight in shining armor, perched upon a white horse, riding out to save mankind from the dragon of its own making. At first, it had been merely a case of stopping Manuel, of destroying him and his ideas—

Abruptly, Regan asked, "How can anyone be sure—outside the family—that Manuel's secret died with him?"

The old man smiled coldly. "Regan, we are not alone in

this thing. There are others with us, and others against us. Do you think that they do not watch us? Do you think that we do not watch them? Why do you think that Manuel was so secretive—why did he trust no one? Have you any idea of the intrigue, the spying, the deceit, the mistrust, the secrecy, which rule our lives?" He shook his head. "No, Regan, you are a child in these matters. They thought that Manuel's secret had died with him, and they were happy that it should be so, until he was reborn on Lichar, and then the whole game began again. Manuel's secret was not destroyed, Manuel himself was not dead. Do you wonder that I keep your true identity as secret as I can? Do you wonder that I want Manuel alive?"

"But why try to destroy the carrier?" Regan insisted. "If it is lost to you then you can do nothing."

"If it is opened by others then Manuel's secrets and ideas are dead forever," said Carlo. "If it is destroyed unopened then there is still a chance that we will find some clue that will lead along the path that he trod."

"Do you really believe that?" sneered Regan.

Only silence greeted him.

He thought of the knight in shining armor, and the picture didn't agree with the words that Carlo had used in speaking of him—a hard man with a brilliant mind, cold and analytical. He must have known what obstacles he was likely to meet, what enemies he would create if he solved the problem of the city state. The colony worlds didn't want a solution—they wanted Earth brought to her knees so that they could reap the rewards of her downfall. The Central Government of Earth—

"What of the Central Government?" Regan asked. "Do they know of all this?"

Cabrera shrugged. "They have their reports, but they strangle in a bureaucratic web of their own making. They govern but they do not rule; they administer but they do not control." The old man chuckled grimly. "The lessons of history teach us that the fate of races is decided by individuals, Regan, not by governments. I wield more power here, at Xanadu, than any six men with large offices and resounding titles. The family of Cabrera and others like them, they are the true rulers of Earth, they control the destiny of races,

just as families like them have done since the dawn of history."

The initial horror he had felt as the tale unfolded had left Regan, and he felt himself caught up in the intrigue in a new and fascinating manner. Previously, he had been a pawn, unknowing and scared by that lack of knowledge. Now, he knew, and in the knowing there was a feeling of power, a feeling that he was in the center of things, the sharer of knowledge common to but a very few. And those few ruled the Earth; they ruled the colony worlds; they dominated the human race in a secret, terrible manner that ignored politicians and governments. And they went about their business unnoticed by the myriads who lived and died, who worked and played in the shadow of their patronage, as Regan had done more than two years ago.

The old man looked steadily at him. "Well Regan? What of our bargain? I have given you the knowledge that you sought. Will you help us in our fight?"

"Fight?" Regan laughed harshly. "There is no fight. You have nothing left with which to fight. Manuel is gone and his secret will not easily come into your hands again."

"But still there is hope," said Carlo. "While my uncle lives to guide us we shall pursue the course that he has chosen. There may be more than one answer, Regan."

Regan shrugged. There was little he could do. His own existence depended on his association with the family of Cabrera, and there was no one outside this room—except Manuel's mother—to whom he could prove his identity. He had asked for knowledge and he had gotten it, but it was of little use to him.

"Well?" asked the old man.

"Yes, I will do your bidding—for the time being at any rate."

"Then you may escort me to lunch," Giselle smiled mockingly at him.

"I am honored," said Regan, "but no. It is not long since I breakfasted, and I have a great deal to think about." He looked at Cabrera. "I want to see more of Xanadu. Is it forbidden that I should walk around alone?"

"Xanadu is yours while you are one of us."

Regan left the house by the wide main door, and followed the path away from the house towards the wooded hills that

lay to the left. He needed time to think, time to ponder what he had learned, time to assimilate the knowledge and to become more familiar with the new world into which he had been pitched.

He walked fast, his body sweating slightly in the hot sun, and his muscles rejoiced in the freedom of movement. He crossed the wide green meadow that lay beyond the trees sheltering the house, and the carpet of the grass was dotted abundantly with yellow flowers. Ahead of him the ground rose towards a hillside that bore woods and trees such as he had never seen on Caledon. He came to a stream that followed the lay of the land down to the center of the valley, and he followed its banks up the slope and into the shade of the trees. Surprisingly, birds sang above his head, the few survivors of another age that was gone, the unknowing victims of man's lust for expansion.

The grass was warm and soft, and he lay down on it with his head cradled on one prosthetic forearm. Through his dark glasses the sun shone strongly, but his eyes cut out the excess light so that he lay in a quiet, dark oasis, peaceful, with the warmth upon his face, and a light breeze around his head.

His thoughts ran in endless circles which led him nowhere. They ran riot, seeking order out of chaos, but, as the answers failed to come, he allowed himself to drift into an aura of well being. He dozed lightly, and lay at peace for he knew not how long.

The strange thudding reached his ears but took long seconds to penetrate his mind; he half listened to it without comprehension while it drew nearer—a rhythmic pounding, muffled in some strange manner.

XVII

HE SAW THE girl long before she reached the clearing, and the reason for the strange sounds of her approach was made clear to him. She was mounted on a magnificent black horse that moved at an easy canter between the trees.

Regan realized with a slight shock that he had never previously heard the sound of a horse's hooves as they pounded on soft turf.

She was clad as she had been in old Cabrera's study earlier

that morning, and her black hair blew free behind her as she rode. She came confidently along the path which Regan had used earlier, and when she reached the clearing she reined in the horse on the top of the rise which Regan had so recently left.

"Regan," she called. She sat confidently on the great, black animal, and she lifted her head regally to call her summons.

Slowly, Regan rose, surprised by her appearance, and wary of her reasons for coming.

A faint smile twitched her lips as she saw him, and she swung herself down from the saddle in one lithe, easy movement. The horse moved away down the slope as she patted it on the rump, and stopped at the foot of the mound to crop the lush grass.

Giselle chuckled and sat down on the grass. Regan looked down at her, and asked, "How did you find me?"

"I watched you from the house as you crossed the meadow, and I guessed that you would follow the stream. This is a spot which I, too, visit."

"Why?"

"Because I like it."

Regan gestured irritably. "You know what I mean. Why did you follow me?"

The violet eyes flickered at him speculatively. "You still have your suspicions, Regan. I can read them on you like a badge."

"And aren't I right to have them? Or would you have me believe that you are fascinated by my good looks?" Regan snapped the words out bitterly, the sarcasm forced from him both by her presence and her beauty. He realized that he was not yet immune, that he was still sensitive about his appearance.

She laughed at him. "Do you think that I am fascinated by your ugliness?"

"Some women find brutality amusing."

"You think too much of yourself," she told him tersely. "I have been surrounded too long by pretty-pretty boys with sweet faces and evil minds. You really think I care about the look of a man?"

Regan took off the glasses with a swift motion. "Don't you?"

She eyed him steadily, her gaze probing every facet of his scarred face with its baby skin and bulging eyes, and Regan stood feeling as if insects crawled across him, seeking out every nook and cranny, every scar and wrinkle.

"You pity yourself too much, Regan." She looked away at last. "What are you going to do?"

"What should I do? Is that what you have come here for?"

She shook her head. "No. You have thrown in your lot with my father. You are doing his bidding. Why?"

"Perhaps I have no choice. I cannot prove who I am, and outside of Xanadu I am naked in a hostile environment. You saw what happened when I fell for your cousins' ruse, and got into the hands of Malatest. Your father is my protection. If he survives then I survive with him—without him I am a dead man."

"Then you will stay at Xanadu and hope for a happy ending? Is that it?"

"Perhaps."

"Don't you want to go home again? To Caledon, to your family?"

"Why are you so interested in my future?" Regan demanded. "Did you follow me out here just to satisfy your curiosity?"

"No. I came because this is the one place where you and I can talk alone and unobserved."

Regan stared down at her in amazement. "Why should that be necessary? Is Xanadu not safe? Couldn't we have talked at the house?"

"Perhaps. I don't know." She shook her head quickly and plucked a few strands of grass from the ground. "Since my brother died I have had no one in Xanadu that I can talk to—no one in whom I can confide a secret that has burned within my brain for more than two years."

"What about your father?"

"Not even him." She looked up at him from her seat on the mound. "Sit down, Regan. Then I shall know that you are not going to fall on me." A ghost of a smile twitched her too perfect lips as she said it, and Regan felt himself flush unaccountably. He sat down.

"You have been drawn into this sorry business through no fault of your own, Regan. You are the one person I know who is totally and completely disinterested."

"I would have thought that I was the most interested of all."

"Because of your face? Because of your limbs? Your eyes? Your scars?" She shook her head. "Those are the marks of your disinterest. These are the things which tell me that you were involved by accident, against your own wishes—they tell me very clearly that I can trust you."

Regan said nothing. He looked away through the trees, and suddenly he was afraid of his possible involvement with this woman—afraid of her confidences and what they might lead to. He knew with a desperate denial that he didn't want her to unburden herself of a secret that she could not trust to her own father. And yet—why couldn't she?

"Why not to your father?"

"Because Carlo and Armand are too close to him. He needs men around him now that Manuel is dead, and, next to me, they are his closest kin. If I had told him, then they would have known in a short while. It is the nature of things."

"Go on."

"If I tell you—will you help?"

"I do not know if I shall be able to."

"Then—if you cannot, will you keep silent?"

Regan nodded. "That much I will promise."

"There is mistrust in Xanadu," said the girl. "I do not know how or why. I only know that Manuel would trust no one, not even our father. You know of the trouble he had in trying to leave Earth?"

Regan nodded.

"And you know, too well, that his efforts came to nought."

"Indeed I do."

"I think he had a feeling that he would not be successful because the night before he was due to leave, he came to me after dinner as I walked on the terrace before the house." She threw away the twisted strands of grass and pulled another handful. "We were never very close. In fact, we were so far apart that we were not even antagonistic as brother and sister sometimes are, and yet, on that last evening we talked together as we had never talked in all our lives before. Looking back I think that he had some premonition that he should make some small gesture in defiance of the future. Much of what he said was of no consequence either then or now, but at the end he did say one thing—and he

said it twice. He told me to remember it against the day when it would be of some use."

She paused and looked at Regan, her face white and serious.

"I think that day has come, Regan. I think that you are the only person to whom I can turn, with whom I can share my brother's secret. If there be knowledge in what he told me, then you are the one who can use it, because—to the world beyond Xanadu—you are Manuel Cabrera."

Regan stared unseeingly at the trees. His brain told him to refuse, to back off while there was still time; his heart and his curiosity were in another place—they were back in the screaming, burning horror of the Ferroval cruiser, they were back in the dark cocoon of pain from which he had emerged after nearly two years of horrible gestation.

"What did he tell you?"

"He said—" She hesitated, and he knew that, even now, after all this long time, she was loath to reveal her trust. Regan did not press her. "He said, 'Remember the planet, Cleomon, and a man named Arfon Plender.' That was all."

The sun was bright in the small clearing, and the song of the birds seemed unnaturally loud in Regan's ears. Xanadu was close to his heart, and the universe was a distant place full of strangeness and unease. Xanadu was quiet.

"What will you do?" she asked quietly.

Regan shrugged. "I don't know. What should I do? There is little enough in what you have told me."

"I know." She stood up stretching herself. "I have been away long enough. I must ride back." She looked down at him, her face strained and somber. "What of you, Regan?"

"I need to think," said Regan slowly. "I came here to think, and now I have something to chew on."

She laughed suddenly and surprisingly. "I feel better now that I have told you. These last days—knowing that you were not Manuel, knowing that I was alone with what he had told me—"

"At least I have been a good listener." Regan smiled up at her.

"And for that I thank you. And, Regan," her smile was gone once more, "if you should speak to me of this again, do it quietly."

"I will be discreet."

He watched her as she went down the slope and mounted the horse. She cantered away through the trees without so much as a backward glance, and soon the forest hid her from view.

The afternoon slid away around him. The sun declined and the shadows fell across the clearing. His watch told him that it was almost five and there was barely an hour to dusk. He rose, stretched, and retraced his steps down the mound, back through the trees, and along the bank of the stream. It was cooler now, and the slight breeze had a chill to it that had not been there earlier. When he reached the road that led to the house the sun was gone.

In a while he would be sitting down with the rest of the family at the great table to eat dinner—and Regan knew what he had to do.

