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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. I

No. I

1958

3 Complete New Novels by Top Writers !

Short Novels :

THE SLAVE.....C. M. Kornbluth 5

To become a man again, ex-Special Agent Charles Barker had to be two men at the same time, fighting an alien enemy who had already conquered billions of others !

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Perhaps it was only a myth ; perhaps it was real, and held the secret of eternal life. All Hallam Navarre knew for sure was that he had to find it — or die !

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There was only one man who could put Earth's blasted and broken civilisation back together again, and that man had been dead for thirty years. Or—had he ?

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THE EDITOR'S SPACE

There's something missing !

Ask what it is, and everybody has a different answer. But everybody agrees that modern science fiction isn't all it could be.

Many critics say that the "sense of wonder" has vanished. Others argue that there simply isn't any science in science fiction any more. Still others speak up for such varied matters as plot, pacing and people.

Whatever the lack, it's clear that science fiction isn't as much fun to read as it used to be. Readers who are looking primarily for entertainment—not long-winded and one-sided arguments about psychology, sociology and culture—have had to go elsewhere to find it.

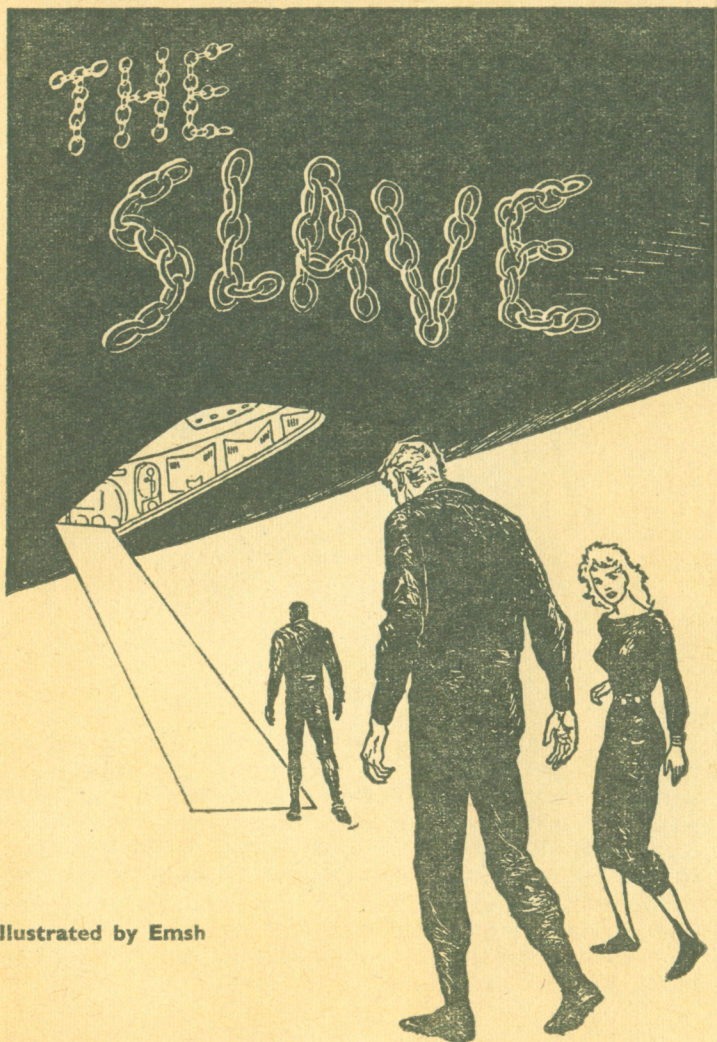
Science Fiction Adventures is designed to be an antidote for that situation. And the title itself is the best clue to our approach.

The best fiction—enduring classics as well as modern best-sellers—has always stressed one thing : adventure. A situation involving genuine conflict and suspense, with real people facing and solving real problems, has always been the most solid foundation for any piece of fiction. Other qualities are important too, but they can only be carried by a good *story*—and the definition of a good story does not change.

The future holds the greatest adventures mankind has yet faced. The entire universe is waiting just around the corner, full of exciting discoveries and mysterious dangers.

What, exactly, will man meet in his race to the stars? Anybody can guess—but we're going to publish the best guesses we can get, presented in the most entertaining form possible. That's our entire policy. We think you'll find that by following it, we've added the missing ingredient science fiction needs.

—L.T.S.



Illustrated by Emsh

C. M. Kornbluth is one of those rare writers whose straight science fiction has become highly popular among a wide audience of people who do not read science fiction regularly. His novels, like Takeoff and The Syndic, have won universal critical acclaim ; his shorter stories are invariably anthologised, not once but over and over again. The Slave we think, in every way maintains the high level of his usual work.

THE SLAVE

by C. M. Kornbluth

*To become a man again, he had to be two men,
fighting an enemy who had conquered billions ?*

Chapter 1

The drunken bum known as Chuck wandered through the revelry of the New Year's Eve crowd. Times Square was jammed with people ; midnight and a whole new millennium were approaching. Horns tooted, impromptu snake-dances formed and dissolved, bottles were happily passed from hand to hand ; it was minutes to A.D. 2,000. One of those bottles passed to Chuck and passed no further. He scowled at a merry-maker who reached for it after he took his swig, and jammed it into a pocket. He had what he came for ; he began to fight his way out of the crowd, westward to the jungle of Riveredge.

The crowd thinned out at Ninth Avenue, and by Tenth Avenue he was almost alone, lurching through the tangle of transport machinery that fed Manhattan its daily billion tons

of food, freight, clothes, toys. Floodlights glared day and night over Riveredge, but there was darkness there too, in patches under a 96-inch oil main or in the angle between a warehouse wall and its inbound roofed freightway. From these patches men looked out at him with sudden suspicion and then dull lack of care. One or two called at him aimlessly, guessing that he had a bottle on him. Once a woman yelled her hoarse invitation at him from the darkness, but he stumbled on. Ten to one the invitation was to a lead pipe behind the ear.

Now and then, losing his bearings, he stopped and turned his head peeringly before stumbling on. He never got lost in Riveredge, which was more than most transport engineers, guided by blueprints, could say. T.G. was *that* way.

He crashed at last into his own shared patch of darkness : the hollow on one side of a titantic I-beam. It supported a freightway over which the heaviest castings and forgings for the city rumbled night and day. A jagged sheet of corrugated metal leaned against the hollow, enclosing it as if by accident.

"Hello, Chuck," T.G. croaked at him from the darkness as he slid under the jagged sheet and collapsed on a pallet of nylon rags.

"Yeh," he grunted.

"Happy New Year," T.G. said. "I heard it over here. It was louder than the freightway. You scored."

"Good guess," Chuck said sceptically, and passed him the bottle. There was a long gurgle in the dark. T.G. said at last : "Good stuff." The gurgle again. Chuck reached for the bottle and took a long drink. It was good stuff. Old Huntsman. He used to drink it with—

T.G. said suddenly, pretending innocent curiosity : "Jocko who ?"

Chuck lurched to his feet and yelled : "God damn you, I told you not to do that ! If you want any more of my liquor keep the hell out of my head—and I *still* think you're a phony !"

T.G. was abject. "Don't take it that way, Chuck," he whined. "I get a belt of good stuff in me and I want to give the talent a little workout, that's all. You know I would not do anything bad to you."

"You'd better not . . . Here's the bottle."

It passed back and forth. T.G. said at last : "You've got it too."

"You're crazy."

I would be if it wasn't for the liquor . . . but you've got it too.

"Oh, shut up and drink."

Innocently: "I didn't say anything, Chuck."

Chuck glared in the darkness. It was true; he hadn't. His imagination was hounding him. His imagination or something else he didn't want to think about.

The sheet of corrugated metal was suddenly wrenched aside and blue-white light stabbed into their eyes. Chuck and the old man cowered instinctively back into the hollow of the I-beam, peering into the light and seeing nothing but dazzle.

"God, look at them!" a voice jeered from the other side of the light. "Like turning over a wet rock."

"What the hell's going on?" Chuck asked hoarsely. "Since when did you clowns begin to pull bags?"

T.G. said: "They aren't the clowns, Chuck. They want you—I can't see why."

The voice said: "Yeah? And just who are you, grampa?"

T.G. stood up straight, his eyes watering in the glare. "The Great Hazleton," he said, with some of the old ring in his voice. "At your service. Don't tell me who you are, sir. The Great Hazleton knows. I see a man of authority, a man who works in a large white building—"

"Knock it off, T.G.," Chuck said.

"You're Charles Barker," the voice said. "Come along quietly."

Chuck took a long pull at the bottle and passed it to T.G. "Take it easy," he said. "I'll be back sometime."

"No," T.G. quavered. "I see danger. I see terrible danger."

The man behind the dazzling light took his arm and yanked him out of the shelter of the I-beam.

"Cut out the mauling," Chuck said flatly.

"Shut up, Barker," the man said with disgust. "You have no beefs coming."

So he knew where the man had come from and could guess where the man was taking him.

At 1:58 a.m. of the third millennium Chuck was slouching in a waiting room on the 89th floor of the New Federal

Building. The man who had pulled him out of Riveredge was sitting there too, silent and aloof.

Chuck had been there before. He cringed at the thought. He had been there before, and not to sit and wait. Special Agent Barker of Federal Security and Intelligence had been ushered right in, with the sweetest smile a receptionist could give him . . .

A door opened and a spare, well-remembered figure stood there. "Come in, Barker," the Chief said.

He stood up and went in, his eyes on the grey carpeting. The office hadn't changed in three years; neither had the Chief. But now Chuck waited until he was asked before sitting down.

"We had some trouble finding you," the Chief said absently. "Not much, but some. First we ran some ads addressed to you in the open Service code. Don't you read the papers any more?"

"No," Chuck said.

"You look pretty well shot. Do you think you can still work?"

The ex-agent looked at him piteously.

"Answer me."

"Don't play with me," Chuck said, his eyes on the carpet. "You never reinstate."

"Barker," the Chief said, "I happen to have an especially filthy assignment to deal out. In my time, I've sent men into an alley at midnight after a mad-dog killer with a full clip. This one is so much worse and the chances of getting a sliver of useable information in return for an agent's life are so slim that I couldn't bring myself to ask for volunteers for the roster.

"Do you think you can still work?"

"Why me?" the ex-agent demanded sullenly.

"That's a good question. There are others. I thought of you because of the defence you put up at your departmental trial. Officially, you turned and ran, leaving Jocko McAllester to be cut down by the gun-runners. Your story was that somehow you knew it was an ambush and when that dawned on you, you ran to cover the flank. The board didn't buy it and neither do I—not all the way. You let a hunch override standard doctrine and you were wrong and it looked like cowardice under fire. We can't have that; you had to go. But you've had other hunches that worked out better.

The Bruni case. Locating the photostats we needed for the Wayne County civil rights indictment. Digging up that louse Sherrard's wife in Birmingham. Unless it's been a string of lucky flukes you have a certain talent I need right now. If you have that talent, you may come out alive. And cleared."

Barker leaned forward and said savagely: "That's good enough for me. Fill me in."

Chapter II

The woman was tall, quietly dressed and a young forty-odd. Her eyes were serene and guileless as she said: "You must be curious as to how I know about your case. It's quite simple—and unethical. We have a tipster in the clinic you visited. May I sit down?"

Dr. Oliver started and waved her to the dun-coloured chair. A reaction was setting in. It was a racket—a cold-blooded racket preying on weak-minded victims silly with terror. "What's your proposition?" he asked impatient to get it over with. "How much do I pay?"

"Nothing," the woman said calmly. "We usually pay poorer patients a little something to make up for the time they lose from work, but I presume you have a nest-egg. All this will cost you is a pledge of secrecy—and a little time."

"Very well," said Oliver stiffly. He had been hooked often enough by salesmen on no-money-down, free-trial-for-thirty-days, demonstration-for-consumer-reaction-only deals. He was on his guard.

"I find it's best to begin at the beginning," the woman said. "I'm an investment counsellor. For the past five years I've also been a field representative for something called the Moorhead Foundation. The Moorhead Foundation was organized in 1915 by Oscar Moorhead, the patent-medicine millionaire. He died very deeply embittered by the attacks of the muck-rakers; they called him a baby-poisoner and a number of other things. He always claimed that his preparations did just as much good as a visit to an average doctor of the period. Considering the state of medical education and licensing, maybe he was right.

"His will provided for a secret search for the cure of cancer. He must have got a lot of consolation daydreaming about it. One day the Foundation would announce to a startled world

that it had cracked the problem and that old Oscar Moorhead was a servant of humanity and not a baby-poisoner after all.

"Maybe secrecy is good for research. I'm told that we know a number of things about neoplasms that the pathologists haven't hit on yet, including how to cure most types by radiation. My job, besides clipping coupons and reinvesting funds for the Foundation, is to find and send on certain specified types of cancer patients. The latest is what they call a Rotino 707-G. You. The technical people will cure you without surgery in return for a buttoned lip and the chance to study you for about a week. Is it a deal?"

Hope and anguish struggled in Dr. Oliver. *Could* anybody invent such a story? *Was* he saved from the horror of the knife?

"Of course," he said, his guts contracting, "I'll be expected to pay a share of the expenses, won't I? In common fairness?"

The woman smiled. "You think it's a racket, don't you? Well it isn't. You don't pay a cent. Come with your pockets empty and leave your cheque book at home if you like. The Foundation gives you free room and board. I personally don't know the ins and outs of the Foundation, but I have professional standing of my own and I assure you I'm not acting as a transmission belt to a criminal gang. I've *seen* the patients, Dr. Oliver. I send them on sick and I see them a week or so later well. It's like a miracle."

Dr. Oliver went distractedly to his telephone stand, picked up the red book and leafed through it.

"Roosevelt 4-19803," the woman said with amusement in her voice.

Doggedly he continued to turn the "W" pages. He found her. "Mgrrt WINSTON invstmnt cnslr RO4-19803." He punched the number.

"Winston investments," came the answer.

"Is Miss Winston there?" he asked.

"No, sir. She should be back by three if you wish to call again. May I take a message?"

"No message. But—would you describe Miss Winston for me?"

The voice giggled. "Why not? She's about five-eight, weighs about 135, brown hair and eyes and when last seen

was wearing a tailored navy culotte suit with white cuffs and collar. What're you up to, mister?"

"Not a thing," he said. "Thanks." He hung up.

"Look," the woman said. She was emptying her wallet. "Membership card in the Investment Counsellors' Guild. U.M.T honorable discharge, even if it is a reduced photostat. City license to do business. Airline credit card. Residential rental permit. City motor vehicle parking permit. Blood-donor card"

He turned them over in his hands. The plastic-laminated things were unanswerable, and he gave himself up to relief and exultation. "I'm in, Miss Winston," he said fervently. "You should have seen the fellow they showed me after an operation like mine." He shuddered as he remembered Jimmy and his "splendid adjustment."

"I don't have to," the woman said, putting her wallet away. "I saw my mother die. From one of the types of cancer they haven't licked yet. I get the usual commission on funds I handle for them, but I have a little personal interest in promoting the research end . . ."

"Oh. I see."

Suddenly she was brisk. "Now, Dr. Oliver, you've got to write whatever letters are necessary to explain that you're taking a little unplanned trip to think things out, or whatever you care to say. And pack enough things for a week. You can be on the jet in an hour if you're a quick packer and a quick letter-writer."

"Jet to where?" he asked, without thinking.

She smiled and shook her head.

Dr. Oliver shrugged and went to his typewriter. This was one gift horse he would not look in the mouth. Not after Jimmy.

Two hours later the fat sophomore Gillespie arrived full of lies and explanations with his overdue theme on the Elizabethan dramatists, which was full of borrowings and evasions. On Dr. Oliver's door was pinned a small note in the doctor's handwriting: *Dr. Oliver will be away for several days for reasons of health.*

Gillespie scratched his head and shrugged. It was all right with him; Dr. Oliver was practically impossible to get along with, in spite of his vague reputation for brilliance. A schizoid, his girl called him. She majored in Psych.

Chapter III

The Moorhead Foundation proved to be in Mexico, in a remote valley of the state of Sonora. A jetliner took Dr. Oliver and Miss Winston most of the way very fast. Buses and finally an obsolete gasoline-powered truck driven by a Mexican took them the rest of the way very slowly. The buildings were a remodelled *rancheria* enclosed by a low, thick adobe wall.

Dr. Oliver, at the door of his comfortable bedroom, said: "Look, will I be treated immediately?" He seemed to have been asking that question for two days, but never to have got a plain yes or no answer.

"It all depends," Miss Winston said. "Your type of growth is definitely curable and they'll definitely cure it. But there may be a slight holdup while they're studying it. That's your part of the bargain, after all. Now I'll be on my way. I expect you're sleepy, and the lab people will take over from here. It's been a great pleasure."

They shook hands and Dr. Oliver had trouble suppressing a yawn. He was very sleepy, but he tried to tell Miss Winston how grateful he was. She smiled deprecatingly, almost cynically, and said: "We're using you too, remember? Well, goodbye."

Dr. Oliver barely made it to his bed.

His nightmares were terrible. There was a flashing light, a ringing bell and a wobbling pendulum that killed him, killed him, killed him, inch by inch, burying him under a mountain of flashes and clangs and blows while he was somehow too drugged to fight his way out.

He reached fuzzily in the morning for the Dialit, which wasn't there. Good God! he marvelled. Was one expected to get *up* for breakfast? But he found a button that brought a grinning Mexican with a breakfast tray. After he dressed the boy took him to *los medicos*.

The laboratory, far down a deserted corridor, was staffed by two men and a woman. "Dr. Oliver," the woman said briskly. "Sit there." It was a thing like a dentist's chair with a suggestion of something ugly and archaic in a cup-shaped headrest.

Oliver sat, uneasily.

"The carcinoma," one of the men said to the other.

"Oh yes." The other man, quite ignoring Oliver as a person, wheeled over a bulky thing not much different in his eyes from a television camera. He pointed it at Oliver's throat and played it noiselessly over his skin. "That should do it," he said to the first man.

Oliver asked incredulously: "You mean I'm cured?" And he started to rise.

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, rapping a button. Dr. Oliver collapsed back into the chair with a moan. Something had happened to him; something terrible and unimaginable. For a hideous split-second he had known undiluted pain, pure and uniform over every part of his body, interpreted variously by each. Blazing headache, eye-ache and ear-ache, wrenching nausea, an agony of itching, colonic convulsions, stabbing ache in each of his bones and joints.

"But—" he began piteously.

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, and rapped the button again.

He did not speak a third time but watched them with sick fear, cringing into the chair.

They spoke quite impersonally before him, lapsing occasionally into an unfamiliar word or so.

"Not more than twenty-seven *vistch*, I should say. Cardiac."

"Under a good—master, would you call it?—who can pace him, more."

"Perhaps. At any rate, he will not be difficult. See his record."

"Stimulate him again."

Again there was the split-second of hell on earth. The woman was studying a small sphere in which colours played prettily. "A good surge," she said, "but not a good recovery. What is the order?"

One of the men ran his finger over a sheet of paper—but he was looking at the woman. "Three military."

"What kind of military, *sobr*?"

The man hastily rechecked the sheet with his index finger. "All for *igr' i khom*. I do not know what you would call it. A smallship? A killship?"

The other man said scornfully: "Either a light cruiser or a heavy destroyer."

"According to functional analogy I would call it a heavy destroyer," the woman said decisively. "A good surge is important to *igr' i khom*. We shall call down the destroyer to take on this Oliver and the two Stosses. Have it done."

"Get up," one of the men said to Oliver.

He got up. Under the impression that he could be punished only in the chair he said: "What—?"

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, and rapped the button. He was doubled up with the wave of pain. When he recovered, the man took his arm and led him from the laboratory. He did not speak as he was half-dragged through endless corridors and shoved at last through a door into a large, sunlit room. Perhaps a dozen people were sitting about and turned to look.

He cringed as a tall, black-haired man said to him: "Did you just get out of the chair?"

"It's all right," somebody else said. "You can talk. We aren't—them. We're in the same boat as you. What's the story—heart disease? Cancer?"

"Cancer," he said, swallowing. "They promised me—"

"They come through on it," the tall man said. "They do come through on the cures. Me, I have nothing to show for it. I was supposed to survey for minerals here—my name's Brockhaus. And this is Johnny White from Los Angeles. He was epileptic—bad seizures every day. But not any more. And this—but never mind. You can meet the rest later. You better sit down. How many times did they give it to you?"

"Four times," Dr. Oliver said. "What's all this about? Am I going crazy?"

The tall man forced him gently into a chair. "Take it easy," he said. "We don't know what it's all about."

"Goddamn it," somebody said, "the hell we don't. It's the commies, as plain as the nose on your face. Why else should they kidnap an experienced paper salesman like me?"

Brockhaus drowned him out: "Well, maybe it's the reds, though I doubt it. All we *know* is that they get us here, stick us in the chair and then—take us away. And the ones they take away don't come back."

"They said something about cruisers and destroyers," Oliver mumbled. "And surges."

"You mean," Brockhaus said, "you stayed conscious all the way through?"

"Yes. Didn't you?"

"No, my friend. Neither did any of us. What are you, a United States Marine?"

"I'm an English Professor. Oliver, of Columbia University."

Johnny White from Los Angeles threw up his hands. "He's an English professor!" he yelled to the room. There was a cackle of laughter.

Oliver flushed and White said hastily: "No offence, prof. But naturally we've been trying to figure out what—they—are after. Here we've got a poetess, a preacher, two lawyers, a salesman, a pitchman, a mining engineer, a dentist—and now an English professor."

"I don't know," Oliver mumbled. "But they did say something about cruisers and destroyers and surges."

Brockhaus was looking sceptical. "I didn't imagine it," Oliver said stubbornly. "And they said something about 'two Stosses.'"

"I guess you didn't imagine it," the tall man said slowly. "Two Stosses we've got. Ginny! This man heard something about you and your old man."

A white-haired man, stocky in build and with the big, mobile face of an actor, thrust himself past Brockhaus to confront Oliver. "What did they say?" he demanded.

A tired-looking blonde girl said to him: "Take it easy, Mike. The man's beat."

"It's all right," Oliver said to her. "They talked about an order. One of the men seemed to be reading something in Braille—but he didn't seem to have anything wrong with his eyes. And the woman said they'd call down the destroyer to take on me and the two Stosses. But don't ask me what it means."

"We've been here a week," the girl said. "They tell me that's as long as anybody stays."

"Young man," Stoss said confidentially, "since we're thrown together in this informal fashion I wonder if I could ask whether you're a sporting man? The deadly dullness of this place—" He was rattling a pair of dice casually.

"Please, Mike!" the girl said in a voice near hysteria. "Leave the man alone. What good's money here?"

"I'm a sporting man, Ginny," he said mildly. "A friendly game of chance to break the monotony—"

"You're a crook on wheels," the girl said bitterly, "and the lousiest monte operator that ever hit the road."

"My own daughter," the man said miserably. "My own daughter that got me into this lousy can—"

"How was I supposed to know it was a fake?" she flared. "And if you do die you won't die a junkie, by God!"

Oliver shook his head dazedly at their bickering.

"What will this young man think?" asked Stoss, with a try at laughing it off. "I can see he's a person of indomitable will behind his mild exterior, a person who won't let the chance word of a malicious girl keep him from indulging in a friendly—"

"Yeah! I might believe that if I hadn't been hearing you give that line to farmhands and truck-drivers since I was seven. Now you're a cold-reader. My aching torso."

"Well," Stoss said with dignity, "*this* time I happened to have meant it."

Oliver's head was throbbing. An indomitable will behind a mild exterior. It rang a bell somewhere deep inside him—a bell that clanged louder and louder until he felt his very body dissolve under its impact.

