

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

A
Nova
Science Fiction
Magazine

No. 22

2/6

VOLUME 4

★ LAN WRIGHT

★ DAVID ROME



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 c/o 130 London Road (basement)
 Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 4 No. 22

1961

Original Science Fiction Stories

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if it could be found—but for vastly different
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of ancient gladiators—except the ball could kill
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fascinating walls the shopper found that it was
almost impossible to get out.

Edited by JOHN CARNELL

Cover by LEWIS illustrating "Should Tyrone Fail"

Published bi-monthly by NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., Maclaren
House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1 Tel. : HOP. 5712

Sole Agents for Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

Sole Agents for North America : Gordon & Gotch (Canada) Ltd.

Annual Subscription 17/- post free (6 issues)

North America \$3.00

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in this magazine are fiction, any similarity between the characters and actual persons
is purely coincidental.

Lan Wright is probably one of our best writers of intergalactic adventures and has a long record of successes to his credit. This month's lead story is no exception—with plenty of surprises.

SHOULD TYRONE FAIL

by LAN WRIGHT

Chapter One

They called it the Jewel City, one of the seven wonders of the Galaxy, and as he strode its wide streets for the first time Tyrone knew why.

The tall, shimmering spires lofted towards golden skies in an almost virgin purity; everywhere were green parks and slender Terran trees, while a myriad of flowers added exotic colour to the vast panorama of beauty and luxury.

The Jewel City was the capital—the only—city of Lyra, fourth planet of the star Caprica, a large G-sun far out on the Galactic Rim and thousands of light years from Earth. To Lyra flowed the trade routes of the Rim itself, and the Jewel City skimmed the cream and bathed itself in luxury.

Tyrone wandered its streets and marvelled. Even on Earth they told stories of the vast city that nestled under protecting force screens amid the fantastic jungle world of Lyra. The air was like wine and the light of Caprica shone with a brilliance that made the city glisten like the name it bore.

As they landed from the space station on the previous day, Tyrone and his fellow passengers had seen the spawning, malevolent green that covered Lyra from pole to pole. The ferry pilot had flown low for his landing so that they could see more closely the primeval horror of the world from which the Jewel City had been carved. Even as the City was a legend so was the jungle around it. In all the human dominated Galaxy there was nothing like the jungle world of Lyra. True, there were more evil planets—the methane storms of Menkall—the scorched wastes of Mercury—the watery swamp of Kinivere—these, and others like them were worse than Lyra. But Lyra was the only one that was habitable by man; the only planet within two hundred light years that was so strategically placed for the trade of the Universe, and for that reason it was imperative that man should conquer it.

His view from the ferry told Tyrone that the conquest had not been easy; it was a finger-hold on a jungle precipice that threatened at any moment to engulf the splendour that lay below the invisible shield of force that held inviolable the Jewel City and all that it contained.

So far from being a day's sightseeing, Tyrone's first day on Lyra was one of orientation. He met people in bars and restaurants, in parks and shops and arcades; and everywhere he went added a fact to his knowledge; everyone he spoke to gave him a little clearer insight into the psychology of the City and its people. By the time the violet dusk had settled and the myriad city lights had begun to cast their spell, Tyrone was a tired man but a satisfied one. He had taken in the local colour, and the Jewel City was more than just an awe-inspiring vision of loveliness—it was a moving entity with its own outlook, its own peculiarities, its own special philosophy of survival.

But beneath the facade of beauty there ran a streak of toughness and brutality that might have escaped the untrained observer, but which Tyrone laid bare within a few short hours. The facade of ease and elegance and luxury was a hard veneer for the rich, cut-throat world of trade and profit that was the reason for the Jewel City's being.

It was quite dark when he returned to his hotel, and the lounge was well peopled with brightly clad visitors. He nodded to a couple who had travelled with him on the starship

from Belloval, and to a man who had shared his table at breakfast that morning. Behind the reception desk an under manager bowed to him with cold-eyed insincerity as he asked for his personal room lock.

"There has been a caller, sir."

Tyrone raised one eyebrow in surprise—he'd expected none.

"No message was left, but perhaps you were not expecting one."

"Perhaps," Tyrone agreed. "Who was the caller?"

"A lady, sir. She called early this afternoon and asked for your room number. She left when I told her you were out."

Tyrone smiled thinly. "And of course you told her my room."

The man shrugged. "She enquired in order that she might video you later this evening."

"Of course, and thank you."

The cold needle of suspicion was tempered by the satisfaction that things were beginning to move even more rapidly than he had anticipated. The unknown caller was clear evidence that his preliminary moves were paying off with astounding speed. He left the lounge and took the grav shaft up to the fifteenth floor. The personal lock and his thumb pattern operated the door and it slid shut behind him as he entered the room. He stood for a few seconds while his eyes scanned the interior of the apartment. Everything was as he had left it some nine hours earlier, but then he didn't expect anything else.

Slowly, he walked round the room his eyes studying every piece of furniture and every article of decoration; every piece of clothing that was not packed away told its own story. Each careless crease in a folded shirt came in for study, the angle of a shoe tucked beneath a bedside table, a book lying on the table itself.

It was ten minutes before he found what he was looking for—a tiny, ornamental button which had apparently fallen from a woman's dress into the recesses of a clothes closet and lain there unnoticed until Tyrone's sharp eyes and eidetic memory tagged it as a new addition to the room furnishings since he had first arrived. He didn't bother to touch it—merely to know it was there was sufficient for his purposes.

He closed the closet door and returned to his study of the room with an even more searching intensity, but another half hour passed before he found another spy device tucked

invisibly behind a wall light fitting beside the door. He loosened the fitting with the blade of a tiny knife, took a shoe from beside his bed, and hit the device hard with the solid plastic, grinning to himself as he did so. He replaced the wall fitting and turned his attention to a study of his two zip cases.

Both were locked as he had left them, the tiny hair at the end of each zip apparently undisturbed. Whoever had done the search was almost as much an expert as was Tyrone himself—almost but not quite. Inside the cases was a different story, for no searcher, however careful and accurate, can duplicate exactly the indiscriminate pattern of folds and creases that tells its own story to the man who created them. The very fact of placing his identity papers and other documents at the bottom of one of the cases had made it that much more difficult, and by the time he had finished his scrutiny Tyrone knew beyond any doubt at all that someone had methodically and thoroughly studied every single article contained in the two cases.

Which suited him admirably.

He straightened from his inspection and made the next move in the plan which he had worked out before his arrival. The secret of any man's success lies in preparation; the more thorough that preparation then the more successful is the conclusion for which he is striving. All the long years of his training and his subsequent experience had proved to Tyrone the basic truth of the maxim by which he lived; every move he made was directed to one single aim—success. There were times when preparations couldn't prevent failure, but failure could be minimised and—to a degree—offset.

It seemed that on this occasion preparation was enough itself.

He turned his attention to the grill of the air system that was placed high in the wall directly opposite the door. He climbed on a chair and detached the cover plate. From behind it he took a tiny automatic camera which he had placed there earlier that day. It was the work of a few minutes to develop the autofilm—and to find that it was useless, apparently because of an accidental exposure. He chuckled to himself and acknowledged the fact that the girl, whoever she was, was no amateur. His next inspection was of another air grill on the opposite wall from the dressing mirror beside his bed.

None would have realised without a very close inspection that the door and the mirror and the grill formed a series of angles which allowed a reverse picture to be taken of anyone entering the room, and the film in the second camera hadn't been disturbed. As he studied the tiny negative in a pocket viewer Tyrone had no doubt at all that this was the girl who had enquired for him at the reception desk, and that he'd know her again when they did eventually meet face to face.

Tyrone washed and cleaned himself before going down to the hotel bar for a snack and a drink. He sat in a corner of the large, luxurious room and ordered a light salad with a rare steak to accompany the expensive iced lager imported from far off Janosir. The steak had vanished but the beer was only half consumed when two men entered the bar whom he recognised as fellow passengers from the starship. He knew that their surprised recognition wasn't in the least genuine as they crossed the room towards his table.

"Tyrone, isn't it?" smiled the short plump one with the bald head. "You joined the ship at Belloval."

"That's right," acknowledged Tyrone. "Sedaka?"

The fat man beamed. "Right in one. Hugo Sedaka, and this is Peter Kwang."

Tyrone smiled his pleasure and waved to two chairs. "Perhaps you'll join me in a drink?"

They settled over tall, iced glasses, and Tyrone exchanged polite platitudes with Sedaka, while Kwang, thin faced and smiling, sat quiet and uttered not a word. Tyrone recognised his byplay with the fat man as the preliminary sparring of a practised operator—he viewed it with almost bored disinterest, and took part in it only as a side issue to his study of the two men.

Kwang, he decided, was probably the strong man of the duo; he looked too weak and skinny in his well-cut suit to be anything else, and stripped down he was almost certainly a lean, tough bundle of sinewy muscle—an expert at weaponless fighting as were most of his racial compatriots. Sedaka, pale and plump, talked easily and wittily, with a wealth of knowledge that was, at times, startling and almost certainly thrown in for effect. All in all they were an unobtrusive, but dangerous, couple.

"We came here from Sulyanam," Sedaka announced abruptly, as the chitchat flagged momentarily.

"Indeed!" Tyrone raised his eyebrows in surprise, and tagged the man a liar in the same instant. Sulyanam was a distant world, far across the Galaxy and almost two months journey from Belloval where they had joined the same ship as himself. "A fascinating planet, I believe, one which I have always wanted to visit. You are of that world?"

"Kwang is, but I am from Coroval."

"Ah, yes. The Minos Group. Lovely worlds." Tyrone cocked a wicked eye at the fat man. "You are both a long way from home."

"As you are, Tyrone," countered Sedaka. "Seneschal, am I right?"

"Near enough. Andria, to be precise, though I came through Belloval from Earth."

"In the course of your duties." Sedaka nodded. "There was a rumour aboard that you are an agent of the Terran Colonial Bureau."

"But only a rumour, I trust." Tyrone permitted himself a sly smile and then covered it rapidly by drinking deeply from his glass.

"Of course," smiled Sedaka. "You know, it is a wonderful thing to look around us and see from what far corners of the Galaxy our fellow guests have come." He waved a pudgy hand expansively around the large lounge. "All of them here have come to seek their fortunes in the Jewel City by one method or another. Each of them believes that he has the secret to a fortune, and in the final analysis most of them will die as nonentities. Trade is a wonderful thing, Tyrone, it can make millionaires of every man in this room—or it can reduce any one of us to utter degradation."

"You are a philosopher, Sedaka." Behind his laughing eyes Tyrone's mind was icy. There was about this stumpy, pudgy man with his bald head and sleepy eyes an aura of danger that could almost be smelt by a man with the right sort of intuition, and Tyrone was never one to ignore his own hunches.

"No, a realist. One must have money to enjoy the good things of this life, and to obtain money one must work hard and be better than the next man. There are too many ruthless men today who seek a fortune at the expense of others. For a clever man there should be enough opportunity in the Galaxy without resorting to many of the methods which are actively

employed by a great many otherwise estimable people." He smiled deprecatingly and almost sadly. "Even I am not averse to opportunity when it knocks—especially when it knocks to the tune of fifty million credits."

The sleepy eyes were sleepy no longer as he spoke the last words; the fat face was grim and thin lipped as Sedaka switched into the open with the suddenness of a striking cobra. Beside him Peter Kwang still smiled gently and disarmingly.

Tyrone took a deep breath. "That's a lot of money, Sedaka."

"And you know as well as I do where it can be obtained."

Tyrone said nothing.

"The ship, Tyrone, the ship," insisted Sedaka softly. "The one that crashed somewhere out there in the Lyran jungle with a cargo of Rimrock aboard worth fifty million credits."

Chapter Two

Not for the first time since he'd been assigned to this particular kettle of fish Tyrone cursed the panicky local governor who had flashed in clear language to Earth the news that *Starship 342* had crashed on Lyra with the probable loss of all on board. One frantic message from the 342 had been all the evidence that she had even been in trouble. One squawk as she died had been followed by two uncoded lines of idiocy—and the trouble had begun.

The news had flashed around the Galaxy quicker than an exploding nova that the 342 was a government ship carrying the biggest cargo of Rimrock ever mined. Rimrock—the fabulous mineral born in the heart of some exploding star aeons before and now spread like an asteroid belt around a vast, endless section of the Galactic Rim. Rimrock—ten times as hard as diamond, the ultimate in cutting capacity, the base for bearings in the engines of the new fleets of stellar ships, the priceless ornamentation of a few thousand pampered women, the rock that cost the life of a man for every pound that was mined—the new lodestone that lured men to a fortune—and to death.

"Why me?" Tyrone demanded abruptly.

The fat man grinned and shrugged. "During the trip from Belloval you went to almost ridiculous lengths to let it be known that you are an agent of the Terran Colonial Bureau.

Now, I am a mistrustful man, Tyrone, and I do not expect agents of the Bureau to be either as clumsy or as informative as you were."

"So?"

"So I made a few enquiries. You know the sort of thing—other passengers, crew members, people who might have come into contact with you on Belloval. It is amazing how much one can learn from apparently disinterested parties. You did not come from Earth as you claimed a few moments ago. You were on Belloval for at least four weeks before you left aboard the same vessel as Kwang and myself, and that means that you were there when the news of the crashed ship broke." Sedaka smiled benignly. "You left Belloval on the first available ship, and all of this, Tyrone, does not add up to a special representative of the Colonial Bureau. Therefore, I started looking for another reason. I did not have far to look. Like almost every other person who has hit Lyra during the past month you are after that ship, and in your own not too subtle way you are trying to intimidate ordinary people like Kwang and myself into thinking that the Bureau already has its men here, ready and waiting to protect the Bureau's interests in this matter."

Tyrone sat quiet and studied the fat man through hooded eyes. He was smart all right—just as smart as Tyrone wanted him to be, and the grim elation he felt at Sedaka's summary could have no place in his facial expression. Sedaka's mental arithmetic was good—if you wanted two and two to make five, and Tyrone hoped that it was the sort of sum that the girl in his room would turn into the same answer.

"Well, Tyrone?" enquired Sedaka as the silence drew to an almost embarrassing length.

Tyrone looked at him speculatively. "Well, indeed," he responded easily. "You seem to be very well informed."

The fat man waved a plump hand expansively. "Half the Galaxy is well informed, and half the Galaxy would be here trying to do something about it if they had any guts or imagination."