XVIII

ONLY HIS "cousins" Roberto and Anita were missing from the dinner table that evening. Roberto was on a business trip of some unspecified nature, and Anita—so Regan gathered—was on a visit to a man who might be her future husband—if the rest of the family approved.

Regan only hoped that the omissions from the family gathering would not seriously interfere with the plans which he had formulated.

For the most part he sat quietly while the conversation ebbed and flowed around him. There was gossip which did not interest him, business talk which was above his head, some sly digs from the thin, saturnine figure of Simon which he answered caustically and with a biting sarcasm that drew a mild reproof from the old man. These things apart he sat quietly and waited and wondered.

The meal drew to a close and the ladies left the room. Giselle—her eyes had hardly left him during the whole time they sat opposite each other—hesitated near the door. As Regan looked at her he read doubt in the violet eyes, and he nodded slightly and with reassurance. The doubt vanished to be replaced by a ghost of a smile. Then she turned and followed the others from the room.

The brandy came and the blue smoke of cigars tainted the

air. The servants withdrew and Regan wondered how he should open up the game he wanted to play.

The question was resolved for him by Simon, who asked, suddenly, "And what escapades have you planned for the future, Cousin? By your silence this evening I judge that you have something serious in view."

"Simon," snapped the old man from the head of the table. "It must be clear to you that your cousin is in no mood for such humor."

"Surely, Uncle, we are entitled to know what trouble we are likely to be caused?" Simon taunted Regan with his sardonic smile. "After all, it took you to extricate him from Malatest's little trap. Next time, it might take all of us."

"Your humor is misplaced, Cousin," said Regan, coldly and quickly, before Cabrera could intervene again. "At least, I attempted something which would, no doubt, be beyond your own capabilities to try."

The humorless smile and the faint flush that darkened Simon's cheeks told him that the shaft had not been misplaced.

"Father," he turned to the old man. "I have thought about our discussion since this morning—" He sensed Carlo stiffen beside him, but the old man gave no sign "—and I still believe that positive action is the only thing which will solve our problems."

"Haven't you had enough of positive action?" asked Armand.

"Would you rather we sat here and waited for others to do first that which we should do ourselves?" Regan snapped.

"What are your thoughts?" asked the old man.

"I shall leave here as soon as possible on the same mission that ended so disastrously two years ago."

Blank, utter astonishment greeted his announcement. The whole room was a frozen tableau broken only by the slow upward movement of Regan's hand as he took a sip of brandy from the glass before him.

"You're mad," whispered Pedro from the far side of the table.

"I don't think so."

"What game are you playing, Cousin?" the hard voice of Carlo asked a question that had two answers, and Regan

smiled as he read the warning note in the black man's voice.

"A game that should have been played long ago," Regan replied. "It was a mistake for me ever to have returned here. I should have carried on from Ferroval as soon as I was fit and well. Oh, yes, I know—" he waved away the interruption from Armand, "I would have been in danger on Ferroval, yet not as much as we all thought. My death is not so important as it once was. The most important factor now is the carrier which is lost to us forever. Our opponents are playing for time until they can gain entrance to the carrier by obtaining possession of my person, but if I should leave Earth then they will be forced into one of two courses of action. First, they will have to find where I have gone, and second, they will be forced to try and open the carrier by artificial means—and if they try that then they may well destroy the contents, which will suit us admirably."

"They knew where you were headed before," Pedro said grimly.

"Because the precautions I took were too elaborate and too long drawn out."

"And what will you do this time?" asked Cabrera softly.

"I will leave at once." Regan sat up straight in his chair and laid his hands flat on the table with an air of finality. "The ship that brought us from Ferroval is still in orbit, and I can be aboard her within the next three hours. This time my destination is secret. I was a fool before to think that travel by ordinary commercial cruiser would afford me protection."

"I say it is madness," rasped Carlo.

"And I," said Armand.

"But still, there is merit in the argument," put in Pedro. "Do you not agree, brother?"

Regan turned and looked at the thin, old form of Cabrera. The dark eyes gleamed from the lined face, but there was no message for Regan in them. They were inscrutable. He could almost see the workings of the old man's brain as he weighed the situation carefully, balancing the facts, probing Regan's intentions, seeking for the twist that was implied by Regan's shock announcement.

"This needs to be thought on," he said at last.

"No," snapped Regan. "If we wait too long the chance

will be lost. If I am to move, it must be swiftly—and it must be now."

"What he says is true," said Pedro.

"It is impossible," hissed Armand, and Regan noted with some amusement the rage and frustration on the thin face. Clearly, the man had his own ideas about Regan's sudden plans; equally clearly he dared not say what he wanted to say about them.

Regan turned the knife a little, and said, "Well, Father?" He knew perfectly well that he had all the cards. If the old man refused point-blank, he would raise questions as to his motives that would be difficult to answer; if he agreed then he would be acting contrary to his own ideas—he would be agreeing to a form of blackmail, the end of which was hidden to him.

The old man was caught, and he knew it.

"You did not prevent me before," said Regan softly, "and the situation is even more perilous now than it was then."

"What he says is true, brother," insisted Pedro. "The position demands some urgent action, and if Manuel goes ahead with this—this secret plan of his then at least we are fighting back. As it is we have stagnated for two years waiting for Manuel to return to us. And now that he has, you hesitate—"

"Not stagnated," said Cabrera. "We kept my son alive during all that time."

The dark, old eyes never left Regan's face. They probed him with unwinking implacability, and in their depths Regan could read his own strength. The eyes slid away from him at last; one brown hand reached for the brandy glass, and the old man drained it in a manner that was almost sacrilegious. Then, slowly, he rose to his feet.

"Give me your arm, Manuel," he ordered. "We will talk in my study—alone."

"Brother, I protest," rasped Pedro. "This is a family matter."

"We are as concerned in this as much as you, Uncle." Carlo too had risen to his feet.

"Be silent and remember your positions. While I am head of the family I will conduct our affairs as I think fit." The old man nodded to Regan. "Come. We will talk."

He leaned heavily on Regan's right arm, and they left the room amid complete silence. The cold anger of Carlo

and the white face of Armand gave Regan more pleasure than he would have believed possible. The very fact that he, an outsider, had dared to flout them in such a manner—had dared to hold a pistol at the head of old Cabrera! Regan almost laughed aloud as the door closed behind them. They climbed the stairs and went along the wide, carpeted corridors towards the old man's study. Not one word was spoken between them.

A fire burned brightly in the room as they entered it, and the lights were soft and muted, adding to the age of the furnishings and the decor.

"One of my few personal indulgences." Cabrera waved to the fire. "The flicker of the flames warms my heart rather than my body."

"If we are to speak—"

A wave of the old man's right hand silenced him, and he watched with understanding as Cabrera crossed slowly to his vast desk and pressed two buttons on the control panel of what Regan had taken to be an intercom unit.

"The room is shielded, Regan," Cabrera told him. "We can talk in private and none will be able to hear us."

"Do you not trust the family?"

"That is unworthy of you."

"I apologize."

"It is no matter." Cabrera sat down in a large, easy chair beside the fire. "The taunt is justified as you well know from what you have seen and heard. Now, what is all this nonsense about following in Manuel's path? How can that be possible?"

"It isn't." Regan sat down opposite the old man, and stared at the flames. He had thought about this moment all afternoon in the quietness of the forest, and now that the time had come he doubted his ability to carry it through—he doubted that he was skilled enough to out-think and out-talk Cabrera. For once he was glad of his alien eyes behind their dark glasses; at least, they would not betray him.

"Come, is it so hard to explain?"

"Manuel was headed for Ferroval," Regan said carefully. "He never got there. The trail leads on from Ferroval, and on Ferroval may lie the clue to the next stage of his journey."

"After two years the trail may be cold and dead."

"I don't think so. Manuel could not possibly have been do-

ing this on his own. He had a plan—what it was no one knows—but a plan has to depend on other people, and that means that somewhere there is someone who is waiting for Manuel Cabrera to return to the scene. His plan could never depend on himself alone, that would not make sense, nor would it be possible, but if I go to Ferroval then the trail may be uncovered again—the trail that you think is dead.”

“You were on Ferroval for almost eighteen months,” Cabrera pointed out. “Why was no approach made during all that time?”

“What good would it have done? I wasn’t capable of doing anything, and I was practically incommunicado—you saw to that. In fact, isn’t it more than likely that my whereabouts—even the fact of Manuel’s survival—might not have reached the ears of those with whom Manuel was connected?”

“It is possible, but unlikely. Too many people knew once the news was given out that the person in the hands of the Licharians was my son.” The old man gestured wearily. “We tried to cover the leak, but it was too late.”

“Exactly,” snapped Regan. “You have made my point for me. If it is known that Manuel is still alive, and that he is back on Ferroval, then there will be attempts to contact him again.”

“And those attempts will be made by more people than you would desire, Regan. If you left Earth the news would be common to all within hours.”

“Then what will you do? Sit here in your armchair and hope that death will claim you before you need to make a move?” sneered Regan. “Cabrera, are you too old to make such a decision? What is holding you back? Is it your fear for my safety? Why should that bother you—I am not Manuel.”

The old man looked away from him and into the fire; for a moment Regan thought that he had gone too far. Then Cabrera said, slowly, “My son was a law unto himself. I could not have stopped him in anything he wished to do.”

“Then why prevent me?”

“You came into this matter through no fault of your own, and you have co-operated with us far beyond any reasonable limits that we might have expected. I owe you something.”

“You owe me nothing except the right to live out the remainder of my life as I desire,” retorted Regan. “What should I do, Cabrera? Skulk in your shadow while you live,

and trust to the charity of your nephews when you are gone? You cannot just sit back and do nothing. Inaction can be more dangerous than to make a wrong move—and I think that this move which I propose is the only one left open to you.”

And still the old man looked at the fire.

A log broke and crackled, sending a shower of sparks up the wide chimney. Regan felt the muscles of his body harden with the tension of waiting. He wondered just how convincing his argument had been. Enough to fool Cabrera? Enough for him to ascend the first rung of the ladder that he had planned, and whose top was shrouded in the mists of uncertainty?

“So be it,” said Cabrera with a sigh. “If my debt to you can be settled thus, then I have no right to withhold payment. What do you wish?”

“Money—as much as you think necessary, and the ship—with orders that the crew shall do my bidding in all matters.”

For a moment Regan thought that he had overstepped the mark. The dark eyes flickered back at him, and the brow, creased with age, gathered the further wrinkles of a frown. Cabrera sighed again, and nodded. “I will make it so, Regan—you go with my blessing.”

XIX

WITH THE decision made that he desired so much, Regan found the next hours slipping away from him before he realized it. There was a kaleidoscopic impression of revolt from Carlo and Armand that mingled with approval from his “uncle,” Pedro, and a wistful farewell from Giselle. There were lights on the landing field of Xanadu, lights in the black night sky that were not stars or planets, and lights on the ground that marked the spawning place of the city state. And all of them merged into the vast, blue globe of Earth that fell away behind them as the small vessel took him out to the great ship orbiting beyond the Terran atmosphere.

The cabin was as it had been barely three days before—only three days, and yet they seemed a lifetime. The crew was the same and so were the officers, yet, this time, there was a subtle difference. This time Regan was the big man

on board, not old Cabrera—and Regan had a taste of personal power that he had never known in his life before.

The captain, a lean, hard man named Quadros, welcomed him stiffly but with a slight obsequiousness that wasn't lost on Regan. There was too, in the man's ice blue eyes, a hint of excitement and anticipation. All of them knew the story of the Ferroval cruiser, and all of them knew that Regan—as Manuel Cabrera—had been the sole survivor. It was common knowledge, too, that where Regan went, danger would not be far behind. His motives and the reasons for the presence of that danger were closed secrets, but the very fact of their existence was sufficient to temper the atmosphere within the great ship with the same excitement and anticipation that was shown by Quadros. Regan went straight to his cabin and slept through the night, peaceful in the knowledge that he had won the first round.

Next morning he was in no hurry to rouse himself. His next move was already planned, but there was no immediate hurry in acting on his plans. The captain of the vessel had accepted him as Manuel Cabrera; the old man's orders had been clear and concise—the ship was Regan's to do with as he wished. As he left his cabin and walked along the wide, main corridor Regan felt a slight, smug sense of satisfaction that things had, thus far, proceeded with a smoothness that was flattering to his ego and soothing to his nerves.

He entered the dining cabin—and the satisfaction vanished like a snow flake in a furnace as the dark figure of Carlo looked at him from the head of the vast table.