He dismissed the bizarre fantasy. He was Dr. Oliver of Columbia. He was Dr. Oliver of Columbia. He had always been.

The Stosses had drifted to a window, still quarrelling. Brockhaus said after a pause: "It's a funny thing. He was on heroin. You should see his arms. When he first got here he went around begging and yelling for a fix of dope because he *expected* that he'd want it. But after a few hours he realised that he didn't want it at all. For the first time in twelve years, he says. Maybe it was the shocks in the chair. Maybe they did it intentionally. I don't know. The girl—there's nothing wrong with her. She just came along to keep the old man company while he took the marvellous free cure."

A slight brunette woman with bangs was saying to him shyly: "Professor, I'm Mitty Worth. You may have heard of me—or not. I've had some pieces in the *New New Review*."

"Delighted," Dr. Oliver said. "How did they get *you*?"

Her mouth twisted. "I was doing the Michoacan ruins. There was a man—a very handsome man—who persuaded me that he had made an archaeological find, that it would take the pen of a poet to do it justice—" She shrugged. "What's your field, professor?"

"Jacobean prose writers."

Her face lit up. "Thank God for somebody to talk to. I'm specially interested in Tom Fuller myself. I have a theory, you know, about the *Worthies of England*. Everybody

automatically says it's a grab-bag, you know, of everybody who happened to interest Fuller. But I think I can detect a definite *structure* in the book—"

Dr. Oliver of Columbia groped wildly in his memory. What was the woman running on about?

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the work," he said.

Mitty Worth was stunned.

"Or perhaps," Oliver said hastily, "I'm still groggy from the—the laboratory. Yes, I think that must be it."

"Oh," Mitty Worth said, and retreated.

Oliver sat and puzzled. Of course his speciality was the Jacobean prose writers. The foolish woman had made a mistake. Tom Fuller must be in another period. The *real* writers of Jacobean prose were—

Were—?

Dr. Oliver of Columbia, whose field was the Jacobean prose writers, didn't know any of them by name.

I'm going crazy, he decided wildly. I'm Oliver of Columbia. I wrote my thesis on—

What?

The old faker was quite right. He was an indomitable will behind a mild exterior, and a ringing bell had something to do with it, and so did a flashing light and a wobbling pendulum, and so did Marty Braun who could keep a tin can bouncing ten yards ahead of him as he walked firing from the hip, but Marty had a pair of stargauge .44's and he wasn't a gun nut himself even if he could nip the ten-ring four out of five—

The world of Dr. Oliver was dissolving into delirium when his name was sharply called.

Everybody was looking at him as if he were something to be shunned, something with a curse laid on it. One of—them—was standing in the door. Dr. Oliver remembered what they could do. He got up hastily and hastily went through an aisle that cleared for him to the door as if by magic.

"Stand there," the man said to him. "The two Stoss people," he called. The old man and his daughter silently joined him.

"You must walk ahead of me," said the man.

They walked down the corridor and turned left at a command, and went through a handsome oak door into the sunlight. Gleaming in the sunlight was a vast disc-shaped thing.

Dr. Oliver of Columbia smiled suddenly and involuntarily. He knew now who he was and what was his mission.

He was Special Agent Charles Barker of Federal Security and Intelligence. He was in disguise—the most thorough disguise ever effected. His own personality had been obliterated by an unbroken month of narco-hypnosis, and for another unbroken month a substitute personality, that of the ineffectual Dr. Oliver, had been shoved into his head by every mechanical and psychological device that the F.S.I. commanded. Twenty-four hours a day, waking and sleeping, records had droned in his ears and films had unreeled before his glazed drugged eyes, all pointing toward this moment of post-hypnotic revelation.

People vanished. People had always vanished. Blind Homer heard vague rumours and incorporated them in his repertory of songs about the recent war against the Trojans : vague rumours about a one-eyed thing that kidnapped men—to eat, of course.

People continued to vanish through the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the growth of population and the invention of census machines. When the census machines were perfected everything was known statistically about everybody, though without invasion of privacy, for the machines dealt in percentages and not personalities. Population loss could be accounted for ; such and such a percentage died, and this percentage pigged it drunkenly in Riveredge, and that percentage deserted wife and kids for a while before it was inevitably, automatically traced—

And there was a percentage left over. People still vanished.

The F.S.I. noted that three cancer patients in Morningside Heights, New York, had vanished last year, so they gave (Temporary) Special Agent Charles Barker a cancer by nagging a harmless throat polyp with dyes and irritants, and installed him in Morningside Heights to vanish—and do something about it.

The man marched the two Stosses and Barker-Oliver into the spaceship.

Minutes later a smashing takeoff acceleration dashed them unconscious to the deck.

Chapter IV

In an earthly navy they would have called Gori "Guns" in the wardroom. He didn't look like an officer and a gentleman, or a human being for that matter, and the batteries of primary and secondary weapons he ruled over did not look like cannon. But Gori had a pride and a class feeling that would have made familiar sense in any navy. He voiced it in his needling of Lakhrut: a brother officer but no fighting man; a sweat-soaked ruler of the Propulsion Division whose station was between decks, screwing the last flicker of drive from the units.

Languidly Gori let his fingertips drift over a page of text; he was taking a familiarization course in propulsion. "I don't understand," he said to Lakhrut, "why one shouldn't treat the units with a little more formality. My gun-pointers, for example—"

Lakhrut knew he was being needled, but had to pretend otherwise. Gori was somewhat his senior. "Gun-pointers are one thing," he said evenly. "Propulsion units are another. I presume you've worked the globes."

Gori raised his fingers from the page in surprise. "Evidently you—people between decks don't follow the Games," he said. "I have a Smooth Award from the last meet but one."

"What class vessel?"

"Single-seater. And a beauty! Built to my orders, stripped to a bare hull microns in thickness."

"Then you know working the globes isn't easy. But—with all respect—I don't believe you know that working a globe under orders, shift after shift, with no stake in the job and no hope or relief ever is most infernally heartbreaking. You competed for the Smooth Award and won it and slept for a week, I dare say, and are still proud—don't misunderstand me: *rightly* proud—of the effort. But the propulsion units aren't competing for anything. They've been snatched away from their families—I'm not certain; I believe a family system prevails—and they *don't* like it. We must break them of that. Come and see the new units."

Gori reluctantly followed Lakhrut to the inport where unconscious figures were being stacked.

"Pah! They stink!" he said.

■ "A matter of diet. It goes away after they've been on our rations for a while."

Gori felt one of the figures curiously. "Clothes," he said in surprise. "I thought—"

Lakhrut told him wearily: "They have been wearing clothes for quite a while now. Some five thousand of their years." That had been a dig too. Gori had been reminding him that he was not greatly concerned with the obscure beasts between decks; that he, Lakhrut, must clutter his mind with such trivial details while Gori was splendidly free to man his guns if there should be need. "I'll go and see my driver," he snapped.

When he left, Gori sat down and laughed silently.

Lakhrut went between decks to the banks of units and swiftly scanned them. Number Seven was sleeping, with deep lines of fatigue engraved on his mind. He would be the next to go; indeed he should have been shot through the space-lock with Three, Eight-Female and Twelve. At the first opportunity—His driver approached.

"Baldwin," he snapped at the driver, "will you be able to speak with the new units."

Baldwin, a giant who had been a mere propulsion unit six months ago and was fiercely determined never to be one again, said in his broken speech: "Believe it. Will make to understand somewise. They may not—converse—my language called English. Will make to understand somewise."

Barker awoke staring into dull-red lights that looked unbelievably like old-fashioned incandescent lamps. Beside him a girl was moaning with shock and fear. In the dull light he could make out her features: Ginny Stoss. Her father was lying unconscious with his head in her lap.

A brutal hand yanked him to his feet—there was gravity! But there was no time to marvel over it. A burly giant in a grey kilt was growling at him: "You speak English?"

"Yes. What's all this about? Where are we?"

He was ignored. The giant yanked Ginny Stoss to her feet and slapped her father into consciousness as the girl winced and Barker balled his fists helplessly. The giant said to the three of them: "My name's Baldwin. You call me mister. Come on."

He led them, the terrified girl, the dazed old man and the rage-choked agent, through spot-polished metal corridors to—



A *barber shop*, Barker thought wildly. Rows and rows of big adjustable chairs gleaming dully under the red lights, people sitting in them, at least a hundred people. And then you saw there was something archaic and ugly about the cup-shaped head rests fitted to the chairs. And then you saw that the people, men and women, were dirty, unkempt and hopeless eyed, dressed in rags or nothing at all.

Ginny Stoss screamed sharply when she saw Lakhrut. He was not a pretty sight with his single bulging orb above the nose. It pointed at her and Lakhrut spat guttural syllables at Baldwin. The burly giant replied, cringing and stammering. The monster's orb aimed at Barker, and he felt a crawling on the surface of his brain—as if fingers were trying to grasp it.

Barker knew what to do ; more important, he did it. He turned off Barker. He turned on Dr. Oliver, the erudite scared rabbit.

Lakhrut scanned them suspiciously. The female was radiating sheer terror ; good. The older male was frightened too, but his sense of a reality was clouded ; he detected a faint undertone of humour. *That* would go. The younger man—Lakhrut stooped forward in a reflex associated with the sense of smell. The younger man—men ?—no ; man—the younger man—

Lakhrut stopped trying to scan him. He seemed to be radiating on two bands simultaneously which was not possible. Lakhrut decided that he wasn't focussing properly, that somebody else's radiation was leaking and that the younger man's radiation was acting as a carrier wave for it. And felt vaguely alarmed and ashamed of himself. He ought to be a better scanner than he was.

"Baldwin," he said, "question that one closely."

The hulking driver asked : "You want name?"

"Of course not, fool ! Question him about anything. I want to scan his responses."

Baldwin spoke to the fellow unintelligibly and the fellow replied unintelligibly. Lakhrut almost smiled with relief as the questioning progressed. The odd double-band effect was vanishing and the young man radiated simple fright.

Baldwin said laboriously : "Says is teacher of language and—tales of art. Says where is this and why have—"

"That's enough," he told the driver. "Install them." None of this group was dangerous enough to need killing.

"Sit there," Baldwin told Barker, jerking his thumb at an empty chair.

Barker felt the crawling fingers withdraw, and stifled a thought of triumph. They *had* him, this renegade and his cyclops boss. They had him like a bug underfoot to be squashed at a whim, but there had been some kind of test and he had bluffed them. Wearing the persona of Oliver, he quavered: "What *is* this terrible place, Mr. Baldwin? *Why* should I sit there?"

Baldwin moved in with a practiced ring shuffle and swung his open palm against the side of Barker's head. The agent cried out and nursed the burning cheek. Baldwin would never know how close he came that moment to a broken back . . .

He collapsed limply into the chair and felt it mould to him almost like a living thing. Plates slid under his thighs and behind his shoulder blades accommodating themselves to his body.

"Just to show you nobody's fooling," Baldwin said grimly. He pressed a button on the chair and again something indescribably painful happened wringing his bones and muscles to jelly for a timeless instant of torment. He did not faint; it was there and gone too quickly for the vascular system to make such an adjustment. He slumped in the chair, gasping.

Baldwin said: "Take hold of the two handles." He was surprised to find that he could move. He took hold of two spherical handles. They were cold and slimy-dry. Baldwin said: "You have to make the handles turn rough, like abrasive paper. You do it different ways. I can't tell you how. Everybody has a different way. Some people just concentrate on the handles. Other people just try to make their minds a blank and that works for them. You just find your own way and do it when we tell you to. Or you get the pain again. That's all."

Barker heard him move down the line and repeat the speech in substantially the same words to the Stosses.

Baldwin was no puzzle. He was just a turncoat bastard. The wrecked, ragged men and women with lacklustre eyes sitting around him were no puzzle. Not after the pain. Baldwin's boss, the cyclops—

How long had this been going on? Since Homer?

He bore down on the spherical handles. Amazingly they went from silk-smooth to paper coarse and then to sandstone-gritty. Baldwin was back, peering to look at an indicator of

some unimaginable kind. "That's very good," the big man said. "You keep that up and some day you'll get out of the chair like me."

Not like you, you bastard. Not like you. He choked down the thought. If the boss were here it would have undone him.

There were mechanical squeals and buzzers. Those who were sleeping in their chairs awoke instantly, with panic on their faces, visible even in the dim red light.

"All right," Baldwin was shouting. "Give you bastards! Five seconds and we cut you in. Give, Morgan, or it's the Pain! Silver, make it move! I ain't forgetting anything, Silver—next time it's three jolts. Give, you bastards! Give!"

Barker gave in a frenzy of concentration. Under his sweaty palms the globes became abrasive. In five seconds there was a thudding shock through his body that left him limp. The globes went smooth and Baldwin was standing over him: "Make it go, Oliver, or it's the Pain. Make it go."

Somehow, he did.

It seemed to go on for hours while the world rocked and reeled about him, whether subjectively or objectively he could not tell. And at last there was the roar: "Let it go now. Everybody off."

Racking vibration ceased and he let his head nod forward limply.

From the chair in front of him came an exhausted whisper: "He's gone now. Some day I'm going to—"

"Can we talk?" Barker asked weakly.

"Talk, sing, anything you want." There was a muttering and stirring through the big room. From the chair in front, hopefully: "You happen to be from Rupp City? My family—"

"No," Barker said. "I'm sorry. What is all this? What are we doing?"

The exhausted whisper said: "All this is an armed merchantman of the A'rkhov-Yar. We're running it. We're galley slaves."

Chapter V

Three feedings later the man from Rupp City leaped from his chair, howling, and threw himself on a tangle of machinery in the centre aisle. He was instantly electrocuted.

Before he died he had told Barker in rambling, formless

conversations that he had it figured out ; the star-people simply knew how to amplify psychokinetic energy. He thought he could trace eighteen stages of amplification through the drive machinery.

The death was—a welcome break in the monotony. Barker was horrified to discover that was his principal reaction to it, but he was not alone.

They were fed water and moist yellow cakes that tasted like spoiled pork. Normally they worked three shifts in rotation. Only now and then were they all summoned for a terrific surge ; usually they had only to keep steerage way on the vessel. But eight hours spent bearing down on the spherical handles, concentrating, was an endless agony of boredom and effort. If your attention wandered, you got the Pain. Barker got it five times in fifteen feedings. Others got it ten or twelve. Ginny Stoss was flighty of mind ; she got it twenty times, and after that, never. She mumbled continuously after that and spent all her time in practice, fingering the handles and peering into the bad light with dim, monomaniac eyes.

There was an efficient four-holer latrine, used without regard to sex or privacy. Sex was a zero in their lives, despite the mingling of men and women. When they slept in their chairs, they slept. The Pain and then death were the penalties for mating, and also their energy was low. The men were not handsome and the women were not beautiful. Hair and beards grew and straggled—why not ? Their masters ignored them as far as clothing went. If the things they wore when they came aboard fell apart, very well, they fell apart. They weren't going any place.

It was approximately eight hours working the globular handles, eight hours sleeping, and eight hours spent in rambling talk about the past, with many lies told of riches and fame. Nobody ever challenged a lie ; why should they ?

Bull-necked Mr. Baldwin appeared for feedings, but he did not eat with them. The feedings were shift-change time, and he spent them in harangues and threats.

Barker sucked up to Baldwin disgustingly, earning the hatred of all the other "units." But they knew next to nothing, and what he desperately needed was information. All they knew was that they had been taken aboard—a year ago ? Six years ago ? A month ago ? They could only guess. It was impossible to keep track of time within the

changeless walls of the room. Some of them had been taken directly aboard. Some had been conveyed in a large craft with many others and then put aboard. Some had served in other vessels, with propulsion rooms that were larger or smaller, and then put aboard. They had been told at one time or another that they were in the A'rkhov-Yar fleet, and disputed feebly about the meaning and pronunciation. It was more of a rumour than a fact.

Barker picked a thread from his tie each day to mark the days, and sucked up to Baldwin.

Baldwin liked to be liked, and pitied himself. "You think," he asked plaintively, "I'm inhuman? You think I want to drive the units like I do? I'm as friendly as the next guy, but it's dog eat dog, isn't it? If I wasn't driving I'd be in a chair getting driven, wouldn't I?"

"I can see that, Mr. Baldwin. And it takes character to be a leader like you are."

"You're Goddamned right it does. And if the truth was known, I'm the best friend you people have. If it wasn't me it'd be somebody else who'd be worse. Lakhrut said to me once that I'm too easy on the units and I stood right up to him and said there wasn't any sense to wearing them out and not having any drive when the going gets hot."

"I think it's amazing, Mr. Baldwin, the way you picked up the language. That takes *brains*."

Baldwin beamed modestly. "Oh, it ain't too hard. For instance—"

Instruction began. It was not too hard, because Baldwin's vocabulary consisted of perhaps four hundred words, all severely restricted to his duties. The language was uninflected; it could have been an old and stable speech. The grammar was merely the word-order of logic: subject, verb, object. Outstandingly, it was a guttural speech. There were remnants of "tonality" in it. Apparently it had once been a sung language like Chinese but had evolved even out of that characteristic. Phonemes that once had been low-toned were now sounded back in the throat; formerly high-toned phonemes were now forward in the throat. That sort of thing he had picked up from "Oliver."

Barker hinted delicately at it, and Baldwin slammed a figurative door in his face. "I don't know," he growled. "I don't go asking smart questions. You better not either."

Four more threads were snapped from the fringe of Barker's tie before Baldwin came back, hungry for flattery. Barker was on shift, his head aching with the pointless, endless, unspeakably dull act of concentration when the big man shook his shoulder and growled: "You can lay off. Seven, eight—it don't matter. The others can work harder."

He slobbered thanks.

"Ah, that's all right. I got a good side to me too, see? I said to Lakhrut once—"

And so on, while the other units glared.

"Mr. Baldwin, this word *khesor*, does it mean the whole propulsion set-up or the energy that makes it work? You say, '*Lakhrut a'g khesor-takh*' for 'Lakhrut is the boss of propulsion,' right?"

Baldwin's contempt was kindly. "For a smart man you can ask some Goddamned stupid questions. What difference does it make?" He turned to inspect the globes for a moment and snarl at Ginny Stoss: "What's the matter with you? You want the Pain again? *Give!*"

Her lips moved in her endless mutter and her globe flared bright.

The bull-necked man said confidently: "Of course I wouldn't really give her the Pain again. But you have to scare them a little from time to time."

"Of course, Mr. Baldwin. You certainly know psychology." *One of these days I'm going to murder you, you bastard.*

"Sure; it's the only way. Now, you know what *ga'lt* means?"

"No, Mr. Baldwin."

The bull-necked pusher was triumphant. "There is no word for it in English. It's something they can do and we can't. They can look right into your head if they want to. '*Lakhrut ga'lt takh-lyur-Baldwin*' means 'Lakhrut looks right into underchief Baldwin's head and reads his mind'."

"Do they do it all the time?"

"No. I think it's something they learn. I don't think all of them can do it either—or maybe not all of them learn to do it. I got a theory that Lakhrut's a *ga'lt* specialist."

"Why, Mr. Baldwin?"

Baldwin grinned. "To screen out troublemakers. No hard feelings, Oliver, but do you notice what a gutless bunch of people you got here? Not a rebel in a carload. Chicken-livered. Don't take it personal—either you got it or you don't"

"But *you*, Mr. Baldwin—why didn't the screening stop you?"

"I got a theory about that. I figure he let me through on purpose because they needed a hard guy to do just what I'm doing. After I got broke in on the globes it wasn't hardly any time at all before I got to be *takh-lyur*."

You're wrong you bastard. You're the yellowest coward aboard.

"That must be it, Mr. Baldwin. They know a leader when they see one."

Four threads later he knew that he had acquired all of the language Baldwin had to give him. During his sleep period he went to old Stoss' chair. Stoss was on rest. He was saying vaguely to a grey-haired woman in the chair in front of his: "Boston, Atlanta, Kansas City—all the prominent cities of the nation, my dear lady. I went in with a deck of cards and came out of each with a diamond ring and a well-filled wallet. My hands were sure, my voice was friendly"

"Atlanta," the woman sighed. "The Mathematics Teachers Association met there in '87 or was it '88? I remember gardens with old brick walls—or was that Charleston? Yes, I think it was Charleston."

"—In one memorable session of stud behind locked doors in the old Muehlbach Hotel I was high on the third card with the Jack of clubs and the ten of diamonds, with the ace of clubs for my hole-card. Well madam—"

"—We had terrible trouble in the school one year with the boys and girls gambling in the reactor room, and worse if you can believe it. The reactor man was their "look-out," so to speak, so naturally we tried to have him discharged. But the union wouldn't let—"

"—Well, madam, there was seven hundred-odd dollars in the pot—"

"Mr. Stoss," Barker said.

The old man studied him coolly for a moment and then said: "I don't believe I care to talk to you, sir. As I was saying, ma'am, there was—"

"I'm going to kill Baldwin," Barker told him.

He was instantly alert, and instantly scared. "But the danger," he whispered. "Won't they take it out on all of us? And he's a big brute—"

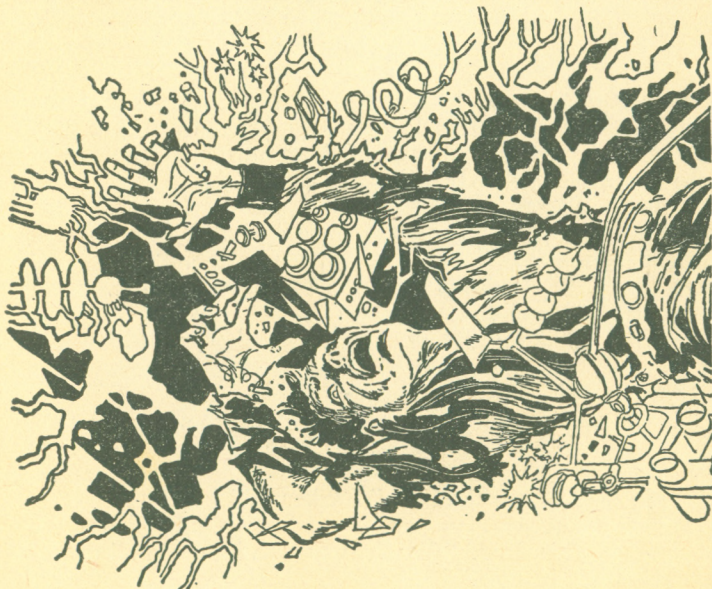
"So maybe he'll kill me. But I'm going to try. I want you to go to the latrine when Baldwin shows up next. Don't quite go in. Watch the corridor. If there's anybody coming, lift your hand. I'll only need a few seconds. Either way, it'll be finished by then."

"The danger," whispered Stoss. His eyes wandered to his daughter's chair. She was asleep. And her lips still moved in her endless muttering. "All right," the old man said at last. "I'll help you."

"Can you imagine that?" the woman said, still amazed after all these years. "The man was caught *in flagrante delicto*, so to speak, and the union wouldn't let the principal discharge him without a full public hearing, and naturally the publicity would have been most distasteful so we were forced to—"

Barker padded back to his chair, a gaunt man in stinking rags, wild-haired and sporting a beard in which grey hairs were beginning to appear.

There had to be a lookout. Three times since takeoff Lakhrut had appeared in the doorway for a moment to stare



at the units. Twice other people had actually come into the room with Baldwin to probe through the tangle of machinery down the centre aisle with long, slender instruments.

It might have been one hour ; it might have been seven. Baldwin appeared, followed by the little self-propelled cart. It began to make its rounds, stopping at each chair long enough for the bottle of water and the dish of soggy cake to be picked off. Stoss, looking perfectly innocent, passed Barker's chair.