"You are probably right."

"They're not like you or I, Tyrone, or Kwang here. We know what we want and we are prepared to take risks to get it." Sedaka leaned forward with sudden urgency, his voice low and taut. "We are among the first on the scene, Tyrone.

In a week or two more than half the money-hungry rogues in the Galaxy will be here willing to take any chance to get their hands on that Rimrock. Whoever gets to it first will have to be lucky, that's certain, but they'll have to strike first. It's going to take tough men who can move quickly if they are to have an chance of success. Do I make myself clear?"

Tyrone picked up his glass and took a long drink to cover his amusement. It was almost too good to be true! The first wary surprise of Sedaka's approach had gone now, and he felt an overwhelming desire to laugh out loud at the incongruity of the position.

"Are you suggesting that we join forces?"

Sedaka shrugged. "You and I, and anyone else we can get hold of quickly. The more we get into our group the better will be the chances of success. After all, it will take a team of men to unload the Rimrock from the ship."

"You've got to find the wreck first," Tyrone commented grimly.

"That is my ace in the hole." Sedaka smiled coldly. "The one advantage I have over everyone else. You see, I know just where that ship crashed."

Tyrone froze in his chair, unable to believe that Sedaka was serious. So far as he was aware no one knew the exact location of the crashed ship. If Sedaka's claim was right then he was the most dangerous man in the Galaxy at this very moment.

"No one knows that, Sedaka, not even the Bureau. If they did then there'd be salvage vessels at work on it already. That jungle will need to be combed by spotting equipment over every damned square yard, and the only people who can do that are the Bureau salvage vessels." He shook his head. "In any event, we'll have a fleet of Patrol cruisers here in a week or two to look after things."

"The Patrol is already here," smiled Sedaka, "all four of their only available ships. But they can't do very much about the situation until they know just where to take up their guard duties—and they won't know that until a salvage craft pinpoints the wreck."

"There could be more Patrol cruisers here any day," Tyrone said.

The fat man shook his head. "They are otherwise engaged."

"How—?"

"How do I know?" Sedaka chuckled. "Because I believe in paying well for good information—and my information about the position of the local Patrol squadrons is very good indeed."

Clearly, Sedaka had worked out all the angles, and there was an air of efficiency about the man that Tyrone didn't like at all.

"The only way in which I can prove all this is to take you to the place where the ship is lying," said Sedaka gently, "and the only occasion on which I shall do that is when we go there for the purpose of removing the cargo."

"I still don't see how you got the details of the crash." Tyrone gazed bleakly at the fat man.

Sedaka shrugged. "It is well known that I pay well for all sorts of odd items of information—one of the secrets of my success has been the picking up of odd scraps of information that are of no apparent use to anyone. Sometimes I am given something which is beyond price—and this was one of those occasions."

"Go on."

"It will be of little use to you, Tyrone. However—" Sedaka waved a negligent hand. "In fact, the wreck was spotted as it came down by a junior technician on the ferry station. He took sightings of the position and reported it to his senior officer. By good fortune no one else was given the exact figures, and when he realised the importance of the information which had come into his possession the officer concerned took steps to see that I was told—for a suitable fee of course."

"And the man who made the sighting?"

"Alas, he met with an unfortunate accident shortly afterwards."

"And you mean to tell me someone hasn't smelt a rat?"

"Why should they?" Sedaka spread his hands wide. "My only worry was that my man on the ferry station might get into trouble before I arrived. Fortunately he didn't, and I was able to collect the information from him when we disembarked from the Belloval cruiser."

"He might still sell you out."

"Extremely unlikely."

"You mean—?"

"He, too, met with an unfortunate accident—he fell down an open hatchway into a cargo storage space that was about to be opened for unloading purposes. Of course, he might have been able to tell the loading officer not to evacuate air from the compartment, but the fall knocked him quite unconscious."

Tyrone nodded grimly—he'd heard that there had been an accident soon after the Belloval cruiser had unloaded its passengers though he had no idea what it was and very little interest in the reasons behind it. All in all, Sedaka was a very dangerous customer, a ruthless man to whom death meant little.

"If you decide not to join me," insisted Sedaka, "that is your affair, and I shall not trouble you further. There are plenty of others who will be only too glad to take advantage of my offer."

Tyrone didn't doubt it. Every crook and adventurer in the Jewel City would jump at the chance, and if he wished it Sedaka could lead a small army out into the Lyran jungle with every chance of success—providing that army was willing to put up with losses that might reach anything up to fifty per cent. Tyrone had done a good bit of research on Lyra, and he knew only too well what dangers lurked outside the protecting force screens of the city.

Almost as if he was reading Tyrone's mind, Sedaka said, "Don't you think it's worth anything that the jungle can throw at us to be set up for life, Tyrone? I think you must, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Tyrone finished the remains of his drink, set the glass on the table, and nodded. "All right, count me. What comes next?"

Sedaka relaxed in his chair and smiled. "I think we have about five days before we need to make a definite move. The nearest salvage depot is on Morgwin, and three of the vessels based there are already engaged on other business. The fourth is undergoing a major overhaul and will not be here for two weeks. The last is already here—it has been for ten days."

"Then it might turn something up at any time."

Sedaka grinned pudgily and shook his head. "The only logical way to search for a crashed ship is by quartering the planet with detection equipment in a proper search pattern,

and I'm happy to say that the vessel from Morgwin is quartering the wrong portion. That much I found out this morning. Therefore, I figure we have five days in which to complete our initial arrangements. Once we move it will be quickly and finally. I intend to be away from Lyra within six hours of the commencement of the operation. We shall need a group of twenty men, and that will allow us some thirty per cent losses during the short time we shall have to face the jungle."

"By that I take it we shall make the trip out by air."

Sedaka nodded.

"How about the trip back?"

"That is my worry. Just you find me some more men to make up the party to full strength. Already we have six—seven including you—and I want the group completed within three days so that we have two days in which to formulate our plans." He smiled. "In a week or less we shall each be richer to the extent of some three million credits."

A few minutes later Tyrone left the table with a promise to speak to Sedaka again next morning. He went out of the hotel into the brilliant night of the Jewel City, intent on pondering the situation that had dropped into his lap so neatly. His preliminary work on the ship had paid off sooner and in far greater detail than he had ever anticipated. The first reaction had been the searching of his baggage, but that had been anticipated and allowed for.

But Sedaka—!

The brilliance of the city cascaded around him as he strolled, deep in thought along the wide, main thoroughfares. The lighted bands of the rollerways moved sedately past him, while the coruscating colours of bars and restaurants and night clubs threw their rainbow hues across the crowded streets. There was noise and music and laughter all around, but Tyrone walked in a quiet oasis of his own creation while his mind sifted and sorted all that he learned in his few short hours in the Jewel City. It was, he realised, more than most people would learn in a lifetime.

Find some more men, Sedaka had said. Tyrone chuckled inwardly. He had come here intent on making other men find him, and so far they had done pretty well. It was more than he dare do to stick his neck out any further than was necessary. The success of his mission rested on the necessity to keep clear,

as far as he was able, of any trouble that was of his own making. Let trouble find him—that was the essence of his own plan, but to seek it, as Sedaka had suggested, that was another matter.

Wryly, he cursed the luck that had set him on Belloval when the news of the crashed ship had broken. But for an unanticipated delay in his previous assignment he would have been away and gone, headed back to Earth, and someone else would have had the unenviable task of sorting out the mess on Lyra.

In his preoccupation he almost missed it.

His eyes were unseeking and disinterested as they wandered over the brilliant facades of the clubs and bars: he was several yards past this particular club before the significance of what he had seen stopped him dead in his tracks. He turned back and stopped once again, looking at the glistening tridi picture that was the centre piece of the garish decorations surrounding the main portals of the Stellar Club and Bar. It was the picture of a girl, hair and shoulders agleam with frosted jewels, while glistening red lips laughed moistly and invitingly at the passing crowds. Even the pseudo glamour of the picture couldn't disguise the fact that Samantha Clair—star attraction of the Stellar Club—had burgled his hotel room earlier that afternoon.

Tyrone grinned seraphically and entered the wide beckoning entrance.

Chapter Three

As he sat in the shadows at the back of the wide, terraced room and looked down on to the brilliantly lit diamond of the central floor, Tyrone waited and wondered what connection he could arrange that would bring Samantha Clair into the open. Obviously, she had at least one other person working with her, someone who was in a position to keep check on the listening device which had been planted in his room.

He was still puzzling about it when she appeared on the floor to perform her act, and even at the distance he was from her it was clear that the pictures he had seen didn't do justice to her beauty. She was tall, beautifully built, with a white blonde cascade of hair and the ivory skin of a native Terran. Her bearing was regal and she moved almost as if it was beneath her dignity to be displaying her talents for such people as frequented the Stellar Club. Tyrone frowned and wondered

what a girl like her was doing way out on the Rim. With her looks and obvious talent she could have made a profitable living on any one of the more populous worlds closer to the Galactic Hub.

She sang several songs in a rich, melodious contralto, and danced a couple of intricate semi-acrobatic dances with a tall, lean man whose build and colouring stamped him as a native of Cleomon. An odd combination to say the least.

When her half hour act was ended, Tyrone paid his bill and left the club; he had seen enough. He walked slowly back to his hotel already convinced that Sedaka was the answer—he was the one to get Samantha Clair into the open. From the hotel lobby he called Sedaka's room and the brown, bland face of Kwang swam in miniature on the screen.

"Is Sedaka there?" he asked, and Kwang nodded without speaking. His face faded from the screen to be replaced seconds later by the plump visage of Sedaka.

"Ah, Tyrone, what do you want?"

"You said you wanted more men for this little party."

"Yes?"

"Then I suggest you look in on the Stellar Club and contact a singer named Samantha Clair—"

"Bring in a woman? Are you mad?" Sedaka shook his head. "No, Tyrone, that would never do."

"You haven't heard the rest. She's got at least one man working with her, and she's interested in the ship—of that I'm certain. I thought it might be smart to have someone in on this who knows more about the Jewel City than we do. In her business she's bound to meet a great many people and pick up a lot of detail that we might never stumble on. In addition to that anyone she's got tied in with her would help to swell the ranks."

Sedaka pondered, his gimlet eyes boring out of the small screen.

"I don't know—"

"Then make some enquiries first. You might come up with some interesting details."

"All right." Sedaka pursed his fat lips and nodded abruptly. "I'll let you know the result. But I warn you, Tyrone, if I'm not in the least bit happy—"

"Fine! Oh, there's one thing more—"

"Well?"

"If you decide to ask her in—okay, but don't involve me yet. Let me introduce myself in my own good time."

Sedaka's face darkened. "Now, look. This isn't the sort of picnic where we can afford to have secrets."

"I know that. I just think it might be smart to have an extra card tucked away—you never know when it might be useful. If she's in then what she doesn't know won't hurt. If she's out—" He shrugged expressively.

Even on the screen he could almost see Sedaka's mind weighing the details before the fat man finally nodded. "All right. We'll play it your way for a bit. I'll call for you."

"Fine. By the way, Sedaka, doesn't Kwang ever say anything?"

The fat man chuckled coldly. "You've noticed that? No, he doesn't, Tyrone. His vocal cords were destroyed in a fight many years ago. He's dumb."

The next day Tyrone slipped away early from the hotel. He made sure that Sedaka and Kwang were in their room, and he played double safe by taking the roller road across the city in the opposite direction to that sector which was his actual destination.

He left the road at the terminus and took an aircab from the copter roof of the nearest large building back across the city to the spaceport. The small enclosed area of the field buildings nestled close under the protective curve of the city's invisible screen. Beyond, the evil menacing green of the alien jungle surrounded the smaller area of the landing strip—and the strip itself was protected by a single small screen unit which could be switched on and off whenever a ship wished to land from or take off for the ferry station which circled its lonely path two hundred miles out in space.

The smaller area could be thoroughly sterilised from its contact with the jungle without affecting the city as a whole, and Tyrone had seen the system in action from the viewport of the ferry ship which had brought him to the Jewel City. The things which had happened during the short period that the screen was down for landing had amazed and shocked him.

As they landed the screen was reborn around them, and inside it—cut off from the miasmic outer world—was left a boiling mass of alien vegetation that had, in those few minutes, encroached on the clear area of the field. It was evil, vicious, ever moving, ever growing—but it died as the city fought its momentary conquest.

There had been animal life, too, which leapt and died as the sterilization proceeded. Horrible travesties of winged and crawling horror that brought gasps from the lips of the watchers. All of them died within the screen and inside ten minutes the field was clear once again.

Tyrone made straight for the administration offices. From the main entrance he went straight to the central enquiry bureau and smiled easily at the bored clerk who was in charge.

"Good morning. I believe that one can hire private aircraft for trips out to see the jungle."

The clerk's eyes lost their bored look, and he studied Tyrone with renewed interest. "One can, if you think it's worth the risk."

"Risk? What risk?. I'd only want to fly out a few miles, take a look, and head back."

The clerk chuckled and shook his head. "It isn't that easy, sir, and it is very expensive. You have to warn the local authorities so that they can make special rescue arrangements in the event that you have an accident. That all costs money. There are some pretty heavy insurance premiums to pay as well. All in all I'd say a three or four hour trip would set you back around two thousand credits."

Tyrone whistled. "Hell, I could buy a copter for that kind of money."

"Not on Lyra you couldn't, it's against the local laws."

"You mean there are no planes for sale?"

"Not one. Oh, sure, there are about a dozen atmosphere craft of various sizes, but they're all licensed in accordance with the City laws. They're the only planes that are allowed to fly outside the screens, and they're for hire—at a price."

Tyrone pursed his lips and grunted. "Seems it would be cheaper to get together a party and cut the cost. Or would it?"

"Yes. A group of, say a dozen, would get away with it for about five hundred credits each. That is, of course, if you can find a dozen stupid enough to go with you."

"If I did, would you have a ship large enough?"

The clerk nodded. "Yes, we've got one ship in the hangar over there that'll take two dozen. I might add that it's only been used twice in the last eight or nine months."

Tyrone nodded and smiled. "Well, thanks, anyway. I'll have to see what I can do about a smaller group."

"Take my advice," said the clerk, "and don't try too hard. It just isn't worth it."

Tyrone left the building more than satisfied with the results of his early morning excursion. At least he had found out what vessel Sedaka intended using to get his party out to the site of the wreck.