"Good morning, Cousin," his tone was slightly mocking, and a light smile played across his lips. "You are late in rising."

"What are you doing here?" snarled Regan, shaken from his placidity by the complete unexpectedness of the man's presence. "Is this another—" He stopped, the question unfinished as he remembered the stewards who were probably within earshot.

"This was my idea, Cousin," said Carlo. "I came aboard in another ferry a little after you arrived." He smiled again. "I thought that my presence might be of use to you."

"It might," Regan retorted sourly. The frustration of the situation sent a tremor of anger through him, and he felt, not for the first time, that Carlo had outsmarted him. The

possibility that the black man would take such a course of action had never entered Regan's head, and yet, now that it had happened, he knew that it was something he should have thought about—something he should have guarded against.

"I warn you, Carlo," he said softly and grimly, "I have my own plans, and I shall carry them through regardless of your presence." His voice dropped even lower. "And if you try to stop me—"

He crossed to the table and sat down opposite Carlo. The sudden turn of events had robbed him of his appetite. He wondered what action Cabrera would take, once he found that Carlo was not at Xanadu. In sudden alarm he glanced at his watch and saw that it was ten in the morning ship time—and ship time would coincide with the South American region that embraced Xanadu! It meant that Carlo's absence would already have been noticed.

Regan got up from the table and crossed to the intercom unit that lay flush against one wall. He punched the control panel and said, "Give me the captain."

The break of a second was enough for him to look at Carlo and to note with satisfaction the slight frown that creased the black man's brow. Then the face of Quadros swam small on the screen, and Regan ordered, briefly, "Captain, I want a complete blanket on communications—no outgoing calls under any circumstances, and no acknowledgment of incoming messages."

"It might be difficult, *señor*," said Quadros uncertainly.

"Nevertheless, it will be done."

"As you say, *señor*."

"And I want a conference in my cabin in one hour. You and the navigation officer. Make it at eleven hundred."

"Eleven hundred, *señor*," agreed Quadros, and Regan broke the connection.

As he turned back to the table Carlo looked at him thoughtfully. "You have flashes of inspiration, Cousin," he commented.

"I'm learning," grinned Regan, and some of his sense of well being returned now that he had foreseen at least one possible source of future trouble. The thought comforted him, and so did the further realization that Carlo—despite his initiative—would be utterly helpless aboard the ship. The

old man had given his orders and they would be obeyed. The vessel was at Regan's command.

His breakfast took on a better flavor, and he found added confidence in the manner of his thinking—it had a force that was new, an incisive bite that was compatible with the position of authority in which he found himself.

A thought crossed his mind, and he looked across at Carlo. "Does your uncle know that you are here?"

"Armand will have told him by now."

"And no doubt you have left a suitable explanation for your conduct?"

"The security of our interests should be reason enough."

Regan nodded thoughtfully. He was fully aware of the fact that he had bulldozed the old man into acceptance of his plans, and that further consideration of them could well reveal the inconsistencies which he had known existed. In the cold, clear light of day, and after a night of thought, the old man would almost certainly approve of the action which Carlo had taken.

Regan's main comfort lay in the fact that his own plans were secret to all except himself. At least in that respect he had been sufficiently prudent to realize that secrecy was of vital importance. The outcome of all that he had planned was shrouded in the mists of the future, and—not for the first time—he asked himself just why he was doing it? He had told himself time and again that he was in mortal danger without the support and shield of Cabrera, and in his heart he knew that this wasn't the real reason for his actions. Of late his thinking had developed a clarity that it had never possessed before; it was sharp and objective, brutally frank in its final assessments—and it told Regan that he was doing not what had to be done, but rather what he wished to do.

The fever of the unknown was in his blood; action for the sake of action was his goal; danger for the sake of danger tingled his nerves with eager delight.

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost eleven. Carlo was looking across the table with a sardonic twist to his eyebrows that wasn't lost on Regan.

"Will you join me in my cabin, Cousin?" he asked.

Carlo eyed him in surprise. "Am I to be trusted with your secrets?"

"They will do you no good," Regan told him, "but your presence will be less remarkable than your absence." He grinned at Carlo. "In fact, Cousin, your presence will do much to aid me."

He left the table and Carlo followed him out of the cabin and along the corridor. They found Quadros and another officer waiting for them, and Regan led the way into his suite.

"Please, gentlemen, make yourselves comfortable." Regan sat down in one of the large easy chairs and watched as the others drew their own seats into a semi-circle before him.

"Señor," said Quadros, "this is Lahaye, Chief Navigator."

Regan nodded and studied the plump-faced officer from behind the camouflage of his dark glasses. He was young and he had an air of precision that seemed to be a part of all men who have to do with the science of mathematics.

"Gentlemen," Regan began, "your course, on orders from Xanadu, is for Ferroval."

Lahaye glanced sideways at Quadros, and the captain nodded, "It is, *señor*."

"And further orders from Señor Cabrera himself have placed the ship and all aboard her under my direct control."

"Yes, *señor*." The questions in Quadros' mind were written clearly upon his thin face.

"Tell me, Lahaye. Do you know of a planet called Cleomon?"

As he asked the question Regan was watching Carlo, and although the black man sat a little straighter in his chair there was only puzzlement on his face, and Regan knew that the information that Giselle had given him meant little or nothing to Carlo.

The navigator nodded. "Yes, sir. I have heard of it."

"Where does it lie?"

"Towards the Rim, and the Galactic west of Earth. I can tell exactly when I have consulted my records."

"And how long a flight is it?"

"From Earth?"

"Yes."

"Twelve days, sir."

Regan could feel the tension mounting in the cabin. All of them realized that he was not simply asking questions for the sake of asking them, and all of them had some inkling

of what he was going to say next. Carlo gazed at him stonily, his face set in a tight mask of grim understanding. He knew that Regan had tricked them all.

"Our course is for Cleomon, Captain," he ordered.

Quadros was smiling openly, and Regan felt a slight tremor of amusement as he realized that the captain was reveling in this sudden cloak and dagger change of plan.

"Yes, *señor*. I shall avoid Earth and take a course which will carry us in an arc towards the sector that holds Cleomon."

Regan smiled and nodded. "You read my thoughts well, Quadros. Keep well clear of the normal trade routes. Oh, and Lahaye, you will let me have as much information about our new destination as you can find in your records. I know little of the planet, and I wish to know more before we arrive."

"Yes, sir."

"Then leave us. My cousin and I have much to talk about."

The two officers rose and left the cabin; Carlo sat stiffly in his chair eying Regan coldly.

"Well, Cousin?" asked Regan.

"I think," said Carlo softly, "that we may have underrated you, Regan."

"You had thought that there would be orders on Ferroval to deprive me of my position and place you in command." Regan smiled and nodded. "I, too, had thought of that."

"But why Cleomon?" Carlo leaned forward in his chair. "What do you know that we do not?"

"You know as much—almost—as I do," Regan told him. "My aim was Cleomon the moment I asked old Cabrera for this ship. But if I told him that I was headed for another destination than Ferroval—do you think he would have allowed me so much latitude?"

Carlo shook his head and relaxed. His face told Regan what he needed to know, and it confirmed his earlier thought—there would be orders waiting on Ferroval, and those orders would be the later thoughts of the old man after he had time to consider just what Regan had talked him into doing.

"What lies on Cleomon?"

Regan shook his head. "I do not know—and on that you have my word. I have a name, two names, but they mean nothing."

Carlo stood up and spread his arms wide in a gesture of acceptance. "I do not know what you intend, Cousin," he smiled bitterly, "but, until Cleomon reveals the answer, I am with you."

XX

REGAN STOOD with Carlo and Quadros on the control bridge of the great ship, and looked at Cleomon, a golden sphere, through the main viewing screen. It was much like other alien worlds seen from such a distance, and, like all of them, it had none of the misty beauty of Earth. It was sharp and clearly defined against the blackness of space, and the halo of its atmosphere seemed to cling to it unwillingly, as if, at any moment, it would fly off into space and leave the round orange of the world to its own devices. And this, too, was strange to Regan, for on Earth the blue haze of atmosphere molded and softened the lines of the world below, and nestled against it as lovingly as any child against its mother. As he looked at Cleomon, Regan wondered if alien eyes always saw beauty in their own surroundings, and only ugliness where strangeness ruled.

"Do they know of us on Cleomon, Quadros?" he asked.

"Yes, *señor*. I have notified them of our arrival."

"No, no. I mean the family of Cabrera—is it known here?"

"There is no world in all the Terran-ruled galaxy that does not know of the family Cabrera," put in Carlo.

"Nevertheless, Cousin, I must be sure," replied Regan. "It may be that the power of our name will be needed and useful."

"You need not fear that," smiled the black man.

Lahaye came out of the small cubicle to one side of the bridge control, and handed a sheet of paper to Quadros.

The captain read it, and turned to Regan, "We have permission to land a tender, *señor*."

"Then let it be so."

Regan rested for awhile in his cabin against the long day that lay ahead, and later he ate with Carlo in the dining cabin. Later still, he took his seat beside Quadros in the small passenger ferry that was to take them to the surface of Cleomon.

The world that came up to meet them was cold and un-

inviting. From each pole the white caps of ice spread out towards the equator, and for only a few hundred miles on either side of that equator did the more colorful patchwork quilt of the fertile lands spread themselves beneath the warmth of the parent sun.

The main landing area lay close to the largest center of population, Morven, a town of around a hundred thousand people, and that fact alone told Regan that he had left the city state of Earth far behind. He was back in a universe that knew of towns and cities and villages and hamlets—where there were green fields and open spaces, wide forests and barren deserts. He was in a universe that man had conquered, yet by that conquest had become more of a slave than ever in his history before. Behind him lay Earth with her teeming millions, starving and suffocating in a prison of their own making; before them lay a hostile galaxy wherein the colony worlds waited like carrion birds beside a corpse that is not yet dead.

As he looked down at the golden globe expanding before them, Regan shuddered as with cold, and wondered what emotions had evoked his own temerity in daring to place himself within such a cauldron of hatred and distrust.

The landing was neat and uneventful, and their reception was informal. Truly, the name of Cabrera meant something even here on a backwater world. A uniformed official greeted them in a tidy functional office, and after the brief formalities had been accomplished, the man said, "We are honored to have members of the family of Cabrera visit our world."

Regan felt the cold humor of his position tug at the corners of his mouth as he answered, gravely, "We are honored to be here."

"Anything we can do to aid you—"

"Indeed, there is," broke in Regan, "one thing."

The man raised his eyebrows in polite inquiry.

"Where would we be able to inquire about one of your citizens?"

The official shrugged. "There are several ways. The public records office is the most comprehensive, but like all public offices it takes time. There would also be the criminal records of the local police, though these," he smiled deprecatingly, "would hardly be suitable for your purposes."

"Who knows?" Regan returned the smile. "Thank you for your help."

Together with Carlo and Quadros he left the office, and once out of the building and in the bright light of the morning sun, he said, "Quadros, this may take longer than I thought. You will take the tender back to the ship and await our call. My cousin and I will pursue our search further with a hotel as our base."

"Yes, *señor*. And if I should wish to contact you?"

"I will notify you of our whereabouts, but do not call me unless something of the utmost importance is concerned."

"Would it not be better, Cousin," put in Carlo, "for the tender to remain here?"

Regan smiled seraphically. "I think not, and in any event the presence of Quadros aboard the ship may be necessary."

The look on Carlo's face told him that he had won another small point—that Carlo realized that he had been effectively marooned on Cleomon and right under Regan's eye.

As they ate lunch in the hotel restaurant, Carlo asked him, "And now, Cousin?"

"I am looking for someone," Regan told him sharply.

"That much I guessed from your questions at the space-port. Who is this someone?"

Regan shrugged. "I have only a name."

"And you came to Cleomon with so little?" Carlo looked at him across the table in blank astonishment. "And where did you learn this name that may be so important?"

Regan shook his head. "That is something I am not prepared to divulge. Carlo, do you think I am the sort of man who would come on a mission like this, if I thought it would turn out to be nothing more than a wild goose chase?"

The black man gazed at him steadily but said nothing.

"Back on Earth," went on Regan, "the old man was sitting around for eighteen months waiting for Manuel to get fit enough to take up where he left off. Is that logical, Carlo? Is that the action of a man who has destiny by the tail? For two years you sat and waited and did nothing—and now, you ask me, an outsider, why a single name may be important."