Barker got up and went to the pusher. Stoss was looking through the door, and did not wave. The car clicked and rolled to the next chair. "Something wrong, Oliver?" Baldwin asked.

"I'm going to kill you, you bastard."

"What?" Baldwin's mouth was open, but he dropped into a fighter's crouch instinctively.

His ankle hooked behind Baldwin's foot. The bull-necked man threw a punch which he ducked, and tried to clinch when he butted him in the chest. Baldwin went sprawling into the tangle of machinery at the same spot where the man from Rupp City had fried. There were sparks and stench. Then it was over.



Baldwin's mouth was still open and his body contorted. Barker could imagine him saying : " You think I'm inhuman ? You think I want to drive the units like I do ? " And he could also imagine him roaring : " *Give, Goddamn you !* "

Steadily Barker went back to his seat in time for the cart to click by. Stoss, his face a perfect blank, padded back from the latrine. A murmur and stir grew louder in the big rectangular room.

Chapter VI

Lakhrut was lying in his hammock in the dark, his fingers idly reading. It should have been a manual ; instead it was an historical romance. His fingers skipped a half-page describing an old-style meal and slowed to absorb the description of the fight in which it ended.

" Yar raises his revolver charged with powder and ball. Who is so brave as Yar ? He pulls back the trigger and presses the hammer of the death-dealing tube ! The flash of flame shows the face of Lurg ! But smoke from the tube obscures— "

His fingers jerked from the page as the commander's voice roared through his cubicle : " *Lakhrut !* Look to your units ! We have no steerage way ! "

He leaped from the hammock and raced through the vessel cursing Baldwin, the maintenance crew, the units and every soul on board.

He took in the situation at a glance. Baldwin lying spread-eagled and charred against the conversion grids. The units jammering and terrified in their chairs, none of them driving. Into a wall mike he snapped to the bridge : " My driver's dead, Commander. He got the charge from the conversion grids— "

" Stop your gabbing and give me power, you fool ! "

Deathly pale, Lakhrut turned to the disorganized units and tried to talk to them in remembered scraps of English. (He should have worked more with his driver on it. He should have worked more). They only gawked at him, and he swore in A'rkhov—

But one of the units was doing something that made sense. He was yelling in English, pointing to the chairs. And a dozen of the units resumed their places and began to drive, feebly at first and then better.

That was taken care of. He turned to the machinery and checked rapidly through the stages of amplification. They were clear ; the commander, curse him, was getting his power. The fellow who had yelled at the units was standing by him when the inspection was completed. Startlingly, he said in A'rkhov, though with a fearsome accent : "Can I serve Lakhrut-*takh* ?"

With considerable effort, Lakhrut scanned him. Obedience, fear, respect, compliance. All was well. He asked him coldly: "Who are you that you should speak the tongue ?"

"Name is Oliver. I studied languages. Baldwin *takh-lyur* taught me the tongue." Lakhrut scanned ; it all was true.

"How did he die ?"

"I did not see. Oliver was not looking. I was in darkness."

Asleep, was he trying clumsily to say ? Lakhrut scanned. There was no memory of the death-scene in the scared, compliant mind of this unit. But something nagged Lakhrut and teased at his mind. "Did you kill him ?" he snapped.

The flood of horror and weakness he scanned was indubitable. The unit babbled brokenly : "No Lakhrut-*takh* ! No ! I could not kill ! I could not kill !" Well, *that* was true enough. It had been a silly thing to ask.

"Take me," he said, "to each unit in turn and ask them whether they killed the *takh-lyur*."

This Oliver did and reported twenty-two denials while Lakhrut scanned each. Each was true ; none of the twenty-two minds into which he peered was shuddering with the aftermath of murder ; none seemed to have the killer's coldness and steel.

Lakhrut said to the wall mike : "Power is restored. I have established that my driver's death was accidental. I have selected a new driver from among the units." He turned off the mike after a curt acknowledgement and said to Oliver : "Did you understand ? I meant you." At the mike again he called two maintenance men to clear the conversion grid and space the body.

"Establish unit shifts and then come to me," he told Oliver, and waited for the new driver to tell off the gangs. He ceased scanning ; his head was aching abominably.

Barker felt the fingers leave his brain and breathed deeper. Dr. Oliver of Columbia, the whining incubus on him, was bad company. His own memory of the past few minutes was

vague and fragmentary. In jittery terror Dr. Oliver had yelled at the units to man their chairs before they all were killed for disobedience. In abject compliance Dr. Oliver had placed himself at Lakhnut's orders. And he had heard that he would be the new slave-driver with almost tearful gratitude. To be shaved and clean again ! To dine again ! Barker wanted to spit. Instead he divided the units into new shifts and followed Lakhnut from the oblong room.

He washed and used a depilatory powder that burned horribly as the cyclops monster called Lakhnut silently watched. Somebody brought him shorts that fit. Apparently the concept of a uniform was missing—so even was style. He saw passing on the upper decks crew "men" in trousers, gowns, kilts and indescribably combinations of these. The only common note was simplicity and a queer, vulgar absence of dash, as if nobody cared what he looked like as long as the clothes didn't get in his way.

"That's enough," Lakhnut said, as Barker was trying to comb his wetted hair with his fingers. "Come with me."

Back between decks they went to a cubicle near the drive room—a combination of kitchen, cramped one-man office and hammock-space. Lakhnut briskly showed Barker how to draw and prepare the food for the units—it was the first time he suspected that Baldwin had cooked for them—and how to fill in a daily report on the condition of the units. It was hardly writing ; he simply had to check a box in the appropriate column next to the unit's number. His "pen" flowed clear plastic which bonded to the paper in a raised ridge. The "printed" form was embossed with raised lines. Barker could make nothing of the numerals that designated the units or the column-headings ; the alphabet rang no bells in his memory or the Oliver-memory. But that would come later.

The commander was winding up his critique, and his division officers were perspiring freely.

"As to the recent gun-drill, I have very little to say. What, gentlemen, *is* there to say about the state of training, the peak of perfection which enabled Gori-takh's crews to unlimber, train and dry-fire their primary and secondary batteries in a mere two hundred and thirty-six and eleven-twelfths *vistch* ? I am sure the significance of this figure will be clear to us all when I point out that the average space engagement lasts

one hundred and eighteen *vistch*. Is the significance clear to you, Gori-takh?"

"Yes, Commander," said the division officer, very pale.

"Perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Commander," Gori said, wishing he were dead.

"Good. Then we will go on to pleasanter subjects. Propulsion has been excellent and uninterrupted since our last meeting. Steerage way has been satisfactorily maintained, units are in reasonable health, mechanical equipment checks out between Satisfactory and Excellent. The surprise-drill calls for driving surges were responded to promptly and with vigour. Lakhrut-takh, you are to be commended."

He left the compartment on that note, and the division officers sprawled, sighed and gave other signs of release from tension.

Lakhrut said to Gori, with the proper blend of modesty and sympathetic blandness: "It's just luck, you know. Your bad luck and my good luck. I happen to have stumbled on the most extraordinary driver in the fleet. The fellow is amazing. He speaks the tongue, he's pitiless to the units, and he's wild to anticipate my every wish. He's even trying to learn the mechanism."

A *takh* vaguely corresponding to the Paymaster of a British naval vessel, with a touch of Chaplain and Purser thrown in, said: "What's that? Isn't there a *Yongsong* order about that? Perhaps I'd better—"

Lakhrut hastily balanced the benefit of a lie at this point against the chance that the *takh*, a master-scanner because of his office, might scan him for veracity. Since scanning of equals was bad manners and he felt himself the *takh's* equal at least after the commander's sweet words of praise, he lied. 'Trying' does not mean 'succeeding,' he said, letting his voice sound a little hurt. "I'm surprised that you should think I'd let an Outworlder into our secrets. No; the man is merely cracking his brains over an obsolete manual or two of advanced theory. He can barely read, as I've repeatedly verified by scanning. His tactile-memory barely exists. What brutes these Outlanders are! I doubt that they can tell fur from marble."

The *takh* said: "That is extremely unlikely in view of their fairly-advanced mechanical culture. Take me to him; I shall scan him."

Gori tried not to look exultant as Lakhrut, crestfallen, led the *takh* from the room.

The *takh* was somehow alarmed when he saw Lakhrut's driver. Even before scanning he could see that the fellow was tough. Vague thoughts of a spotter from Fleet Command or a plant from some enemy—or nominally friendly—fleet drifted through his head before he could clamp down on them. He said to the driver: "Who are you and what was your occupation?" And simultaneously he scanned deep.

The driver said: "Name is Oliver, *takh*. Teacher of language and letters.

The personality-integral included: Inferiority? Self-deprecation/Neurosis? . . . Weakling's job/Shame? Traumata A light. A bell. A pendulum.

Fear, Fear.

Being buried, swallowed, engulfed.

The *takh* was relieved. There was no danger in such a personality-integral. But the matter of security—he handed the driver a fingering-piece, a charming abstraction by the great Kh'hora. It had cost him his pay for an entire tour of duty and it was quite worth it. Kh'hora had carved it at the height of his power, and his witty juxtapositions of textures were unsurpassed to this day. It could be fingered a dozen ways, each a brilliant variation on a classic theme.

The driver held it stupidly.

"Well?" demanded the *takh*, his brows drawing together. He scanned.

The driver said: "Please, *takh*, I don't know what to do with it."

The personality-integral included:

Fear. Bewilderment. Ignorance.

Blankness.

"Finger it, you fool!"

The driver fumbled at the piece and the *takh* scanned. The tactile impressions were unbelievably obtuse and blurry. There was no emotional response to them whatsoever, except a faint, dull gratification at a smooth boss on the piece. And the imbecile kept *looking* at it.

It was something like sacrilege. The *takh* snatched the piece back indignantly. "Describe it," he said, controlling himself.

The fellow began to maunder about its visual appearance while the *takh* scanned. It was true; he had practically no tactile memory.

The *takh* left abruptly with Lakhrut. "You were right," he said. "If it amuses the fellow to pretend that he can read, I see no obstacle. And if it contributes to the efficiency of your department, we all shine that much brighter." (More literally, with fuller etymological values, his words could be rendered: "If it amuses the fellow to pretend that he fingers wisdom, my hands are not grated. And if it smoothes your quarry wall, we all hew more easily.").

Lakhrut's hands were not grated either; it was a triumphant vindication of his judgment.

And so, for departmental efficiency, he let his marvellous driver have all the books he wanted.

Chapter VII

Barker's head ached and his eyes felt ready to fall out of their sockets. He did not dare take rubbings of the books, which would have made them reasonably legible. He had to hold them slantwise to the light in his cubicle and read the shadows of the characters. Lakhrut had taught him the Forty-Three Syllables, condescendingly and the rest was up to him. He had made the most of it.

An imagery derived more from tactile than visual sense-impressions sometimes flooded him with subtleties—as, he was sure, an intensely visual English nature poem would have flooded Lakhrut. But he progressed.

Lakhrut had brought him a mish-mash of technical material and trashy novelettes—and a lexicon. The *takh* who had made such a fuss about the chipped pebble had brought him something like a Bible. Pay dirt!

It seems that in the beginning Spirit had created Man—which is what the A'rkhov-Yar called the A'arkhov-Yar—and set him to rule over all lesser creation. Man had had his ups and downs on the Planet, but Spirit had seen to it that he annihilated after sanguinary, millennium-long battles, his principal rivals for the Planet. These appeared to have been twelve-footed brutes who fought with flint knives in their first four feet.

And then Spirit had sent the Weak People to the Planet in a spaceship. Schooled to treachery in the long struggle against the knife-wielding beasts, Man had greeted the Weak People with smiles, food and homage. The Weak People

had foolishly taught them the art of writing, had foolishly taught Man their sciences. And then the Weak People had been slain, all twelve of them, in an hour of blood.

Barker somehow saw the Weak People as very tired, very gentle, very guileless survivors of a planetary catastrophe beyond guessing. But the book didn't say.

So the A'rkhov-Yar stole things. Science. People. Let George do it, appeared to be their morality, and then steal it from George. Well, they'd had a hard upbringing fighting down the Knifers, which was no concern of his. They'd been man-stealing for God knows how long; they'd made turn-coats like the late Mister Baldwin, and judas goats like neat Miss Winston, disgusting creatures preying on their own kind.

From the varied reading matter he built up a sketchy picture of the A'rkhov-Yar universe. There were three neighbouring stars with planetary systems, and the cyclopes had swarmed over them once the guileless Weak People had shown them spaceflight. First they had driven their own ships with their own wills. Then they had learned that conquered races could be used equally well, so they had used them. Then they learned that conquered races tended to despair and die out.

"Then," he said savagely to old man Stoss, "they showed the one flash of creative intelligence in their career—unless they stole it from one of their subjects. They invaded Earth—secretly. Without knowing it, we're their slave-breeding pen. If we knew it, we'd either fight and win, or fight and lose—and die out in despair."

"The one flash?" Stoss asked dryly, looking about them at the massive machinery.

"Stolen. All stolen. They have nations, trades and wars—but this is a copy of the Weak People's ship; all their ships are. And their weapons are the meteor screens and sweepers of the Weak People. With stolen science they've been stealing people. I think at a rate of thousands per year. God knows how long it's been going on—probably since the neolithic age. You want proof of their stupidity? The way they treat us. It leads to a high death rate and fast turnover. That's bad engineering, bad economics and bad housekeeping. Look at the lights they use—low-wattage incandescents! As inefficient lamps as were ever designed—"

"I've got a thought about those lights," Stoss said. "The other day when Lakhrut was inspecting and you were passing out the food I took two cakes instead of one—just to keep in practice. I used slight of hand, misdirection—but Lakhrut didn't misdirect worth a damn. He slapped the pain button and I put the extra cake back. What does it mean when the hand is quicker than the eye but the sucker isn't fooled?"

"I don't get you."

"What if those aren't very inefficient lamps but very efficient heaters?"

"*They're blind*," whispered Barker. "My God, you've got to be right! The lamps, the tactile culture, the embossed writing. And that thing that looks like an eye—it's their mind-reading organ, so it can't be an eye after all. You can't perform two radically different functions with the same structure."

"It's worth thinking about," old man Stoss said.

"I could have thought about it for a million years without figuring that out, Stoss. How did you do it?"

The old man looked modest. "Practice. Long years of it. When you want to take a deacon for a long score on the con game, you study him for his weaknesses. You don't assume he hasn't got any just because he's a deacon, or a doctor, or a corporation treasurer. Maybe it's women, or liquor, or gambling, or greed. You just play along, what interests him interests you, everything he says is wise and witty, and sooner or later he lets you know what's his soft spot. Then, lad, you've got him. You make his world revolve around his little weakness. You cater to it and play it up and by and by he gets to thinking that you're the greatest man in the world, next to him, and the only real friend he'll ever have. Then you 'tell the tale,' as we say. And the next sound you hear is the sweetest music this side of Heaven, the squealing of a trimmed sucker."

"You're a revolting old man," said Barker, "and I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad you're here too," the old man said. And he added with a steady look: "Whoever you are."

"You might as well know. Charles Barker—F.S.I. agent. They fished me out of the Riveredge gutter because I may or may not have telepathic flashes, and they put me on the disappearance thing."

Stoss shook his head unhappily. "At my age, co-operating with the F.S.I. I'll never live it down."

Barker said: "They've got sound to go on, of course. They hear movements, air currents. They carry in their head a sound picture—but it isn't a 'picture': damn language!—of their environment. They can't have much range of discrimination with that sense; too much noise hashing up the picture. They're probably heat-detectors, too. If bedbugs and mosquitoes can use heat for information, so can these things. Man could do it too if he had to, but we have eyes. The heat-sense must be short range too; black-body radiation falls off proportional to the fourth power of the distance. It's beginning to fit together. They don't go *very* near those incandescent bulbs ever, do they? They keep about a metre distant?"

"Yes, I've noticed that. Anything closer must be painful to the heat sense—'blinding,' you might say."

"Then that leaves their telepathy. That specialist came into this room to examine me, which tells us something about the range. Something—but not enough."

Stoss said: "A person might pretend to throw something at one of them from a distance of ten yards. If the creature didn't notice, we'd know they don't have a ten-yard range with sound, heat or telepathy. And the next day he could try it at nine yards. And so on, until it noticed."

"And blew the person in half with those side-arms they carry," said Barker. "Who volunteers for the assignment, Stoss?"

"Not I," the old man said hastily. "Let's be practical. But perhaps I could persuade Miss Trimble?"

"The math teacher? Hell, no. If things work out, we're going to need all the mathematical talent we've got."

They conferred quietly, deciding which of their fellow-Earthmen would be persuaded to sacrifice himself. The choice fell on a nameless half-mad youngster in the third seat of the second tier; he spoke to nobody and glared suspiciously over his food and drink.

"But can you do it?" asked Barker.

Stoss was offended. "In my time," he said, "I've taken some fifty-five really big scores from suckers. I've persuaded people who love money better than life itself to turn their money over to me, and I've sent them to the bank for more."

"Do your best," Barker said.

What approach the old swindler did use, he never learned. But the next day Third Seat, Second Tier, rose during the doling out of the food and pretended to hurl his plate at Lakhrut. The cyclops, ten metres away, stalked serenely on and the young man collapsed in an ecstasy of fright.

The next day is was eight yards.

The next day six.

And other things filled the days: the need for steady driving of the ship, and whispered consultations up and down the benches.

They needed a heat source, something that would blaze at 500 degrees, jangling, dazzling and confusing the senses of their captors. But it was an armed merchantman, a warship, and warships have nothing on board that will burn. Their poor clothing heaped together and somehow ignited would make a smouldering little fire, doing more damage to the human beings by its smoke than to the A'rkhov-Yar by its heat.

Barker went exploring in the cargo spaces. Again and again he was passed in the corridors by crew "men." Huddling against the glowing bulbs, choking down his rage and fear, he imitated the paint on the walls, and sometimes they broke their stride for a puzzled moment, sometimes not.

In a cargo space on the next day he found cases labelled with worms of plastic as "attention sticks" or possibly "arresting or halting tubes."

They were the close equivalent of railroad flares in appearance. He worked the tight-fitting cap of one to the point where he felt gritty friction. A striking surface—but he did not dare strike and test it. These things would have to put out hundreds of degrees of heat, or, if they were intended for use at any appreciable distance, thousands. They were thermal shrieks; they would be heard from one end of the ship to the other. In three trips he smuggled 140 of the sticks back to the propulsion room. Stoss helped him distribute them among the seats. He grimly told the lack-lustre eyes and loose mouths: "If anybody pulls off one of the caps before I say so, I am going to hit the pain button and hold it down for five minutes."

They understood it for the death threat it was.

"Today's the day, I think," said Stoss in a whisper as Lakhrut made his benevolent entrance. "He sensed something yesterday at four metres. Today it's going to be three."

Barker pushed his little food cart, fingering the broken-off knob of a propulsion chair resting on its lower tray. He moved past Third Seat, Second Tier, Lakhrut behind him. The mad young man rose, picked up his plate and pretended to throw it at the cyclops.

Lakhrut drew his side-arm and blew the young man's head into a charred lump. "Oliver !" he cried, outraged. "Why did you not report that one of your units was becoming deranged ? You should have put him through the space-lock days ago !"

"Oliver's" reply was to pace off a precise four meters and hurl the broken-off knob at the monster. He took a full windup, and rage for five thousand years of slavery and theft drove his muscles. The cyclops eye broke and spilled ; the cyclops staggered in circles, screaming. Barker closed in, twisted the side-arm from the monster's convulsed hand and gave him what Third Seat, Second Tier, had got.

The roomful of men and women rose in terror, screaming.

"Quiet !" he yelled at them. "I've talked to some of you about this. You saw what happened. Those things are blind ! You can strike them from five yards away and they'll never know what hit them."

He snatched up one of the fusees and rasped off the cap ; it began to flare pulsatingly, not very bright, but intensely hot. He held it at arm's length and it scorched the hair on the back of his hand. "These things will dazzle what sensory equipment they do have," he yelled, "and you can confuse them with noise. They'll be coming to get us in a minute. All you have to do is make noise and mill around. You'll see what happens when they come for us—and then we'll go hunting !"

In less than a minute his prediction was verified. A squad of the cyclops crew burst in, and the screaming of the Earth people left nothing to be desired ; the creatures recoiled as if they had struck a wall. From six metres away Barker and Stosses carefully ignited the flares and tossed them into the squad. They made half-hearted efforts to fire into the source of the trouble, but they were like men in a darkened boiler works—whose darkness was intermittently relieved by intolerable magnesium flares. Lakhrut's side-arm made short work of the squad.

Barker ripped their weapons from their fingers and demanded : " Who wants one ? Who wants to go hunting ? Not you, Miss Trimble ; we'll need you for later. Stay in a safe place. Who's ready for a hunting party ?"

One by one, twitching creatures remembered they were men and came up to take their weapons.

The first hunting party worked its way down a corridor, hurling fusees, yelling and firing. The bag was a dozen cyclops, a dozen more weapons.

They met resistance at a massive door with a loophole. Blasts from a hand weapon leaped through the loophole, blind but deadly. Three of them fell charging the door.

" Warm it up for them," Stoss said. He snatched a dozen fusees, ducked under the fire and plastered himself against the door. Meticulously he uncapped the sticks and leaned them against the door, one by one. The blast of heat drove Barker and his party back down the corridor. Stoss did not collapse until he had ignited the last flare and wrenched open the door with a seared hand.

Through the door could be seen staggering cyclops figures, clawing blindly at the compartment walls. The Earthmen leaped through the brief, searing heat of the dozen flares and burned them down.

In the A'rkhov-Yar language, a terrified voice spoke over the ship public address system : " To the leader of the rebels ! To the leader of the rebels ! Return to your propulsion room and your crimes will be forgiven ! Food will be doubled and the use of the Pain discontinued !"

Barker did not bother to translate. " Let's head for the navigation room," he said. " Try to save a couple of them." One hour later he was telling the commander and Gori : " You two will set courses for Earth. You will work separately, and if your results don't agree we will put you each in a chair and hold down the button until you produce results that do agree. We also have a lady able to check on your mathematics, so don't try anything."

" You are insane," said the commander. " Other ships will pursue and destroy you."

" Other ships," Barker corrected him, " will pursue and fail to overtake us. I doubt very much that slave ships can overtake a ship driven by free men and women going home."

"We will attack openly for this insolence," snorted Gori. "Do you think you can stand against a battle fleet? We will destroy your cities until you've had enough and then use you as the slaves you are."

"I'm sure you'll try," said Barker. "However, all I ask is a couple of weeks for a few first-rate Ph.D.'s to go over this ship and its armaments. I believe you'll find you have a first-rate war on your hands, gentlemen. We don't steal; we *learn*."

"And now if you please, start figuring that course. *You're* working for *us* now."