As he made his way back to the hotel Tyrone was sure of one other factor. Sedaka wasn't going to hire the plane in a proper and legitimate manner. There would be too much preliminary warning for the authorities if a large group suddenly decided to go sightseeing over the Lyran jungle, and if most of the group was made up of men whose reputations were dubious to say the least. He couldn't see Sedaka risking having anyone aboard the plane who was not in the party, and the hire of the ship would mean hiring a crew to fly it.

Sedaka wouldn't welcome a setup like that.

Once he realised that, Tyrone was able to look even further ahead. First, the fat man intended stealing the plane without raising an immediate alarm. Second, to do that he would have to create some kind of diversion. Third, he would have to have some means of getting off Lyra once his mission was accomplished—if it ever was. There was no question in Tyrone's mind that Sedaka was a tough and determined man who could and would lead a large party of avid fortune hunters on such an expedition as he had proposed to Tyrone. He had been able to think about it during the trip from Belloval, and Tyrone wouldn't have taken any odds on the fact that Sedaka already had his plans laid and prepared.

What possible diversion could he have thought up that would enable him to steal a plane and fly off with it unnoticed—or at least unnoticed for a short but vital period of time. And how would they get outside the screens and back again?

It was mid-morning before he reached the hotel again and went into the restaurant for a late breakfast of fresh fruit and a rare steak topped off with a large pot of imported and expensive coffee. He was half way through the meal when Sedaka and Kwang appeared.

"You are an early riser, Tyrone," the fat man greeted him.

"I had work to do," Tyrone winked knowingly.

"Most commendable." Sedaka sat down without waiting for an invitation. "I, too, have been—ah—working during

the night, hence my late arrival for breakfast." He summoned a waiter and ordered a repeat of Tyrone's meal for himself and Kwang. "I took your advice and investigated that night club singer."

Tyrone raised his eyebrows in surprise. When he moved Sedaka certainly moved rapidly. "And?" he asked.

"A most suitable choice. She wants to get off Lyra, but she can't do it without a large sum of money. She has been here for almost three years, saving money and earning as much as she can by various rather dubious methods. She has two men who are connected with her in some way. One of them is from Cleomon, his name is Pedro Genza, and he is her dancing partner. There is another man, a Terran named Morgan who acts as manager of her act—and as other things as well." Sedaka cocked an eye at Tyrone. "At the moment he is registered in this hotel, and he has the room next to your own. He took it on the morning after you registered."

Tyrone smiled complacently. "I thought he might have."

Sedaka slammed a hand on to the table top with sudden ferocity, his face angry and grim. "Stop playing games with me, Tyrone. This project is too big for any secrets—I told you that before. I want to know what this is all about, or I'll exclude you and this wretched girl. I can't take any risks, and what's more I don't intend to."

Tyrone nodded and chewed thoughtfully on a piece of steak. "I had to be sure about her, that's all. She searched my room on the day after I arrived, and planted a spy device in a closet. Morgan has a pick-up in the next room so that he can try and find out what I'm up to."

"Why should they pick on you?" demanded Sedaka. "A score of people came off the Belloval ship. Why should it be you?"

"Possibly because I'd let it be known that I'm a representative of the Terran Colonial Bureau."

Sedaka's face lost its angry glare, and the old, familiar smile creased his pudgy features. "The same game you were playing aboard ship?"

Tyrone nodded. "It worked there, so I didn't see why it should be less successful on Lyra. It—er—puts you in touch with the right people."

"One day people might decide to take you seriously and get rid of you before you can put a spoke in their plans."

"I doubt it. You can bet that Miss Samantha Clair and her two partners are as interested in that wreck as anyone else, Sedaka. I suppose they thought they might be able to get a head start on everyone else by spying on a Bureau agent. If that doesn't happen then she'll eventually reach the same conclusion that you did and she'll make a direct approach to me—unless you get to her first."

"I'll do it today," promised Sedaka. "That brings our group up to an even dozen."

"A dozen?" Tyrone was startled.

Sedaka nodded, smiling, his mouth so full of rare steak that his cheeks bulged obscenely as he champed his jaws together.

"Including the girl?"

Sedaka swallowed. "Yes, including the girl. She will come with us to the wreck. I don't wish to leave anyone behind in the Jewel City when we leave, and that means she must come as well, despite your suggestion that it would be advantageous to have someone around."

Chapter Four

Tyrone took another drink of coffee to cover his surprise and his satisfaction. Surprise that Sedaka had been able to move so fast, and satisfaction that another piece had been added to the jigsaw. The fact that no one was to be left behind meant that Sedaka had no intention of returning to the City once his task was accomplished; and that, in turn, meant that he had a ship available which could pick them up once the treasure was in their hands and head out into the vast reaches of the Rim before anyone could stop them.

He pushed the empty cup away from him, and stood up from the table. "Just get those other eight, Sedaka," he said with what he hoped was convincing eagerness. "The sooner we get started the happier I'll be."

He turned away from the table and went up to his room.

The man who was waiting for him had 'policeman' written all over him.

Tyrone closed the door gently behind him and gazed steadily at the neat, grey clad figure sitting in the one easy chair. "Well?" he asked. "This is a pleasure, but a puzzling one. May I ask how you got in?"

"Does it matter?" His voice was soft, almost mild, and it fitted his neat, almost clerical, appearance. His hands as they lay limply in his lap, were lean and hard, and they belied the mild expression on his thin face with its blue, lazy eyes and aquiline nose.

Tyrone sighed. "No, I suppose not. I could do the same thing a dozen different ways. It merely indicates to me that you are very eager to see me without anyone knowing it." With sudden horror he remembered the spy device in the closet. The Stellar Club was closed now, and it was a complete certainty that Morgan or one of the others was listening to all that took place. He had to do something and do it fast—and he had to do it without giving the unseen listener the slightest inkling that something was wrong.

"Don't you know my name?"

"Eh?" Tyrone was startled out of his slightly panicky reverie. "Sure, what's in a name? It's who you are that counts." As he spoke he pointed desperately towards the closet and cupped one hand to his ear as though listening. "You're from the local Law Office, I suppose. It's written all over you."

"The name is Mendoza," the man insisted gently, nodding and smiling as he did so. "And you're Tyrone."

"All right, so you've checked on me. I'm a law abiding citizen and there isn't very much you can do about that."

"No, but we can ensure that you stay on the right side. We've done some checking on you and we didn't much like what we found out, so this visit is something in the nature of a preliminary warning. One wrong step and you'll be in trouble. You know as well as I do that there's a lot happening in the Jewel City, and anyone who gets mixed up in it will get the book thrown at him—and it won't be just a local rap. You'll have a Terran Security Restraint slapped on you, and you know what that means." While he spoke Mendoza took a card from his pocket and wrote a few words on it in a clear and rapid hand. He laid it on the table beside the bed and smiled again at Tyrone. "Do I make myself clear?"

"I don't need a drawing," snarled Tyrone with mock aggression.

"Just remember, that's all." Mendoza nodded and left the room.

As the door closed behind him Tyrone let out a long sigh of relief. It had been close—too close. Another moment, a few ill advised words, and that would have been very much that. He picked up the card. On it was an address, and the neat, printed wording, "Call me here at three." There was a video number as well.

Promptly at three Tyrone was in a public visibooth some ten minutes walk from the hotel. He called the number and waited till the screen darkened and Mendoza's face swam small on the screen.

"Did I nearly foul it up, Tyrone?" were the policeman's first words.

"Almost," replied Tyrone grimly. "There was a spy device in that closet."

"Why not destroy it?"

"I destroyed one just to let them know that I was on the lookout, but I left that one to lull their suspicions. Now then, what's all this about?"

"I don't have to tell you the trouble that's brewing in the Jewel City," said Mendoza. "My chief has instituted security measures which entails checking on every new arrival. What we've turned up doesn't paint a very pretty picture."

"I know that," broke in Tyrone. "Almost every smart jack in the Galaxy who can raise the fare has headed here to cash in on the cargo. So?"

"So we checked on you as well, especially in view of your veiled hints that you were a Bureau man, and when we got confirmation from them that you were one of their operators the Chief thought it best if we co-operated."

"That's fine," snapped Tyrone. "Why didn't he just roll out a red carpet when I got here, or better still roll up at the hotel in his best official wagon and walk in on me in full regalia? If I'd wanted to tie myself in with you people I'd have been in touch before now, Mendoza."

"That's what we thought." The policeman's face was uncomfortable. "So I was detailed to make a private contact."

Tyrone sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry, I should have known you were only following orders. Look, I'm sitting on a knife edge here and one slip will send me off the wrong side."

"We're doing our best—"

"Yes, sure. But your best may not be good enough."

"Oh? Why?"

"Someone knows where that ship crashed."

"What?" Mendoza's eyes widened in sheer astonishment.

"Where?"

"If I knew that it would make things a lot easier."

"We could pull him in and sweat it out of him."

"No, that isn't the answer."

"Then what?"

"Then nothing. Just leave me to follow it through as far as I can."

"Well, all right." Mendoza looked dubious. "Anything else?"

"No, just keep me clear of the law."

"Of course, but that damned ship out there has made us jumpy. My Chief was even thinking of calling for a squadron of Guard cruisers to patrol the planet—"

"What?" Tyrone barked the word in sudden horror.

"Well, things being what they are—"

"I know what they are, Mendoza," snapped Tyrone, "probably better than you do. And you get one thing through your Chief's head—there would have been a flotilla here weeks ago if the Bureau had wanted one, but we don't. If he's got any ideas of drawing a small fleet of ships anywhere near Lyra tell him to forget it. If he won't listen to you then tell him to get in touch with me. Understood?"

Mendoza nodded, chastened surprise written all over his lean face.

"Off the record," said Tyrone more gently, "we're sitting on a bomb, Mendoza, and one careless move will set it off. If that happens no one on Lyra will know what hit them." He nodded and broke the connection.

Before two more days were up Sedaka announced that he had completed his party. The shock announcement was made at dinner on the evening of the day following Tyrone's contact with Mendoza. The smugness on the pudgy face of Sedaka as he made the announcement was plain to see, and Tyrone realised—not for the first time—that he had underestimated the man.

"We'll move tomorrow night," Sedaka said, smiling amiably. "Right on schedule."

"Then it's about time we had a full scale meeting to sort things out properly," remarked Tyrone.

"Not necessary. Things are already figured out," replied Sedaka, "in here." He tapped his forehead significantly. "And I don't need anyone to tell me how to run this thing. The deadline as far as you are concerned, Tyrone, will be four in the morning of the day after tomorrow."

"But we've got to know what's going on," Tyrone protested desperately. "You can't ask eighteen men to stick their heads into an unknown noose without some form of explanation."

"I can and I will. Tyrone, I'm not a fool. I know the risks I'm taking by recruiting this group so quickly, but time isn't on my side. Any one of those men could be a police agent. I've checked as fully as I can, but even I am not infallible. Six of them are known to me personally—they came here for the same reason as I did—and I'm reasonably sure of five others. That leaves me with seven unknown quantities—including you and the girl."

"Well, that's nice to know."

"All anyone needs to know," went on Sedaka, ignoring the comment, "is the function of the particular group to which they are attached. There are three groups. You will be in charge of one of them, I will take another, and Samantha Clair will lead the third."

"The girl?"

Sedaka nodded. "Her local knowledge makes her ideal for the plans I have."

Tyrone studied the table top before him. Clearly, Sedaka was not going to say one word more than was necessary, and there was no earthly good in pumping him further.

"If you're not sure of these people," he said, "why take a risk and get them in on this?"

"Because I'm smart." Sedaka looked at him sombrely. "I know the law and how it works. That visit to you by Mendoza—oh, yes," he waved away Tyrone's interruption, "I know about it from Morgan and his spy device. Four others have received similar visits and similar warnings. As I say, the law knows why we are here, and they can only hope to contain and delay us until Terran Security forces get here to back them up. One way in which they can watch us is to infiltrate a man into the group with a view either to tipping off

his superiors or with the object of sabotaging and delaying us long enough to make it impossible to carry out our objective. Now, if I know I have to watch certain particular men it is easier than having to watch the whole twenty, and it is better to move quickly and to take some risk than to delay the operation to the point where it becomes suicidal even to try."

Tyrone pursed his lips and nodded. "Good thinking." Indeed, it was much too close to home as far as he was concerned. Sedaka was proving every time they met how resourceful a character he was, and Tyrone had cause to wonder how it was he had never come across records of the man in the files of the Bureau. He was the ideal criminal type—tough, completely unscrupulous, a man who was smart enough to realise the odds he was accepting and with the know-how to cut them as short as he possibly could.

"At two in the morning of the day after tomorrow we make our first move," said Sedaka.

Tyrone looked at him with awakened interest.

"The group of which I shall have charge has the task of making sure that we can tackle the jungle without too much danger. To that end I have already located the storage place for the special suits that are used by the more foolhardy tourists who do not wish to take notice of the official warnings. No one lands in the Lyran jungle voluntarily, but anyone who wants to have a close look from an atmosphere craft has to be suitably dressed in case there is an accident." Sedaka wiped a grease spot from his chin, and laid aside his crumpled napkin. "These survival suits can maintain a person for twenty-four hours against anything the jungle can throw at him—I should say, almost anything. They will protect the wearer against disease, from poisonous plant life, attacks from the smaller species of animals, and they will provide effective means of attack against the larger specimens."

"You said almost anything," pointed out Tyrone.

"I did," Sedaka nodded. "Not even Man can unlock all the secrets of the Lyran jungle, Tyrone. It would be idle to pretend that some of our group will not find their grave somewhere near to the wrecked ship." He chuckled hugely. "Why, it might be you—it might even be me."

Tyrone ignored the grim humour and asked. "Why wait till tomorrow? What's wrong with tonight if everything's set up?"

"The storage compartment for the suits is inspected once every three days," explained Sedaka patiently. "Tomorrow is inspection day."

"Are they well guarded?"

"No, only automatic alarms which can be dealt with quite effectively."

"What about transport?"

"I have a carrier truck already hired which will act in that capacity and will also carry the members of my group to the space field."

"From all of which I gather I have something else to do," said Tyrone grumpily.

"Quite right. You're not being left out of anything," smiled the fat man. "You will take eight other men whom you will meet at a pre-arranged rendezvous, and at precisely four in the morning you will take over control of the space-
port."

"What?" Tyrone boggled at him. "Just like that? Nine of us?"