"We had no choice. There was nothing we could do save guard you and hope that all would be well."

"Hope," sneered Regan. "Only a fool relies on hope. The

shape of the future is decided by actions, not by hope or faith or philosophy."

"You're wrong," Carlo interrupted him sharply. "It is because of those three things that man has come so far, and it is because of the material approach that you propound that mankind finds itself in the trouble which we are trying to combat. There are times when you can fight fire with fire, and this is one of those times, but because it applies in this situation it does not mean that fire can build or create—"

"You think that I am a second fire?"

The black man smiled slightly and nodded. "Yes, I think you are the power that we needed to drive us on, but that does not mean that your methods are the panacea to all our ills."

"All this does nothing to solve the immediate problem," said Regan flatly. "I have questions to ask, and if we are to go further I need the right answers to them."

"The records office?"

"Yes."

The remainder of the meal passed in comparative silence as each of them pondered his own thoughts. Regan brooded on the problem of Arfon Plender, and wondered how two years and more would have affected the man's position in relation to Manuel Cabrera. Had he known Manuel personally? How frequently had they met? The immediate answers to those questions would be covered by the fact that he was—as Regan or as Manuel—completely unrecognizable from the physical standpoint. It would be later that trouble could arise, because ultimately he would have to ask questions, and the very nature of those questions would breed suspicion—the suspicion that he was not Manuel Cabrera. And once Arfon Plender knew that . . .

As they left the hotel restaurant, Regan said, "I'll call the Records Bureau from my room, Carlo. It will probably take them some time to make their inquiries, and a personal call might be a waste of time."

"And then—what?"

"Then," Regan smiled, "as we are on a strange planet, why don't we do some sightseeing?"

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day, the word for which they had been waiting came.

Regan took the call in his own room after the hotel re-

ceptionist had told him that he was wanted. He summoned Carlo and together they hurried from the lounge to his room on the first floor. Once there he pushed the button of the video set and held a pair of crossed fingers for Carlo's amused inspection as he watched the gray face of the bureau official swim small on the screen.

"Mr. Cabrera, good day."

"Good day. You have some news for me?" Regan was hard put to control his impatience.

"I regret the delay which has occurred, however, it would not have been so long if I had consulted the criminal records of the law officers first of all."

Regan felt a coldness grow within him. There was about the tiny face on the silver screen something that told him the answer was not one that he wished to hear, yet the fascination of his own desire for that answer held him in a steely grip.

"Go on," he said.

"Arfon Plender," replied the man coldly, "was murdered sixteen Terran months ago."

XXI

REGAN SAT numbed with shock. Until this moment he had been so sure—so absolutely sure—that here, on Cleomon, lay the whole answer to his problem, and to the problems of the Cabrerases and of Earth. And now the door had slammed shut in his face.

"I'm sorry—" he was aware that the man was still speaking.

"I said, I regret that the information is so unsatisfactory."

"Oh, yes, of course." Frantically, he tried to pull himself back to reality. "If I wish to know more, I suppose—"

"The police records for this city will give full details."

"Thank you." Regan broke the connection.

And still he could not realize what had happened. Sixteen months ago, the man said. Arfon Plender was dust with his ancestors, and had been so while Regan lay in hospital fighting for his life. The flow of the universe had moved too fast for him ever to have caught up; it had been too late sixteen months ago, and only now did he realize it.

"Well, Regan?"

He looked up at the somber figure of Carlo, startled out of his reverie.

"What now?" asked Carlo. "Where do we go now that your man has slipped away from you?"

Regan waved one hand in vague disgust. "I don't know. I need time to think. There has to be another way." Somehow, somewhere he had to open up the trail again.

"The law," he snapped. "They must know something. There must be records of Plender—what he was; what he did. Perhaps in them we may find something."

"You are clutching at straws," Carlo whispered harshly.

"And what else should I clutch at?" Regan demanded angrily. "I have come too far to go back without a fight. No, Carlo, there are still questions to be asked, and perhaps some of the answers are still there to be heard."

Carlo sighed. "Then it is to be the police records."

Regan nodded.

"Today?"

The clock on the small table beside the bed told Regan that it was almost five, and he shook his head. "No. Tomorrow will be time enough."

The night that followed was a wretched and almost sleepless one for Regan as he pondered the desperation of his position. He had listened to Giselle, and had been fired by his own newborn desire for excitement. He had tricked the old man, and the gamble he had taken had stumbled at the first obstacle. Outside his hotel window the night sounds of Morven were magnified by his frustration as he tossed and turned. Why had Plender been murdered? How had it been done? Had they caught the people responsible?

And even as he asked the questions one fact made itself abundantly clear—someone had known about Plender and his connection with Manuel Cabrera, and that person was responsible for the murder.

The logical train of his thoughts didn't relieve the tension either of his mind or his body, and by the time full daylight had dawned he lay limp and weary on his bed, dozing a little, yet knowing that sleep was as far away as it had been the whole night through.

At breakfast Carlo eyed him curiously, but made no comment on his appearance, and when the meal was over they

made their way across Morven to the headquarters of the police department.

The name, Cabrera, worked its usual magic, and they were shown into a quiet, austere office by a uniformed officer who promised them prompt attention.

"Do you know what you are after, Regan?" asked Carlo, as they made themselves comfortable in two large, padded chairs.

"Not really." Regan rubbed his tired eyes with his fingertips. "Someone who knew Plender, perhaps. His wife—if he had one. His family, friends—anyone who might help."

"I've never asked you this before," said Carlo, "but now I think you might tell me—who was Arfon Plender?"

Regan chuckled ironically. "I doubt if you will believe me, but I haven't the vaguest idea. I only heard his name once—"

Behind them the office door opened, breaking into the thread of conversation, and Regan half rose to his feet before a voice said, "Sit down, sit down, gentlemen, please. Ceremony is not necessary here. I am Sarwadi, Chief Superintendent."

Regan relaxed again, and took in the details of the plump, brown-skinned man with his neat uniform and carefully groomed black hair. His face was fleshy, friendly, with a smile that looked to be perpetual around his full-lipped mouth. His eyes were dark and penetrating, and they belied the smile beneath them. Sarwadi was pleasant, benign—and tough.

He seated himself at the desk, and placed a light-colored folder beside his right hand.

His eyes looked at them each in turn. "And what can I do for you?"

"We are interested in a murder," Regan said, "one that was committed here some little time ago."

"The Plender Affair." Sarwadi nodded. "I heard of your interest in the case from the Bureau of Records. It was I who authorized the release of our files for your information."

"That is very good of you," said Regan.

"What is it you wish to know?" Sarwadi tapped the slim folder. "It is all in here—all, that is, of which we are sure."

"How did Plender die?"

"Ostensibly in a fire which completely destroyed his house. But there was enough of his body left for identification,

and also for a post-mortem to tell us that he was poisoned first. He was dead before the fire started."

"I see." So far as Regan was concerned the information added one fact to his knowledge. Not only was Plender murdered, but care had been taken to destroy any records that might have existed concerning Manuel Cabrera. "There was nothing saved from the fire?"

"Nothing."

"Did he leave any family? Wife, children, perhaps?"

"No." Sarwadi shook his head. "He was a bachelor—a rover who never settled. Oh, he had a home here, on Cleomon, but he had roamed the galaxy all of his life, and his house was just a place for him to keep his belongings while he himself wandered through the stars along the rim." Sarwadi sat back in his chair. "I have heard it said that he visited every colony world at one time or another—and a lot of worlds that would never become colonies. He was one of the last of the old professional explorers, and he sold his secrets to the highest bidder. When he died he was a rich man—one of the elite of this poor world."

A professional explorer! Regan felt his heart lift within him. This was the sort of man who might well have claimed the attention of Manuel Cabrera. And he felt the dullness of disappointment as he thought of Plender's lost records.

He looked across the desk at Sarwadi. "Is there nothing left that might be of use to us? No papers, documents, records?"

"Gentlemen," Sarwadi leaned forward in his chair and rested his forearms on the desk. "I am only interested in you because of your interest in Plender. The murder was never solved, and that is most unusual these days for very obvious reasons. The very fact of its occurrence tells me that there is something big at the back of it." He tapped the folder with his right hand. "This file has been open for a long time. It is the only one of its kind in our records, and I want to see it closed."

"Just where does that get us?" demanded Carlo suddenly. "We are interested only in certain information that Plender was holding pending a visit from my cousin. This information should have been passed over to us two years ago, but circumstances prevented it."

Regan shot a surprised glance at Carlo. The man's interven-

tion was surprising, and the manner of his deductions was more amazing still. Carlo was nobody's fool.

"The Ferroval cruiser," commented Sarwadi, and Regan looked back at the officer to meet his steady, searching gaze. "I have heard of it, gentlemen. When I learned that you were on Cleomon, I put the two facts together, and I assumed that the attempt to kill you," he nodded to Regan, "and the murder of Arfon Plender were closely connected. It occurred to me that we might be able to help one another."

"It is not impossible," agreed Regan, "but it is unlikely."

Sarwadi made a pyramid of his fingertips and studied them almost myopically. "Plender," he said, "was away from Cleomon for long periods, and, because of that, he appointed a local man to be his agent and to handle his affairs while he was away."

Regan felt a surge of excitement flare within him, and beside him Carlo stirred.

"This fact was not generally known," went on Sarwadi. "The agreement between them was kept secret on the insistence of Plender, but our inquiries uncovered the details. All this happened after the murder of Plender, of course. The man concerned was a lawyer named Henri Tecwyn, and he handled all Plender's business for many years. If anyone knows anything at all about the business which you were to conduct with Arfon Plender, then it will be this man, Tecwyn."

"If he knew so much," said Carlo, "why was he not killed at the time of Plender's death?"

"As I said, their relationship was kept secret. Plender trusted no one, and although Tecwyn admitted acting for Plender, he didn't make this admission until some time after his client's death. And that was the only admission he would make." Sarwadi shrugged. "In law I was powerless to coerce him into revealing Plender's secrets—"

"But you think—" began Regan.

"I think that he may tell you what he would not tell me," said Sarwadi. "He must have known of any connection between Plender and the family of Cabrera, and, knowing that, he may be able to supply you with any information you want."

"Where is this man?" demanded Regan.

"Softly, softly." Sarwadi held up his hand. "I told you, I have a murder to solve."

Regan gestured impatiently. "All right. What do you wish from us?"

"Your promise that you will tell me anything that might help in closing this file." He tapped the folder with one forefinger.

Regan glanced at Carlo, but the black man was studying the floor between his feet, and there was no help there. Carlo said, more plainly than by any spoken words, that Regan had to make his own decision. The black man had deduced the situation as far as he could, but beyond that point he could not and would not go. The decision was Regan's.

"Well?" insisted Sarwadi, gently.

"I will promise you this," Regan said slowly, "you may be present while I talk to this man, Tecwyn, and you may ask anything that you think may help you. If it's within my power I will answer you, but beyond that I cannot go. There is one assurance that I must have in return."

"And that is?"

"That we shall not be kept here, on Cleomon, for any protracted legal proceedings that may result."

Sarwadi studied them thoughtfully. "You are asking a great deal."

"I am offering a great deal as well."

Sarwadi hesitated.

"I have nothing to hide," Regan insisted. "My only interest is in the information that I hoped to get from Plender. Whatever that information is may still be valuable, even after two years, and I do not wish to have its value spoiled. If it will help you solve your crime," he shrugged, "then it is of double use."

Sarwadi nodded slowly. "Very well. I accept."

"Good. Then where is this man, Tecwyn? When can I see him?"

Sarwadi smiled. "He is here, in the next office. You can see him now."

XXII

THE MAN THAT Sarwadi brought into the office was small and white-haired, with a thin, pale face, and a stooped gait.

His eyes were bright and blue and beady, and they bored into Regan with a prescient gleam that was unsettling. Regan studied the man from behind his dark glasses, and decided that Plender had made an admirable choice, for Tecwyn looked what he was—a close-mouthed, hard-headed, quick-minded advocate.

After the brief introductions had been completed Regan said, "No doubt you are aware that I was to meet Arfon Plender here, on Cleomon, more than two years ago."

"I had heard of it," agreed Tecwyn amiably, "and, so far as I was aware, that meeting took place."

The silence that followed blanketed the room like a cloud, and Regan felt his senses reel slightly with the shock that the implication of Tecwyn's words engendered.

"What did you say?" whispered Carlo.