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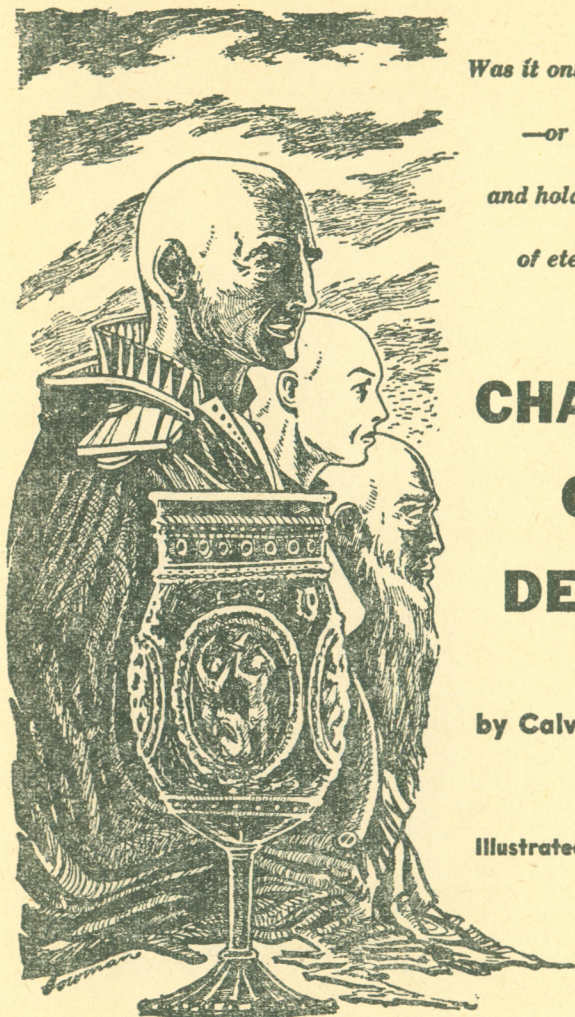
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of eternal life?

CHALICE OF DEATH

by Calvin M. Knox

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CHALICE OF DEATH

by Calvin M. Knox

Calvin M. Knox held many jobs before becoming a freelance writer, but the most interesting by far was a top secret post doing research connected with the possibilities of real-life spaceships. He can't talk about his work in that line, of course, but he obviously gathered a lot of convincing background for his stories while doing it. Read Chalice of Death and you'll see what we mean !

Chapter I

It was mid-day on Jorus, and Hallam Navarre, Earthman to the Court, had overslept. It had been a long night for the courtier, the night before : a night much filled with strange out-system wines and less strange women.

But duty was duty. And, as the Overlord's Earthman, Navarre was due at the throne room by the hour when the blue rays of the sun lit the dial in Central Plaza. Wearily, he sprang from bed, washed, dabbed depilator on his gleaming head to assure it the hairlessness that was the mark of his station, and caught the ramp heading downstairs.

A jetcab lurked hopefully in the street. Navarre sprang in and snapped, "To the Palace !"

"Yessir." The driver was a Dergonian, his coarse skin a gentle green. He jabbed down on the control stud and the cab sprang forward.

The Dergonian took a twisting, winding route through Jorus City—past the multitudinous stinks of the Street of the Fishmongers, where the warm blue sunlight filtered in everywhere, where racks of drying finfish lay spread winged in the sun, then down past the Temple, through swarms of mid-day worshippers, then a sharp right that brought the cab careening into Central Plaza.

The micronite dial in the heart of the plaza was blazing gold. Navarre cursed softly. He belonged at the Overlord's side, and he was late.

Earthmen were *never* late. Earthmen had a special reputation to uphold in the universe. Navarre's fertile mind set to work concocting a story to place before the Overlord when the inevitable query came.

"You seek an audience with the Overlord?" the cabbie asked.

"Not quite," Navarre said wryly. He slipped back his hood, revealing his bald dome. "Look."

The driver squinted at the rear-view mirror and nodded at the sight of Navarre's shaven scalp. "Oh. The Earthman. Sorry I didn't recognise you, sir."

"Quite all right. But get this crate moving; I'm due at court."

"I'll do my best."

The Dergonian's best wasn't quite good enough. He rounded the Plaza, turned down into the Street of the Lords, charged full throttle ahead—

Smack into a parade—

The Legions of Jorus were marching. The jetcab came to a screeching halt no more than ten paces from a regiment of tusked Daborians marching stiffly along, carrying their blue-and-red flag mounted just beneath the bright purple of Jorus, tooting on their thin, whining electronic bagpipes. There were thousands of them.

"Guess it's tough luck, Sir Earthman," the cabbie said philosophically. "The parade's going around the Palace. It may take hours."

Navarre sat perfectly still, meditating on the precarious position of an Earthman in a court of the Cluster. Here he was, remnant of a wise race shrouded in antiquity, relict of the warrior-kings of old—and he sat sweating in a taxi while a legion of tusked barbarians delayed his passage. Once

again he cursed the rule that forced him to live at such a distance from the Palace, knowing as he did so that the arrangement was deliberately designed to serve as a constant reminder of the precariousness of his position.

The cabbie opaqued his windows.

"What's that for?"

"We might as well be cool while we wait. This can take hours. I'll be patient if you will."

"The hell you will," Navarre snapped, gesturing at the still-running meter. "At two demi-units per minute I could be renting a fine seat on the reviewing stand. Let me out of here."

"But—"

"Out." Navarre leaned forward, slammed down the meter, cutting it short at thirty-six demi-units. He handed the driver a newly-minted semi-unit piece.

"Keep the change. And thanks for the service."

"A pleasure." The driver made the formal farewell salute.

"May I serve you again, Sir Earthman, and—"

"Sure," Navarre said, and slipped out of the cab. A moment later he had to jump to one side as the driver activated his side blowers, clearing debris from the turbojets and incidentally spraying the Earthman with a cloud of fine particles of filth.

Navarre turned, clapping a hand to his blaster, but the grinning cabbie was already scooting away in reverse. Navarre scowled. Behind the usual mask of respect for Earthmen, there was always a lack of civility that irked him. It was another reminder of his ambiguous position in the galaxy, as an emissary from nowhere, a native of a world long forgotten and which he himself had never seen.

Earth. It was not a planet any longer, but a frame of mind, a way of thinking. He was an Earthman, and thus valuable to the Overlord. But he could be replaced; there were other advisers nearly as shrewd.

Navarre fingered his bald scalp ruefully and flicked off his hood again. He started across the wide street.

The regiment of Daborians still stalked on—the seven-foot humanoids with their jutting tusks polished brightly, their fierce beards combed, marching in an unbreakable phalanx round and round the Palace.

Damn parades anyway, he thought. Foolish display, calculated to impress barbarians.

He reached the Daborian ranks. "Excuse me, please."

He started to force his way between two towering artillery men. Without breaking step, a Daborian grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and threw him back toward the street. An appreciative ripple of laughter went up from the onlookers as Navarre landed unsteadily on one leg, started to topple, and had to skip three or four times to stay upright.

"Let me through," he snapped again, as a corps of tusked musicians came by. The Daborians merely ignored him. Navarre waited until a bagpiper came by, one long valved chaunter thrust between his tusks and hands flying over the electronic keyboard. Navarre grabbed the base of the instrument with both hands and rammed upward.

The Daborian let out a howl of pain and took a step backward as the mouthpiece cracked against his palate. Navarre grinned and slipped through the gap in formation, and kept on running. Behind him, the bagpiping rose to an angry wail, but none of the Daborians dared break formation to pursue the insolent Earthman.

He reached the steps of the Palace. Fifty-two of them, each a little wider and higher than the next. He was better than an hour late at court. The Overlord would be close to a tantrum—and in all probability Kausirn, the sly Vegan adviser, had taken ample opportunity to work mischief.

Navarre only hoped the order for his execution had not yet been signed. There was no telling what the Overlord would do under Kausirn's influence.

He reached the long black-walled corridor leading to the throne room somewhat out of breath. The pair of unemotional Trizian monoptics guarding access to the corridor recognised him and nodded disapprovingly as he went toward the throne room.

Arriving at the penultimate turn in the hall, he ducked into a convenience at the left and slammed the door. He was so late that a few moments more wouldn't aggravate the offence, and he wanted to look his best.

A couple of seconds later, the brisk molecular flow of the vibron had him refreshed and back in breath; he splashed water on his face, dried it, straightened his tunic, tied back his hood. Then, stiffly, walking with a dignity he had not displayed a moment before, he stalked out and headed for the throne room.

The annunciator said : " Hallam Navarre, Earthman to the Overlord."

Joroiran VII was on his throne, looking, as always, like a rather nervous butcher's apprentice elevated quite suddenly to galactic rank. He muttered a few words, and the micro-amplifier surgically implanted in his throat picked them up and tossed them at the kneeling Navarre.

" Enter, Earthman. You're late."

The throne room was filled. For this was Threeday—audience-day—and all sizes and shapes of commoners thronged before the Overlord each hoping that the finger of fate would light on him and bring him forward to plead his cause. It was Navarre's customary job to select those who were to address the Overlord, but he saw coldly that Kausirn, the Vegan, had taken over the task in his absence.

He advanced toward the throne and abased himself before the purple carpet. A sudden sensation of heat told him that Lagard, the slave who operated the spotlight from the balcony, was having a field day with the Earthman's glitteringly bald head.

" You may rise," Joroiran said casually. " The audience began more than an hour ago. You have been missed, Navarre."

" I have been employed in your Majesty's service all the while," Navarre said. " I was pursuing that which may be of great value to your Majesty and to all of Jorus."

Jorioran looked amused. " And what may that be ?"

Navarre paused, drawing in breath, and prepared himself for the plunge. " I have discovered information that may lead to the Chalice of Life, my Overlord."

To his surprise Joroiran did not react at all ; his mousy face showed not the slightest sign of animation. Navarre blinked ; the whopper was not going over.

But it was the Vegan who saved him in a way. Leaning over, Kausirn whispered harshly, " He means the Chalice of *Death*, Majesty."

" Death . . . ?"

" Eternal life for Joroiran VII," Navarre said ringingly. As long as he was going to make excuses for having overslept, he might as well make them good ones. " The Chalice holds death for some—life for thee."

" Indeed," the Overlord said. " You must talk to me of this in my chambers. But now, the audience."

Navarre mounted the steps and took his customary position at the monarch's right ; Kausirn had at least not appropriated *that*. But the Earthman saw that the Vegan's nest of tapering fingers played idly over the short-beam generator which controlled the way the hand of fate fell upon commoners. That meant Kausirn, not Navarre, would be selecting those whose cases were to be plead this day.

Looking into the crowd, Navarre picked out the bleak, heavily-bearded face of Domrik Carso. Carso was staring reproachfully at him, and Navarre felt a sudden burst of guilt. He had promised Carso a hearing today ; the halfbreed lay under a sentence of banishment, but Navarre had lightly assured him that revokement would be a simple matter.

But not now. Not with Kausirn wielding the blue beam. Kausirn had no desire to have an Earthman's kith and kin plaguing him on Jorus ; Carso would rot in the crowd before the Vegan chose *his* case to be pled.

Navarre met Carso's eyes. *Sorry*, he tried to say. But Carso stared stiffly through him. Navarre had failed him.

"Proceed with your tale," Joroiran said.

Navarre looked down and saw a pale Joran in the pleader's square below, bathed in the blue light of chance. The man looked up at the command and said, "Shall I continue or begin over, Highness?"

"Begin over. The Earthman may be interested."

"May it please the Overlord and his advisers, my name is Drusu of the Loaves ; I am a baker from Dombril Street who was taken with overmuch wine of yesternight, and did find myself in another man's wife's arms by the hour of midnight, all unconscious what I was doing. The girl had given me to understand she was a woman of the streets ; not only was I befuddled by the wine but by the woman's lies. The man himself arrived at his home late, and did fly into a mighty rage from which he could hardly be dissuaded."

The story went on and on—a rambling account of the negotiations between the outraged husband and the besotted baker. Navarre's attention wandered; he glanced around the court, spying here and there a person whom he had pledged to assist this day. Of all days to oversleep ! Kausirn held the reins, now.

"... and finally we came before your Nobility for adjudgement, Sire. The man desires a night with my wife as fee simple for the insult, plus payment of one hundred units ; my wife

refuses to grant this, while his will have naught to do with either of us."

On his throne, Joroiran scowled and twisted fretfully. Such petty matters embarrassed and annoyed him, but he kept up the pretence of the public audience at Navarre's advice. Even in a galactic society, a monarch must keep in touch with his subjects.

The Overlord turned to Navarre. "What say you in this matter, Earthman?"

Navarre thought for a moment. "All four must be punished—Drusu for straying from his wife, his wife for not being loving enough to keep her husband's undivided affections, the other woman for seducing Drusu, her husband for taking so little care of his wife as to allow a stranger to enter his home of a night. Therefore—Drusu is sentenced to supply the offended husband with bread, free of charge, for the period of a fortnight; the erring wife is condemned to cut short her hair. But all four are sentenced to unbreaking rectitude of behaviour for one year, and should any of you be taken with a person not your spouse the sentence will be death *for all four*."

"Excellent, excellent," Joroiran murmured. Drusu nodded and backed away from the royal presence. Navarre grinned; he enjoyed delivering such decisions on the moment's spur.

Joroiran intoned, "Fate will decide who is next to be heard"

Fate—surreptitiously controlled by the generator hidden in the Vegan's twenty fingers—materialized as a ball of blue light high in the vaulted throne room. The ball lowered. For a moment it flickered above the head of Domrik Carso, and Navarre wondered if the Vegan would choose the half-breed's case unknowingly.

But Kausirn was too sly for that. The beam swung tantalizingly over Carso's head and settled on a pudgy grocer at his side. The man did a little dance of delight, and stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, I am Lugfor of Zaigla Street, grocer and purveyor of food. I have been accused falsely of thinning my measure, but—"

Navarre sat back while the man droned on. The time of audience was coming to its end; Carso would go unheard, and at twenty-fourth hour the halfbreed would be banished. Well, there was no helping it, Navarre thought glumly. He knotted his hands together and tried to follow Lugfor's plea of innocence.

At the end of the session Navarre turned to the Overlord—

but Kausirn was already speaking. "Majesty, may I talk to you alone."

"And I?" Navarre said.

"I'll hear Kausirn first," Joroiran decided. "To my chambers; Navarre, attend me there later."

"Certainly, Sire." He slipped from the dais and headed down into the dispersing throng. Carso was shuffling morosely toward the exit when Navarre reached him.

"Domrik! Wait!"

The half-breed turned. "It looks like you'll be the only Earthman on Jorus by nightfall, Hallam."

"I'm sorry. Believe me. I'm sorry. I just couldn't get here in time—and that damned Vegan got control of the selections."

Carso shrugged moodily. "I understand." He tugged at his thick beard. "I am only half of Earth, anyway. You'll not miss me."

"Nonsense!" Navarre whispered harshly. "I—oh, forget it, Domrik. Will you forgive me?"

The half-breed nodded gravely. "My writ commands me to leave the cluster. I'll be heading for Kariad tonight, and then outward. You'll be able to reach me there if you can—I mean—I'll be there a week."

"Kariad? All right. I'll get in touch with you there if I can influence Joroiran to revoke the sentence. Damn it, Carso, you shouldn't have hit that innkeeper so hard."

"He made remarks," Carso said. "I had to." The half-breed bowed and turned away to leave.

The throne room was nearly empty; only a few stragglers were left, staring at the grandeur of the room and probably comparing it with their own squalid huts. Joroiran enjoyed living on a large scale, certainly.

Navarre sprawled down broodingly on the edge of the royal purple carpet and stared at his jewelled fingers. Things were looking bad. His sway as Joroiran's adviser was definitely weakening, and the Vegan's star seemed in the ascendant. Navarre's one foothold was the claim of tradition: all seven of the Joroiran Overlords had had an Earthman as adviser. The Overlord, weak man that he was, would scarcely care to break with tradition.

Yet Kausirn had wormed himself securely into the monarch's graces. The situation was definitely not promising.

Gloomily, Navarre wondered if there were any other local monarchs in the market for advisers. His stay on Jorus did not look to be long continuing.

Chapter II

After a while a solemn Trizian glided toward him, stared down out of its one eye, and said. "The Overlord will see you now."

"Thanks." He allowed the monoptic to guide him through the swinging panel that led to Joroiran's private chambers, and entered.

The Overlord was alone, but the scent of the waxy-fleshed Vegan still lingered. Navarre took the indicated seat.

"Sire?"

"That was a fine decision you rendered in the case of the baker today, Navarre. I often wonder how I should endure the throne without two such ministers as you and Kausirn."

"Thank you, Sire."

Perspiration beaded Joroiran's upper lip; the monarch seemed dwarfed by the stiff strutwork that held his uniform out from his scrawny body. He glanced nervously at the Earthman, then said, "You spoke of a Chalice today, as your reason for being late to the audience. The Chalice of Death, is it? Or of Life?"

"It is known under both names, Sire."

"Of course. Its details slipped my mind for the instant. It is said to hold the secret of eternal life, not so? Its possessor need never die?"

Navarre nodded.

"And," Joroiran continued, "you tell me you have some knowledge of its whereabouts, eh?"

"I think I do," said Navarre hoarsely. "My informant claimed to know someone whose father had led an earlier expedition in search of it, and who had nearly located it." The statement was strictly from whole cloth, but Navarre reeled it off smoothly.

"Indeed? Who is this man?"

Sudden inspiration struck Navarre. "His name is Domrik Carso. His mother was an Earthman—and you know of course that the Chalice is connected in some legend-shrouded way with Earth."

"Of course. Produce this Carso."

"He was here today, Sire. He searched for pardon from an unfair sentence of banishment over some silly bar-room squabble. Alas, the finger of fate did not fall on him, and he leaves for Kariad tonight. But perhaps if the sentence were

revoked I could get further information from him concerning the Chalice, which I would most dearly love to win for your Majesty—”

Joroiran's fingers drummed the desktop. “Ah, yes—revokement. It would be possible, perhaps. Can you reach the man?”

“I think so.”

“Good. Tell him not to pay for his passage tickets, that the Public Treasury will cover the cost of his travels from now on.”

“But—”

“The same applies to you, of course.”

Taken aback, Navarre lost a little of his composure. “Sire?”

“I have spoken to Kausirn. Navarre, I don't know if I can spare you, and Kausirn is uncertain as to whether he can bear the double load in your absence. But he will try it, noble fellow that he is.”

“I don't understand,” Navarre stammered.

“You say you have a lead on the Chalice, no? Kausirn has refreshed my overburdened memory with some information on this Chalice, and I find myself longing for its promise of eternal life, Navarre. You say you have a lead; very well. I have arranged for an indefinite leave of absence for you. Find this man Carso; together, you can search the galaxies at my expense. I don't care how long it takes, nor what it costs. *But bring me the Chalice, Navarre!*”

The Earthman nearly fell backward in astonishment. The Chalice? Why, it was just a myth, an old wives' tale he had resorted to as an excuse for oversleeping—

Greed shone in the Overlord's eyes: greed for eternal life. Dizzily Navarre realised that this was the work of the clever Kausirn: he would send the annoying Earthman all over space on a fool's mission while consolidating his own position at the side of the Overlord.

Navarre forced himself to meet Joroiran's eyes. “I will not fail you, my lord,” he said in a strangled voice.

He had been weaving twisted strands, and now he had spun himself a noose. Talk of tradition! Nothing could melt it faster than a king's desire to keep his throne.

For seven generations there had been an Earthman at the Overlord's side. Now, in a flash, the patient work of years was undone. Dejectedly Navarre reviewed his mistakes.

One : he had allowed Kausirn to worm his way into a position of eminence on the Council. Allow a Vegan an inch, and he'll grab a parsec. Navarre now saw he should have had the many-fingered one quietly put away while he had the chance.

Two : he had caroused the night before an audience day. Inexcusable. By hereditary right and by his own wits he had always chosen the cases to be heard, and in the space of a single hour the Vegan had done him out of *that*.

Three : he had lied too well. This was something he should have foreseen. He had aroused weak Joroiran's desire to such a pitch that Kausirn was easily able to plant the suggestion that the Overlord send the faithful Earthman out to find the Chalice.

Three mistakes. Now, he was on the outside and Kausirn in control. Navarre tipped his glass and drained it. "You're a disgrace to your genes," he told the oddly distorted reflection on the wall of the glass. "A hundred thousand years of Earthmen labour to produce—what? *You?* Fumblewit!"

Still, there was nothing to be done for it now. Joroiran had given the word, and here he was, assigned to chase a phantom, to pursue a will-o'-the-wisp that was half fancy, half lie. The Chalice! Chalice, indeed! There was no such thing.

And even if there were, the sky was full of stars. Navarre could search the heavens for a billion decades and not touch each world twice. And he dared not return to Joroiran empty-handed. That was what Kausirn was counting on. Navarre was a prisoner of his own reputation, of the reputation of Earthman's ability to achieve anything they set out to do.

Navarre chuckled hollowly and wondered what would happen if they knew the truth—if they knew just how futile the much-feared Earthmen really were.

Here we are, he thought. *A couple of million of us, scattered one or two to a world throughout the galaxies. We dictate policies, we are sought as advisers—and yet we were unable to hold our own empire. We don't even remember where our home world is.*

He tossed his empty glass aside and reached for the communicator. He punched the stud, quickly fed in four numbers and a letter.

A blank radiance filled the screen, and an impersonal voice said, "Citizen Carso is not at home. Citizen Carso is not at home. Citizen Car—"

Navarre cut the contact and dialled again. This time the screen lit, glowed, and showed a tired-looking man in a white smock. "Jublain Street Bar," the man said. "Do you want to see the manager?"

"No. Is there a man named Domrik Carso there—a heavy-set fellow, with a thick beard?"

"I'll look around," the barkeep grunted. A moment later, Carso came to the screen. His thick-nostrilled face looked puffy and bloated; as Navarre had suspected, he was having a few last swills of Joran beer before taking off for the out-worlds.

"Navarre? What do you want?"

"Have you bought your ticket for Kariad yet?"

Carso blinked. "Not yet. What's it to you?"

"If you haven't bought it yet, *don't*. How soon can you get over here?"

"Couple of centuries, maybe. What's going on?"

"You've been pardoned."

"*What?* I'm not banished?"

"Not exactly," Navarre said. "Look, I don't want to talk about it at long range. How soon can you get over here?"

"I'm due at the spaceport at twenty-one to pick up my tick—"

"*Damn* your ticket," Navarre snapped. "You don't have to leave yet. Come on over, will you?"

Navarre peered across the table at the heavy-shouldered figure of Domrik Carso. "That's the whole story," the Earthman said. "Joroiran wants the Chalice—and he wants it real hard."

Carso shook his head and exhaled a beery breath. "Your oversleeping has ruined us both, Hallam. With but half an Earthman's mind I could have done better."

"It's done, and Kausirn has me in a cleft stick. If nothing else, I've saved you a banishment."

"Only under condition that I help you find this damnable Chalice," Carso grunted. "Some improvement that is. Well, at least, Joroiran will foot the bill. We can both see the universe at his expense, and when we come back—"

"We come back when we've found the Chalice," said Navarre. "This isn't going to be a pleasure-jaunt."

Carso glared at him sourly. "Hallam, are you mad? There *is* no Chalice!"

"How do you know? Joroiran says there is. The least we can do is look for it."

"We'll wander space forever," Carso said, sighing. "As no doubt the Vegan intends for you to do. Well, there's nothing but to accept. I'm no poorer for it than if I were banished. Chalice! *Pah!*"

"Have another drink," Navarre suggested. "It may make it easier for you to swallow the idea."

"I doubt it," the half-breed said, but accepted the drink anyway. He drained it, then said, "You told the Overlord you had a lead. What was it?"

"*You* were my lead," Navarre said. "I had to invent something."

"Fine, fine. This leaves us less than nowhere. Well, tell me of this Chalice. What is known of it?"

Navarre frowned. "The legend is connected with ancient Earth. They say the Chalice holds the key to eternal life, if the proper people find it—and instant death for the wrong ones. Hence the ambiguous name, Chalice of Life and Chalice of Death."

"A chalice is a drinking-cup," Carso observed. "Does this mean a potion of immortality, or something of the like?"

"Your guess is equal to mine. I've given you all I know on the subject."

"Excellent. Where is this Chalice supposedly located, now?"