"Nine should be ample, I have worked it out very carefully."

"I just hope you have," retorted Tyrone grimly. "I just hope you know exactly what is happening tomorrow night and that nothing happens to you in the meantime."

Sedaka smiled and nodded like an evil, life-sized idol. "Tomorrow night is the start of a twelve hour operation to get the Rimrock out of that wrecked ship. Within that period, Tyrone, we shall have achieved our objective and be headed out from Lyra with a fortune large enough to keep us all in comfort for the rest of our lives."

Chapter Five

The rest of the meal passed in a desultory discussion of Sedaka's plans, but the fat man wasn't to be drawn further, and after a while Tyrone retired to his room.

He lay fully dressed on his bed for the better part of two hours wondering what he could do. At the back of his mind the whole time was the doubt that anything he might attempt would be frustrated by the foresight of the fat man. He could try and delay the whole operation, but Sedaka would be equal to that and would immediately smell a rat.

Mendoza had suggested taking Sedaka in and sweating the knowledge of the wreck's position out of him, but Tyrone

knew that such an attempt would be no use. The slightest form of physical or mental pressure would probably trigger off a defence mechanism that would throw Sedaka into a cataleptic mental state that would only be broken when the threat was entirely removed. There were other forms of defence which could be used, and too many of them were common knowledge among the criminal minorities; self-induced amnesia which was almost impossible to break down; self-hypnosis which could defeat any artificial attempt at mind probing. Too many men of Sedaka's type were able to employ such means to defeat the ends of justice.

There was, too, another factor involved. If he could, Tyrone had to take advantage of Sedaka's knowledge. There would be a great saving in time and trouble if he could speed up the efforts of the single salvage vessel from Morgwin and prevent the despatch of other such ships to Lyra. The Bureau didn't want fleets of ships heading for Lyra, nor did it want slow congregations of single ships that were in any way out of the ordinary. The wrecked ship had to be found as quickly and as quietly as possible—and Sedaka was the only man alive who knew just where to look.

By morning Tyrone knew what he had to do.

The small morning hours dragged slowly away as Tyrone dozed lightly, and the daylight hours that followed ticked past with a metronome solidity that was maddening. He made one short sally from the hotel and did what he could through a visicall to the office of Mendoza. It was little enough, but it was all that he dared attempt. When it was done he walked back to the hotel grimly aware that he would have to play almost a lone hand in his efforts to forestall Sedaka's success. What little Mendoza could do would be done, but it might be too little and too late if circumstances were against the policeman and Sedaka acted with the swiftness that Tyrone anticipated.

He sat in the hotel bar drinking moodily and watching a teleshow that didn't interest him in the least as the night hours came and darkness shrouded the brilliant panorama of the Jewel City. It was after midnight when he saw Sedaka and Kwang step from the grav shaft and saunter across the wide hall towards the hotel entrance—two tourists apparently on their way to sample the vivid night life of the City. Sedaka

nodded and smiled at him, and Tyrone raised his glass a couple of inches in acknowledgement.

The final stage of the game had begun.

Quietly, the night hours slid away. Tyrone went up to his room and lay gazing out of the window across the glistening vista of the Jewel City which still buzzed and pulsed with the eager life of a nocturnal insect. Only in the hotel was it silent.

At three he rose and from his luggage came a small, deadly needle gun that fitted snugly into the wrist band of his tunic. He changed his shoes for another less innocent pair that had death built into one heel and detection built into the other. It was all he could do, but he had to pray that it might be of some use.

By five minutes to four—the deadline—he was one of a group of loiterers who had arrived in a hired vehicle that was making a night tour of the City, and had included the spaceport in their itinerary. What they were waiting for Tyrone had no idea; all he did know was that Sedaka and his party had, in all probability, obtained the suits they had gone for and were on their way across the City to the spaceport. They should arrive at five past four to find Tyrone and his party in control.

At one minute to four they left the parked vehicle and strolled unhurriedly towards the field entrance. The outer screen was up and the inner one was down. The small office at the entrance to the administration block was dark and unmanned, and only a dozen night staff kept the light burning brilliantly within the main offices.

It was half a minute to four as Tyrone led the eight men silently through the main entrance and waited quietly for the hour to come. His lips were taut and his tongue dry as he watched the seconds tick away. If only he knew what sign to look for! But when he had asked Sedaka had replied sardonically, "You'll know it when it comes, and when it does just hit that main office and stop anyone doing anything stupid. It should take you just two minutes. When it's done send three men out to the hangar to get out the big flier—one of the men with you is an experienced pilot, and he knows what to do. It should take them five minutes to get the vessel ready for takeoff, and by that time we shall be into our suits and ready to cut the outer screen."

The orders whirled in Tyrone's brain. Surely it was four by now? And even as he raised his wrist to check the slowly moving watch the muffled roar of an explosion echoed dimly from somewhere far across the Jewel City. The lights around flickered momentarily and then recovered to shine with only about half their former brilliance. Tyrone didn't wait. "You'll know it when it comes," Sedaka had said, and even as he moved the others moved with him, each of them holding a gun of some shape and size.

Two men took the single lighted offices to either side of the main corridor and two others hit the reception bureau. Tyrone and the other four went through into the main office where half a dozen dazed looking night clerks had risen from their desks in bewilderment.

"All right. Everyone stay quiet," Tyrone ordered.

A grey haired, white skinned man turned towards them, his face slack jawed with astonishment. "What in the name—?"

"No talking," snapped Tyrone. "Just do what we ask and there'll be no trouble."

The door behind him opened again and admitted two more men and three girls being shepherded by two of Tyrone's group.

"All of you together, over there." He waved them to an open space between the neat rows of desks. "You," he nodded to a man at his side. "Look for a small office with no double access. Rip out any phone connections and make sure it can be locked from the outside."

"Right." The man nodded and was gone through the door.

As it swung shut there was a muffled cough from somewhere along the corridor, and Tyrone turned, sudden apprehension creasing his forehead—he knew the explosion of a missile gun when he heard one, and his unspoken question was answered a moment later as a man came grimly into the room.

He jerked his head in the direction of the shot. "One of them decided not to co-operate."

Tyrone nodded and wondered how many more victims of Sedaka's evil genius there would be before the thing was ended.

"There's an office along the corridor just made for us." His messenger called from the doorway. "No doors or

windows and no phone connections. Looks like a filing room."

"Good, that'll do." Tyrone motioned to the stricken group with his gun. "All right, everybody move out. Take it easy and no one else will get hurt."

By now all eight of his group were present, guns at the ready, watchful for any stupid move. They stood aside and made a passage for the dozen frightened people who shuffled apathetically in the direction indicated by Tyrone.

As the last of them went through the door Tyrone said, "You three responsible for getting that ship ready—get moving. You've got—er—three minutes before the rest of the party shows up."

Like a well drilled machine three dark skinned, heavily muscled men turned away and moved towards the main entrance. Tyrone stood and watched the others usher the prisoners into the small room that had been chosen as their jail. The door was locked firmly behind the last of them and Tyrone had time to wonder how it was that only three minutes had slipped by since the explosion had triggered them into action. A distant hum from outside the field entrance sent him running from the office block followed by the other five. It came from along the wide main road leading directly on to the field entrance, and as they watched the distant lights of a fast moving vehicle swelled out of the darkness and grew larger with the mounting roar of a powerful engine at full throttle.

Sedaka was fifty seconds early.

The fat man was in the front of the large transport as it pulled to a stop, and he swung himself quickly to the ground as Tyrone stepped forward.

"Everything all right?"

For answer Tyrone waved silently across to the hangar that housed the ship which was their aim. The doors were already moving open to reveal the brilliantly lit interior, and the lean squat shape of the vessel within.

Sedaka beamed with satisfaction. "Good. The other members of the group should be here in about two minutes."

"What in hell was that explosion?" Tyrone demanded.

Sedaka chuckled. "A little diversion to keep the City authorities occupied for a few hours. Miss Clair's group blew up the main power source for two of the screen units."

Tyrone's jaw dropped in horror.

"I think that it will take every available man to evacuate the two sectors involved, and to keep out the jungle until repairs are effected or emergency units brought into operation. All right," the smile left his face, "everyone grab a suit and climb into it. The field screen comes down in four minutes and we head straight out."

As he headed for the back of the transport Tyrone's mind was in a turmoil. The last thing he expected was that Sedaka would deliberately sabotage the City, but that was what the fat man's action threatened. He dared not guess at the number of people who would die as the invading horror of the jungle broke through the two unprotected segments of the City suburbs. In two hours there could be vicious animals and reptiles of a hundred different species prowling the unprotected streets. It would take every armed man in the City to stem the encroaching horror of the jungle's incredibly rapid invasion.

He pulled on the heavy suit, and under cover of the operation flicked the explosive heel from his left shoe and slid it into his jerkin pocket. Under the heavy foot protection of the suit the missing heel wouldn't be noticed. He checked the oxy-nitrogen supply, and the airtight clips at throat and wrists and ankles. The front fastenings were dogged and tight, and he tucked the light plastic helmet under his left arm.

From along the road came the hum of another approaching vehicle, and Tyrone stepped from the interior of the transport in time to see a low, fast luxury cab scream to a halt bare yards away. From it tumbled six more men—and a girl. Even though he was expecting her Tyrone felt a slight thrill run through him as he saw Samantha Clair. Even in the dim light, with her hair caught up in a tight knot and her lovely figure covered by a set of shapeless overalls, he couldn't fail to recognise the grim-faced beauty in the dim light.

He was aware of the bulky, suited figure of Sedaka beside him.

"As I said, Tyrone, Miss Clair has proved to be very useful."

Tyrone said nothing.

The girl crossed towards them, a slight, cold smile flickering across a face that was bare of make-up, and Tyrone realised that though they knew each other by indirect contact, this was their first face to face meeting.

"Sedaka," she nodded at the fat man, and turned her amused gaze on Tyrone. "Well, I didn't think we'd be on the same side when I searched your room."

"You might not have been if you hadn't been careless," said Tyrone ironically.

"The camera?" Her right eyebrow raised a trifle. "Yes, I heard about that."

"Everything all right, Samantha?" asked Sedaka.

"Couldn't be better. It went up right on time—though you know that already. There were only three technicians on duty, and we took them with no trouble, set the charges and got out fast. They blew just as we hit the main road to the field."

"Good." Sedaka looked at his watch and then turned towards the gaping doors of the hangar. The slim, sleek, hull was nosing its way out into the field, and the low, preliminary murmur of its engines echoed across the field. "Take off in three minutes. Get your men into their suits as soon as you can, Samantha. Come on, Tyrone, let's get started."

Tyrone followed the fat man away from the two vehicles and they became just two more of a larger, straggling group, moving across the field towards a date with a fortune—or with death! Beside him the slim form of Kwang, still with his enigmatic smile, moved with his usual lithe grace, unhampered it seemed by the bulk of the suit. Bringing up the rear, still struggling with the fastenings of their suits, came the men of Samantha Clair's group. The girl was still a slim figure in a suit that fitted her with surprising elegance, and her hair had come free so that it blew behind her, a brilliant golden cloud in the field lights.

From the transport several men were unloading a dozen items of heavy equipment and carting them towards the ship. Tyrone recognised the bulk of a ray unit—no, there were two of them; he could see a portable flame gun and a power unit, and several heavy duty portable blasting torches. He shook his head wryly—Sedaka had thought of everything.

The ship was well out in the open now, a slim silver shape with a gaping black opening amidships which denoted the main hatch. The inner lights came on as they reached the foot of the ramp, and Sedaka led the way into the craft. He paused in the entrance and looked back at the men following

him. Then he smiled down at Tyrone, and said, "It will be dawn in forty-three minutes, Tyrone. We shall reach the wreck in about seventy minutes. It will be full daylight. With any luck we should be on our way out in two and a half hours."

Tyrone nodded, grimly aware that everything was going Sedaka's way.

"What does it feel like to be less than three hours away from a fortune, Tyrone?"

"We might be three hours from our graves," he retorted sourly, but Sedaka only laughed and turned away into the body of the ship.

Slowly, Tyrone followed.

Chapter Six

It was full light now, and below them the livid green of the jungle slid away in a miasmic, ever rising mist as the hot sun began its daily work of dehydration. They were flying low enough to hold the protection of a line of hills to the east of the Jewel City; low enough for them to catch occasional glimpses of the deadly jungle life that rolled and flamed barely two hundred metres beneath the speeding craft.

Sedaka was up front with the pilot in the control room, guiding and checking their position from his own pre-knowledge of their ultimate objective.

Tyrone sat quietly, smoking, alone with his thoughts, while opposite the golden haired figure of Samantha Clair slept like a child, curled up in the soft, heavy padded seat. Two or three others were sleeping also, but there were two card schools playing quietly and unemotionally. Kwang read silently from a well thumbed, ancient, leather covered book.

The past hour had been too long, Tyrone thought, it had given him too much time for speculation about the horror of the Jewel City. At best he knew the authorities would be slowly winning a horrible fight against a thousand different forms of death; at worst—he shuddered a trifle—at worst the City could be dead or dying as the Lyran jungle fought back to reclaim that which had been ripped from its grasp by the questing hand of Man. There weren't only the things that could be seen and fought, the flying, crawling, leaping, slithering monstrosities that had spawned in Lyra's jungle

hell—there were other, unseen things, the bacteria, the disease, the tiny insects, so small and so fast that they eye couldn't follow them; and all of them carried death as ghastly and as final as the sweeping claws and the grinding teeth of the animals, and the poisonous touch of the trees and plants.

With the centuries of progress one thing had remained unchanged—the greed and the conscience of the human race. Sedaka might be a throwback, but there were far too many like him for the safety of all ordinary citizens, and it was a terrifying thought that the apparent imperviousness of the Jewel City could be brought to an end by the depredations of just one man.

Tyrone came out of his reverie to find the brilliant eyes of Samantha Clair steady upon him. He stirred and smiled uneasily.

"You look like a man fighting his conscience," she remarked with disturbing candour.

Tyrone shrugged. "I didn't know what was happening to the City before it happened. I just don't like it, that's all."

"Just how did you think we were going to divert attention from ourselves?" The bright eyes pondered him coldly.

"I didn't bother about it. I just left it to Sedaka."

The door to the control cabin slid open and the chubby form of Sedaka came through. He beamed at them and waved a gloved hand to the clock on the bulkhead. "Two minutes. Better get ready; helmets on, suits checked."