"I should have thought my meaning was quite clear," replied Tecwyn precisely. "Someone came here who claimed to be Manuel Cabrera. Plender and he met, and their business was completed. I may say that the—ah—contract between them had been conducted over a period of several Terran years. The meeting of two years ago was the climax of a long period of negotiation."

Regan felt his stomach churning as the bright eyes of the lawyer bore into him. The implication of Tecwyn's surprising statement wasn't lost on him, and if Tecwyn knew that Plender and Manuel had met previously then his masquerade as Manuel was ended before it was even begun. He wondered, with sudden panic, how much support and protection he would get from Carlo.

Sarwadi said quietly, "Then if this is true, who was the man who visited Plender two years ago?"

"His murderer," said Carlo grimly. "He got what he wanted, and, later, he organized the removal of the only person who might have been able to upset his plans."

"Then why did he wait so long before doing it?" asked the superintendent.

"Because Manuel was thought to be dead, killed in the Ferroval cruiser," snapped Carlo. "And then, later, they found that he was alive. They did the only thing possible—they got rid of Arfon Plender."

Regan felt thankfulness flood through him as the tension was removed; Carlo, too, had foreseen the danger, and with

consummate ease he had extricated Regan from the trap that seemed to be opening before him. Carlo was his ally! The black man's position seemed to have changed a great deal over the past days, and Regan wondered if he, too, was getting involved in the thrill of solving the mystery, as Regan was himself.

"You knew the reason for that last meeting between Plender and myself?" Regan said to Tecwyn.

"Yes. It was to settle final details of your joint enterprise."

"And you were there?"

Tecwyn shook his head. "Plender conducted all his own business. I was merely his—ah—repository."

"And you say that this final meeting was accomplished here, on Cleomon, between Plender and the—the stranger who took my place?"

"It was."

"For the benefit of Sarwadi," put in Carlo smoothly, "would you explain the details of the project."

"If you wish, I will tell what little I know." Tecwyn took a sheaf of papers from the case which he had brought with him. "It concerned an agreement reached between Manuel Cabrera and an alien race known as the Kaldori—"

"I have heard of them," murmured Carlo.

"I should hope so," snapped Tecwyn acidly, "since you were doing business with them. The documents handed to me state that Manuel Cabrera was acting on behalf of the family Cabrera."

"You mistake me," retorted Carlo easily. "The details of the business were kept a close secret, and although we knew the bare facts of what was involved the names of the parties concerned were kept secret from us—even my cousin, Manuel, did not know the full details. That was why the meeting which you referred to was arranged with Plender."

"I see." Tecwyn nodded in understanding, and Regan breathed again, thinking his stars for the agile brain of the black man. Without his nonchalant probing and easy, deceptive maneuvering Regan would have been lost within minutes—and he had sense enough to know it.

"As I was saying," went on Tecwyn, "the Kaldori, under the agreement, ceded colonization control of two planets within their system to the parties represented by Arfon Plender,

and in exchange they received guarantees concerning the exploitation of the two worlds."

"I should explain," put in Carlo, turning to Sarwadi, "that the Kaldori are a silicon-based life form."

"That is so," agreed Tecwyn. "They inhabit the fourth planet of the sun Alpha Regis—a cold world by any standards, but one which is well suited to their needs. They exercise control over the other five worlds of the system, but they have colonized only the fifth and sixth. The second and third worlds are quite unsuited to them from an environmental point of view, and yet they are interested in them because of the mineral wealth involved."

"How did all this concern Plender?" asked Sarwadi.

"I am coming to that. Plender negotiated with the Kaldori for the family Cabrera to take control of these two worlds. They were to be handed over intact, complete with the extensive installations that the Kaldori had built over many years. These installations took the form of sealed cities and sealed work units of many kinds. The cost of building and maintaining them was enormous, and almost canceled out the economic benefits to be gained. Plender visited the Kaldori worlds several years ago during one of his many exploratory trips, and it didn't take him long to realize that the planets concerned were ideal for colonization by Terrans! He decided to negotiate some form of Terran control with the Central Government of Earth—until the family Cabrera came upon the scene."

"I think I can add a little to the story at this point," broke in Carlo, and for the third time in almost as many minutes, Regan marveled at the facility with which the black man maneuvered the situation so that they were placed on a more substantial footing. He knew that he himself could have made some good guesses on the strength of what Tecwyn had told them, but he knew, also, that he would never have had the nerve to put forward those guesses as actual knowledge in front of a man who was in the position of the lawyer. Yet Carlo did it—and almost convinced Regan by his facility.

"My cousin," said Carlo, "had the idea of taking over these two planets from the Kaldori—though the actual race and the position of the worlds was not known to us—and using them for colonization purposes outside the sphere of the

Terran government. In return for these planets there was to be a trading agreement with the Kaldori that would guarantee them a far better return than their previous unwieldy set-up. You must realize, Sarwadi, that a planet can only be successfully colonized by a race that can live in ecological harmony upon its surface without the need for the artificial trappings of its home world. That is why so many planets are useless to so many worlds. The cost of operating them on an economic basis is out of all proportion to the return which they achieve.

"That is why conflict between races is unnecessary when the only reasons for that conflict are the possession of worlds that cannot yield an economic return."

"Quite so," agreed Tecwyn. "And it was on such a basis that Plender worked for much of his life."

"And that was the reason for his murder, you think?" asked Sarwadi.

Carlo leaned forward in his chair. "Plender had hit the jackpot, Sarwadi. A thing like this, on such a vast scale would set him up for life. It was the sort of El Dorado that ancient explorers dreamed about, and Plender had it, right there in his hands. Yes, I think that was why he was murdered."

"Then the people responsible for his death are those that now control the two Kaldori worlds?"

"It seems a reasonable hypothesis."

Sarwadi sighed. "Then the chances of finding the actual person responsible are almost nil."

"Why do you say that?" asked Regan.

"Because they will have the backing of a vast organization," snapped Sarwadi. "That organization will be blameless—or, at best, too vast for us to fix the blame properly. Their agent will have been paid off, and may be anywhere in the Galaxy with no trail behind him that we might follow."

Only now, as the silence followed Sarwadi's pronouncement, did Regan feel the excitement stir within him. Only hours before the trail had been cold and dead, the chances that it would open before them had been remote in the extreme. Now it was open, a broad, straight road with mist only at the very end of it. So many pieces had fallen into place that the picture was almost complete and now

Regan could see the whole of the great canvas that Manuel Cabrera had been working on.

Two new worlds with conditions that were Terran and an ecology that would support a Terran population. Ready-built installations that might, in detail, be alien, but which, in particular, could easily be converted for human habitation. Manuel had seen the picture early on and had worked towards it secretly, and with the vast resources of the family Cabrera at the back of him. It would have solved all the problems of Earth at one swoop as populations by the millions could have been lifted from the parent world and sent across the light years to the two Kaldori worlds. An agreement with the Terran government was all that would have been needed; the city state would have been broken by a strict control of population by laws that were already in force, and by the great outflow of colonists over the years to come.

Regan couldn't even guess at the timetable which would be necessary to fulfill such a vast project, but with the large resources of Earth behind it, then millions of people a year could be sent to the new worlds; great areas of the city state would be depopulated, buildings torn down, and open lands restored. In five years the balance would begin to swing the other way; in ten, fifteen, twenty years, there would be three planets carrying the population now borne by one. And at the back of that dream the family Cabrera—with Manuel at its head—would have ridden to power undreamed of by previous generations.

The magnitude of the vision behind the plan awed Regan as he sat and considered it, and, as he considered it, the reasons for Manuel's secrecy were made equally clear. Earth would cease to be greedy, her needs would diminish, the picture of the grasping Terran, raping the resources of the colony worlds would be killed. The tension and the hatred between the home world and the colony planets would be a thing of the past.

No wonder someone wanted to kill the idea before it took hold.

Regan felt suddenly cold even though the office was warmed by the sunlight that streamed through the window. If the plan went through, then the reasons for conflict would be gone—the ripe plum of Earth would not fall into the hands

of the waiting colony worlds, for the cause of Terran demands would be removed; without those demands no one could stoke up the enmity that was necessary if the fires of conflict were to be brightened into the redness of danger.

Regan looked across at Carlo, and the grim expression on the black man's face told him that the selfsame thoughts had crystallized in his mind also.

"Well, gentlemen?" asked Sarwadi, breaking the silence. "I have learned the reasons for the murder of Arfon Plender, and perhaps I may even be able to use them for clearing this file. Which leaves only one problem!"

"And what is that?" asked Regan.

Sarwadi chuckled. "That, I am happy to say, is not a question that I have to answer. The implications of what I have heard today are sufficiently large for me to realize that there are vast issues at stake, issues where the life of one man is not of very much importance." He looked somberly at Regan and Carlo. "The problem I mentioned is in your hands, gentlemen, though what it is I cannot guess. The answer, too, is in your hands, and there again," he shook his head sadly, "I do not even begin to know what it is."

Carlo rose to his feet and Regan followed suit.

"There is one favor I would ask of you," said the black man.

Sarwadi spread wide his hands. "If it is within my power."

"Just how effectively can you control the communications link between Cleomon and other planets?"

Sarwadi considered the question for a moment, his eyes dark and appraising, then he replied, "If it will make you happier, I can promise you that there will be no contact between Cleomon and the outside galaxy that might have to do with the Kaldori and their system."

Carlo smiled and bowed slightly. "Thank you, Sarwadi. That is all we wished to know."

"Do I need to ask where you are going?"

Carlo glanced at Regan, and then returned the police officer's slight smile. "No," he replied. "No, Sarwadi, I don't think you do."

XXIII

ALPHA REGIS was the brightest light in the heavens from the control bridge of the Cabrera vessel. It was a light that had

been pointed out to Regan by Lahaye as they headed out from Cleomon, and it had grown steadily stronger and brighter during the whole five days of their leap across space.

Around them the great arm of the galaxy swirled and glistened; and, since Alpha Regis was a rim star, the blazing fire of the universe thickened and glowed away to the port side ship, while to the starboard the stars were thin spread, each one gleaming in apparent solitude.

As he gazed upon the glowing ember that was their destination, Regan felt the all too familiar tingle of excitement grow within him. It was a sensation that he had not known until six weeks earlier, but it was a sensation that had become so much a part of him that he wondered how he had lived for so many years without it. Back in the pseudo-hospital on Ferroval a new mind had been created as well as a new body, and he realized that he had risen like a phoenix from the pyre of the exploding ship.

"What are you thinking, Cousin?" Carlo's voice stirred him from his dreams, and Regan nodded briefly towards the golden marble of Alpha Regis.

"I am thinking of another ship and another time, of a circumstance that saved my life—mine alone of all others aboard the Ferroval cruiser."

"That—and more no doubt."

Regan laughed harshly, and pointed to the star that lay ahead. "There may lie my destiny, Carlo. Perhaps, soon, I shall know why I was spared. The old man believes in God and fate, and there are moments when I think he may right. This is one of them."

They stood together in silence while the ship hummed and moved around them. Quadros, Lahaye and several others worked with muted voices, each of them showing the eagerness that had been generated by the precipitious departure from Cleomon. None of them knew the purpose of the journey, but all of them sensed the tension within Regan as well as the more easy anticipation of Carlo.

And Regan knew just how much he owed to the black man.

On Cleomon he had accomplished more in a few hours than Regan could have done in a week, and he had done it because of the inbred sureness and dynamic resolution that came only with a lifetime of observation and training. Old

Cabrera had spoken of the secrecy, the treachery, the double-dealing that had, for centuries, ruled the lives of the family Cabrera, and Regan had sense enough to know that Carlo was a product of just such a system. Carlo, like Regan, had been tempered in the fires of reality, but in the case of the black man, that tempering had been longer and deeper, with results that showed themselves under such conditions as they had encountered on Cleomon. Carlo had thought of everything, and by his actions he had told Regan that this was his world—the scene in which he was the main character, while Regan was merely a bystander, hanging on to his coat tails, and drawn inexorably into the whirlpool of his progress.

There had been long conferences with Tecwyn during which the papers of the dead Plender had been sifted and studied. In those papers had been information that was invaluable—so invaluable that Regan had thought callously how little they needed the living presence of Arfon Plender. Carlo had made diplomatically sure that Sarwadi had implemented his promise of strict security; Carlo had galvanized Quadros and Lahaye into producing flight plans for Alpha Regis; Carlo had dominated the whole twenty-four hours following the conference in Sarwadi's office. Carlo! Regan wondered just how far he would have got without the black man at his side.

And even as he thought of it Carlo shattered the illusion by asking, "What are your intentions now, Cousin?"