Navarre shrugged. "Legend is incomplete. The thing might be anywhere. Our job is to find a particular drinking-cup on a particular world in a nearly infinite universe. Unfortunately we have only a finite length of time to do the job."

"The typical shortsightedness of kings," Carso muttered.

"A sensible monarch would have sent a couple of immortals out in search of the Chalice."

"A sensible monarch would know when he'd had enough, and not ask to rule his system forever. But Joroiran's not sensible."

They were silent for a moment, while the candle between them flickered. Then Carso grinned.

"What's so funny?"

"Listen, Hallam. We don't know where the Chalice is, right? It might be anywhere at all. And so we can begin our search at random."

"So?"

"Why don't we assume a location for the Chalice? At least it'll give us a first goal to crack at. And it ought to be easier to find a planet than a drinking-cup shouldn't it?"

Navarre's eyes narrowed. "Just where are you assuming the Chalice is? Where are we going to look for it?"

There was a mischievous twinkle in the half-breed's eyes. He gulped another drink, grinned broadly, and belched.

"Where? Why—Earth, of course."

Chapter III

On more-or-less sober reflection the next morning, it seemed to Navarre that Carso's idea was right: finding Earth promised to be easier than finding the Chalice (if it were proper to talk about degrees of ease in locating myths). It seemed a good deal more probable that there had been an Earth than that there had been a Chalice, and, if they directed their aims Earthward, their quest would have a more solid footing.

Earth. Navarre knew the stories that each Earthman told to his children, that few non-Earthmen knew. As a half-breed Carso would be aware of them too.

Years ago—a hundred thousand, the legend said—man had sprung from Earth, an inconsequential world revolving around a small sun in an obscure galaxy. He had leaped forward to the stars, and carved out a mighty empire. The glory of Earth was carried to the far galaxies, to the wide-flung nebulae of deepest space.

But no race, no matter how strong, could hold sway over an empire that spanned a billion parsecs. The centuries passed; Earth's grasp grew weaker. And, finally, the stars rebelled.

Navarre remembered his father's vivid description. Earth had been outnumbered a billion to one, yet they had kept the defensive screens up, and kept the home world untouched, had beaten back the invaders. But still the invaders came, sweeping down on the small planet like angry beetles.

Earth drew back from the stars; its military forces came to the aid of the mother world, and the empire crumbled.

It was to no avail. The hordes from the stars won the war of attrition, sacrificing men ten thousand to one and still not showing signs of defeat. The mother world yielded ; the proud name of Earth was humbled .

What became of the armies of Earth no one knew. Those who survived were scattered through the galaxies. But fiercely the Earthmen clung to their name. They shaved their heads to distinguish themselves from humanoids of a million star-systems—and death it was to the alien who tried to counterfeit himself as an Earthman !

The centuries rolled by in their never-ending sweep, and Earth itself was forgotten. Yet the Earthmen remained, a thin band scattered through the heavens proud of their heritage, jealous of their genetic traits. Carso was rare ; it was but infrequently that an Earthwoman could be persuaded to mate with an alien. Yet Carso regarded himself as an Earther, and never spoke of his father.

Where was Earth ? No one could name the sector of space—but Earth was in the hearts of the men who lived among the stars. Earthmen were sought out by kings ; the bald-heads could not rule themselves, but they could advise those less fitted than they to command.

Then would come a fool like Joroiran, who held his throne because his father seven times removed had hewed an empire for him—and Joroiran would succumb to a Vegan's wiles and order his Earthman off on a madman's quest.

Navarre's fists stiffened. *Send me for the Chalice, eh ? I'll find something for him !*

The Chalice was an idiot's dream ; immortal life was a filmy bubble. But Earth was real, Earth merely awaited finding. Somewhere it bobbed in the heavens, forgotten symbol of an empire that had been.

Smiling, Navarre thought, *I'll find Earth for him.*

Unlimited funds were at his disposal. He would bring Joroiran a potion too powerful to swallow at a gulp.

Later that day he and Carso were aboard a liner of the Royal fleet, bearing tickets paid for by Royal frank, and feeling against their thighs the thick bulge of Imperial scrip received with glee from the Royal treasury.

A stewardess moved up and down the aisle of the liner, making sure everyone was prepared for blastoff. Navarre studied her impartially. She was a Joran native, pink-skinned,

high-breasted, with only the flickering nictitating lid filming her eyes to indicate that she did not come from the direct line of Earth.

"A fine wench," Carso murmured as she passed.

"For you, perhaps. Give me an Earthwoman of the full blood."

Carso chuckled. "As a mate, perhaps; you fullbloods are ever anxious to keep your lines pure. But as for that one—if I judge you on past practice, you would not toss her from your couch if she sought a night's sport."

"Possibly not," Navarre admitted wryly. "But sport and bloodlines are separate affairs to me. Obviously this is not the rule in your family."

Carso stiffened in his seat. "My mother was forced by a drunken Joran, else I would be full-blooded like the rest."

"Oh," Navarre said softly. Carso had never spoken of this before. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"You didn't think she'd seek a Joran bed willingly, did you?"

"Of course not. I—wasn't thinking."

"Ready for blasting," came the stewardess's voice. "We depart for Kariad in fifteen seconds. Relax and prepare to enjoy your trip."

Navarre slumped back in the acceleration cradle and closed his eyes. His heart ticked the seconds off impatiently. *Twelve. Eleven. Nine. Six.*

Two. One. Acceleration took him, thrust him downward as the liner left ground. Within seconds, they were above the afternoon sky, thrusting outward into the brightly-dotted blackness speckled with the sharp points of a billion suns.

One of those suns was Sol, Navarre thought. And one of the planets of Sol was Earth.

Chalice of Life, he thought scornfully. As Jorus dwindled behind him Navarre wondered how long it would be before he would see the simpering face of Joroiran VII again.

Kariad, the planet nearest the Joran Empire's cluster, was the lone world of a double sun. This arrangement, uneconomical as it was, provided some spectacular views and made the planet a much-visited pleasure place.

As Navarre and Carso alighted from the liner, Primus, the massive red giant that was the heart of the system, hung high

overhead, intersecting a huge arc of the sky, while Secindus, the smaller main-sequence yellow sun, flickered palely near the horizon. Kariad was moving between the two stars on its complex and eccentric orbit, and, in the light of the two suns, all objects in sight had acquired a purple shimmer.

Those who had disembarked from the liner were standing in a tight knot on the field while Kariadi customs officials moved among them. Navarre folded his arms and waited for his turn to come.

The official wore a gilt-encrusted surplice and a bright red sash that seemed almost brown in the strange light. He yanked forth a notebook and started to scribble.

"Name and planet of origin?"

"Hallam Navarre. Planet of origin is Earth."

The customs man glared impatiently at Navarre's shaven scalp and said, "You know what I mean. Where are you from?"

"Jorus," Navarre said.

"Purpose of visiting Kariad?"

"Special emissary from Overlord Joroiran VII; intent peaceful, mission confidential."

"Are you the Earthman to the Court?"

Navarre nodded.

"And this man?"

"Domrik Carso," the half-breed growled. "Planet of origin Jorus."

The official indicated Carso's stubbly scalp. "I wish you Earthmen would be consistent. Or are you merely prematurely bald?"

"I'm of Earth descent," Carso said stolidly. "But I'm from Jorus, and you can put it down. I'm Navarre's travelling companion."

"Very well; you may both pass."

Navarre and Carso moved off the field and into the space-port itself. "I could use a beer," Carso said.

"I guess you've never been on Kariad, then. They must brew their beer from sewer-flushings."

"I'll drink sewer-flushings when I must," Carso said. He pointed to a glowing sign. "There's a bar. Shall we go in?"

As Navarre had expected, the beer was vile. He stared unhappily at the big mug of green, brackish liquid, stirring it with a quiver of his wrist and watching the oily patterns forming and re-forming on its surface.

Across the table, Carso was showing no such qualms. The halfbreed tilted the bottle into his mug, raised the mug to his lips, drank. Navarre shuddered.

Grinning, Carso crashed the mug down and wiped his beard clean. "It's not the best I've ever had," he commented finally. "But it'll do, in a pinch." He filled his mug again cheerfully.

Very quietly, Navarre said, "Do you see those men sitting at the far table?"

Carso squinted without seeming to do so. "Aye. They were on board the ship with us."

"Exactly."

"But so were five others in this bar! Surely you don't think—"

"I don't intend to take any chances," Navarre said. "Finish your drink and let's make a tour of the spaceport."

"Well enough, if so you say." Carso drained the drink and left one of Overlord Joroiran's bills on the table to pay for it. Casually, the pair left the bar.

Their first stop was a tape-shop, where Navarre made a great business over ordering a symphony.

The effusive, apologetic proprietor did his best. "*The Anvils of Juno*? I don't think I have that number in stock. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever heard of it. Could it be *The Hammer of Drolon* you seek?"

"I'm fairly sure it was the *Juno*," said Navarre, who had invented the work a moment before. "But perhaps I'm wrong. Is there any place I can listen to *Drolon*?"

"Surely; we have a booth back here where you'll experience full audiovisual effect. If you'd step this way—"

They spent fifteen minutes sampling the tape, Carso with an expression of utter boredom, Navarre with a scowl for the work's total insipidity. At the end of that time he snapped off the playback and rose.

The proprietor came bustling up. "Well?"

"Sorry," Navarre said. "It's not the one."

Gathering his cloak around him, he swept out of the shop, followed by Carso. As they re-entered the arcade, Navarre saw two figures glide swiftly into the shadows—but not swiftly enough.

"I do believe you're right," Carso muttered. "We're being followed."

"Kausirn's men, no doubt. The Vegan's curious to see where we're heading. Possibly he's ordered me assassinated now that I'm away from the Court. But let's give it one more test before we take steps."

"No more music !" Carso said hastily.

"No. The next stop will be more practical."

He led the way down the arcade until they reached a shop whose front display said simply, WEAPONS. They went in.

The proprietor here was of a different stamp from the man in the music shop ; he was a rangy Kariadi, his light blue skin glowing in harmony with the electroluminescents in the shop's walls. "Can I help you ?"

"Possibly you can," Navarre said. He swept back his hood, revealing his Earthman's scalp. "We're from Jorus. There are assassins on our trail, and we want to shake them. Have you a back exit ?"

"Over there," the armourer said. "Are you armed ?"

"Yes, but we could do with some spare charges. Say, five apiece." Navarre placed a bill on the counter and slid the wrapped-up packages into his tunic pocket.

"Are those the men ?" the proprietor said.

Two shadowy figures were visible through the one-way glass of the window. They peered toward it uneasily.

"I think they're coming in here," Navarre said.

"All right. You two go out the back way ; I'll chat with them for a while."

Navarre flashed the man an appreciative smile and then he and Carso slipped through the indicated door, just as their pursuers entered the weapons shop.

"Double around the arcade and wait at the end of the corridor, eh ?" Carso said.

"Right. We'll catch 'em as they come out."

Some very fast running brought them to a strategic position. "Keep your eyes open," Navarre said. "That shopkeeper may have told them where we are."

"I doubt it. He looked honest."

"You never can tell," Navarre said. "Hush, now !"

The door of the gunshop was opening.

Chapter IV

The followers edged out into the corridor again, squeezing themselves against the wall and peering in all directions. They looked acutely uncomfortable, having lost sight of their quarry.

Navarre drew his blaster and hefted it thoughtfully. Then he shouted, "Stand and raise your hands," and squirted a bolt of energy almost at their feet.

One of the two yelled in fear, but the other, responding instantly, drew and fired. His bolt, deliberately aimed high, brought a section of the arcade roofing down ; the drifting dust and plaster obscured sight.

"They're getting away !" Carso snapped. "Let's go after them !"

They leaped from hiding and raced through the rubble ; dimly they could see the retreating pair heading for the main waiting-room. Navarre cursed ; if they got in there, there'd be no chance of bringing them down.

As he ran, he levelled his blaster and emitted a short burst. One of the two toppled and fell ; the other continued running, and vanished abruptly into the crowded waiting-room.

"I'll go in after him," Navarre said. "You look at the dead one and see if there's any identification on him."

Navarre pushed through the photon-beam and into the spaceport's crowded waiting-room. He saw his man up ahead, jostling desperately toward the cabstand. Navarre holstered his blaster ; he would never be able to use it in here.

"Stop that man !" he roared. "Stop him !"

Perhaps it was the authority in his tone, perhaps it was his baldness, but to his surprise a foot stretched out and sent the fleeing spy sprawling. Navarre caught him in an instant, and knocked the useless blaster from his hand. He tugged the quivering man to his feet.

"All right, who are you ?"

He concluded the question with a slap. The man sputtered and turned his face away without replying, and Navarre hit him again.

This time the man cursed and tried to break away. "Did Kausirn send you ?" Navarre demanded.

"I don't know anything. Leave me alone."

"You'd better start knowing," Navarre said. He drew his blaster. "I'll give you five to tell me why you

were following us, and then I'll burn you right here. One. Two."

On the count of three Navarre suddenly felt hands go round his waist. Other hands grabbed at his wrist and immobilized the blaster. He was pulled away from his prisoner and the blaster wrenched from his hand.

"Let go of him, Earthman," a rough voice said. "What's going on here, anyway?"

"This man's an assassin," Navarre said. "He and a companion were sent here to kill me. Luckily my friend and I detected the plot and—"

"That's enough," the burly Kariadi said. "You'd all better come with me."

Navarre turned and saw several other officers approaching. One bore the body of the dead assassin; the other two pinioned the furiously-struggling figure of Domrik Carso.

"Come along, now," the Kariadi said.

"A good beginning to our quest," Carso said wryly. "A noble start!"

"Quiet," Navarre told him. "I think someone's coming."

They were in a dungeon somewhere in the heart of Kariad City, having been taken there from the spaceport. They sat in unbroken darkness. The surviving assassin had been taken to another cell.

But someone *was* coming. The door of the cell was opening, and a yellow beam of light was crawling diagonally across the concrete floor.

A slim figure entered the cell. Light glinted off a bald skull; it was an Earthman, then.

"Hello. Which of you is Navarre?"

"I am."

"I'm Helna Winstin, Earthman to the Court of Lord Marhaill, Oligocrat of Kariad. Sorry our men had to throw you in this dank cell, but they couldn't take any chances."

"We understand," Navarre said. He was still staring without believing. "No one told me that on Kariad the Earthman to the Court was a *woman*."

Helna Winstin smiled. "The appointment was recent. My father held the post till last month."

"And you succeeded him?"

"After a brief struggle. Milord was much taken by a Vegan who had served as Astronomer Royal, but I am happy to say he did not choose to break the tradition."

Navarre stared at the slim female Earthman with sharp respect. Evidently there had been a fierce battle for power—a battle in which she had bested a Vegan. *That was more than I managed to do*, he thought.

“Come,” she said. “The order for your realease has been signed, and I find cells unpleasant. Shall we go to my rooms?”

“I don’t see why not,” Navarre replied. He glanced at Carso, who looked utterly thunderstruck. “Come along, Domrik.”

They were led through the corridor to a liftshaft and upward; it was evident now that the dungeon had been in the depths of the royal palace itself. Helna Winstin’s rooms were warm and inviting-looking; the decor was brighter than Navarre was accustomed to, but beneath its obvious femininity lay a core of surprising toughness that seemed repeated in the girl herself. Considering the fact that her rooms, unlike his own on Jorus, were in the Palace itself, he reflected that there must be both advantages and disadvantages to being a woman.

“Now, then,” she said, making herself comfortable and motioning for the men to do the same. “What have you two done to bring you to Kariad with a pair of assassins on your trail?”

“Has the man confessed?”

“He—ah—revealed all,” Helna Winstin said. “He said he was sent here by one Kausirn, a Vegan attached to the Joran court, with orders to make away with you, specifically, and your companion if possible.”

Navarre nodded. “I thought as much. Can I see the man?”

“Unfortunately, he died during interrogation. The job was clumsily handled.”

She’s tough, all right, Navarre thought in appreciation. She wore her head shaven, though it was not strictly required of female Earthmen; she wore a man’s costume and did a man’s job. In other ways, she was obviously feminine.

She leaned forward. “Now—may I ask what brings the Earthman of Joroiran’s court here to Kariad?”

“We travel on a mission from Joroiran,” Navarre said. “For him, we seek the Chalice of Death.”

A tapering eyebrow rose. “How interesting. I have heard of this Chalice. If it really exists, its value is fabulous. I wonder . . .”

She paused, and seemed to come to a decision. "With such a prize at stake, you may still be in danger," she said. "It was on *my* authority that you were released; Lord Marhaill knows nothing of this affair as yet—as far as I know. But even now, he is closeted with another man who disembarked from the liner from Jorus. Could he, perhaps, seek to beat you to your goal?"

The news was shocking, but Navarre forced himself to consider it calmly. The wily Kausirn would in all likelihood have more than one string to his bow. The situation looked critical—but would Helna Winstin continue to help them if she knew the truth?

Casting caution aside he told her the whole story of their search for Earth in terse, clipped sentences. A strange look crossed her face when he had finished.

"Lord Marhaill is all too likely to side in with your friend Kausirn in this matter," she said. "If I help you, it may mean the loss of my post here—if not all our lives. But we Earthmen must stick together! What is our course?"

Chapter V

The main library of Kariad City was a building fifty stories high and as many more deep below the ground—and even so, it could not begin to store the accumulated outpourings of a hundred thousand years of civilization on uncountable worlds.

"The open files go back only about five hundred years," Helna said, as she and Navarre entered the vast doorway, followed by Carso. "Everything else is stored away somewhere, and hardly anyone but antiquarians ever bothers with it. I imagine they ship twenty tons a month to various out-world libraries that can handle the early material."

Navarre frowned. "We may have some trouble, then."

An efficient-looking Dergonian met them at the door. "Good day, Sir Earthman," he said to Helna. Catching sight of Navarre and Carso, he added, "And to you as well."

"We seek the main index," Helna said.

"Through that archway," said the librarian. "May I help you find what you seek?"

"We can manage by ourselves," Vavarre said.

The main index occupied one enormous room from floor to ceiling. Navarre blinked dizzily at the immensity of it.

Coolly, Helna walked to a screen mounted on a table in the centre of the index-room and punched out the letters E-A-R-T-H. She twisted a dial and the screen lit.

A card appeared in the screen. Navarre squinted to read its fine print :

EARTH, *legendary planet of Sol system (?) considered in myth as home of mankind*

SEE : D80009.1643, Smednal, *Creation Myths of the Galaxy.*

D80009.1644 Snodgras, *Legends of the First Empire.*

Helna looked up doubtfully. "Shall I try the next card ? Should I order these books ?"

"I don't think there's any sense in it," said Navarre. "These works look fairly recent ; they won't tell us anything we don't know. We'll have to dig a little deeper. How do we get to the closed files ?"

"I'll have to pull rank, I guess."

"Let's go, then. The real location of Earth is somewhere in these libraries, I'm sure ; you just can't *lose* a world completely. If we go back far enough we're sure to find out where Earth was."

"Unless such information was carefully deleted when Earth fell," Carso pointed out.

Navarre shook his head. "Impossible. The library system is too vast, too decentralized. There's bound to have been a slip-up somewhere—and we can find it !"

"I hope so," the half-breed said moodily.

Track 57 of the closed shelves was as cold and as desolate as a sunless planet, Navarre thought bleakly, as he and his companions stepped out of the dropshaft.

A Genobonian serpent-man came slithering toward them, and the chittering echo of his body sliding across the dark floor went shivering down the long dust-laden aisles. At the sight of the reptile Carso went for his blaster ; Genobonians entered this system but little, and they were fearsome sights to anyone not prepared for them.

"What's this worm coming from the books ?" Carso asked. His voice rang loudly through the corridors.

"Peace, friends. I am but an old and dessicated librarian left to moulder in these forgotten stacks." The Genobonian

chuckled. "A book-worm in truth, Earthman. But you are the first to visit here in a year or more ; what do you seek ?"

"Books on Earth," Navarre said. "Is there a catalogue down here ?"

"There is. But it shan't be needed ; I'll show you what we have, if you'll take care with it."

The serpent slithered away, leaving a foot-wide track in the dust on the floor. Hesitantly the three followed. He led them down to the end of a corridor, through a passageway dank-smelling with the odour of dying books, and into an even mustier alcove.

"Here we are," the dry voice croaked. The Genobonian extended a skinny arm and yanked a book from a shelf. It was a book indeed, not a mere tape.

"Handle it with care, friends. The budget does not allow for taping it, so we must preserve the original—until the day must come to clean this track. The library peels away its oldest layer like an onion shedding its skin ; when the weight of new words is too great—*whisht* ! and track 57 vanishes into the outworlds."

"And with it you ?"

"No," said the serpent sadly. "I stay here, and endeavour to learn my way around the new volumes that descend from above. The time of changing is always sad."

"Enough talk," Navarre said. "Let's look at this book."

It was a history of the galaxy, arranged alphabetically. Navarre stared at the title page and felt a strange chill upon learning the book was more than thirty thousand years old.

Thirty thousand years. And yet Earth had fallen seventy millenia before this book was printed.

Navarre frowned. "This is but the volume from *Fenelon* to *Fenris*," he said. "Where is Earth ?"

"Earth is in an earlier volume," the Genobonian said. "A volume which we no longer have in this library. But look, look at this book ; perhaps it may give you some information."

Navarre stared at the librarian for a long moment, then said, "Have you read all these books ?"

"Many of them. There is little for me to do down here."

"Very well, then. This is a question no Earthman has ever asked of an alien before—and if I suspect you're lying to me, I'll kill you here among your books."

"Go ahead, Earthman," the serpent said. He sounded unafraid.

Navarre moistened his lips. "Before we pursue our search further, tell me this : *did Earth ever exist ?*"

There was silence, broken only by the echoes of Navarre's voice whispering the harsh question over and over down the aisles. The serpent's bright eyes glittered. "You do not know yourselves ?"

"No, damn you," Carso growled. "Else why do we come to you ?"

"Strange," the serpent mused. "But yes--yes, Earth existed. You may read of Earth, in this book I have given you. Soon they will send the book far away, and the truth of Earth will vanish from Kariad. But till then—yes, there was an Earth."

"Where ?"

"I knew once, but I have forgotten. It is in that volume, that earlier volume that was sent away. But look, look, Earthmen. Read there, under *Fendobar*."

Navarre opened the ancient History with trembling fingers and found his way through the greying pages to *Fendobar*. He read the faded text aloud :

FENDOBAR, The larger of a double-star system in Galaxy RGC18347, giving its name to the entire system. It is ringed by eight planets, only one inhabited and likewise known as Fendobar.

Because of its strategic location just eleven light-years from the Earth system, Fendobar was of extreme importance in the attack on Earth (which see). Starships were customarily refuelled on Fendobar before . . .

Co-ordinates . . .

The inhabitants of . . .

"Most of it's illegible," Navarre said, looking up. "But there's enough here to prove that there *was* an Earth—and it was just eleven light-years from Fendobar."

"Wherever Fendobar was," Helna said.

There was silence in the vault for a moment. Navarre said, "There's no way you can recall the volume dealing with Earth, is there ? This book gives co-ordinates and everything else. We could get there if—"

He stopped. The Genobonian looked at him slyly. "Do you plan to visit your homeland, Earthman ?"



"Possibly. It is none of your business."

"As you wish. But the answer is no ; the volume cannot be recalled. It was shipped out with others of its era last year some time before the great eclipse, I believe—or was it the year before ? Well, no matter ; I remember not where the book was sent. We scatter our excess over every eager library within a thousand light-years."

"And there's no way you could remember ?" Carso demanded. "Not even if we refreshed your memory ?" The half-breed's thick hands shot around the Genobonian's scaly neck, but Navarre slapped him away.