"How do we land?" asked Tyrone.

"It's all taken care of. You'll soon see."

Tyrone didn't doubt it for a moment. He rose stiffly from his seat and snapped the loosened fastenings of his suit. He pulled the helmet into place and checked the self-sealing joints. The inside of the suit was as quiet as a tomb until he switched in the communicator, and then he could hear the normal rumble of voices around him as the rest of the party made ready for the task ahead.

Through the communicator Sedaka's voice boomed at them with barely suppressed satisfaction and excitement.

"There she is. To port about half a mile."

Tyrone crossed to the viewport on that side of the ship and looked down on to the lurid jungle pattern. The ship had slowed and was turning in a vast circle around some central

point, and as he looked Tyrone could see what that central point was. A vast pinnacle rose from the smooth green of the jungle top, covered almost completely by the crawling, writhing vegetation that seemed to have resented the intrusion of something alien; yet at the top of the pinnacle a gleam of metal showed bright in the rising sun, and that, together with the smooth, regular shape of the green mound, proved that Sedaka was right. Somewhere, under that huge pile of vegetation, lay a king's ransom ready for the taking. In spite of himself Tyrone chuckled mirthlessly.

"How does it feel to be rich, Tyrone?"

Samantha Clair's voice echoed in his helmet and he was aware of her suited form pressing close against him as she strained to look out of the port.

"I'll tell you later."

She chuckled. "You're a pessimist, Tyrone. I wonder why."

"I just check the odds every so often—"

"All quiet," called Sedaka. "We're going to clear the landing area and then set down. When we open the main hatch I want the two groups with the ray units to be out first to clean up the area between us and the wreck. Once that's done group three can start uncovering the actual wreck with the flame throwers. I don't want it all cleared—just enough so that we know where the main lock is situated."

"Why not use the heat rays for clearing the wreck?" asked Tyrone. "It'll be quicker."

"Not in the long run. If we use those it'll take best part of two hours to cool the ship down before we can get near it, and we don't have that much time."

The ship swung lower and it seemed to Tyrone that the eager fingers of the forest reached up to try and pluck them from the sky. From somewhere amidships a booming roar reached him through the communicator, and he saw a vast area of the jungle spring into flaming confusion below him. The roaring mounted in pitch as the ship pumped fiery death on to the ground beneath. The jungle boiled and flamed as if it was fighting back, and then died slowly, cringing away from the tortured earth that lay burnt black and smouldering under the rays from the vessel. In five minutes there was a vast smouldering, two hundred yard circle of death whose closest point of contact to the wreck was a bare ten yards—but in that ten

yards the jungle still ruled. No man would be able to get nearer to the wreck until the flame throwers had completed the work.

“Landing now,” called Sedaka. “Ray teams ready.”

The pilot was good Tyrone had to admit; the bare earth floor wasn't level by any means and it was necessary for him to land as close to the wreck as he could with the main lock facing in that direction. He had a few short yards in which to manoeuvre in any one direction, and as Tyrone watched the ground coming up to meet them he knew that a slip could mean disaster. That slip never came. Slowly, with consummate ease, the silver hull grounded on the still smoking earth from which living things already moved and sprouted—a tribute to the fantastic will to live of Lyra's insensate life.

The ray units hummed from the hatch killing and cleaning the area around the vessel, and behind them as they moved from the safety of the ship the three men of the flame gun team moved their bulky equipment into the open.

“The rest stay in the ship until I tell you to move,” ordered Sedaka. “No one else goes out until we've got the hatch cleared.”

Tyrone leaned against the hatch entrance and watched the operations proceeding. The earth died again beneath the heat rays and already the flame unit was close enough to begin its assault on the vegetation which hid and protected the wrecked ship. The scorched crackle roared in his ears, mounting thunderously and punctuated by the death screams of unseen creatures as they died in the holocaust; the gleam of metal came into view as the creepers and vines fell away. A shout of triumph from the flame gun team was replaced by a sudden cry of terror as the first tragedy hit the expedition. Out of the flame and smoke, vast jaws agape with rage and pain, sprang a lightning grey form—four times the size of a Terran bull; it was dying even as it hit the foremost ray, and with it died one of the crew, torn in half and shattered by one mighty blow from a great clawed foot. The creature leapt in its death agony and dissolved as the second heat ray turned and caught it in full flight.

The stunned silence in the ship degenerated into a rumble of horror. Beside Tyrone the girl gagged and retched.

“All right, forget it,” snapped Sedaka's cold voice. “Clear that wreck and find the main lock.”

The flame gun turned again to its task while another man from the ship ran across the smoking ground to take the place of the one who had died.

As they watched more and more of the wreck came into view. The vegetation died, and the jungle crumbled away, the temporary area of man's conquest grew a little wider.

The flame gun spluttered and died as the man controlling the fuel flow cut off the supply.

"Hey, Sedaka."

"What is it?"

"The ship. Can't you see from there?"

"What about the ship? Have you cleared it?"

"Yeah, sure. It's cleared. But look at it, Sedaka. That ship didn't crash on its own—it's been shot down and half destroyed."

The announcement was greeted by a deathly silence; Tyrone felt his lips twitch in a humourless grin. Suddenly he felt old and tired as if the tension of weeks had slipped away leaving an empty hollow in the centre of his being. The knowledge wasn't new to him but with its public proclamation a small hope had died that had no right ever to have been born.

"Don't be a fool," snapped Sedaka.

"Then look at the hole in the hull, Sedaka, you could fly a copter through it. We don't need the main hatch, we can walk in through the hole."

There was a long silence, and Tyrone could imagine Sedaka's ice cold brain weighing the information as he studied the wreck closely through a pair of glasses from the safety of the ship. He felt a gloved hand fumbling at this chest and as he looked down he saw Samantha Clair reach up to snap off the switch controlling his communicator. She turned off her own as well and then leaned across to place her helmet close to his.

He saw her lips move and heard her muffled voice echo through the slight contact of their helmets.

"You didn't seem surprised about that wreck, Tyrone."

"So? Should I be?"

"Everyone else was."

"It had to crash somehow, I suppose shooting down was as good a way as any."

"Don't give me that," she snapped. "You know as well as I do that the wreckage is that of a government vessel. Who

would be able to knock out her protective screens with enough power to destroy her?"

"I never gave it a thought."

There was a long silence but their helmets still touched, and after a moment Samantha Clair's small voice said, "You know a lot more than you're saying, Tyrone. I think you know more about it than Sedaka." And the contact was broken.

Tyrone switched back his communicator and heard Sedaka's voice saying,—"forget it. Everybody out and over to the wreck. We've got to work fast. Flame crews, keep the jungle clear of the hole in the ship. Ray units, hit the surrounding jungle and hit it hard. We've got to be clear in about thirty minutes—that's all the power we've got."

Tyrone went down the ramp with the rest of them, a jostling eager crew who saw a fortune just ahead of them. The death of their companion moments before was forgotten, they were a bare forty yards from the gaping hole that was their entrance, but that forty yards spelt death for two men.

From the ground still smouldering from the onslaught of the ray units there came a flicker of black which reached out and whipped at the legs of one of the men. He fell shouting, and the black thing died in the blast of a ray gun from the man next to him. But it was too late. The tough, almost impervious plastic of the suit was ripped and torn as if by a row of tiny teeth, and as Tyrone looked he could see the holes growing larger as if a corrosive acid was eating into the material. The man screamed, high and wild, his body contorted in a terrible muscular spasm—and then he was dead—just ten seconds after the black unknown had hit him.

"Leave him," shouted Sedaka, "but watch out. We can't afford more losses."

Even as he spoke the next man was caught in a screaming diving bundle of life that hurled itself with terrific speed out of the empty sky to settle on his helmet. Tyrone jerked at his needle gun but he couldn't get in a clear shot for fear of hitting the thing's victim. The man fell to the ground screaming, his gloved hands tearing futilely at the horror which had replaced his head; and what was going on under that hideous, flapping cowl made Tyrone gag with horror.

Sedaka settled it for them all. Coldly and unemotionally he turned his own ray gun on the thing and the man, and blasted them both into their own separate hells.

Twenty yards and two men, thought Tyrone with sickened wonder. And yet the others still kept going; there was no thought of going back, or of giving up. Each dead man meant more for the rest, and he didn't doubt but that was the private philosophy that kept the others going forward. In every man's soul is the seed of immortality, and with greed to subdue his fear it is always someone else who is going to die, not him.

"Sedaka." The voice screamed at them all through the communicator. "Sedaka, look. Up there, a ship."

Tyrone looked round rapidly. Near the wreck a man stood like a statue, his right arm raised and pointing out across the tops of the jungle trees away to the south. The rest of the group stopped dead in their tracks and turned, looking in the direction of the pointing arm.

Tyrone turned with them and saw it. His heart jerked within him and his mouth dried suddenly under the impact of horror. It was a ship such as he had never seen before, a vast, black, peardrop, featureless save for a few angled protruberances, and it moved silently with a deliberate, omnipotent purpose.

"What is it, Sedaka, what the hell is it?" the voice screamed again.

Sedaka didn't answer, his pudgy figure was standing bare yards away from Tyrone, stiff and stunned, as if he couldn't believe the evidence of his own eyes. As they watched, it slowed its headlong flight and hung several hundred feet above them observing the frozen scene with a cold, brooding detachment.

"What do we do, Sedaka?" screamed the communicator in Tyrone's ears, but the fat man was silent.

"It's moving again."

And so it was. As he looked Tyrone could see the imperceptible shift of its vast black bulk as it rose silently upwards into the clear sky climbing rapidly as if to gain height. For a moment Tyrone was puzzled. It seemed as if it had seen all it wanted to see, and was now heading back the way it had come. But why? Even as the question framed itself so was the answer provided. Out of the brilliant morning sky of Lyra, headed from the direction of the Jewel City, sped four sleek silver shapes. They were high flying, gleaming needles that glinted in the sunlight and moved with terrific speed down upon the vast rising bulk of the alien ship. In Tyrone's

communicator echoed a sudden terrible crackling roar that he recognised as the jamming whine of an all frequency blackout signal.

As the crackling was born he heard a frantic shout, "They're Squad ships—" die in his ears. Across the dawn sky, brilliant and soundless, he watched the lancing bolts of death as the squadron poured death upon the rising vessel. Its inability to rise fast enough and high enough was its undoing. The slowness of its reactions against the gravitational pull of the planet showed it to be a thing of space, a ship whose home was the black void between the stars. Here, close to the bulk of a planet, she was a death trap to those within her. Still she fought back, her own blue lightnings matching those of the Squad ships that lanced upon her without any apparent effect.

She was but a speck now, still rising, and Tyrone had to squint into the sunlight to follow her. Then it happened—one of the diving silver specks dissolved into a burst of terrible flame that dimmed even the rising sun, and even as it was born its brilliance was enveloped by a greater and brighter flame that blossomed forth from the black speck, spewing out in an all embracing flame of death that blinded those who watched from the ground. Tyrone turned away closing his eyes against the aching, searing flame. Around him men fell to the ground burying their helmets in their arms in an effort to protect their eyes and their vision.

Abruptly there was silence and a degree of normalcy. The jamming crackle faded, the flame in the sky died, and the comparative dullness of the sun shone through once again. The three remaining silver streaks were low over the tree tops, the muffled roar of their coming echoing through the communicator. They swung low over the tree tops in a brief searching sweep and then headed away from the burnt oasis that contained Sedaka's group.

"Back to the ship." Sedaka's voice roared at them. "It's our only chance. Get airborne before they can come back."

"We haven't got a chance, Sedaka," howled a fear stricken voice.

"Then stay and rot. The rest of you—hurry."

Chapter Seven

The group turned and scattered, some faster than others as their reactions were quicker. Sedaka was already shambling hurriedly towards the open lock with the slim figure of Kwang like a protective guard beside him. Tyrone looked round wildly, there was no sign of the girl at first glance, and he wondered what he should do. All thoughts of treasure had left the party now, there was only the desperate need to get away and salvage something from the disaster that had, bare minutes earlier, promised so much for so many. The veneer of success was gone and already the first men were scrambling up the ramp into the open hatch. The engines were roaring their muted song, and in seconds she would slip away from the burnt ground and leave the jungle to reclaim its own. Perhaps she could do it, Sedaka had reacted fast—but had he acted fast enough?

For one agonised second Tyrone hesitated. It might mean death if he undid the suit fastenings but there was no other way. His gloved hand fumbled with the front fastenings, fingers clumsy in their haste, ripping the suit open to admit his eager hand to the jerkin pocket beneath. He felt the small rounded shoe heel with its tiny but deadly charge, and he jerked it out fumbling again to close the seal on his suit.

"Tyrone, come on." Sedaka's voice boomed frantically in his ears. "What in hell are you playing at. Get back here or we'll leave you."

"I forgot something, Sedaka." Even in his own ears he could sense the note of hysteria. "Here it is, a present for you." He jabbed a gloved finger at the tiny button in the centre of the heel and hurled it as hard as he could towards the wavering group at the entrance to the ship. He saw it hit the shining hull beside the hatch and bounce ever so slowly down towards the ground. It never reached the burnt soil.

There was a booming explosion that split the ears asunder, and a mushrooming burst of fire and flame bowled him over with sickening force. His head rang as it banged against the hard plastic of his helmet, and in the silence that followed the explosion he could hear the screams of someone who hadn't quite died in the holocaust he had created.

"Tyrone!" He raised his head dizzily and saw the black, smouldering wreckage around the hatchway. The ship wouldn't fly again.

"Tyrone!" The voice was louder now, and his eyes had difficulty in focussing. He saw several figures staggering to their feet and standing still or wandering aimlessly in futile despair. "Tyrone!" His eyes made out the figure of Samantha Clair a bare ten yards away from him, standing straddle legged, swaying slightly, a needle gun tight in her gloved hand. Unsteadily, he tried to get to his feet, his hand fumbling for the needle gun which he knew should be at his wrist, but he couldn't find it. Above him the sky wheeled in gyrating circles, and as he fell back to the scorched ground he heard her screaming at him, "Tyrone—"

To die is to find peace; to be born again is to know pain.

With his waking Tyrone knew only that death was very close, held tight in the gloved hand of a slim, determined girl who had seen a fortune slip from her grasp. Yet this was not the place in which he had died! This was not death.