Regan smiled and glanced sideways at the black man. "I think that we will head for the second and third planets," he replied. "The Kaldori are not concerned in this matter. It would only confuse the issue to involve them unnecessarily."

"I agree," nodded Carlo. "And when we reach the two worlds—what then, Cousin?"

Regan's smile turned to ice. "I told you once that I was playing this whole business by ear. I think I'll go on that way."

"Have you considered the consequences? Have you thought that you may be heading straight for trouble?"

"Yes, but I see no alternative."

"Return to Earth. Inform the family. Enlist the whole resources of our empire."

Regan shook his head. "No, Carlo. It would be too late.

At the moment we have the advantage of surprise, and that is not a card that I will deliver easily." He looked across the control bridge to the hunched figures of Quadros and Lahaye. "Quadros, how far from the third planet are we?"

"Just over three hours flight, *señor*. It is on the right side of the parent star—you can see it as a point of light some ten degrees to the left of the sun."

"Then let that be our destination." Regan turned back to Carlo. "I shall be in my cabin, Cousin, there is little we can do here, and I wish to rest before we make planetfall."

"Then I will stay and admire the view," Carlo smiled.

Regan left the bridge and made his way back along the wide, metal corridors to the more luxurious quarters amidships. He felt that he needed to be alone, to think, to consider. Ahead of him, he knew, lay the climax to all that had begun over two years ago—a climax that had been as inexorable as death. And yet he felt no elation; rather there was a dull, nagging question—what would he do once it was over? He had lived for years in a vacuum of inactivity, and that vacuum lay ahead once more, just out of sight, hidden by the misty confusion of the present and of the immediate future.

He lay down on the bed and shielded his eyes so that darkness shrouded him. There was peace here, disturbed only by the muted life of the great ship. He thought of the old man and wondered what he was doing, where he was, how he had reacted to the sudden disappearance of the ship on its route to Ferroval. He thought of Giselle and her violet eyes, of Armand with his blond hair and pasty face, of Pedro and Simon, of the dead, bloated form of Malatest, of Plender whom he had never known, and yet who had held the key which might unlock the door.

Most of all he thought of Manuel Cabrera, who lived on because of him.

Beside the bed the intercom unit buzzed its urgent note, and he reached out with one prosthetic hand to press the control button.

"Cousin." Carlo's voice was clear and hard. "Come to the bridge—now."

Regan was awake in an instant. He left the cabin and headed back along the passages towards the nerve center of

the ship. As he entered the control room Carlo turned away from the central viewport and beckoned to him.

"Here, Cousin." He pointed out into the star strewn darkness. "See, there."

Regan stepped up beside him and looked out of the port, following with his eyes the pointing finger that Carlo aimed towards the starboard side. For a moment he could see nothing. He allowed his eyes to take in more light, and he removed the dark glasses—and it was then that he saw it. Another ship, black against the stars, yet with flecks of light. Regan's stomach turned over as he saw it.

"Carlo, what—"

"Our rendezvous, Cousin."

Regan's throat was dry as he saw the slight, wistful smile that twisted the black lips. He looked for aid to Quadros, but the captain was busy of the far side of the bridge with Lahaye and several others.

"Rendezvous? Carlo, what nonsense is this?"

The black man laughed. "Cousin," he said softly, "you are too naïve for your own good. Did you really think that I would have allowed you to come here from Cleomon without taking some precautions?"

Regan said nothing; his bewilderment was too great.

"The instant we made planetfall on Cleomon the information was passed to Xanadu. It would have been the same wherever and whenever we appeared, for the fingers of the family Cabrera are widespread, Cousin. We were almost six days on Cleomon, and that would give my uncle—your father—a good chance of making up time on us." Carlo laid a hand apologetically on Regan's shoulder. "Before we left I arranged with Sarwadi—on your orders—for a rendezvous to be arranged and a message to be passed to old Cabrera telling him of our plans. The fact that our route from Cleomon to the Kaldori sun lay back upon the route to Earth—albeit at an angle—meant that any ships from Earth would reach Kaldori ahead of us. Cousin, my deception troubles me." He cocked a wicked eye at Regan. "But I think we may be glad of those two ships before this day is over."

"Two ships?"

Carlo nodded. "Look there—to the other side."

And as he did so Regan saw another—a mirror image of the one to starboard.

"Do I have your forgiveness, Cousin?"

Regan turned from the viewport, and, strangely, he found the thought of those other vessels comforting. He grinned. "Yes, I grant you forgiveness. Have you spoken with—with my father?"

"The old one is sleeping. I would not disturb him."

"Then I too will sleep. Call me when it is time."

Regan went back to his cabin; he needed time to think and to thank whatever fates had caused Carlo to doubt his motives in the first place. Without the presence of the black man he would have blundered from error to error with results that were all too clear and all too unpleasant to contemplate. As he looked back on the confusion of that last day on Cleomon he could see just how Carlo had accomplished his deception during those hectic hours when he had taken the initiative away from Regan; everything had been handled that needed to be handled with a sureness and a precision that had drawn Regan's admiration and relief.

Now, he could see why.

So much had happened—so much needed to be done—that it had been easy for Carlo to make the arrangements he had spoken of, and Sarwadi would not have questioned the orders because it was Carlo who had acted as an equal partner; it was Carlo who had spoken of a communication blanket; it was Carlo who had questioned Tecwyn; and it was the black man who had foreseen the dangers of the unannounced arrival of a single ship within the Kaldori system.

Regan offered a prayer for the presence of Carlo—and then he slept.

XXIV

HE WAS AWAKENED by Carlo's knock on the door of his cabin, and the black man entered at his summons.

"We are arrived, Cousin."

"No trouble?" Regan asked.

"None to speak of. We were challenged by two ships as we made our approach, but Quadros had a cover story ready to shield us, and we have been allowed to proceed."

"Allowed?"

Carlo smiled wryly. "Ordered, then."

"And what now?"

"We shall land in a tender. Co-ordinates have been given for the point at which we are to arrive."

"What of the old man?"

"He stays aboard his own ship," said Carlo. "I told him that we insisted on it as a safety measure. Three ships with him in charge could be a guarantee of our safety."

Regan nodded in agreement.

"He will land later, should he deem it necessary."

Regan sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the carpeted floor between his feet. "It is too quiet," he said. "I have a feeling, Carlo, that I cannot explain. I would have expected trouble."

"Why should there be? No one knows our true identity."

"I don't know. These worlds are waiting here for colonists from Earth, and they have been waiting for two years and more. They are the answer to all the problems that lie on Earth—and someone has taken possession of them."

He looked up at Carlo.

"Who, Cousin?" The word came automatically to his lips. "Only Manuel knew about them—he and Plender and Tecwyn—"

"And one other," added Carlo. "I have thought about it, too. I have no answer save that the colony worlds do not know what is planned or they would have taken control of the Kaldori worlds for themselves. Yet, as we see, they are not here."

"Then who is," snarled Regan. "Who is here to greet us with ships and men? Who has kept your cousin's secret so close these past years?"

"The tender is waiting for us," Carlo told him, gently. "Perhaps, within the hour, we shall have the answer."

The tender swung away from the ship and headed down over the surface of the planet, and from it Regan and Carlo could see how much like Earth the world below them was. Those first far glimpses from the control bridge of the ship were but heralds of the beauty that was to come. It was Xanadu again, but larger and greener—more beautiful because of its sheer size and splendor as it rose to greet them. There were wide rivers, high peaks and vast, green plains; there were rain clouds scudding gray beneath blue acres of sky; there was storm and hurricane, wind and rain, snow at the poles and blistering heat at the equator. All this and

more that was necessary to the heart and soul of man if he were to be happy. And here, thought Regan, could be the rebirth of that other world so far away in space yet so close in time; here could be brought the teeming millions that were suffocating on their native world—and they would come happily to a world that was so much like their own that it might have been a twin. But the twin was as Earth had been, as Earth should be, and could be in the future; it was a world to play upon the heart strings of any man who saw it, especially if that man had known the spawning horror of the city state.

As they headed for the position that had been given them, they could see, gleaming in the brilliant sun, small signs of habitation—a town here, an industrial installation there; the buildings were not shielded as the papers Tecwyn had showed them had indicated.

"Someone has been busy, Cousin," remarked Carlo, as they swept low over a small, geometrically designed town. "The Kaldori needed shielded cities, and these are open—and see, there," he pointed away to the left where the regular lines of cultivation showed the multi-colors of large fields. "I would guess that this world could take many millions of colonists at this moment."

"But who—"

"Patience, cousin. I cannot begin to guess, but someone has taken Manuel's plan and is using it for a very different reason. It was too big to be thrown away entirely."

"Carlo," said Regan, "I am thinking—there is another world like this. Can you imagine what Earth would be like in a few years?"

"If Earth had the benefit of all that we can see." Carlo nodded. "Yes, I can imagine."

Regan was silent. He looked down on the panorama that swept below the fast-moving tender, and wondered what he could do. The ships that had greeted them were an indication of the power that was held by those who opposed him—a power which he should not have assailed alone; and, thanks to Carlo, they were not alone. But the power was still there, tangible and threatening. He recalled Carlo's warning: "Return to Earth. Inform the family. Enlist the resources of our empire." But no, he had been too eager, too ready to trust his own instinct rather than the greater experience of the

black man, and only Carlo's foresight had staved off complete disaster. Now, at least, they had a chance.

A small, gray landing area showed ahead and to the right, and beyond it a wide, low area of buildings—one- and two-storied—marked the largest area of habitation that they had yet seen. A river wound its blue-green way towards a lake that glistened in the distance, and mountains loomed dark in the background. The landing field came up to meet them—they set down gently and easily—the motors whispered to silence, and from the buildings at the edge of the field two small ground vehicles sped out towards them.

"The spider has an effective web," commented Carlo.

"Let us hope it is not so effective as it might seem," replied Regan. "Come, let us meet our hosts."

There was small comfort in knowing that the men who greeted them were Terran. They were young, and they had a healthy, outdoor look that was not common on Earth. Regan recognized it for what it was. He had seen it on Caledon and Cleomon, on Ferroval and the other colony worlds, but on Earth—never. These men had been on the Kaldori worlds for a considerable time.

They were polite in their greetings, but their underlying attitude was that of hostility. Strangers were not welcome, and that fact was made abundantly clear. Regan recognized the insistence behind their request that he and Carlo should take their places in the rear of one of the ground vehicles, and he gave no sign that he was unwilling. They were whisked away from the landing field and out on to the wide road that led into the nearby town. The buildings that they saw were unmistakably alien in origin, but they had been adapted by their new occupants, and there were, here and there, evidences of new buildings in the familiar lines of Terran architecture.

"You have adapted yourselves well, gentlemen," said Regan to the two men who rode in the front of the vehicle.

The man beside the driver turned and smiled thinly back at him. "We have had plenty of time and many resources. Do you like our efforts?"

"Indeed I do. There will be room here for many millions of people." Regan gazed unconcernedly out the window as he said it.

"Perhaps." The word was allowed to slip out reluctantly as the young man's eyes narrowed slightly.

Regan could almost see the wheels turning within his mind, but he said no more, and turned back to look along the road that lay ahead.

They followed the route as it passed through the town and out into the countryside again. And as the buildings fell away behind them and the green fields opened out on either side, Regan could see their final destination. It was a house built low and large upon a slight crest so that it overlooked the surrounding land. The road ran beyond and disappeared over another rise away in the distance. In the sunlight, the house gleamed white with the black holes of windows and doors to give it eyes. In the front a wide, smooth drive led away from the road and up to the main entrance, and as the vehicle pulled to a halt before the great arched doorway the young man asked, "Who may I have the pleasure of announcing, gentlemen?"

Regan looked at Carlo and smiled. "Perhaps our own introductions will be better received."

"As you wish." The man shrugged his indifference.

They walked up the three steps to the entrance, and inside, the house was cool and white and airy. There was a wood block floor on which their feet echoed as the guide led them through the house and out into the sunlight again, into a wide, flower-decked garden.

A man knelt on the lawn with his back towards them, tending a bush that blazed in scarlet beauty under the blue sky, and the young man crossed to him, and said, "These are the visitors who have landed from the ships."

"Good. Bid them welcome."