"He's probably telling the truth, Domrik. And even if he isn't, there's no way we can force him to find the volume for us."

Helna brightened suddenly. "Navarre, if we could find this Fendobar, do you think it would help us in the quest for Earth ?"

"It would bring us within eleven light-years—a mighty stride toward success. But how ? The co-ordinates are illegible."



"The Oligocrat's scientists are shrewd about restoring faded books. They may help us, if they have not yet been warned not to," the girl said. She turned to the Genobonian. "Librarian, may we borrow this book a while?"

"Impossible! No book may be withdrawn from a closed track at any time!"

Helna scowled prettily. "But if they only rot here and eventually are shipped off at random, why make such to do about them? Come; let us have this book."

"It is against all rules."

Helna shrugged and nodded to Navarre, who said, "Step on him, Carso. Here's a case where violence *is* justified."

The half-breed advanced menacingly toward the Genobonian, who scuttled away. "Should I kill him?" Carso asked.

"Yes," said Helna instantly. "He's dangerous. He can report us to Marhaill."

"No," Navarre said. "The serpent is a gentle old creature who lives by his rules and loves his books. Merely pull his fangs, Carso: tie him up and hide him behind a pile of books."

He won't be found till tonight—or next year, perhaps. By which time, we'll be safely on our way."

He handed the book to Helna. "Let's go. We'll see what the Oligocrat's scientists can do with these faded pages."

The little ship spiralled to a graceful landing on the large world.

"This might well be Kariad," Helna said. "I am used to the double stars in the skies."

Directly overhead, the massive orb that was Fendobar burned brightly; farther away, a dim dab of light indicated the huge star's companion.

"Even this far away," Navarre said, "the universe remains constant."

"And somewhere eleven light-years ahead of us lies Earth," grunted Carso.

They had travelled more than a billion light-years, an immensity so vast that even Helna's personal cruiser, a warship which was virtually instantaneous on stellar distances of a few thousand light-years, had required a solid week to make the journey.

And now, where were they? Fendobar—a world left far behind by the universe, a world orbiting a bright star in a galaxy known only as RGC18347. A world eleven light-years from Earth.

The Oligocrat's scientists had restored the missing co-ordinates as Helna had anticipated. Helna had packed a few things, and the three had said an abrupt goodbye to Kariad. They were none too soon; Marhaill's police had been stopping all strangers on Kariad and questioning them. Luck had been with them and they had reached the cruiser safely.

And they had swept out into space, into the subwarp and across the tideless sea of a billion light-years. They were driving back, back into humanity's past, into Galaxy RGC 18347—the obscure galaxy from which mankind had sprung.

They had narrowed the field. Navarre had never thought they would get this far. Pursuit was inevitable, and he was expecting signs of it at any moment.

"We seek Earth, friend," Navarre told the aged chieftain who came out supported by two young children to greet the arriving ship.

"Earth? Earth? What be this?"

The old man's accents were strange and barely understandable. Navarre looked around ; he saw primitive huts, a smoking fire, naked babes uneasily testing their legs. The wheel of life had come full ; one of mankind's oldest worlds had evidently entered its second youth.

"Earth is a planet somewhere in this galaxy," Carso said impatiently.

"I see," the old man said. "Planets . . . galaxies . . . these are strange words."

Navarre fumed. "This is Fendobar, isn't it?"

"Fendobar? The name of this world is Mundahl. I know no Fendobar."

Carso looked worried. "You don't think we made some mistake, do you, Hallam?"

"No. Names change in thirty thousand years." He leaned close to the oldster. "Do you study the stars, old man?"

"Not I. But there is a man in our village who does. He knows many strange things."

"Take us to him," Navarre said.

The astronomer was a withered old man who might have been the twin of the chieftain. The Earthmen entered his hut, and were surprised to see shelves of books, tapes, and an efficient-looking telescope.

"Yes?"

"Bremoire, these people search for Earth. Know you the place?"

The astronomer frowned. "The name sounds familiar, but—let me search my charts." He unrolled a thin, terribly fragile-looking sheet of paper covered with tiny marks.

"Earth is the name of the planet," Navarre said. "It revolves around a sun called Sol. We know that the system is some eleven light-years from here."

The wrinkled astronomer pored over his charts, frowning and scratching his leathery neck. After a while he looked up. "There is indeed a sun-system at the distance you give. Nine planets revolve about a small yellow sun. But—those names—?"

"Earth was the planet. Sol was the sun."

"Earth? Sol? There are no such names on my charts. The star's name is Dubihsar."

"And the third planet?"

"Velidoon."

Dubihsar. Velidoon In thirty thousand years, names change. But could Earth forget its own name—so soon?

Chapter VI

There was a yellow sun ahead. Navarre stared at it hungrily through the fore viewplate, letting its brightness burn into his eyes.

"There it is," he said. "Dubihsar. *Sol*."

"And the planets?" Carso asked.

"There are nine." He peered at the crumbling book the astronomer had given him, after long hours of search and thought. The book with the old names. "Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Venus, Mercury. And *Earth*."

"Earth," Helna said. "Soon we'll be on Earth."

Navarre frowned broodingly. "I'm not sure I actually want to land, now that we've found it. I know what Earth's going to be like: Fendobar. It's awful when a world forgets its name."

"Fendobar is called Procyon on these charts," Carso commented.

"It was the Earth name for it. But now all are forgotten—Procyon, Fendobar, Earth. These planets have new names; they have forgotten their past. And we'll be coming down out of that past. I don't like it."

"Nonsense, Hallam." Carso was jovial. "Earth is Earth, whether its people know it or not. We've come this far; let's land, at least, before turning back. Who knows—we may even find the Chalice!"

"The Chalice," Navarre repeated quietly. "I had almost forgotten the Chalice. Yes. Perhaps we'll find the Chalice." Chuckling, he said, "Poor Joroiran will never forgive me if I return without it."

Nine planets. One spun in an eccentric orbit millions of miles from the small yellow star; three others were giant worlds, unlivable; a fifth, ringed with cosmic debris, was not yet solidified. A sixth was virtually lost in the blazing heat of the sun.

There were three other worlds—according to the book, Mars, Earth, Venus. The small craft fixed its sights on the green world.

Navarre was first from the ship; he sprang down the catwalk and stood in the bright, warm sunlight, feet planted

firmly in sprouting green shoots nudging up from brown soil. Carso and Helna followed a moment later.

"Earth," Navarre said. "We're probably the first from the galactic worlds to set foot here in thousands of years." He squinted off into the thicket of trees that ringed them. Creatures were appearing.

They looked like men—dwarfed, shrunken, twisted little men. They stood about four and a half feet tall, their feet bare, their middles swathed in hides. Yet in their faces could be seen the unmistakable light of intelligence.

"Behold our cousins," Navarre murmured. "While we in the stars scrupulously kept our genes intact, they have become *this*."

The little men filed toward them unafraid, and grouped themselves around the trio and their ship. "Where be you from, strangers?" asked a flaxen-haired dwarf, evidently the leader.

"We are from the stars," Carso said. "From the world of Jorus, he and I, and the girl from Kariad. But this is our homeland. Our remote ancestors were born here on Earth."

"Earth? You mistake, strangers. This world be Velidoon, and we be its people. You look naught like us, unless ye be in enchantment."

"No enchantment," Navarre said. "Our fathers lived on—Velidoon—when it was called Earth, many thousands of years past."

How can I tell them that we once ruled the universe? Navarre wondered. *How can it be that these dwarfs are the sons of Earth?*

The flaxen-haired little man grinned and said, "What would you do on Velidoon, then?"

"We came merely to visit. We wished to see the world of our long-gone ancestors."

"Strange to cross the sky merely to see a world. But come; let us take you to the village."

"In a mere hundred thousand years," Helna murmured, as they walked through the forest's dark glades. "From rulers of the universe to scrubby little dwarfs living in thatched huts."

"And they don't even remember their planet's name," Carso added.

"Not surprising," said Navarre. "Don't forget that most of Earth's best men were killed defending the planet, and the rest—our ancestors—were scattered all over the universe. Evidently the conquerors left just the dregs on Earth itself, and this is what they've become."

They turned past a clear brook and emerged into an open dell, in which a group of huts not unlike those on Fendabar could be seen.

The yellow sun shone brightly and warmly; overhead, colourful birds sang, and the forest looked fertile and young.

"This is a pleasant world," Helna said.

"Yes. It has none of the strain and stress of our system. Possibly it's best to live on a forgotten planet."

"Look," Carso said. "Someone important is coming."

A procession advanced toward them, led by the little group who had found them in the forest. A wrinkled grey-beard, more twisted and bent than the rest, strode gravely toward them.

"You be the men from the stars?"

"I am Hallam Navarre, and these are Helna Winstin and Domrik Carso. We trace our ancestry from this world, many thousands of years ago."

"Hmm. Could be. I'm Gluihn, in charge of this tribe." Gluihn stepped back and scrutinized the trio. "It might well be," he said, studying them. "Yes, could indeed. You say your remote fathers lived here?"

"When the planet was called Earth, and ruled all the worlds of the skies."

"I know nothing of that. But you look much like the Sleepers, and perhaps you be of that breed. They have lain here many a year themselves."

"What sleepers?" Navarre asked.

The old man shrugged. "They look to be of your size, though they lie down and are not easy to see behind their cloudy fluid. But they have slept for ages untold, and perhaps

Gluihn's voice trailed off. Navarre exchanged a sharp glance with his companions. "Tell us about these Sleepers," Carso growled threateningly.

Now the old man seemed frightened. "I know nothing more. Boys, playing, stumbled over them not long ago, buried in their place of rest. We think they be alive."

"Can you take us there?"

"I suppose so," Gluihn sighed. He gestured to the flaxen-haired one. "Llean, take these three to look at the Sleepers."

"Here we are," the dwarf said.

A stubby hill jutted up from the green-carpeted plain before them, and Navarre saw that a great rock had been rolled to one side, baring a cave-mouth.

"Will we need lights?"

"No," said Llean. "It is lit inside. Go ahead in—I'll wait here. I care little to see what lies in there a second time."

Helna touched Navarre's arm. "Should we trust him?"

"Not completely. Domrik stay here with this Llean, and watch over him. Should you hear us cry out—come to us, and bring him with you."

Carso grinned. "Right."

Navarre took Helna's hand and hesitantly they stepped within the cave mouth. It was like entering the gateway to some other world.

The cave walls were bright with some form of electroluminescence, glowing lambently without any visible light-source. The path of the light continued straight for some twenty yards, then snaked away at a sharp angle beyond which nothing was visible.

There were small footprints in the soft sand covering the floor of the cave; evidently they had been made by the boys of the tribe who had discovered this place.

Navarre and Helna proceeded to the bend in the corridor, and turned. A metal plaque of some sort was the first object their eyes met.

"Can you read it?" she asked.

"It's in ancient language—no, it isn't at all. It's Galactic—but an archaic form." He blew away the dust and let his eyes skim the inscription. He whistled.

"What does it say?"

"Listen: *Within this crypt lie ten thousand men and women, placed here to sleep in the year 11432, the two thousandth year of Earth's galactic supremacy and the last year of that supremacy. Each of the ten thousand is a volunteer. Each has been chosen from the group of more than ten million volunteers for this project on a basis of physical condition, genetic background, intelligence, and adaptability to a varying environment.*

"Earth's empire has fallen, and within weeks Earth herself will go under. But, regardless of what fate befalls us, the ten

thousand sealed in this crypt will slumber on into the years to come, until such time as it will be possible for them to be awakened.

"To the finder of this crypt : the chambers may be opened simply by pulling the lever at the left of each sleeper. None of the crypts will open before ten thousand years have elapsed. The sleepers will lie here in this tunnel until the time for their release, and then will come spilling out as wine from a chalice, to restore the ways of doomed Earth and bring glory to the sons of tomorrow."

Navarre and Helna remained frozen for an instant or two after he had read the final words. In a hushed whisper he said, "Do you know what this is?"

She nodded. "'As wine from a chalice—'"

"Beneath all the legends, beneath the shroud of myth—there was a Chalice," Navarre said fiercely. "A Chalice holding immortal life—sleepers who would sleep for all eternity if no one woke them. And when they were awakened—eternal life for doomed Earth, death for her enemies!"

"Shall we wake them now?" Helna asked.

"Let's get Carso. Let him be with us."

The half-breed responded to Navarre's call and appeared, dragging the protesting Llean with him.

"Let the dwarf go," Navarre said. "Then read this plaque"

Carso released the squealing Llean, who promptly dashed for freedom. The half-breed read the plaque, then turned gravely to Navarre.

"It seems we've found the Chalice after all!"

"It seems that way." Navarre led the way and they penetrated deeper into the crypt. After about a hundred yards he stopped.

"Look."

A wall had been cut in the side of the cave and a sheet of some massively thick plastic inserted as a window. And behind the window, floating easily in a cloudy solution of some grey-blue liquid, was a sleeping woman. Her eyes were closed, but her breasts rose and fell in a slow, even rhythm. Her hair was long and flowing; otherwise, she was similar to any of the three.

A lever of some gleaming metal projected about half a foot from the wall near her head. Carso reached for it, fingering the smooth metal. "Should we wake her up?"

"Not yet. There are more down this way."

The next chamber was that of a man, strong and powerful, his muscles swelling along his relaxed arms and his heavy thighs. Beyond him, another woman; then another man, stiff and determined-looking even in sleep.

"It goes on for miles," Helna murmured. "Ten thousand of them."

"What an army!" Navarre said. He stared down the long bright corridor as if peering ahead into the years to come. "A legacy from our ancestors: the Chalice holds life indeed. Ten thousand Earthmen ready to spring to life." His eyes brightened. "They could be the nucleus of the Second Galactic Empire."

"A bold idea," Carso said. "But a good one."

"We could begin with Earth itself," Helna said. "Leave a few hundred couples here to repopulate the planet with warriors. We could conquer Kariad, Jorus—and that would be just the beginning!"

"We would have the experience of old to draw upon," said Navarre. "The Empire would be built painfully, slowly, instead of in a riotous mushroom of expansion." He grinned broadly. "Domrik, Joroiran would be proud of us! He sent us to find the Chalice—and we've succeeded."

"He'll be surprised when he finds out what was in the Chalice, though!"

Navarre shut his eyes for a moment, let his imagination dwell on a galaxy once more bright with an Empire of Earth, of cities again thronging with his people after millenia of obscurity.

Never again, he promised, would Earth be forgotten.

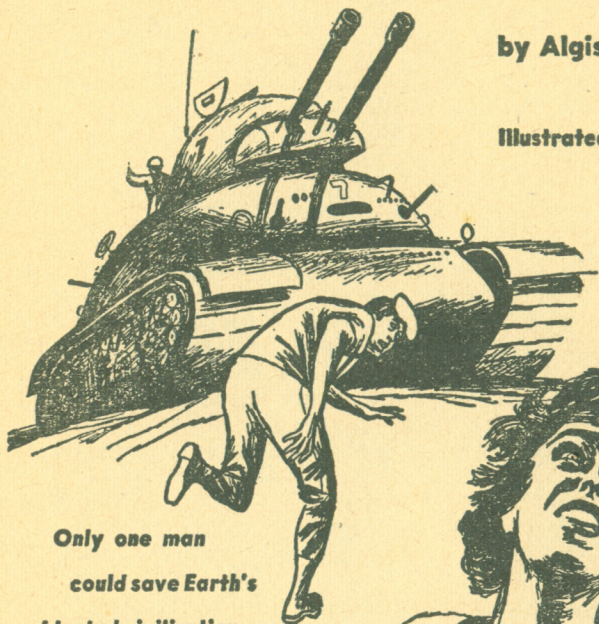
Smiling, he reached for the lever that would free the first of Earth's sleeping legion.

Calvin M. Knox

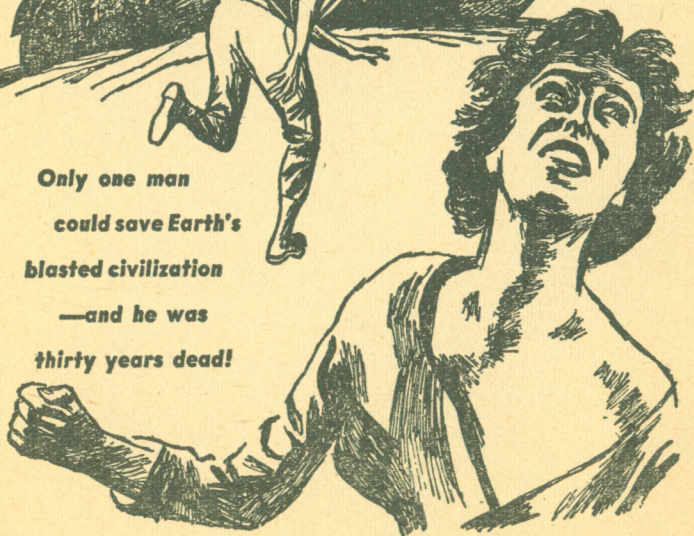
YESTERDAY'S MAN

by Algis Budrys

Illustrated by Engle



**Only one man
could save Earth's
blasted civilization
—and he was
thirty years dead!**



Algis Budrys is a paradoxical young man—as muscularly handsome as the hero of any science fiction story, but so quietly self-effacing that his hair-raisingly powerful writing style comes as a distinct surprise to many readers. His first story for Science Fiction Adventures is a typical Budrys shocker—with the punch of a runaway rocket!

YESTERDAY'S MAN

by Algis Budrys

Chapter I

Night was coming down on the immense plain that stretched from the Rockies to the Appalachians. The long grass whispered in the evening wind.

Clanking and whining, a half-tracked battlewagon surged up from a low swale, snuffing toward the setting sun. Behind it lay the featureless grass horizon, almost completely flat and with no life in it. The empty grass fell away to either side. Ahead, the mountains lay black and blended by distance, a brush-stroke lying in a thick line just under the sun. The car moved all alone across the plain; a squat, dark, scurrying shape at the head of a constantly lengthening trail of pulped grass. Its armour was red with rust and scarred by welds. The paint was a peeling flat dark green, and on the side of the broad double turret, someone had painted the Seventh North American Republic's escutcheon with a clumsy brush.

The paint was bad here, too, though it was much more recent. The Sixth Republic's badge showed through from underneath, and under that, the Fifth's.

Joe Custis, with the assimilated rank of captain in the Seventh Republican Army, sat in the car commander's saddle, head and shoulders thrust up through the open hatch, his heavy hands braced on the coaming. His broad-billed cap was pulled down low over his scuffed polaroid goggles and crushed against his skull by a headphone harness. His thick jaw was burned teak-brown and the tight, deep lines around his mouth and nose were black with dust and sweat that had cemented themselves together. His head turned constantly from side to side, and at intervals he twisted around to look behind him. Whenever he saw a patch of ruins ahead, slicing their eroded walls straight up through the grass that drowned their foundations, he called down to his driver and altered the car's heading to circle around them. Except for the grass and the ruins, he never saw anything.

The AA machine gunner's hatch, back on the turtle deck, crashed open. He looked down. Major Henley, the political officer, pulled himself up, shouting above the dentist's-drill whine of the motors: "Custis! Have you seen anything yet?"

Custis shook his head.

Henley shouted something else, but the motors damped it out. Custis looked blankly at the man, and after a moment Henley kicked himself higher up in the hatch, squirmed over the coaming, and scrambled forward up the turtledeck. He braced a foot on the portside track cover and took hold of the grab iron welded to the side of the turret. He looked up at Custis, swaying and jouncing, and Custis wondered how soon he was going to slip and smash his teeth out on the turret.

"I said: I thought you said this was outlaw territory?"

Custis nodded. "Don't see any more farms, do you?"

"I don't see any outlaws, either."

Custis pointed toward the mountains. "Watching us come at 'em."

Henley's eyes twitched toward the west. "How do you know?"

"It's where I'd be," Custis answered patiently. "Out here on the grass, I can run rings around 'em and they'd know it. Up there, I'm a sittin' duck. So that's where they are."

"That's pretty smart of them. I suppose a little bird told them we were coming?"

"Look, Henley, we been pointin' in this direction for a solid week."

"And they, of course, have a communications net that lets them know and gives them time to fall back on the mountains—I suppose someone runs the news along on foot?"

"That's right."

"Rubbish!"

"You go to your church 'n I'll go to mine." Custis spat over the side, to starboard. "I been out on these plains all my life, workin' hired-out to one outfit or another. If you say you know this country better, I guess that's right on account of you're a Major."

"All right, Custis."

"I guess these people out here're stupid or somethin'—can't figure out how come they're still alive."

"I said all right."

Custis grinned nastily without any particular malice, giving the needle another jab under Henley's city-thin skin. "Hell, man, if I thought Wheelwright was still alive and around here someplace, I'd figure things were being run so smart out here that we ought to of never left Chicago at all."

Henley flushed angrily. "Custis, you furnish the vehicle and I'll handle the thinking. If the government thinks it's good enough a chance to be worth investigating, then that's it—we'll investigate it."

Custis looked at him in disgust. "Wheelwright's dead. They shot him in Detroit thirty years ago. They pumped him full of holes and dragged his body behind a jeep, right down the main street at twenty miles an hour. People threw cobblestones at it all the way. That's all there is left of Wheelwright—a thirty year-old streak of blood down Woodward Avenue."

"That's only what the stories you've heard say."

"Henley, a hell of a lot more people heard it that way than've heard he's still alive. Maybe you want us to look for Julius Caesar around these mountains too, long's we're here?"

"All right, Custis; that'll be enough of your remarks!"

Custis looked down at him steadily, the expression on his face hovering on the thin edge between a grin and something else entirely, and after a moment Henley broke off the conversation.

“How soon before we reach the mountains?”

“Tonight. Couple more hours, you’ll get a chance to see some bandits.”

Henley chewed his lip. “Well, let me know when you come across something,” he said, and gingerly crawled back to the AA hatch. He dropped out of sight inside the car. After a moment, he remembered, reached up, and pulled the hatch shut.

Custis went back to keeping an eye out.

The battlewagon was a long way from Chicago. The only drinking water aboard was a muddy mess scooped out of one of the shrinking creeks. The food was canned army rations—some of it, under the re-labelling, might be from before the Plague—and the inside of the car stank with clothes that hadn’t been off their backs in three weeks. The summer sun pounded down on them all through the long day, and the complex power train that began with a pile and a steam turbine, and ended in the individual electric motors turning the drive bogeys, threw off more waste heat than most men could stand.

Henley was just barely getting along. For Custis and his crew, any other way of living was a possibility too remote to consider.

But it had been a long run. They’d stretched themselves to make it, and they still had the worst part of the job to do.

Custis had no faith in it. Wheelwright’s name was used to frighten children—real children or politicians, it was all one—all over the Republic. It had been the same during the five Republics before it, for that matter. Somebody was always waving the blue and silver flag, or threatening to. A handful of fake Wheelwrights had been turned up, here and there, in these past thirty years, trying to trade on a dead man’s legend. Some of them had been such pitifully obvious fakes that they’d been laughed down before they got fairly started. Some hadn’t—the Fourth Republic got itself going while the Third was busy fighting down the mob formed around a man who’d turned out to be one of Wheelwright’s old garrison commanders. Through the years the whole thing had turned into a kind of grim running joke.

But the fact was that the politicians back in Chicago couldn’t afford to have the ghost walking their frontiers. The fact was that Wheelwright had been the man who took over

after the Plague scoured the world clean of ninety per cent of its people. The fact you had to live with was that Wheelwright had put together the First North American Republic—meaning the old American Midwest and a bit of old Canada—and made it stand up for ten years before he got his. And nobody else had ever been able to do as well. Between the times his name frightened them, people still thought of ten whole years with no fighting in the cities. It made them growl with anger whenever the politicians did something they disliked. It made them restless, and it left no peace in the politicians' minds. You could say, and say it with a good part of justice, that Wheelwright was behind every mob that rolled down on Government House and dragged the men inside up to the rusty lamp posts.