Around was peace and silence, and a clean, sweet smelling air that was far removed from the jungle horror that had been his last waking memory. There was a softness to ease his aching body, a yielding, pleasant cosiness beneath his head, and a clean, aseptic freshness all around.

He opened his eyes a fraction and looked at a white ceiling with soft lights. Tentatively he moved his limbs: they ached, but that was all.

A woman's voice said, quietly, "He's coming round now," and a deeper male voice answered, "Good, I'll tell Mendoza."

The name triggered reactions within Tyrone's brain, and the whole flood of knowledge that flashed into being in his mind brought with it a hundred different questions.

He turned his head a trifle and winced at the pain caused by the movement. There was a nurse close by, within his vision, a dark-skinned young woman in white, who smiled as he looked at her.

"How do you feel, Mister Tyrone?"

"Rough." His voice sounded strained and thin, and he tried to ease himself into a more upright position. "Anything broken? Anything I'm likely to die of?"

She laughed. "No. Bruising and cuts, some slight burns. Oh—and we had to shoot you full of antibodies to make sure the jungle didn't claim a belated victim. You should be up and about in a couple of days."

A man's face appeared over her left shoulder and smiled at him.

"Care for a visitor?"

"Name of Mendoza?" asked Tyrone.

The man nodded.

"Yes. I want to see him."

The doctor left and the nurse helped him into a more comfortable position so that he could see the door. Mendoza came in, smiling broadly, but even in his weakened state Tyrone was aware of the lines of tension that creased the man's face. Mendoza looked as if he had been through quite a bit in the last few hours.

"How are you, Tyrone?" They shook hands briefly.

"I'll live. How long have I been here?"

"Twenty-four hours give or take. The drugs knocked you flat, but the doctors assured me that it was quite necessary. No telling what bugs you picked up when you opened that suit the way you did."

"You know about that? Hell, it was only for a second."

"Seconds can kill on Lyra."

Tyrone had a momentary vision of a black thing that had whipped out of the ground and—hurriedly he pushed the thought away from him. "Yes, I know. What happened after I threw that grenade?"

Mendoza shrugged, his mouth twisted wryly. "You crippled the ship, and killed Sedaka and six others. The rest of them holed up in the ship until we landed. The jungle started fighting back and we only just got you all out in time." His brow creased in worry. "Tyrone, one thing hasn't been answered—"

Tyrone anticipated the question and broke in roughly, "What about the girl? Samantha Clair?"

The worry faded from the policeman's face and he grinned. "You two should have got to know each other a little better. She fired two shots at you, and then put on a pretty good act herself and prayed you would stay down and out until we got to you."

Tyrone's brain was clear now, and there were questions to which he thought he knew the answers. "Go on," he said grimly.

"She was the Colonial Bureau agent on Lyra, and it seems that headquarters on Earth forgot to tip her off to the fact that you were arriving."

"They weren't supposed to," snapped Tyrone. "For just the same reasons that I didn't inform you."

"Well, once she'd been invited to join the party, Sedaka put her in the group that was to blow up the screen generators—"

"And she tipped you off?" Relief flooded through Tyrone at the indirect knowledge that the Jewel City was safe—that the jungle never had a chance to win back its lost lands.

"Yes, we had some of our experts lay alternative charges in an open park while we dismantled those she had laid. It lulled Sedaka into thinking that we'd be too busy to follow up the attack on the spaceport. Once you'd taken off we just followed the pulses from the detector in your heel. We'd have hit the landing area earlier but we had two diversions."

"Two?"

Mendoza nodded. "First we had to take care of a small cargo ship that was lying off the planet, obviously ready to come in and pick you up once the job was done."

Tyrone nodded; so that was how Sedaka had planned his getaway. "You got them, of course?"

"Yes, but we can't charge them with anything. They had no apparent connection with Sedaka, and we can't prove that they had." Mendoza leaned forward in the chair which he had pulled to the bedside. "The second interruption was that black ship," he said quietly.

Tyrone said nothing. He knew that the questions were inevitable and he knew that he shouldn't be answering them when they came. The only question was how much would Mendoza guess and how much speculation would he start as a result of supplying his own answers to the questions in his mind.

"I never saw anything like it before, Tyrone," he said.

"Pray God you never will again."

In a few weeks or months the Central Government would have to take some action. They couldn't keep it quiet much longer. He'd done his job.

"We got the salvage vessel up in two hours, Tyrone," Mendoza's quiet voice broke his train of thought, "and it took them just under an hour to get the cargo out of the wreck."

Tyrone looked at him sombrely but said nothing.

"I don't know what it was they got," insisted the policeman, "but I do know that it wasn't a thousand pounds of Rimrock."

"No." Tyrone shook his head, and took a deep breath, his mind was made up now, and he knew what he must say. "No, it wasn't."

"Well, then?"

"Mendoza, have you ever heard of Paravel or Marvic?"

"Why, of course. They are colonist worlds out on the Rim."

"They were," Tyrone corrected him. "They were, until two years ago. Have you got a cigarette?"

Silently, Mendoza handed him a packet and Tyrone took one and lit it, puffing a luxurious cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

"Something came in from the outside and wiped them off the face of the Universe."

"What?"

"We didn't know what had happened for sure until a patrol ship, which had landed on one of the Dead Worlds for a minor repair job, got a sighting on a single giant vessel that was coming into the Galaxy very fast from—" he shrugged, "well, from nowhere. It couldn't be identified, but the patrol vessel got off a report before it was destroyed—along with the planet on which it had landed."

"A planet?" breathed Mendoza. "Destroyed by a single ship?"

Tyrone nodded. "It took us a long time but eventually we got a fleet out to the area of infiltration that should have been strong enough to tackle anything, and then we sat back and waited and watched. We got half a dozen more sighting reports plus some useful and detailed recordings from robot spy stations with which we littered the entire area. From those it didn't take a master mind to realise that we were up against something so big and so powerful that it was almost outside the limit of our comprehension."

"But—who are they? Where do they come from?"

"If we knew we'd have ten times as much information as we have at present. All we do know is that they are extra-Galactic; that they can cross inter-Galactic space as easily as we move between the planets of our own Universe. We lost seventeen ships in a battle with one of their big, black vessels—and we didn't even touch it."

"A ship like the one we destroyed?"

"No, no. That was only a small scout craft. The really big ships carry them like—well, like fleas on the back of a dog. They always come in singly, never in fleets and in that fact lies our own small hope. We believe they can only make small scale incursions at present, that they are limited to single ship operation for one of two reasons. One, there aren't many of them; or two, that this Galaxy is just a segment of their exploratory range. We rather hope that the first reason is the right one."

"But where does the wreck come into all this?" demanded Mendoza.

"I'm coming to that." Tyrone felt weak, and he lay back more comfortably against the pillows as he marshalled his thoughts.

"After that first disastrous battle we kept at it, we used newer spotting techniques. Oh, sure, we lost more ships and more men, we even lost another planet—this time it was Oreste, and right on the heels of that disaster we got our first piece of luck. We caught one of their smaller scouts on its own away from the mother vessel. It was like the one that hit Lyra. It was damaged sufficiently to force it to crash land on an uninhabited lump of rock in the Gomez sector of the Rim. Three salvage vessels got to it fast and found thirteen dead and disintegrated aliens—and one who was alive.

"I can't describe it because I don't know what it looks like, but you saw the size of the box that came out of the wreck. They got it under deep freeze and sedation and shipped it out in a fast cruiser scout; then they dismantled the wreck—or as much of it as they could—and they got that away too. The remains of the ship, the carcass, the main body, plates, girders, and the rest of the big stuff was packed up and sent off in two other ships. Neither of them got within ten light years."

Tyrone drew deeply on the cigarette, and wiped a hand across his brow, aware that he was sweating slightly. "The mother ship came in and caught them. She wiped them both out and took off after the other two scouts. The second one, with all the instruments, and weapons, the moveable parts, got clean away and all the stuff it carried is on Earth being taken apart in our laboratories there. The one with the life specimen wasn't so lucky. We think they must have some form of backtracing direction equipment because the mother

ship headed right after her on a dead straight course parallel with that taken by the first ship. They caught her about twenty light years from Lyra and got in one damaging blast before she managed to lose herself under cover of an asteroid cloud. Her distress call was picked up and we got a fleet away and into the area before the attackers caught up with her again.

"What happened after that we can only guess. The mother ship took flight and headed out of the Galaxy before the fleet got within a dozen light years. The wrecked scout limped from cover and headed for Lyra, the nearest inhabited planet. She got out one more call saying that her cargo was still safe and had been cushioned against a possible crash in the midship compartment. It would survive if she was forced to crash land." He shrugged. "The rest you know—or most of it, anyway. We dared not put out the true story for obvious reasons, and we couldn't congregate too many ships in the area in case we drew the attention of the aliens to the congregation. To cover up we made a couple of decoy searches in other areas, and, sure enough, we got visitors looking for the same thing we were."

Mendoza's face was white and shocked. "You mean—we've got an extra-Galactic invasion on our hands?"

"Who knows? They may only be scout ships on exploration trips outside their own Galaxy. We don't know how far they've come or even if they're in a position to mount and maintain a long range operation like the invasion of another Universe. All we do know is that they represent a fantastic threat to us, one which we can only fight by learning as much as we can as fast as we can from that one scout ship we managed to bag."

"And the one prisoner." Mendoza nodded slowly, his lips pursed and grim. "I did see the box they took out of that wreck, Tyrone."

"And?"

"It was all of fifty feet long, thirty wide and twenty deep. Even allowing for the equipment necessary to maintain it in a suspended state of life—" He stopped and shuddered briefly. "I don't think I'd want to be around when they opened it up."

"Compare it with the size of their ships," Tyrone told him. "The one you got was only a small scout."

There was a long pause as Mendoza allowed his brain to take in all that Tyrone had told him. "Can we learn fast enough from what we have?" he asked at last.

Tyrone shrugged and stubbed out the cigarette. "Who knows? I do know this, we have to start somewhere—everything has a beginning and an end. This may be the beginning for us. One thing, Mendoza, I think the whole story will be made public before long. It isn't the sort of thing you can keep quiet indefinitely. Three planets destroyed, thirty odd ships and their crews. Rumours will start soon, and then the Central Government will have to do something. In the meantime," he grinned, "don't say anything to spark them off."

"I daren't," the policeman replied gloomily, "no one would believe me if I did." He rose from the chair and turned away from the bedside towards the door. "They tell me you'll be up and about in a few days. I'll look in again tomorrow. Anything I can do in the meantime."

"No, I don't think so." Tyrone shook his head. "I'll send my report through to Bureau Headquarters when I'm out of here. They will have enough to go on in the interim. Oh, there is one thing."

"Yes?"

"What happened to Samantha Clair? Did she come through all right?"

Mendoza looked at him in surprise. "Didn't I tell you? Oh, no, I forgot. You've another visitor."

Tyrone looked past him to the door and saw the smiling face of the girl framed in it. She crossed to the bedside and held out a soft, cool hand for him to take. Behind her Mendoza grinned and closed the door behind him.

"You should have told me," Tyrone chided. "I nearly died of a heart attack when you pointed that gun at me."

She laughed back at him. "I had you tagged as just another of Sedaka's men until we uncovered that wreck."

Tyrone studied her blonde beauty with a good deal of pleasure as he asked, "How did that help?"

"I knew the ship had been shot down from the report I got from the Bureau, but no one else on Lyra did. I watched you when they cut away the vegetation and told Sedaka what they'd found. You weren't in the least surprised, your only reaction was a slightly cynical grin that told me that you knew

all along. As I said at the time, you knew a great deal more than you should have done, and I began to wonder about your apparently unsuccessful pose as a Bureau Agent. The confirmation came when you threw that bomb."

"We could have saved each other such a lot of trouble," sighed Tyrone.

"I doubt it. Things might not have worked out as well if we had tried to work in unison."

"No. Anyway, I owe you some thanks." Tyrone grinned a little sheepishly. "If you hadn't—er—shot me first, someone else would certainly have tried, and I don't think they would have missed." He cocked a questioning eye at her. "And now, what happens to you?"

"I'm expecting recall orders to Earth," she told him. "My usefulness is ended as a result of this operation. I've been here long enough and there'll be too many stories floating around for far too long to do my position any good. My usefulness is ended as far as Lyra is concerned."

"Perhaps," said Tyrone smiling briefly, "we could travel back to Earth together."

"Perhaps." She chuckled drily. "And now, do you think I could have my hand back, please?"

—Lan Wright

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David Rome is a comparatively new writer of science fiction but he has already produced several exciting stories with interesting ideas. A freelance, he has only recently returned from Australia where he worked for a time on a newspaper.

THE GAME

by DAVID ROME

Chapter One

The Venusian Streamcar came up the wide driveway at a cautious, woman's pace and stopped under the scimitar shade of the house porch.

Hugo Molineaux pushed back the plexiglass dome, and the girl who had been driving swung out of the car. She was tall and dark-haired, dressed like an Earthgirl in white shorts and a white, sleeveless blouse. Only her eyes, sweeping upward in long, glowing curves, marked her as Venusian.

Molineaux looked at her for a long time as she stood beside the car, her legs golden brown, her face darkly beautiful.

The girl caught his look. She said softly, "Anticipating, Hu?"

He grinned, white teeth flashing, and the girl laughed aloud, backing away. Her hair was very black, still shining wet from swimming. She turned suddenly, running toward the steps of the house, her tiny blue and white costume fluttering in her hand. Molineaux chased her, made a grab for her arm, and was left holding the costume. The girl reached the top of the steps and turned, laughing down at him. Molineaux held up

the costume and waved it triumphantly. Then he came on up the steps and together they went into the house.

It was quiet and cool in the long hallway, and they went on up the stairs in silence. The house was warmer up here because the sun-trap was directly overhead now, feeding power into the multicelled converter that was installed in its basement cave, somewhere below.

The house itself was almost new, but was styled—as so many modern Venusian homes are—after Earth's twentieth-century dwellings. The stairway was carpeted, and the walls of the dressing-room, to which Molineaux made his way, were hung with reproductions of van Gogh and Chamberlain.

As he changed into his clothes for third meal, Molineaux studied himself in the glass and tried to picture himself in the scarlet and white of a Teacher's robes. But that wouldn't come either. He cursed himself for a fool, combed his hair, and went downstairs.

The table was laid but the meal hadn't been served. Susan was still dressing. As Molineaux came in, two Venusians, who had been talking over a drink at the fireplace, stood up to welcome him.