Regan and Carlo crossed the lawn when the young man beckoned to them, and as they approached the kneeling figure he rose and turned to greet them. He was a youngish man—in his early forties—dark-faced, with clear gray eyes and a piercing hawk-like face that gleamed with sweat. His clothing was old and dusty, and it did nothing to indicate that he was the man who ruled two worlds. The man who had destroyed the Ferroval cruiser, who had usurped the position of Manuel Cabrera, killed Arfon Plender—the man who had so disturbed the life of Martin Regan that it would never be the same again.

Beside him Carlo stopped and let out his breath in a long sigh, then he said, slowly and with a cold detachment, "I had thought about it—but I did not believe, truly, that it might be so. My greetings to you, Cousin Manuel."

XXV

THE SUN OF Alpha Regis burned upon Regan's head. It was the one concrete thing onto which he could latch in a world that had suddenly exploded around him. Vaguely, he knew that he should be feeling all the emotions that had been pent up within him for so long, yet all he was aware of was a cold wonder that he had not considered the possibility earlier. At one stroke, above the mental numbness that he felt, all questions were answered; each and every portion of the great panorama fell into perspective with a clarity that was blinding in its simplicity.

The man on the Ferroval cruiser had been a decoy, and his death had covered the tracks of Manuel Cabrera with a thoroughness that no other stratagem would have achieved. At one stroke Manuel had protected himself and his plans; and with that stroke he had brought grief to his parents, and bewilderment and pain into the life of an innocent trading agent named Martin Regan.

Regan lifted his prosthetic hands and held them before his face. His arms were covered from wrist to shoulder, and only he knew of the horror that lay beneath the covering, the pain that had given them birth. He looked up at the hawk face of Manuel Cabrera and saw the alarm and the surprise written there. The gray eyes were stark and wide, and they bore the look of a man who has suffered an almost psychic shock. Yet even as he looked into them Regan could see the bewilderment fade as Manuel Cabrera fought to regain his self-control. The lines of his face settled into grim acceptance of an unpleasant fact as he said, "Had I but known that it was you, Cousin!"

"And I—if I had guessed—" Carlo let the words hang in the air, and the silence that followed dragged, it seemed, into hours.

The gray eyes studied Regan, taking in details of his being, and, as in a dream, he heard Manuel say, "I have heard of you, Regan. My reports from the outside universe

told me of your masquerade. Oh, yes." He nodded at Regan's obvious surprise. "Oh, yes, I know of the error of identification that placed you in my shoes. It was a happy circumstance at the time, yet now I begin to doubt it."

"Then if it wasn't you aboard the ship—" breathed Carlo.

"Does it matter who took his place?" rasped Regan. "The man is dead, and death was the price of his loyalty. What of the carrier, Manuel? The box that caused us so much trouble and concern."

Manuel laughed gently. "I do not know what was in it, but whatever it was would have been of no use to anyone. It was the final happy circumstance that made my escape here—to Kaldori—so free of trouble." He wiped a hand across his moist brow. "Come, let us sit in the shade. We have much to talk on." He took Carlo by the elbow, linking arms as relatives do who are close to one another, but Regan saw the look on Carlo's face as the couple moved away, and he followed them more slowly, still in a daze of surprise and apprehension.

Manuel led them to a rough wooden seat set under a tree with wide spread arms and large green leaves. There was a table with a jug of liquid and several glasses that glistened as the sunlight played upon them.

"Please, sit down." Manuel waved them to the bench. "It is hot working in this sun, yet I think a drink will be as welcome to you as it will be to me."

And still Carlo kept silent as the glasses were filled with sweet fruit juice that was unfamiliar to Regan.

"Remember how I always wanted a garden, Cousin?" asked Manuel.

"Yes, I remember," replied Carlo, huskily. "You had all of Xanadu for your garden. Wasn't that enough?"

"Was Xanadu enough for you, Regan?" asked Manuel, his gray eyes mockingly upon Regan's scarred face.

"It was all that I could ever have wished for."

"Then you are a fool. Once I saw this world I knew what I wanted."

"You had it at Xanadu," snapped Carlo bitterly.

"No." Manuel's voice was soft but his manner was grim. "No, Xanadu belonged to the family—to my father and to Giselle, to you and to Pedro, to Simon and all the other

Cabreras. It was never mine—I had only a small part of it, and it was never enough.”

“Did you have to be so cruel?” asked Carlo. “Did you have to weigh down the hearts of your parents with so much anguish? Do you know the grief you caused, the worry—”

“It was unavoidable,” broke in Manuel. “You know as well as I the difficulties, the trouble I had. The representatives of the colony worlds did their utmost to find what I was about. Thanks to Regan and the happy circumstance that allowed his survival with my supposed belongings, the way was made easier for me.”

“All you had to do was to confide in us.”

“That was all.” Manuel sneered. “Confide in the family and hand over all this?” He shook his head. “No, Carlo. This plan is mine, the efforts behind it are mine, and the fruits of its success will be mine. If the family had joined me, how much of it do you think would have been left to me?”

“It belongs to mankind.”

The quick exchanges had given Regan time to recover, and now there was a question burning within his brain to which he already knew the answer, yet it was a question that still had to be asked because the answer was too terrible to contemplate without complete confirmation.

“The Ferroval cruiser,” Regan said. “You were responsible for its destruction?”

The question was greeted with a deathly silence; Carlo turned his head slowly and looked at Regan from eyes that were stark with denial and horror. “Regan! No—”

“Yes, Carlo, I think the answer is yes. Look at his eyes and tell me that you can deny it.” Regan turned his gaze back to Manuel. “Did you—arrange it?”

“What would you have me say, Regan? What would you have me do? This whole thing is greater than any one person or group of people.”

“Sixty-eight people died on that ship,” Regan whipped off the dark glasses to reveal the bulging orbs of his alien eyes. “And I have wished many times in the dark of the night that I had been the sixty-ninth. There is no justification in all the universe—”

“Who are you to talk of justification,” rasped Manuel. “You are a little man who has strayed into something that is too vast for your comprehension. Can’t you understand that I

had to vanish utterly and completely? Can't you understand that my supposed death was the only way by which I could pursue the goal which I was seeking? Only one person in the whole galaxy knew where I was—"

"Plender." Carlo's voice was dead of all emotion. "Plender—and you killed him too."

"You knew of Plender?" Manuel looked at them in surprise.

"How else do you think we trailed you here?"

"It was a question I had intended to ask." Manuel chuckled. "So my little Giselle remembered all too well. And for that one brief moment of weakness—ah, well! It is too late for regrets."

"Giselle?" Carlo turned on Regan. "It was Giselle who told you?"

Manuel laughed outright. "She would trust a stranger and yet she would not trust one of the family. Carlo, I think our friend has some attraction that is lost to us." The smile vanished. "And yet, with Plender dead—"

"You should have killed again," snapped Regan. "Or did it not occur to you that Plender might have left records?"

"His house was completely destroyed."

"But not his friends—"

"He had none. He was a lone wolf with no other God but money."

"There was one," said Regan. "One man of whom we learned."

"I wondered—"

"You wondered. God in heaven." Carlo rose to his feet and lifted his arms to the sky. "Is life so cheap to you, Cousin?"

"Sit down, Carlo. You wear your emotions too gaudily."

Manuel drained his glass and set it on the table. "Regan, can you not see the dream I have? Can you not see how great is the plan that I have created?"

"I see only dead men," retorted Regan, "and I see them through alien eyes, and I touch them with false hands. No, I do not see." He rose to his feet and stood beside the black man. "Come, Carlo. We have been here too long for any good that we might do."

"Do you think that you shall leave here, now, Regan? With Plender in his grave, and those others lost on the Ferrovial cruiser?"

"There are three ships up there. He wouldn't dare—"

"Indeed he would. Tell him, Cousin."

Manuel gestured briefly and smiled at them. "I have to think on this matter, Cousin. Three ships are a strong force. In the meantime, consider yourselves my guests. This is a lovely world—as lovely as Earth once was—enjoy it and watch it blossom."

For Regan, the next hours passed in a realm that bordered on the fantastic. By almost tacit consent the conversation veered away from controversial subjects, and Manuel Cabrera presented another side to his character that was very different from the picture that Regan had built up. He escorted them around his vast garden, proudly showing them his flowers and bushes, and explaining in great detail the science of horticulture. In the warm sun and under the blue sky the tension lifted and Regan relaxed. He savored the brilliant colors and the exquisite perfumes, and he found an unexpected gentleness in his prosthetic hands as he held in them the fragrant blooms offered by his host.

Only briefly did he wonder about the old man waiting in his ship.

The sun declined and the hours passed, and the shadows lengthened across the green lawns. Their tour ended back at the wood seat, and Manuel offered them further drinks from the large jug. As he did so a man came from the house and crossed towards them. Manuel moved away from them and listened intently as the man whispered in his ear.

"Cousin." He turned away from the messenger. "You will excuse me. I have urgent business to attend to. Please, enjoy my garden while I am gone."

Regan watched somberly as the slim wiry figure vanished inside the house, then he said, "I do not like what I hear, Carlo."

"And have you heard as much as I?" Something in the black man's tone made Regan look at him sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"I know Manuel and you do not. I knew him during all of our previous life together. I knew him then and I know him now."

"Well?"

"He has had six years, Regan. Four years before he found it necessary to disappear, and a further two years since. He has had at the back of him all the resources of two planets.

There are thousands of men from Earth working here; there are towns and cities, and factories and farms and mines. There are two almost virgin worlds waiting for a flood of immigrants which each of them can easily absorb." Carlo looked at Regan from cold, bleak eyes. "And yet he does nothing except guard his secrets and cover his tracks. He does nothing except maintain a veil of silence and secrecy that it has taken blind luck and a great deal of valuable time to uncover."

Regan sat down again on the bench. At the back of his mind there stirred something of the dread apprehension that had moved Carlo's voice to urgency.

"Do you not see it, Regan?" Carlo insisted. "At the back of him is only murder and death and intrigue. Manuel is a master of intrigue—he learned well from his father, but he has not the old man's compassion and belief in his fellow men. He is cold and calculating, and, as you have heard, human life means little to him beyond the overriding necessity to remove anyone who threatens his dream."

Regan said nothing.

"He should be out in the open by now. He could be gaining the support of the Terran Central government. If he acted now then the threat that hangs over the galaxy will be removed in a few months. The flow of immigrants could begin and in ten years—five years even—the whole structure of human inter-relationships could be changed beyond recognition. In twenty years the green spaces would begin to be seen on Earth, the city state would begin to die, the demands by Earth on the colony worlds would diminish and the causes of the tension would be removed." Carlo turned and looked at the doorway through which Manuel had passed so recently. "And yet he waits. Why, Regan? Why?"

While Carlo spoke Regan allowed his thoughts to run ahead of the black man's words. He looked around the brilliant garden and he remembered Xanadu. He thought of Manuel's love for this garden and the things that grew in it, and he remembered the dead aboard the Ferroval cruiser. His eyes saw the flame red beauty of a burning bush, and his mind thought of the flowering horror of fire that had devoured the body and the home of Arfon Plender. In one man lay the love of beauty *and* a callousness of death that was at once both horrible and fascinating. The family

meant more to Regan that it did to Manuel Cabrera—and in that fact lay the answer to the questions that Carlo was asking.

"I think, Carlo," said Regan, "that your cousin is waiting on the death of the galaxy."

"What?"

Regan gestured wearily. "He doesn't want to end the conflict or reduce the tension. He wants the destruction of Earth and of the colony worlds as effective economic units, and the way in which that can best be done is to sit aside and watch them tear at each other's throats. And when it is over he will be the one power within the galaxy that has been untouched by force; he will be the one person with an organization capable of rebuilding from the chaos that will be left."

Carlo stood shaking his head in a desperate mute denial of the words that assailed his ears. "You must be wrong."

"Am I? Can there be any other reason for his secrecy? Manuel hated Xanadu because it was not his. He hated the family for denying him the power that he desired. Carlo," Regan leaned urgently forward, "his every word confirms that what you attempt to deny must be so. There is too vast a picture spread over too long a time, and if you see all of that picture you must see what lies in the background."

"It could never happen," whispered Carlo. "If such a conflagration comes it will be too widespread for even these worlds to survive."

"There are few that know of them."

"Yet there are some, and the Kaldori are not unknown to the colony worlds."

"Exactly," snapped Regan. "They are Kaldori worlds, and the Kaldori would not allow an outside conflict to threaten their system. And Manuel knows it."

Carlo sat down heavily on the seat.

"No alien race would allow it," insisted Regan. "Whatever happens on Earth or on the colony worlds—whatever destruction takes place—these two planets will be under the nominal protection of an alien race that cares nothing for Terran motives and desires. The Kaldori are interested only in the economic advantages to be gained by the presence within their system of an alien race. And so long as Manuel

and his followers stick to their side of the bargain then they will be safe."