Thirty years since Wheelwright'd died. Nobody was sure of exactly who'd been behind the shooting, the politicians or the people. But it was a sure thing it'd been the people who mutilated his body. And six months later the mobs'd killed the men they said killed Wheelwright. So there you were—try and make sense out of it. You couldn't. The man's name was magic, and that was that.

Custis, up in his turret, shook his head. If he didn't find this ghost for Henley, it was a cinch he'd never get paid—contract or no contract. But at least he'd had his car re-shopped for this job. Sourly, Custis weighed cutting the political officer's throat right here and reporting him lost to bandit action. Or cutting his throat and not reporting back at all.

But that meant turning bandit himself—at least until the next Republic wanted to hire a battlewagon. That was something Custis wouldn't have minded, if oil and ammunition, replacement barrels for his guns, spare parts, pile fuels, and rations for his crew grew on this plain as thick as the grass.

"Bear 340, Lew," he said to his driver through the command microphone, and the car jinked slightly on its tracks, headed on a more direct course for the nearest of the dark foothills.

Chapter II

The ground in the foothills was rocky, covered by loose gravel, and treacherous. The car heaved itself up over a sharp ridge with tortuous slowness and pancaked down the other side with a hard smash. The steering levers whipped

back and forth just short of the driver's kneecaps, and the motors raced.

"No more seeing, Joe," the driver told Custis. "Lights?"

"No. Bed 'er down, Lew."

The driver locked his treads and cut the switches. The damper rods slammed home in the power pile and the motor ground down to a stop. The car lay dead.

Custis slid down out of the turret. "All right, let's button up. We sleep inside tonight." The driver dogged his slit shutters and Hutchinson, the machine gunner, began stuffing rags into the worn gasproof seal on his hatch. Robb, the turret gunner, dogged down the command hatch. "Load napalm," Custis told him, and Robb pulled the racks of fragmentation shells he'd carried in the guns all day. He fitted the new loads, locked the breeches, and pulled the charging handles. "Napalm loaded," he checked back in his colourless voice.

"Acoustics out," Custis said, and Hutchinson activated the car's listening gear.

Henley, standing where the twin 75's could pound his head to a pulp with their recoiling breeches, asked: "What're you going to do now, Custis?"

"Eat." He broke out five cans of rations, handed three to the crew and one to Henley. "Here." He squatted down on the deck and peeled back the lid on the can. Bending it between his fingers, he scooped food into his mouth.

"Do you mean to say we're going to simply wait for the outlaws to surround us and kill us? Is that your purpose in stopping here?"

Custis looked up, his eye sockets thick with black shadow from the overhead light. His face was tanned to the cheekbones, and dead white from there to the nape of his recently shaved skull. The goggles had left a wide outline of rubber particles around his eyes. "Major, we been comin' at these hills in a straight line over open country. It figures, if you want to see bandits, they'll be here in the mornin'. They ain't gonna crack into us until they find out how come we're such damned fools. That's the fastest way I could think of to get this show goin'. We ain't that rich in time we can afford to waste any. O.K.?"

"You might have consulted me."

"What for? How many hours combat you got? Whose car is this, anyway?"

"Captain, this is *not* a combat mission. This is a diplomatic negotiation. You're not qualified—"

"You're gonna have dealin's with bandits. That's combat."

"Custis—"

"Lew."

The driver cocked his 45. Custis looked quietly at Henley, and the driver pointed his 45 quietly at Henley's belt buckle. Then Custis unscrewed the top of his canteen and handed it to the officer, still quietly. "One mouthful to a man, Henley," he reminded him. Henley took his drink, handed the canteen back, and wiped his mouth.

"There's somebody," Custis said at daybreak. He stepped away from the periscope eyepiece and let Henley take his look at the soldiery squatted on the rocks outside.

There were men all around the battlegwagon, in plain sight, looking at it stolidly. They were in all kinds of uniforms, standardized only by black and yellow shoulder badges. Some of the uniforms dated two or three Republics back, all of them were ragged, and some were unfamiliar. West Coast, maybe. Or maybe even East. Lord knew what they might not be doing out in those areas.

The men on the rocks were making no moves. They waited motionless under the battlegwagon's guns. Some of them were smoking patiently. The only arms they seemed to have were rifles—Garand M-1's, mostly, that had to be practically smoothbores by now—and it had taken Custis a while to find out why these men, who looked like they'd know what they were doing, were trusting in muskets against a battle wagon. But there were five two-man teams spread in a loose circle around the car. Each team had a Springfield '03 fitted with a grenade launcher. The men aiming them had them elevated just right to hit the car's turtleneck with their first shots.

"Black and yellow," Henley said angrily.

Custis shrugged. "No blue and silver, that's true," he answered, giving Henley the needle again. "But that was thirty years ago. It might still be Wheelwright."

He went back to the periscope eyepiece for another look at the grenadiers. Each of them had an open, lead-lined box beside him with more grenades in it.

Custis grunted. Napalm splashed pretty well, but it would take one full traverse of the turret to knock out all five teams.

The turret took fifteen seconds to revolve 360 degrees. A man could pull a trigger and have a grenade lofting in, say, one second's reaction time. The grenade's muzzle velocity would be low, and it would be arcing sharply upward before it started falling—but it would be in the air, and the battlewagon couldn't possibly get moving . . .

Custis unbuckled his web belt and took off his 45. He walked under the command hatch and undogged it.

"What're you doing?" Henley demanded.

"Starting." He threw the hatch back and pulled himself up, getting a foothold on the saddle and climbing out on top of the turret. He flipped the hatch shut behind him and stood up.

"My name's Custis," he said carefully as the men raised their rifles. "Hired out to the Seventh Republic. I've got a man here who wants to talk to your boss."

There was no immediate answer. He stood and waited. He heard the hatch scrape beside him, and planted a boot on it before Henley could lift it.

"What about, Custis?" a voice asked from off to one side, out of range of his eyes. The voice was old and husky, kept in tight check. Custis wondered if it might not tremble if the man let it.

He weighed his answer. Things were at a poor stalemate. There was no sense in playing around. These men didn't give a damn whether the battlewagon had its guns loaded or not. Maybe he had an answer to that kind of confidence and maybe he was going to get himself killed right now.

"About Wheelwright," he said.

The name dropped into these men like a stone. He saw their faces go tight, and he saw heads jerk involuntarily. Well, the British had stood guard over Napoleon's grave for nineteen years.

"Turn this way, Custis," the same worn voice said.

Custis risked taking his eyes off the grenadiers. He turned toward the voice.

Standing a bit apart from his troops, there was a thin, weather-burned man with sharp eyes hooded under thick white eyebrows. He needed a shave badly. His salt-white hair was shaggy. There were deep creases in his face, pouches under his eyes, and a dry wattle of skin under his jaw.

"I'm the commander here," he said in his halting voice. "Bring out your man."

Custis stepped off the hatch and let Henley come out. The political officer gave him a savage look as he squirmed up and got to his feet. Custis ignored it. "Over there—the white-haired one," he said without moving his lips. "He's the local boss." He stepped a little to one side and gave Henley room to stand on the sloping turret top, but he kept watching the old commander, who was wearing a faded pair of black coveralls with that black and yellow shoulder badge.

Henley squinted up toward the thin figure. The back of his neck was damp, even in the chill morning breeze, and he was nervous about his footing.

"I'm Major Thomas Henley," he finally said. "Direct representative of the Seventh North American Republic." Then he stopped, obviously unable to think of what to say next. Custis realised, with a flat grin, that his coming out cold with Wheelwright's name hadn't left the major much room to work in.

"You're out of your country's jurisdiction, Major," the commander said.

"That's a matter of opinion."

"That's a matter of fact," the commander said flatly. "You and Custis can come down. I'll talk to you. Leave the rest of your men here."

Henley's head turned quickly. "Should we go with him?" he muttered to Custis.

"Lord, Major, don't ask *me* ! But if you're plannin' to get anywhere, you better talk to *somebody*. Or do you expect Wheelwright to plop down in your lap?"

Henley looked back at the thin figure on the hillside. "Maybe he already has."

Custis looked at him steadily. "They shot Wheelwright in Detroit thirty years ago. They threw what was left of his body on a garbage heap and twenty years ago they built a tomb over where they threw it."

"Maybe, Captain. Maybe. Were you there?"

"Were you?"

Custis felt annoyed at himself for getting so exercised about it. He glared at the major. Then his common sense came trickling back, and he turned away to give Lew his orders about keeping the car sealed and the guns ready until he and Henley got back.

Thirty years dead, Wheelwright was. Judged for treason, condemned, killed—and men still quarrelled at the mention of his name. Custis shook his head and took another look at the old, dried-out man on the hill, wearing those patched, threadbare coveralls.

Chapter III

Most of the commander's men stayed behind, dispersed among the rocks around the silent battlewagon. Twenty of them formed up in a loose party around the commander and Henley, and Custis walked along a few yards behind the two men as they started off into the mountains.

It was turning into a bright but cool day, and looking up into the west Custis could see mountaintops pluming as high altitude gales swept their snow caps out in banners. The track they were walking on wound among boulders higher than Custis's head, and he felt vaguely uncomfortable. He was used to the sweeping plains where his father had raised him, where, except for the spindly trees along the sparse creeks, nothing stood taller than a man.

But it wasn't a man's height that mattered, he thought as he worked his way up a sharp slope. Some men stood taller than the rest, and it wasn't a thing of inches.

Why? What was a man born with, that made people turn themselves over to him? A man like that could start with nothing—no money, no rank, no important friends—and in a few years, there he was, blazing up like a comet, with people ready to die for him and the whole world at his feet. You couldn't stop that kind of man. No matter what you did to him he landed upright, and then he was on his way back up, and coming straight at you. The best you could do was kill him, and even then he haunted you forever. Your name was one fading line in a history book somewhere, and his burned on until it was something more than history—it was a legend, and two thousand years after he had come and gone, he was still remembered. Genghis Khan—Tamerlane—Friedrich Barbarossa—Alexander, whom every Indian peasant still remembered as the terrible Iskander—

Custis remembered his father rolling the names off his tongue like a man counting his gods.

There wasn't any explaining it. There was only living with it. You lived in Charlemagne's time, in Cromwell's time—in

Wheelwright's time. And here you were, your feet slipping on loose rock, climbing up a mountain on a chilly morning with armed men looking at you coldly.

Custis growled and shook himself, annoyed at getting into this kind of mood. He walked steadily behind Henley and the commander, ignoring the commander's men.

The Commander's base was a group of low, one-room huts strung out along the foot of a cliff, with a cook-fire pit in front of each one. Their outlines were broken by rocks and boulders piled around them. There were prepared slit trenches spotted around the area, two machine gun pits covering the approach, and a few mortar batteries situated on reverse slopes. From the size of the place and the depth of organization, Custis judged the commander had about four hundred people in his outfit.

Custis wondered how he kept them all supplied and fed, and the answer he got from looking around was that he couldn't do it very well. The huts were dark and dingy, with what looked like dirt floors. A few wan-looking women were carrying water up from a tiny spring, balancing pails made out of cut-down oil cans. They were raggedly dressed, and the spindly-legged children that trotted beside them were hollow-eyed. Here and there, among the rocks, there were a few pitiful patches of scraggly gardens. Up at one end of the valley, a small herd of gaunt cows was grazing on indifferent grass.

Custis nodded to himself. It confirmed something he'd been suspecting for a couple of years ; the bandits were still crossing the plains to raid into Republic territory, but they'd never dared set up towns on the untenable prairie. With women and children, they'd needed a permanent settlement somewhere. So now they were pulled back into the mountains, trying to make a go of it, but with their weapons wearing out. They were dying on the vine, something left behind, and by the time the cities began spreading out their holdings again, they'd find little here to stop them.

Well, when you came down to it, there wasn't much that could be done about it.

"In here," the commander said, gesturing into a hut. Henley and Custis stepped inside, followed by two men with rifles and then the commander. The hut was almost bare except for a cot and a table with one chair, all made out of

odd pieces of scrap lumber and weapons crates. The commander sat down facing them with his veined and brown-mottled hands resting on the stained wood.

Custis spread his feet and stood relaxed. Henley's hands were playing with the seams along his pant legs.

"What about Wheelwright, Major?" the commander asked.

"We've heard he's still alive."

The commander snorted. "Fairy tales!"

"Possibly. But if he's still alive, these mountains are the logical place for him to be." Henley looked at the commander meaningfully.

The commander's narrow lips twitched. "My name isn't Wheelwright, Major. I don't use his colours. And my men don't call themselves The Army of The Union."

"Things change," Henley answered. "I didn't say you were Wheelwright. But if Wheelwright got away from Detroit, he'd be a fool to use his own name. If he's in these mountains, he might not care to advertise the fact."

The commander grimaced. "This isn't getting us anywhere. What do you want from me?"

"Information, then, if you have it. We'll pay for it, in cash or supplies, whatever you say, within reason."

"In weapons?"

Henley paused for a moment. Then he nodded. "If that's what you want."

"And to blazes with what we do to your people in the outlying areas, once we're rearmed?"

"It's important that we have this information."

The commander smiled coldly. "There's no pretence of governing for anyone's benefit but your own, is there?"

"I'm loyal to the Seventh Republic. I follow my orders."

"No doubt. All right, what do you want to know?"

"Do you know of any groups in this area that Wheelwright might be leading?"

The commander shook his head. "No. There aren't any other groups. I've consolidated them all. You can have that news gratis."

"I see." Henley smiled for the first time Custis had ever seen. It was an odd, spinsterish puckering of his lips. The corners of his eyes wrinkled upward, and gave him the look of a sly cat. "You could have made me pay to find that out."

"I'd rather not soil myself in dealings with your kind. A few rusty rifles pulled out of the old armouries aren't worth that much to me."

Henley's mouth twitched. He looked at the austere pride on the commander's face, gathered like a stronger and more youthful mask on the grey-stubbled cheeks, and then he said: "Well, if I ever do find him, I'm empowered to offer him the Presidency of the Eighth Republic." His eyes glittered and fastened like talons on the old commander's expression.

Custis grunted to himself. So that explained what Henley was really doing here.

And the old man was looking down at the table top, his old hands suddenly clenched. After a long time, he looked up slowly.

"So you're not really working for the Seventh Republic. You've been sent here to find a useful figurehead for a new combination of power."

Henley smiled again—easily, blandly—and looked like a man who has shot his animal and only has to wait for it to die. "I wouldn't put it that way. Though, naturally, we wouldn't stand for any one-man dictatorships."

"Naturally." One corner of the commander's lip lifted, and suddenly Henley wasn't so sure. Custis saw him tense, as though a dying lion had suddenly lashed out a paw. The commander's eyes narrowed. "I'm through talking to you for the moment," he said crisply, and Custis wondered just how much of his weakness had been carefully laid on. "You'll wait outside, I want to talk to Custis." He motioned to the two waiting riflemen. "Take him out—put him in another hut and keep your eyes on him."

And Custis was left alone in the hut with the old commander.

Chapter IV

The commander looked up at him. "That's your own car out there?" he asked quietly.

Custis nodded.

"So you're just under contract to the Seventh Republic—you've got no particular loyalty to the government?"

Custis shrugged. "Right now, there's no telling who I'm hired out to." He was willing to wait the commander out—see what he was driving at.

"You did a good job of handling things, this morning. What are you—about twenty-nine, thirty?"

"Twenty-six."

"So you were born four years after Wheelwright was killed. What do you know about him? What have you heard?"

"Usual stuff. After the Plague, everything was a mess. Nine out of ten people dead, not enough people alive to keep things goin', no transport, no communications. Everybody cut off from everybody else. Everybody havin' to scratch for himself. In the cities, with no food comin' in and the farmers shootin' everybody that came out, it meant people were gettin' killed over a can of peaches. That's when Wheelwright put an army together and tried to get the country back in one piece."

The commander nodded to himself—an old man's nod, passing judgment on the far past. "You left out a lot of people between the Plague and Wheelwright. And you'll never imagine how bad it was. But that'll do. Do you know why he did it?"

"Why's anybody set up a government? He wanted to be boss, I guess. Then somebody decided he was gettin' too big, and cut him down. Then the people cut the somebody down. But I figure Wheelwright's dead for sure."

"Do you?" The commander's eyes were steady on Custis. He was thinly smiling.

Custis tightened his jaw, "Yeah."

"Do I look like Wheelwright?" the commander asked softly.

"No."

"But hand-drawn portraits thirty years old don't really prove anything, do they?"

"Well—no." Custis felt himself getting edgy. "But you're not Wheelwright," he growled belligerently. "I'm sure Wheelwright's dead."

The old commander sighed. "Of course. Tell me about Chicago," he said, going off in a new direction. "Has it changed much? Have they cleaned it up? Or are they simply abandoning the buildings that're ready to fall down?"

"Sometimes. They try and fix 'em up sometimes."

"Only sometimes." The commander shook his head regretfully. "I had hoped that by this time, no matter what kind of men were in charge . . . But, never mind."

"When's the last time you were there?" Custis asked.

"I've never been there," the commander said, looking rigidly at Custis. "Tell me about this car of yours." Then his eyes dropped again, as though there was so little strength left in him that he dared not use it for long. "I—used to be rather fond of mechanized equipment, once." Now he was an old man again, dreaming back into the past, only half-seeing Custis. "We took a whole city, once, with almost no infantry support at all. That's a hard thing to do, even with tanks, and all I had was armoured cars. Just twenty of them, and the heaviest weapons they mounted were automatic light cannon in demi-turrets. No tracks—I remember they shot our tyres flat almost at once, and we went bumping through the streets. Just armoured scout cars, really, but we used them like tanks, and we took the city." He looked down at his hands. "It wasn't a very big place, but still, I don't believe that had ever been done before."

"Never did any street fighting," Custis said. "Don't know a thing about it."

"What do you know, then?"

"Open country work. Only thing a car's good for."

"One car, yes."

"Hell, mister, there ain't five good cars left runnin' in the Republic, and they ain't got any range. Only reason I'm still goin' is mine don't need no gasoline. I run across it in an old American government depot outside Kansas City. Provin' grounds, it was. My dad, he'd taught me about running cars, and I had this fellow with me, Lew Gaines, and we got it going."

"How long ago was that?"

"Seven years."

"And nobody ever tried to take it away from you?"

"Mister, there's three fifty-calibre machine guns and two 75's on that car."

The commander looked at him from head to foot. "I see." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "And now you've practically handed it to me."

"Not by a long shot, I ain't. My crew's still inside, and it's kind of an open question just how much those baby bombs of yours'll do before your boys get turned into a barbecue."

The commander cocked an eyebrow at him. "Not as open as all that."

"Try me."

"You're here. Your car's down the mountain."

"My crew's just as good without me, mister."

The commander let it ride, switching his tack a little. "You'll admit you've come to a peculiar place for a man who only knows open country."

Custis shrugged. "Car needed shopwork. Chicago's the only place with the equipment. If I use their shops, I do their work. That's the straight up and down of it. And it's one more reason why gettin' that car'd be more work than it was worth to you. Anything you busted on it'd stay busted for good. And you know it."

The commander smiled crookedly. "And you know I know it. It takes a good deal to budge you, doesn't it, Custis?"

"Depends on the spot I'm in. My dad taught me to pick my spots carefully."

The commander nodded. "I'd say so. All right, Custis, I'll want to talk to you again, later. One of my men'll stay close to you. Other than that, you're free to look around as much as you want to. I don't imagine you'll ever be leading any expeditions up here—not if Henley's plans work out. Or even if they don't."

He turned away and reached under the cot for a bottle, and Custis hadn't found out what the old commander was driving at.

Chapter V

Outside, they were cooking their noon meal. The camp women were huddled around the firepits, bent shapeless as they stirred their pots with charred long wooden-spoons, and the smell of food lay over the area near the huts in an invisible cloud that dilated Custis's nostrils and made his empty stomach tighten up. Whatever these people ate, it was hot and smelled different from the sludgy meat in the car's ration cans.

Then he shrugged and closed his mind to it. Walking upwind, he went over to a low rock and sat down on it. One of the commander's riflemen went with him and leaned against a boulder fifteen feet away, cradling his rifle in the crook of one thin arm and looking steadily at Custis through coldly sleepy eyes.

A bunch of kids clustered around the fires, filling oil cans that had crude handles made out of insulated wire. When they had loaded up they moved out of the little valley with a few riflemen for escort, carrying the food out to the men who were in position around the battlewagon. Custis watched them for a while, and then ignored them as well as he could.

So Henley was working for a group that wanted to set up the next government. It wasn't particularly surprising that the Seventh Republic was financing its own death. Every government was at least half made up of men from the one before. They played musical chairs with the titles—one government's tax collector was the next government's chief of police—and whoever wasn't happy with the graft was bound to be figuring some way to improve it next time the positions moved around.

It looked a hell of a lot like, however the pie was going to be cut, Custis wasn't going to get paid. The Seventh wouldn't pay him if he didn't come back with Wheelwright ; and if he did find him, the Eighth wouldn't hold to the last government's contract.

Custis twitched his mouth. Anyhow, the car was running as well as you could expect. If he got out of here, Kansas City might have a job for him. Or he might even head east, if the highways over the mountains there were still any good at all. That could be a pretty touchy business all around, with unfamiliar terrain and God knew what going on behind the Appalachians. Going there wouldn't be the smart thing to do. But at the moment, Custis was feeling a little sick of this whole part of the world.

He wondered how the boys in the car were making out. He hadn't heard any firing from over there, and he didn't expect to. But it was a lousy business, sitting cooped up in there, not doing anything, and looking out at the men on the rocks as time went by.

When you came right down to it, this was a lousy kind of life, waiting for the day you ran into a trap under the sod and the last thing you ever did was trying to climb out through the turret while the people who'd dug the hole waited outside with their knives. Or wondering, every time you went into one of the abandoned old towns, if somebody there hadn't found some gasoline in a sealed drum and was waiting to set you on fire.

But what the hell else could a man do? Live in the damned cities, breaking his back in somebody's jackleg factory, living in some hole somewhere that had twelve flights of stairs before you got up to it? Freezing in the winter and maybe getting your throat cut for your clothes in a back alley?

Custis shivered suddenly. To hell with this. He was thinking in circles. When a man did that, he licked himself before he got started.

Custis slid off his rock, stretched out on the ground, and went to sleep.

He'd been asleep for about a half hour when somebody touched his shoulder. He turned over in one easy motion and caught the hand around the wrist. With his next move he was on his feet, and the girl's arm was twisted back between her shoulder blades. "What's up, honey?" he said quietly, putting just enough strain on her shoulder to turn her head toward him.

The girl was about eighteen or twenty, with a pale, bony face and black hair hacked off around her shoulders. She was thin, and the top of her head came up to his collar bone. She was wearing a man's army shirt that bagged around her, and a skirt made by cutting off a pair of pants at the knees, opening the seams, and using the extra material to make gussets. The whole business was pretty crudely sewed, and came down to just above her dirty calves.

"I was bringing you something to eat, soldier," she said calmly.

"O.K." He let go of her wrist, and she turned all the way around, putting the pail of stew down on the ground in front of him. There was a wooden spoon sticking up out of it, and Custis sat down, folded his legs under him and started to eat.

The girl sat down next to him. "Go easy," she said. "Half of that's mine."

Custis grunted. "The commander send you over here with this?" he asked, passing the spoon.