The taller of the two, Jonathon Prape, came toward him. He was as dark as his daughter, but his face was pale. His plump lips gave an effeminate lilt to everything he said.

"A drink, Hu?" he said now, and he motioned Molineaux forward. The second Venusian was still on his feet. He bowed faintly from the waist and said, "Hugo . . ."

Molineaux nodded unsmilingly. Isaac Fearn was Prape's secretary. There was unconcealed antagonism between him and Molineaux.

Prape had poured the drinks and was offering redwine to Molineaux now. Molineaux took it and sat down on the curving lounge. He wasn't tall, but his big hand dwarfed the glass.

"Fearn and I have been thrashing out your future, Hu," Prape was saying.

"Uh-huh," Molineaux said. He was wondering how long Susan would be. Prape's accent frayed his nerves. He kept hearing Susan's high, laughing voice, her lips forming the words as though she'd been born to the language.

He had met her in England, during the time she'd spent on Earth. He'd been with her for one day, walking and talking

endlessly, and later that evening he'd gone to Cooper's and told them he was through with space. He'd taken a job loading tubecars, seeing Susan whenever he could.

His mind had carried him away. When he looked up, Prape was in front of him with a videoframe in his hands. Isaac Fearn was looking at Molineaux, smiling faintly.

When Molineaux looked at the video, he knew why.

His own face stared back at him—perfectly reproduced in living colour. As he put his drink down, the video began to change. He heard Susan come into the room, but he didn't turn. There was a scene from the Game on the screen now. A figure in scarlet darted futilely to one side as the massive ball crashed down. As the ball engulfed the figure the video became a close-up of a white-clad Player—and again the scene changed. A girl in scarlet stood smiling, removing her hood, while the vast amphitheatre was filled with applause. Finally the series began to repeat itself; Molineaux's own face was shown again . . .

Prape moved a lever in the back of the frame and the videos were gone. "There'll be a sound hook-up, of course. We'll be running a couple of lines about you—and a couple about us."

Quietly Molineaux said, "How many of these have you had prepared?"

Prape said distinctly, "A hundred."

"At what cost?"

Prape's smile faded. "There's some objection?"

Molineaux shook his head slowly, looking at his hands. Tonight he'd made up his mind that it was going to be settled. He wanted Prape's daughter—but not the job as a Teacher of the Game. Now Prape was confronting him with an advertising gadget that must have cost him fifty thousand credits.

Molineaux looked at Susan; but she was smiling, certain he'd be pleased. Her father was giving Molineaux a big money job because he was marrying her. Why shouldn't he be pleased?"

Prape said again, "What's your objection, Hu?" His voice was tight.

Molineaux said dully, "The girl, maybe . . . She's attractive, yes—but custom says that a scarlet should never remove the hood."

Prape gestured faintly with his hands. "Fearn's notion," he said. "Sex stuff." He pursed his thick, woman's lips. "I'll have it re-shot."

They were moving toward the table now, and Molineaux said, "Fine." Then, as they took their places, Prape said to Fearn, "If there were more like Hu on Earth, Isaac, the Game would take hold, even there."

Fearn smiled faintly and sat down. "You agree, Hu?"

"No," Molineaux said.

Susan looked up quickly. So did Prape.

"Look," Molineaux said slowly. "All spacers play the Game. It's a novelty to control the ball with your mind. But it doesn't last. Not with most Earthmen."

Prape had begun eating, but he stopped now. His eyes settled on a huge brass urn at the far end of the table. He concentrated his mind for a moment, and lifted it. As it hung in the air he said to Molineaux, "You deny that Earthmen, after training, are able to do this?"

Patiently Molineaux said, "That's not my point. I know ninety-nine per cent of the populated planets play some version of the Game. If they have the motivation, Earthmen can certainly develop their telekinetic powers. But the point is that the motivation isn't there. A certain predatory feeling, essential to enjoyment of the Game, is missing on Earth."

"Predatory?" Prape said, very softly.

Molineaux plunged on. "We know that Scarlets are only taking part because of the prize money for surviving three Encounters. But the others—the Players and spectators—are there for another reason. They want to see a killing."

Fearn looked at Prape.

"Take the history," Molineaux said. "The Game was begun during the Hate Days as an entertainment for the Rulers. There were no voluntary Scarlets, no prize money. They were slaves—they had no choice."

There was a moment of silence.

"The game interests *you*," Prape said heavily.

"Yes—" Molineaux said.

There were others words—words that would have to be said soon—but tonight something inside him held them back. He could only add, as an afterthought: "Individuals are exceptions."

At the close of an uneasy meal, Prape—still rankled but doing his best not to show it—pushed back his chair and smiled at Susan.

"Now," he said. "What are we doing tonight?"

Susan said quietly, "You should ask Hu, father."

"Hu?" Prape said stiffly.

Molineaux said, "I was planning a drive along the coast—Susan and myself."

Servant girls were coming in now, beginning to clear the table. Prape stood up heavily, planting his palm on the table and leaning forward, his eyes on Susan.

"You won't be mine much longer," he said, with a thin smile. "I thought perhaps you would indulge me tonight."

Molineaux looked at Susan too, but didn't say anything. He could see the disappointment in her eyes, but he knew how she would react to her father's suggestion. She caught Molineaux's glance and smiled fleetingly. "I'm only going to be single for two more days, Hu. Shall we give in to him?"

He said, "It's fine with me."

"Good," Prape said. Some of his former humour was returning. "I think you'll enjoy the evening, Hu. Someone you know is taking part."

"Uh-huh," Molineaux said.

"Yes. The girl on your ad, Hu. Tonight she's going out for her third Encounter."

They were moving away from the table now, going toward the fire. Susan sat down on the lounge and Molineaux perched himself on the arm. Prape was pouring drinks, Isaac Fearn hovering at his elbow.

"I think that girl is going to cost me a lot of money tonight Hu. She's good. She's quick and intelligent and very light on her feet."

Molineaux said slowly, "Who's her Player?"

Prape was turning with the drinks in his hand. He said lightly, "Meeger and Olanigh will be the Players."

"Olanigh is good," Molineaux said softly.

"Yes, I suppose he is."

"Perhaps the girl will be against Olanigh?"

A flicker of anger showed itself in Prape's eyes. "I haven't the slightest idea, Hu. The positions are decided by a draw."

"I know," said Molineaux, who had played the Game on a dozen worlds in the galaxy. He let the subject drop. He knew that when they got to the amphitheatre Prape would show surprise that Molineaux had been right.

A Scarlet surviving three Encounters wins half a million credits.

A lot for Jonathon Prape to lose.

They were dropping out of the night sky and the amphitheatre was below. Prape's private helio was absolutely sound proof and was equipped with globe vision. It was a dreamlike experience, floating downward in utter silence, as though they themselves were flying.

"The amphitheatre is beautiful from the air," Susan said.

Molineaux looked down at it, shining in floodlights below them. Then his eyes followed the black curve of the river as it coursed through the myriad lights of the city.

Centuries ago, as on Earth, floating ships had come up that waterway from the steaming Venusian seas; vast pleasure craft, and pipe-covered tankers; bluff-bowed fishing boats, and slim Naval ships. Now it lay silent and dark—almost deserted.

The helio touched, quivered gently, and was still. The plexiglass dome swung back quietly, and for a moment Molineaux was reminded of the drive he and Susan had intended to take.

He caught her eyes as the thought came into his mind, and as though she was aware of it, Susan said softly, "There may still be time, Hu. If the Game finishes early we could run down the coast for an hour."

He nodded without speaking. But as they made their way to the elevator she took his hand, smiling up at him in the darkness.

Prape shepherded them in and depressed a button. They fell down the shaft and halted smoothly at ground level. As they stepped out, Molineaux heard the familiar murmur of sound from the crowd. But they were in Prape's private box, with a view of the arena but not of the spectators, and Molineaux could only guess at the numbers out there.

They took their seats, looking out across the arena. The golden mesh domes—strongly woven, yet somehow transparent—took up three quarters of the arena, set side by side, but not touching. Directly in front of Molineaux was the controller's booth, with its multisided clock that was visible from any part of the amphitheatre. For the moment, the domes and the booth were unoccupied. Only the Player's dais

in the centre of each dome indicated that there was going to be action in the arena this evening.

Molineaux looked out at the familiar scene, and his eyes settled finally on the clock. When the Game began, the sweep hand would begin moving round the dial, edging toward the time limit that would bring each Encounter to an end.

Molineaux, remembering the girl in scarlet, couldn't shake off a vague uneasiness. He moved his eyes to the domes now, waiting for the darkening of the arena that would prelude the first Encounter.

He could see the mesh tunnels, going off into the darkness of the preparation chambers, where Scarlets and Players would be donning their traditional costumes. And as he watched, a hush began to fall over the crowd, and at the same time the clock on the controller's booth became luminescent, and the surrounding arena began to darken.

Only the clock and the domes themselves retained their brightness. And as the degree of light lessened, the expectancy of the crowd increased. A soft Venusian voice began speaking over the audio, giving details of the evening's programme. The girl, Molineaux knew, would be taking part in the second Encounter.

A minute ticked by, and the crowd stirred. Two scarlet figures had entered their respective tunnels and were making their way into the domes. Behind them, resplendent in white, came the Players—both Venusians. Molineaux watched them as they followed the Scarlets into the domes, and for an instant he was on an alien world again, playing the Game. But the memory brought self disgust into his mind, and he shut it off angrily, looking at Susan. Tonight, as they drove down the coast, he would tell her he couldn't take the job. Prape's advertising gimmick could go to hell.

He turned his attention back to the arena, aware of Prape breathing heavily behind him. The Scarlets had taken their places. There were two figures in each dome now, as the Players mounted their daises, bowing first to their Scarlets, then toward the darkness of the crowd. The Scarlets responded and there was a moment of silence.

For the first time that night, attention turned to the black ball that hung from the vast curving ceiling of each dome.

And now, as both Players brought telekinetic powers into play, the globes began to descend. Magnetic cups released

their hold as psi minds took over. The balls of iron came slowly downward, until—according to rules written long ago—each Scarlet was dwarfed by the sphere that was suspended above him.

The hooded Scarlets reached upward, touching the balls with their fingers. Then they knelt, twin patches of colour on the golden floors of the domes, as they prayed to whichever gods ruled over their worlds.

The Players, in their turn, faced each other across the distance that separated them, bowing again from the waist. For them, the evening would be one of simple competition. The man to destroy his Scarlet first would win the Encounter, and a prize of fifty thousand credits. If neither Scarlet was destroyed within the time limit, the Scarlets would go on to another night and another Encounter, striving toward the half-million credits that lay at the end of it all.

More likely, they would die in the arena, and the death notices would go out through the hyperspace tubes, informing their families.

The mortality rate among Scarlets was high.

Chapter Two

A blast of sound rang out from the controller's booth, and Molineaux tensed. The sweep hand began to move. The black balls rose and hovered. A rolling thunder rose in the amphitheatre.

The Scarlets moved.

Bright flashes of fire—swift men gambling with death—they darted from beneath the menacing balls. The Players flipped the massive spheres into action. Silently, fantastically, the iron weapons sprang after the dancing Scarlet figures. A ball flew high, struck the resilient mesh of the dome and gained thrust for a crashing, downward strike. The amphitheatre boomed with sound as the ball struck the floor and bounced high. The Player controlled it again, twisting it toward the darting, untouched Scarlet.

In the other dome, the Scarlet had fallen. The ball was above him, leaping down. For an instant the Scarlet was motionless under the ball, and then, with the startling speed of a Rim humanoid, he was clear. The ball quivered to a halt, inches above the floor. Then it flew horizontally at head height

sweeping toward the waiting Scarlet. At the last moment, the Scarlet sprang to his left and spun away, clasping his hands above his head in a gesture to the crowd. He was sure of himself, as so many of the Rim men were.

In the first dome the Scarlet had been forced back against the mesh. He was an inner planet alien, and not as quick as the Rimmer. There was an expectant roar from the crowd as the ball surged in ; but at the last moment the Scarlet flung himself down on his face and the ball crashed into the mesh a foot above his head. He came to his feet again in a low, crouching run.

As the Player brought the ball hissing off the mesh, the Scarlet swung around, feinted to his left, then went that way. It was an intelligent move. The ball hurtled by, and the Player wavered for an instant on his dais as he brought his mind to bear on the iron weapon. Then he lifted it in a high, swooping curve, boosted it suddenly—and with no warning, with no time for evasion, it thudded down . . .

When the girl in scarlet came out of the tunnel and into the dome, the first thing that struck Molineaux was her size. She was hooded now, but there was no doubt that this was the girl he had seen on the videoscreen. She was slim and very small. But she moved with grace and confidence.

Prape was conferring with Isaac Fearn now, and Molineaux was acutely aware of them as he turned to speak to Susan. Susan was intent on the Players entering the domes, and Molineaux didn't say anything. He tried to hear what Prape was saying to Fearn, but their voices were too low.

When he finally turned his attention back to the arena, the Players were bowing to each other and the Scarlets were already kneeling in traditional prayer.

Then the blast of sound rang out from the controller's booth again. The hand of the clock began to move. The black balls rose and hovered. The girl's final match had begun.

For the first two minutes of the Encounter, Molineaux didn't even glance at the Scarlets. His eyes were on Olanigh, as the Player swayed with the action of the weapon he was handling. Olanigh was good—was better than any Player the girl had faced in her previous Encounters. But what Molineaux was looking for wasn't there. He knew Olanigh's style well. When the Venusian had been told to kill at all costs, he adopted a

trembling crouch, thin hands clasped, his narrow face white with concentration.

Now he was more relaxed than this, was playing the Encounter merely as another competition.

Molineaux sat back, wondering. But years in space had taught him the value of hunches. He watched Olanigh swing the ball high in a swift climbing arc. As it fell toward the girl, she darted to her left, pivoted, and sprang forward—a flare of scarlet across the golden floor. The ball quivered to a halt and moved after her. Olanigh carried it along very slowly, and the girl faced it, slim legs ready to thrust her to the right or left.

The ball was ten yards from her now, and Molineaux looked quickly at Olanigh. The Venusian was erect, his gaze on the scarlet-clad girl. He began to increase the speed of the ball; slowly at first, then rapidly, shooting it along at chest height in an incredible burst of telekinetic power.