Above them the blue sky had taken on the first faint purple tints of dusk. Carlo put his face in his hands and rested his elbows on his knees in an attitude of utter dejection.

"You must be right," he whispered after a long pause. "I know you must be right for there can be no other answer."

From the house the slim figure of Manuel emerged and crossed towards them. His face was cold and serious as he approached them, and Regan wondered what could have happened to change him from the pleasant companion of bare minutes before.

"What game are you playing, Cousin?" he demanded of Carlo who looked up at him in surprise.

"What do you mean?" snapped Regan.

Manuel's eyes were cold as he said, "Another tender has landed from one of your ships. Its occupants are already on their way to this house."

XXVI

REGAN LOOKED grimly at Carlo and read the alarm in the other's face.

"Well?" demanded Manuel.

"I don't know, Cousin," replied Carlo slowly. "No one should have followed us."

Yet Regan knew that within his mind there burned the same question that burned in Carlo's. What was the old man doing? Why had he come? And in Carlo's eyes he could read the same questions. Had the old man become too impatient with the silence of Regan and Carlo, and, with dusk drawing across the place where they had landed, had he decided to come and see for himself what lay on the surface of the world below the ship?

"I am waiting for an answer," rasped Manuel.

"Then you will get none from us," replied Regan, "for we don't know the answer that you are seeking."

From the house the same servant who had come before hurried towards Manuel.

"There are visitors arrived from the spacefield."

"So soon?" Manuel's eyes glinted with sudden anger as

he turned on Carlo. "It seems my questions will be answered without your aid, Cousin."

To the servant he said, "Bring them through to the garden."

The seconds ticked away in silence as Manuel paced a few impatient yards across the rich grass and Carlo sat, stiff backed, his face a mask on which no emotions were written. Regan felt numbed, first by the realization that he had foreseen the ambitions and the desires of Manuel Cabrera, and second by the conflict that he knew must come from the presence on the planet of old Cabrera. He wondered desperately what lay ahead of them—what the next few hours of time would bring forth, and his desperation faded into dull acceptance. He knew that there was nothing he could do—no single act that he could perform—which would prevent the onward march of events that had begun so long ago.

He knew that only here, now, in the next short period of time, there lay the climax to all that he had endured.

From the black doorway figures appeared. The servant at the head of the small group stood aside and waved the rest of the party through. Cabrera stood, hunched and old, his gray, old fashioned clothes drab and unbecoming in the bright garden. His right hand leaned heavily on his stick, and his left—Regan's heart jumped—his left hand held the arm of Giselle. Behind them, the tall, lean figure of Armand stood.

Slowly, they came down the steps and on to the lawn, and Regan heard Manuel curse softly and unintelligibly behind him. Bare yards separated them when Giselle stopped dead in her tracks and her left hand flew to her mouth in sudden horror and surprise, and Regan knew that she had recognized Manuel.

He crossed to the old man, trying to keep himself between Manuel and the group, aware that such a shock as this could have disastrous consequences.

"Cabrera," he greeted him, his eyes boring into the old brown, wrinkled face and drawing the gaze of the old man towards him. "We are ill met. You should have stayed aboard and waited for us to come to you."

"I have waited too long, Regan," said the old man softly. "My time is running out—and so is the time for all mankind. I had to come."

Clearly, he had not noticed Manuel, and Regan glanced

hurriedly at Giselle standing stark and white beside her father. He read in her eyes the fear that he himself had felt—that the shock could kill the old man.

"I have news for you, Cabrera," Regan said slowly. "It may be that it will shock you, and I ask you to brace yourself for it."

The old eyes narrowed, searching his face for some sign and then he said, "I am beyond shock, Regan. I have lived too long to be surprised by what I hear or what I see."

"So be it." Regan stood aside and allowed the slim figure of Manuel to stand in clear view.

The silence grew and settled upon them. Cabrera looked and saw and stood as a stone statue, making no move nor showing any sign. Regan wondered if he would fall down and he noticed that Giselle had tightened her grip upon the old man's arm. Then, slowly and with no word spoken, the old man walked forward, his step firm upon the soft grass and his stick planted solidly to aid his movements. He crossed to the seat from which Carlo had risen, and disengaged his arm from Giselle's grasp so that he could seat himself. He rested his hands across the top of the cane and sat upright, his legs slightly apart.

"Father!" The first sound in long seconds was a whisper from Manuel.

"Who is this man?" demanded Cabrera. "He speaks to me as if we claim acquaintance."

For an instant Regan thought that the old man's mind had cracked under the sudden shock, but his voice was too firm and his words too bitter for there to be any doubt of what he had said. Regan felt a sudden elation, for, in those few words the old man had shattered any illusions that any of them might have had for the future. He looked at Carlo and read the amazement in the black man's eyes; he saw the tears shining on the cheeks of Giselle; he noted the grim anger on the face of Armand, and the stark bewilderment of Manuel.

"Father, it is I, Manuel."

"Regan," snapped the old man. "Regan, tell me of this man—what he has done—what he is doing here, on the Kaldori worlds."

"He is a man with a dream, Cabrera," said Regan coldly. "He has a dream of an empire with himself at its head, and

he will realize that dream over the broken worlds of Earth and Caledon and Cleomon, of Ferroval and Cabri. There are dead men behind him, Cabrera, and dead men form the road ahead—if he is allowed to go on.”

“Father!” The dark eyes blazed their malevolence at Regan.

“Tell him,” said Regan coldly. “Tell him of your plan to hide here and await the dissolution of mankind. Tell him how you hid yourself even from your own people. There are dead men to be paid for, and broken lives; there is the grief of your family to be assuaged and debts in plenty to be redeemed. This is the moment of redemption, Manuel, and I need to see you crawl.”

“There is no truth in you,” snarled Manuel.

“Murderer,” said Regan implacably. “Tell them of the dead men that have marked your passing. Tell them of the Ferroval cruiser. Deny me these hands and these scars. Deny the grief of your mother and your father—if you can.”

The silence that followed his words stretched into aeons; Regan looked at the old man and knew that he was holding himself together only by a tremendous effort of will. He knew that the old man’s brain was fitting the pieces together, seeking motives here, placing facts there, in their proper order.

“Can you explain your lies and your deceit?” The old voice was a whisper but the contempt it bore was plain for all of them to read. “Can you explain the two lost years, or those who died in the Ferroval cruiser?”

Manuel took three faltering steps towards Regan. His ashen face and terrible eyes bespoke his state of mind more clearly than any words could tell. He hesitated and then turned back to the old man.

“Father, I had a dream—a dream too great for you to understand. I hold it still, deep within me, and I want it to blossom here, on the Kaldori worlds. I want the sort of world here that Earth once was. Can you not see it? Can you not understand it, and see why I have done what has to be done? Father—”

“No,” snapped the old man. “I see only ambition, a lust for power that has been placed above human life.” He leaned forward on the seat. “I landed for one reason—a reason that has not been told. Our time is running out. Regan—Carlo—what we have feared for so long has happened. I received

word of an open breach between Earth and the colony worlds. It has come sooner than we expected, and it has come because of demands upon the economy of the colony worlds by the Terran government. They have taken fright over the situation that exists on Earth and have demanded that millions of colonists be taken from Earth and settled on the new worlds. They have demanded a long term program of evacuation that will be spread over the next twenty years and will reduce Earth's population by at least twenty percent in that time."

Regan stared bleakly at Carlo and read the horror in the man's eyes. He looked at Manuel and saw the gleam of hope in the gray eyes—and he knew that this was what Manuel had been waiting for. This was the culmination of his idea.

"The colony worlds have rejected the suggestion," said Cabrera.

"Then there could be war," whispered Carlo.

"There will be if the situation deteriorates any further."

"It won't," broke in Regan decisively. "The answer is here—on the Kaldori worlds. We will offer them to Earth on the basis of Manuel's original idea, and I think they will accept. Once that is accomplished then the reason for strife will be gone."

"What of the colony worlds?" asked Carlo. "They will see their own dreams of conquest frustrated."

"Earth is too strong," said the old man. "They would never dare to tackle her when she has had hope reborn. These worlds will mean life for millions and the rebirth of the entire Terran economy. No," he shook his head, "I do not think—"

"You shall not do it," screamed Manuel. "These are my worlds, and this is my plan"

"You are a dead man," said Regan coldly. "Manuel your time is here and now, and you will wish a thousand times that you had died in the destruction of that ship."

Even as he spoke, Manuel turned and threw himself at Regan. He screamed an animal howl of rage, and the momentary glimpse that Regan had of his face, contorted as it was with rage and fear, told him that Manuel had given up the fight. He was beaten and he knew it; yet, in one last effort at revenge he dared to contest his strength with that of the man whose death he had so nearly accomplished.

Regan threw him off, and caught him again as he came in a second time; he held him tightly in his prosthetic arms, tensing them against the maniacal struggles of a man half mad with rage and frustration. There was a sudden crack, and Manuel screamed with pain. Regan relaxed his grip slightly, and as he did so, Manuel shrieked, "Armand! Armand, kill him!"

The shock of it flooded through Regan's whole being. His eyes jumped across the space that separated him from the blond man standing beside Giselle, and he read the flowering hatred and panic written so clearly upon the thin face. Armand! And Manuel had called upon him for aid. The blazing rage on Armand's face answered any questions that he might have had. There had to be someone on Earth to tell Manuel of Regan's survival and of his subsequent masquerade; there had to be someone to help him obtain his recruits—the men and women needed to populate the two Kaldori worlds; there had to be an agent for all the hundred things that needed to be done that could not be done by Manuel.

It had to be Armand!

No wonder Armand had opposed his plan to go to Ferroval; no wonder Armand had tried to trap Regan into leaving Xanadu to fall into the hands of Malatest—if the plans had come off then the agents of the colony worlds would have had the person of Manuel Cabrera in their hands—or so they would have believed—and the real Manuel would have been doubly safe.

And it had been Armand who had kept Manuel informed of all that had happened—all, that was, except the closeness of Regan. And that he could not do because he didn't know Regan's plans until after he had left Earth with the old man. He and Cabrera would have been in space when the news reached them of Regan's ultimate destination, and it would have been far too dangerous for him to have tried to warn his cousin of the threat that was developing.

Armand!

Regan felt a terrible rage flood through him; he was vaguely aware of the struggling form of Manuel clutched tightly in his arms like a fly in a giant web; he was vaguely aware that the man was screaming, a high, horrible sound that made a mockery of the beauty that was around them. Then the screaming stopped, and the struggling. Regan won-

dered stupidly why Manuel was so still; he opened his arms and allowed the dead, crushed body of Manuel Cabrera to fall to the ground where it lay, twisted and crumpled, upon the green grass.

He looked at it, and realized with growing horror just what he had done. The frozen tableau of the old man, of Giselle, of Carlo, stood looking at him, and he spread wide his hands in a gesture of hopeless repentance.

"I—I am sorry"

Someone sobbed close by, a high pitched, bitter sound that had an edge of hysteria to it, and he thought at once that it was Giselle crying for her twice lost brother. But she stood still and straight as she had been, white and motionless with her great violet eyes fixed on him, unblinking. There was no hatred in them. Beside her the tall, hunched form of Armand stood and wailed and moaned in the hopelessness of discovery, a broken tool now that his cousin was no more.

"Cabrera." Regan felt the words stick in his throat. "Cabrera, I have robbed you of your son again."

The old man rose slowly to his feet, and crossed to him, leaning heavily on his stick; his face was as gray as death, yet it bore no sign of sorrow to add to the thousand wrinkles of his aged face. He paused beside the broken body of Manuel and poked at it gently with his cane.

"This was not my son, Regan," he said. "No son of mine can bear my name and act as he has done." The old eyes lifted from the body and looked at Regan, and there were tears in them. "You are more my son than ever he could be, and these tears of mine are for your survival—not for his death. My son lives on in what you have suffered, in what you have accomplished. And this—this carrion who bore my name has paid his debt in full."

He turned from Regan and walked slowly and stiffly towards the house. Giselle took his arm as he passed by and together they moved from Regan's sight through the dark doorway. Behind them the tottering, weeping figure of Armand was ushered away by Carlo, and Regan was left alone in the garden, with the dusk closing silently around him.

Hysterically, he wondered how a brother and sister might marry, and he was still laughing, high and tearfully, when Giselle came out to fetch him.

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