She shook her head. "He's busy. He always gets busy about this time of day, working on that bottle of his." She was eating as hungrily as Custis had, not looking up, and talking between mouthfuls.

Custis looked over toward the guard. The man was squatted down, with an empty dinner bucket beside him, scowling at Custis and the girl.

"That your man?" Custis asked her.

She looked up briefly. "You could say that. There's maybe six or seven of us that don't belong in anybody's hut. There's maybe fifty men without any families."

Custis nodded. He looked over toward the guard again, shrugged, and took the girl's spoon. "The commander here—what's his name?"

"Eichler, Eisner—some thing like that. Anyhow, that's what he says. I was with the last bunch he took over up here, a couple of years ago. Never did get it straight—who cares? Names come easy. He's the only commander we got."

So that didn't tell him anything. "What's your name?"

"Jody. You from Chicago, soldier?"

"Right now, yeah. Name's Joe Custis. You ever seen Chicago?"

She shook her head. "I was born up here. Never seen anything else. You going back to Chicago, Joe? Go ahead—finish that—I'm full."

Custis looked around at the cliffs and huts. "I figure I'll be getting out of here, anyway. Maybe Chicago's where I'll head for."

"Don't you know?"

"Don't much care. I live where my car is."

"Don't you like cities? I hear they've got all kinds of stores and things, and warehouses full of clothes and food."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Some of the fellows here came out from Chicago, and Denver, and places like that. They tell me. But Chicago sounds like it's the best of all."

Custis grunted. "Ain't never been to Denver." He finished the stew. "Food's pretty good right here. You cook it?"

She nodded. "You got a big car? Room for extra people to take a ride in?" She leaned back until her shoulder was touching his.

Custis looked down at the stew pot. "You're a pretty good cook."

"I like it. I'm strong, too. I'm not afraid of work. And I shoot a rifle pretty good, when I have to."

Custis frowned. "You want me to take you to Chicago?"

The girl was quiet for a minute. "That's up to you." She was still leaning on his shoulder, looking straight out ahead of her.

"I'll think about it."

The guard had been getting uglier and uglier in the face. Now he stood up. "All right, Jody, he's fed. Now get away from him."

Custis got slowly to his feet, using two fingers of his right hand to quietly push the girl's shoulder down and keep her where she was. He looked over toward the guard with a casual glance, and jumped him.

He hit the man's rifle barrel with his left forearm, knocking it out of the way and getting a grip across the guard's chest. He got his other hand on the man's neck, brought his thigh up, and pulled his back down across it. The rifle fell loose. Custis dropped him, scooped up the rifle, and pulled out the clip. He worked the bolt and caught the extracted chamber cartridge in mid-air. Then he handed the whole business back to the man.

"You tend to your job and I'll give you no trouble, son," he told him, and went back to where the girl was sitting. The guard was cursing, but by the time he had reloaded his rifle, he'd come to realise just how much Custis had done to him. If he didn't want the girl spreading this story all over the camp, his best move was to keep quiet from now on. He did it.

The girl looked sideward at Custis as he sat down again. "You always move that fast?"

"When it's gonna save me trouble, I do."

"You're a funny bird, you know? How come you've got that black smear around your eyes?"

"Rubber, off the goggles. Some of it's under the skin. Can't wash it off."

"You must have been wearing those goggles a long time."

"Ever since I was big enough to go along with my dad. He had a car of his own—full-track job. That was the trouble with it—too damned slow on roads. We got caught that way in a town, once. This place was built around the only bridge standin' over this river, and we had to go through it. Dad goosed her up as fast's she'd go, but that wasn't much. There was a couple of birds with a bazooka—anti-tank rocket launcher, is what that is—down at the far end of town, behind some piled-up concrete.

"We opened up on them, but this car only had a 35-millimeter cannon. High velocity stuff, and that wears hell out of the rifling. It was pretty shot. We kept missin', and they kept tryin' to fire this bazooka. They must have had ten of the rockets that fit it, and one after another they was duds. One of 'em fired, all right, but when it hit us, it didn't go off. Punched through the armour, and got inside the car. The primer went off, but the charge was no good. The primer goin' off smoked up the inside of the car so bad we couldn't see. Dad was drivin', and I heard him tryin' to stay on the road. Then we hit somethin' with one track—maybe they got us with another rocket—so we went around in a circle and flipped over sideways.

"Well, I crawled out and the car was between me and the birds with the bazooka. Then my dad crawled out. Both of us were busted up some, but our legs were okay.

"Meanwhile, these two birds were bangin' away with rifles. Dad and I, all we had was 45's. I figured the only thing to do was try and run for it, and I said so. Dad said the way to do it was to split up, or they'd get us both. And I couldn't see it, because if we got separated, there was no tellin' when we'd get back together again. Well, dad didn't argue. He just got this funny look on his face and gave me a shove away from him, and he started runnin'."

The girl looked at Custis. "Did he make it?"

"No."

"He must have been a funny kind of man."

Custis shrugged. He sat with the girl through the afternoon, making talk, until finally another rifleman came over to them from the line of huts.

He looked down at Custis and the girl, his eyes flicking back and forth once and letting it go at that. "This Henley fellow you brought wants to see you, soldier."

"What's his trouble?"

"I figure that's his business. He give me his wrist watch to come get you. That don't mean I work for either of you guys. You comin'?"

The man was a big, hairy type—bigger than Custis. This kind of life grew them either that way or undersized, skinny—and deadly treacherous.

But when Custis came smoothly to his feet, annoyance showing on his face, the rifleman took a step back. Custis

looked at him curiously for a moment. The damnedest people were always doing that with him, and he had a hard time understanding it. The man was glowering at him now, and Custis knew there wouldn't be any getting anything out of him. If the man got mad enough they might have a fight, but not now. Custis frowned. Some kinds of people just lost their drive and got surly around him, and that was that. No accounting for it.

"I'll see you later," he said to the girl, and walked off.

Henley was pacing back and forth in his hut when Custis stopped in the doorway. He twitched his lips nervously. "It's time you got here. I watched you out there, lollygagging with that girl."

"Make your point, Henley. What'd you want to see me about?"

"What did I want to see you about!" Henley burst out. "Why didn't you come here as soon as the commander released you? We have to make plans—we have to think this through. We have to decide what to do if our situation grows any worse. Hasn't it occurred to you that this man might be planning to do almost anything to us?"

Custis shrugged. "I didn't see any sense in getting all worked up about it. When he makes up his mind, we'll find out. No use making any plans of our own until we know what his are."

Henley stared angrily at him. "Don't you care? Don't you care if you get killed?"

"Sure I do. But the time to decide about that was back down on the plains."

"Yes, and you decided quite easily, didn't you?" Henley answered waspishly. "It wasn't very hard for you to risk all our lives." His eyes narrowed. "Unless— You know something, Custis. No man in his right mind would have acted the way you have unless you knew you weren't in any danger."

"That's a lie."

"Is it? You drove up here like a man coming home. What do I know about you, after all? A freebooting car commander, off the same plains where the outlaws run. Yes, I know you've worked for Chicago before, but what does that mean?" Henley seemed to be almost hysterical. Custis could smell the fear soaking the officer's clothes. "You've

sold us out, Custis ! I can't understand how Chicago could ever have trusted you !"

"They must have, or they wouldn't have hired me for this job."

Henley gnawed his lip. "I don't know." He stopped and muttered down at the ground. "I have enemies there. People who want my place for themselves. They might have planned all this to get rid of me."

"You're a damned fool, Henley."

Custis was thinking that, a few years ago, he might have felt sorry for Henley. But since then he'd seen a lot of men go to pieces when they thought they might get killed. Most men seemed to lose their heads in a spot like that—and more of them died than would have if they'd kept thinking. It seemed to be something built into them. Custis had never felt it, and he wondered if there might not be something wrong with him. But, anyhow, Custis had learned it wasn't anything to feel one way or another about. It was something people did, and you allowed for it.

Henley suddenly said : "Custis—if we get out of here, don't take me back to Chicago."

"What ?"

"No—listen—they'll kill us if we go back. Let's go somewhere else. Or let's stay on the plains. We can live off the country. We can raid farms. Put me in your crew. I don't care—I'll learn to shoot a machine gun, or whatever you want me to do. But we can't go back to Chicago."

"I wouldn't have you in my crew if I had to drive and fire the guns by myself."

"Is that your final answer ?" Henley's lips quivered.

"Damned right."

"You think you're so strong !" Henley cried. "You think you know all the answers."

"Good Lord, man," Custis growled, "get a hold on yourself."

And Henley did it. His face turned white, and he locked his muscles until his body shook. But he stopped his pacing, and flicked one hand up to brush his perspired hair back into place.

"All right, Custis," he said in a voice that was hollow with tension but at least wasn't a whine. "I will. If you won't help me, I'll beat you yet." His lips curled. "I know

your kind. You think strength is everything. You think all you have to do is get an angry look on your face and everyone'll be afraid of you. You think you're invulnerable. You think you can get out of any situation with brute force. You think women worship you—don't tell me, I've *seen* you!—and you spit on people like myself.

"But I'll get out of this. You watch me—I'll get out of this and see you executed."

"You poor son-of-a-bitch," Custis said slowly, shaking his head. "Look—I want to get out of here just as much as you do. I think maybe I can. If I do, I'll take you along because I got you into this. But if you can't stand the gaff, you had no business out here in the first place."

"Never mind the speeches, Custis. From now on, I'll look after myself. Don't expect any help from me."

"Hey, you two," the rifleman said from the doorway, "commander wants you."

Chapter VI

The sun was going down behind the mountains. It was still broad daylight farther up on the peaks, but the valley was filling with shadows from the west. Custis followed Henley along the line of huts, feeling a little edgy in the thick gloom down here at the base of the cliff, and wondering how all this was going to work out.

He watched Henley. The officer was walking in short, choppy strides, and Custis could see him working his self-control up to high pitch. His face lost its desperate set, and the look of confidence came back to him. It was only if you knew what to look for that you could still see the panic in him, driving him like fuel. They reached the commander's hut.

"Come in," the commander said from his table, and Custis couldn't decide whether he was drunk on his home brew or not. The inside of the hut was so dark that all he could see of the old man was a shadow without a face. It might have been almost anyone sitting there.

Custis felt his belly tightening up. Henley stopped in front of the table, and Custis took a stand beside him.

"I'm glad to see you're still here, Custis," the old man said. "I was afraid you might be killed trying to break."

"I'm not crazy."

"I didn't think you were."

Henley broke in. "Have you decided what you're going to do?"

The commander sighed. "Just why would you want Wheelwright back, Major?"

"Then, he's available?"

"Just answer the question, please, Major, if you don't mind. We'll do this my way, or not at all."

Henley licked his lips. Custis could hear the sound plainly. "Well," the political officer finally said in a persuasive voice, "there's been no stability since he was deposed. Governments come and go overnight. A constitution isn't worth the paper it's printed on—hasn't been since the Plague, but Wheelwright's stood up better than most." Now that he'd started, he was talking much more easily. "Paper money's so much mouse-stuffing, credit's non-existent, and half the time your life's at the mercy of the next man's good will. We don't have a society—we have a semi-organized rabble. The closest we've come to a decent life was under Wheelwright. And they killed him for his ambitions—or said they did, for what they said were his ambitions. They said it loudly and as often as they could before they were overthrown, and he didn't come forward to deny it. But if he's still alive, we need him. He's the only man anyone will follow with enthusiasm."

"Follow a corpse?"

"Follow a name—a legend. A memory of a time when there was civilization in the world."

The words sounded good. Henley's way of saying them didn't.

The commander twitched his head to one side and spat through the open doorway.

"Spare me your dramatics, Major."

"I was telling the truth."

"Certainly. But not your truth. You don't want a stable society. Your kind lives on connivance and battens on chaos. You're a breed of jackals, skulking around a sickened world. You're free to gorge because all the lions are dead." His voice, for a moment, had drifted away as though he remembered a man and could see him in front of his eyes. "If I

could give you Wheelwright, I wouldn't—and if I were Wheelwright, I'd have you hung."

Henley gave it one more try. "Even with the presidency for a prize? Don't you think Wheelwright might see his opportunity to come back and finish what he'd begun?"

"Despite the controls you'd put over him, and the assassins dogging his steps? The people were turned against him once. It could be done again. No—that kind of thing's a young man's game, if it's anybody's game at all."

"Then you won't do it?"

"I'm not Wheelwright."

"Then, who is? Do you know where he is?"

"Wheelwright's been dead for thirty years," the old man said. "What in Heaven's name did you expect? If he was alive—and he's not—he'd be sixty years old now. A man that age, in this world—your whole scheme's fantastic, Major, and rational men would know it. But you can't let yourselves think about it rationally. You need your Wheelwrights too badly."

"Then that's your final word?"

"I want to ask Custis something, first. You stay and listen. It'll interest you."

Custis frowned.

"Custis."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think I'm Wheelwright?"

"You asked me that. No."

"You don't. Well, do you think Wheelwright's alive?"

"No."

"I see. You don't think I'm Wheelwright, and you don't think Wheelwright's alive—then, what're you doing up here in these mountains? What were you hoping to find?"

Custis felt himself getting angry. He felt like an egg the old man'd peeled, somehow. "Nothing, maybe. Maybe I'm just a guy doing a job, because he has to. Not looking for anything or anybody—just doing a job."

The commander laughed mirthlessly. The sound stabbed at Custis out of the dark. "It's time we stopped lying to each other. You put your car—your entire life—in a position where you might lose them instantly. You know it and I know it, and let's not argue the merits of grenades against cannon. Why did you take that kind of a gamble? Why

were you dangling that bait? Who were you hoping might snap at it?"

"It was a quick way of finding out what Henley wanted to know."

"And how did you propose to get out, once you'd got yourself in? You don't give two cents paper for Henley. You're an independent armoured car commander on a simple contract job—then why all the extra effort? You must have known damned well this mission wasn't in the interests of the Seventh Republic. You're a child of the age. If you'd let yourself stop and think, you would have realised what was going on. But you don't care anything about the Eighth Republic, either. A man doesn't pledge allegiance to one of a meaningless string of numbers. No. What you wanted to do was pledge allegiance to a man who's thirty years dead. *Now deny it.*"

Custis didn't have an answer. It was dark outside. He'd played out his string, with the commander and with himself.

"You want me to tell you I'm Wheelwright, don't you?"

"Maybe," Custis said grudgingly.

The commander laughed again—a harsh, bitter croak of sound that made the hackles stand on Custis's neck. Henley was breathing heavily in the darkness. "You and Henley—both damned fools. What would you do with your Wheelwright? Starve with him, up here in these mountains with an old man? If you found him, did you expect him to go out and remake the world for you? But you're a different breed from this jackal. What did you think Wheelwright started with? What's the matter with you, Custis? You've got your crew and your car, and they'll go wherever you take them. What do you need Wheelwright for? What's the matter with yourself?"

Custis had no answer at all.

"Don't worry, Custis—Henley's getting an earful. I can hear the gears turning in his head. Right now, he's planning how to use you. He can see it already. The Chicago machine swinging in behind you. The carefully built-up legend they'll manufacture around you. All you'll have to do is stand on a platform and shout, and his gang will take care of the rest. That's the way he's thinking. But you don't have to worry about him. You can take care of him. It'll be a long time before anyone like you has to worry about anyone like Henley—

years. And I can sit here and tell you this, and the likes of Henley'll still not worry, because they think they'll always run things. Of course, in order to safeguard the legend of Joe Custis, he has to make sure, once and for all, about Wheelwright—"

Custis heard the sound of steel snaking out of Henley's boot top. He jumped for where the man had been, but Henley'd had minutes to get ready. Custis heard him bump into the desk, and the thin scream of his blade through the air.

The old man'll have moved, Custis thought. He's had time.

He heard the ripe sound of Henley's dagger, and then the dull *chunk* ! as its hilt struck flesh. He heard the old commander sigh.

He stood still, breathing open-mouthed, until he heard Henley move. He went in low, under where the blade might be. As he hit him, Henley whispered : " Don't be a fool ! Don't make any noise ! We can walk out of here, with any luck !"

He broke Henley apart with his hands, making no noise. He let the officer slip to the floor and went silently around the table, to where he felt the old man folded over the desk. He touched his shoulder. " Commander—"

" It's all right," the old man sighed. " I've been waiting for it." He stirred. " I've left things in a terrible mess. He was quicker to make up his mind than I expected." He hunched himself up, his cracked and dirty fingernails scraping at his shirt. " I don't know . . . You'll have to get out somehow. I can't help you. Why am I so old ?"

" It's O.K., Commander. I've had something figured out. I'll make it."

" You'll need a weapon." He raised his head and pulled his shoulders back. " Here." He tugged at his chest and fumbled the wet knife into Custis's hands.

Chapter VII

He stepped out of the dead commander's hut into the flickering shadows from the cookfires. There was a rifleman posted about ten yards away, and Custis looked at him thoughtfully. Then he called, in a voice pitched to reach the man and no farther : " Hey—the boss wants some light in here."

The man grunted and went to one of the near fires for a sliver of burning wood. He carried it back, shielding it carefully with his hands. "First no lights, and now lights," he grumbled as he stepped through the doorway. He reached up to a shelf where an oil lamp was sitting, and stopped dead as he dimly saw Henley on the floor and the commander lying across the table. "Now who the hell'd be dumb enough to kill the boss right in the camp . . ." he murmured, mouthing the words in an attempt to get them through his head.

Custis whipped the flat of his hand across the side of the man's neck. He caught the burning light and carefully crushed it out on the floor. And then he stepped outside again, gently closing the door behind him. He walked slowly away until he was fifty feet from the huts, in the shadows, and then he turned toward the fire where he saw Jody working. He had the knife in his belt under his shirt, and as he walked he rolled up his bloody sleeves. His skin gathered itself into gooseflesh under the night wind's chill.

When he was fairly close to the fire, he changed his pace until he was simply strolling. He walked up to the fire, listening for the first sounds from the hut on the other side of the camp. "Jody."

She looked up, wiping the wet hair off her forehead with the back of a hand. "Hi, soldier. Come for supper?"

He shook his head. "Still want to come to Chicago?"

She straightened up. "Just a minute." She stirred the food in the pot, let the spoon slide back into it, and picked up her water pail. "Ready," she said.

"Let's go."

They walked toward the spring. Out of the firelight, she touched his forearm. "You're not kidding me?"

"No. You know how to get down to where the car is?"

"Yeah." She put the water pail down. "Come on."

As they walked up the rise to the valley entrance, she gripped his hand. "Anything go wrong, Joe? You get hurt, or something?"

"No."

"There's blood on your shirt."

"Henley's."

"You sure?"

"He spilled it. It belongs to him."

She took a deep breath. "There's gonna be hell to pay."

"Can't help it. It worked out that way." He was busy trying to remember the exact positions where the grenadiers had been.

They came to where the two machine gun pits covered the valley entrance, and one of the men there heard them walking.

"Who's that?"

"Me. Jody."

The man chuckled. "Hey, Jody. You bringin' me my supper?" The other men laughed out of the darkness.

"Not right now, Sam," Jody answered. "I got somebody with me."

There was more laughter in the shadows among the rocks, and then they were past. They made their way down the mountainside, walking as quietly as they could on the loose rock, and then Custis heard a man's shoes scrape as he settled himself more comfortably in his position.

"We're there," Jody whispered.

"Okay." Custis oriented himself. After a minute, he was pretty sure where he was in relation to the car, and where everyone else would be.

"What now, Joe?"

"You walk on down. Let 'em hear you. Talk to 'em."

"You sure, Joe?"

"Yeah. It's okay."

"You're not gonna leave me?"

"I told you I'd take you to Chicago, didn't I?"

"All right, Joe." Her fingers trailed over his forearm.

"Be seeing you."

"Give me twenty minutes," he said, and slipped off among the rocks.

He moved as noiselessly as he knew how, the knife ready in his hand. Once he stumbled over a man. "'Scuse me, buddy," he mumbled.

"Okay, pal," the man answered. "Take one for me."

Farther down the mountainside, he heard somebody say loudly: "Hey! It's Jody! C'mere, Jody, gal." He could feel the ripple of attention run through the men among the rocks. Equipment rattled as men leaned forward, sick of this duty and glad of something to watch, and maybe join in on.

Now he was behind one of the grenade teams. He inched forward, found them, and after a minute he was moving on.

The men where Jody was were laughing and tossing remarks back and forth. He heard her giggle.

He found the next team, craning forward to look down into a cup behind some rocks where a small fire had been built on the side away from the car. When he was through, he looked over the edge and saw Jody standing in the middle of a bunch of men. Her head was thrown back and she was laughing.

When he'd left the third emplacement, and was working toward the fourth, he heard the sound of a slap. A man yelled: "Hey, gal, don't you treat me mean like that!" The rest of the men were laughing harshly.

The fourth team was easy to handle.

Working on the fifth, he missed the last man. It was a tricky business getting the first with one sure swing and then going for the other before he could yell. This time, the man rolled sideways, and there was nothing for Custis to do but kick at him. He hit the man, but didn't even cripple him. The man slid off the rock, yelling, and Custis, scrambling as fast as he could, threw the box of grenades one way, the rifle the other, and jumped for the car.

"Lew! Open up! I'm coming in!" he bellowed as the night broke apart.

Rifle fire yammered toward him as he ran, ricochets screaming off the rocks. The car's motors began to wind up. It was still as dark as the bottom of a bucket, and then Hutchinson fired the car's flare gun. The world turned green.

Custis slammed into the starboard track cover, threw himself on top of it, and clawed his way over the turtledeck. He rapped his knuckles quickly on the turret hatch, and Robb flung it back. Custis teetered on the edge of the coaming. The car's machine guns opened up, hammering at the rocks. Custis heard a voice screaming like a lost soul: "Grenades! Where's the damned grenades?"

Then he heard the girl shouting: "Joe!"

He stopped. He looked over toward the sound of her voice. "Oh, dammit!" he muttered. Then he sighed, "What the hell." He shouted down the hatch: "Cover me!" and jumped down off the battlewagon, his boots resounding on the foreplates before he hit the ground. He pitched forward, smashing into the gravel, threw himself erect, and ran toward the spot.

Rifle fire chunked into the ground around him. He weaved and jumped from side to side, floundering over the rocks, panting for breath. Hutchinson fired another flare, and now the world was red, laced by the bright gold of the car's tracers as the machine guns searched back and forth in their demi-turrets. He heard the tracks slide and bite on the gravel, and the whole car groaned as the bogeys lurched it suddenly forward.

The girl was running toward him, and there were men back in rocks who were sighting deliberately now, taking good aim.

"Joe !"

"All right, damn you !" he growled as he scooped her up. He flung her toward the car ahead of him, feeling a crack of fire lance across his back, and then the car was practically on top of them. Lew had his driver's hatch open, and Custis pushed the girl through. Then he was clambering up the side of the turret and into the command seat. "All right," he panted into the command microphone, "Let's go home."

The hatch dropped shut on top of him. He fell into the car, landing on his side and hearing ribs break. Lew locked a track and spun them around. The inside of the car sounded like a wash boiler being pelted by stones.

Robb looked at him, patting his 75's. "Open fire, Joe ?"

"No ! No—leave the poor bastards alone."

He looked over toward the girl. "Hey, Jody," he grinned.

The half-track rumbled down the last slope, spraying stones out from under its tracks as it took a bite of the tough prairie grass. Custis jammed his hands against the sides of the hatch and scowled out at the plains ahead, where Chicago waited beyond the edge of the green horizon. He didn't turn his head back. He was through with the mountains.

He was going to Chicago. He was going to Chicago and see what kind of a man he was.

He thought about the ruts and jagged holes in State Street's asphalt. He shivered a little. But he was going.

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