But the girl was quick. She threw herself to her left, abandoning strategy, and the ball struck the mesh and rebounded. Then Olanigh did a fantastic thing with it. As it came off the mesh, travelling at high speed, he took hold of it with his mind again—without the usual pause to regain control—and hurled it back at the girl.

It was a brilliant move, and the crowd was beginning to roar its appreciation before the ball was halfway back to the girl. Then the roar became applause for the girl. Somehow she had moved fast enough to get clear. The ball struck the mesh once again, and this time Olanigh, smiling a brief acknowledgement to the Scarlet, took his time controlling it.

The Match ended two minutes later when the opposite Scarlet was struck heavily on the shoulder—fell—and was caught before he could get back to his feet.

It was an anticlimax, but there was sufficient applause to raise the girl's head in pride. She stood erect, her body trembling visibly with suddenly-spent tension. Molineaux couldn't take his eyes off the tiny figure that was bowing now to a crowd that was already settling back into anticipatory silence, preparing itself for the next Encounter.

When Susan turned to him, he said harshly, "We've leaving now, Sue. We'll take that drive!"

Prape, seated behind them, heard this. He leaned forward sharply. "You're leaving, Hu?"

Molineaux bit off an angry retort. "I think I need some fresh air. The redwine, I think."

Fearn was smiling faintly, his eyes on Sue. When she got up too, the chagrin faded his smile to a thin, hard line.

"You're going, Susan?"

"Of course," Susan said.

Molineaux didn't say anything. He nodded to Prape as he left the box with Susan. He didn't trust himself to look at Fearn. They made their way to the elevator and were carried to the roof. Prape's helio was waiting here, its metal sides gleaming faintly and somehow beautifully under the stars.

Sue said quickly, "We could take the helio all the way. Father won't mind. We'll come back before the Game ends."

"You trust me?" Molineaux said.

"You're a space pilot," Susan smiled.

Molineaux kissed her, and grinned suddenly. "That wasn't what I meant." Suddenly he knew—was absolutely sure—that she would understand. And as he lifted the helio and planed it off over the city, he began to form the words in his mind; words he would use tonight to tell her that he was through with the Game.

They were hovering above the sea, the night blackness of the waves moving soundlessly far below them. The city was behind them, the lights lost by distance. It was quiet, and they were alone out here.

"But why, Hu?" Susan said softly.

Molineaux was sitting hunched, big hands on his knees. "It's what I was trying to lead up to at dinner, Sue. The feeling doesn't last. Not with Earthmen."

Susan's voice sparked. "Doesn't last?"

There was a dullness coming into Molineaux's voice. Quietly he said, "Does it make that much difference?"

"Difference!" Susan swung on him angrily. "Have you any idea how much has been paid to prepare the way for you?"

"Look," Molineaux said. "I don't have to take a space job again, Sue, if that's what you're thinking."

She didn't say anything. She was far away from him now, her eyes holding his in the silence of the helio. And suddenly—strangely—Molineaux got the feeling that this wasn't really happening.

"What kind of kid's play is this?" he said.

Anger flashed black in Susan's eyes. She was wearing Molineaux's ring above the stunner-beam ring that was every woman's protection now. She began working it off her finger, and again—despite the smoulder of anger in his mind—Molineaux felt the touch of unreality.

"Sue—this is crazy."

"Is it?" she said. Then slowly she said, "How much do I mean to you, Hu?"

"For God's sake, make sense."

The cool, hard circle of the ring touched his fingers, and suddenly the anger exploded inside him. He struck at her hand and the ring flew into the shadows of the cabin. He brought the engine of the helio to violent life and swung the craft round. Tight-lipped, never looking at Sue, he flew back toward the city.

He had left her on the roof of the amphitheatre, and he was in Farman's now, at a table with a view of the poky dance floor and the couples moving out there. There were black-haired Venusian girls alone at the counter, hard eyes scanning the crush, thin mouths smiling perpetually.

That was all right with Molineaux.

He ordered another drink and set the glass carefully at the other side of the table. Then he drank alone for a while, not looking up; and when he did look up, one of the girls from the counter was sitting opposite.

"Molineaux," he said, and he stuck out his hand. "Redhot can shooter."

The girl smiled. She drank. When her glass was empty, Molineaux ordered others.

"I've corkscrewed the whole damned galaxy," he said confidently. "You're drinking with a damn fine can boy."

"You're an Earthman?" the girl asked.

"Venusian," Molineaux said. He peered at her. "You ever been there, Rosa? You know Venus, eh?"

The girl laughed softly, professionally. "We're on Venus now, Hu."

Molineaux smiled knowingly. "Listen," he said. "I've corkscrewed it. I know what I'm talking about. Venus is hell, Rosa. Venus is hell and damnation."

The girl smiled.

"What the hell are you smiling about?" Molineaux said. "What's with your face?"

"My face?"

"Your smile. Your bloody smile!"

Anger flashed in the girl's eyes.

A mistake that. Anger had flashed in Susan's eyes. Now these were Susan's eyes.

"You damn lousy bitch," Molineaux said. He lurched to his feet and pawed at her, and somehow his hand got around her throat and her head went back and she screamed.

Two pairs of hard and competent hands jerked Molineaux away. He turned with difficulty, in time to meet an exploding fist with his face: and somehow he got carried out of Farman's by that fist and was suddenly breathing night air, debating whether or not to go back through the airlock.

Then he began to orient, and he realised that he wasn't on a can somewhere off Vega. He was on Venus. And right now he was all alone on Venus.

He began to walk. As he walked he thought, 'Who the hell was going to married in two days?' Then he began to think, 'Who the hell *wants* to be married in two days.' And by this time he was crossing the park, and the amphitheatre was ahead, rearing into the night sky.

The sight of it moved him a little.

He sat down in the park—in the grass—and looked across at the amphitheatre for a time. He wondered if Susan was still there; and then he looked at the sky and he knew that she couldn't be. It was three in the morning now, and the amphitheatre closed at midnight. Then he began to think about Susan, and because of the drink he began to change his mind about her.

'Susan is all right,' Molineaux thought.

Then he began to wonder about the job he'd be doing after they were married.

Susan wanted him to be a Teacher. And what the hell was wrong with being a Teacher? Molineaux could teach with the best of them, and if Susan would realize he wanted to be a Teacher, it wouldn't have happened the way it had tonight.

Molineaux got to his feet and stumbled toward the amphitheatre. He didn't know why—he didn't have anything in mind. His feet and the drink just carried him that way.

He crossed the silent street and began to follow the curve of the towering, circular building.

He never really knew what sobered him up.

One moment he was a shambling drunk—the next he was Hugo Molineaux, eyes and ears alert, his senses straining into the night.

The violence of the transition left him shaking. He had heard or seen, or sensed, something. But he didn't know what. He stood there in the darkness—one clenched hand actually touching the wall of the building—and he listened.

Then he turned slowly, looking back at the park. His mind was startlingly clear, but still he couldn't pinpoint anything. There was traffic further down the road, aircars with headlight eyes piercing the darkness. But here it was quiet and there was nothing to see.

He turned his attention to the amphitheatre itself. The wall rose high above him, and as he tilted his head, looking upward, a drift of night wind carried a sound to him.

For a moment he couldn't place it. It was barely louder than the wind itself. *Was* almost the word. Then—and it burst in his mind : an explosion of certainty—he heard the dull, faraway sounds that could only have one meaning . . .

Inside the building, the Game was being played.

Absurdly, the first thing Molineaux did was glance at his watch. But his earlier study of the sky had been accurate, despite the drink. It was now twenty past three. The amphitheatre should have been empty for three and a half hours.

Again Molineaux heard the sound of the ball striking the floor of the dome. He half expected—even waited for—a corresponding surge of applause from the crowd.

But the crowd had gone long ago, and there was only the ghostly whisper and thud of the iron ball somewhere behind the towering wall.

Molineaux turned his attention to the wall, looking for a way in. The murmur of apprehension that had been with him all night was sharp in his mind now. He began to follow the gigantic circle of the building, walking quickly. He reached the first main entrance, but the steel shutters were up and locked.

He moved on. He reached a second, smaller, entrance. He hesitated a moment, then put his shoulder against it tentatively. But nothing gave. The door was locked, and was a good three inches thick.

Then, quite suddenly, the solution came to him.

It was so simple that when he first thought of it he rejected it almost in the same instant. Then, as he walked, it came back to him, and his stupidity staggered him.

He felt into the pocket of his suit to make sure his wallet had survived the incident at Farman's, then he turned away from the amphitheatre and walked rapidly back across the park.

In Guava Square, where the Venusian Memorial pointed its pyramid at the sky, Molineaux hailed a heliotaxi. At this time of night they were prowling the streets in search of fares, so he didn't have any trouble.

As they lifted on the night wind, he leant over toward the driver and proffered a twenty-credit note.

"You want to go far, huh?" said the driver.

In Venusian, Molineaux said, "I want you to drop me off on the roof of the amphitheatre."

There was a moment of silence.

"You know the air regulations, friend?"

Molineaux made it forty credits.

The city was beautiful below, and Molineaux began to think about Susan again as the helio whirled him toward the amphitheatre. He stared down at the lights of the city moving by beneath them.

"Hey," the driver said suddenly, a thought striking him. "You're not one of these jumpers, are you?"

"What?"

"One of these crazy men who throw themselves off buildings." He pointed significantly at the amphitheatre which was rising out of the night below. "Like that one, maybe?"

The helio touched. Molineaux got out.

"Relax," he said. "I'll be using the elevator."

"Yeah?"

The driver was doubtful. But he had his forty credits. He took the helio upward, rotors swishing softly in the darkness. When he got to regulation height again he switched on his indicators.

Molineaux was alone on the roof.

He moved forward cautiously, making his way toward the elevator they had used earlier in the evening. It was quiet on the roof, but when he reached the elevator he paused for a moment, looking around. Then he put his weight against the door, breathed a silent prayer, and depressed the locking-button.

The door slid open quietly, revealing the interior of the elevator. Now that the door was open, it was automatically illuminated by concealed fluorescents, the gauzy light playing on the silver controls. Molineaux stepped through quickly, sliding the door shut at his back. His hand moved toward the ground level button, then wavered, not touching it. Changing his mind, he pressed the button above it, and the elevator fell smoothly down the shaft.

When it stopped again the slide door opened silently, and Molineaux stepped into a lighted corridor flanked by office doorways. This was the administrative section of the building, deserted now, and quiet. From the arena below, Molineaux could detect the almost inaudible sound of the ball striking the mesh of the dome time and again. The floor was heavily sound proofed, but the noise was sufficient to hasten Molineaux's steps. Almost at a run, he went down the corridor and swung left, searching for a door that would take him down to the next floor.

He found it almost immediately. An immense, fireproof affair that opened on to wide steps going downward into the amphitheatre itself.

Molineaux closed the door softly behind him, standing for a moment on the top step, looking down the dark tunnel of empty seats to the arena.

Then, with the horror bursting hot in his throat, he threw himself forward.

Chapter Three

The domes were glowing with light, like vast shining eyes in the dark face of the arena. The clock on the controller's booth was a single fleck of brightness at the edge of the face.

But Molineaux's eyes were fixed on the two figures in the nearest dome : the Player—not dressed in traditional white—on his dais, and the girl in scarlet, darting, darting, across the golden floor.

Molineaux bounded down the steps—and now he saw the Player's face, pale under the lights. Isaac Fearn ! He was wearing his crumpled grey suit ; his body was swaying drunkenly on the dais.

When Molineaux was actually in the arena, approaching the lighted dome, Fearn heard him coming. For an instant the

ball hovered. Then Fearn controlled it again and flung it at the girl.

He was drunk, and inexperienced. A flare of scarlet and the girl was clear. The ball rebounded from the mesh, humming savagely.

"Fearn!"

Molineaux was close to the dome now. He reached the mesh and fell against it, letting it take his weight.

Fearn held the ball motionless. His eyes squinted as he looked out at Molineaux. Over to Molineaux's right the girl was quivering with fear, her body swaying with fatigue.

"Hugo," Fearn said dully.

Very softly Molineaux said, "Let her come out of there, Fearn. Hold the ball where it is . . ."

Fearn smiled gently. "No, Hu, I don't think so."

Without moving her eyes from the ball, the girl said, "The booth . . . The magnets . . ." Her voice was breaking.

The words bit into Molineaux's mind—and he whirled, cursing himself for a fool. Inside the controller's booth was the switch for the powerful cup-magnet that was set in the ceiling of each dome. No telekinetic alive could fight the pull of that magnet once the controller opened his circuit.

He ran, not looking back. He reached the booth and flung open the slide door.

And the muzzle of a blaster stopped him dead.

Jonathon Prape was pressing the blaster into Molineaux's chest. Very softly he said, "Move away, Hu." Then he touched a switch in the booth and Molineaux heard the dull boom of sound as the ball was drawn into its cup.

"We've had our fun, Hu," Prape said. "Now we've got serious business on hand."

Molineaux didn't say anything. His mind was racing. He was fitting pieces together—fast. Olanigh hadn't been ordered to kill at any cost. The girl had survived three matches—she should have been on her way home with half a million credits . . .

The blaster moved in Prape's hand.

"Don't try to understand it, Hu. You haven't got time." He was very close, and the blaster steadied abruptly. He shook his head slowly. "You shouldn't have come here, Hugo . . ." His voice was soft, but in the light of the clock overhead his mouth was thin.

It was going to be as quick as that. A shake of the head ; a tightening of his finger on the trigger . . .

Molineaux moved ! He was dead if he didn't move, and this was his one chance to stay alive. He lunged in under the blaster, head down. It went off, and the heat beam lashed over his head. He caught Prape in the chest at the same instant and hurled him back against the half open door of the booth.

Prape's breath whoomphed out of him. Molineaux lashed out with one hand, catching Prape in the side of the head. Prape fell, but didn't lose his grip on the blaster. He rolled and came half to his knees. He levelled the blaster and fired twice, but his aim was poor. Molineaux spun, threw himself away into the curtain of darkness. He leapt over the rim of the arena and began to climb the tiered seats.

Twice more, Prape fired at the sound. Then there was a silence. Molineaux climbed fast, lost in the maze of seats, knowing only that there had to be steps and a doorway somewhere. He was high above the arena now, looking down, when he turned, on the domes. Ahead were the long curving windows that provided light for the daylight Encounters.

Then, from the arena below, a beam of torchlight stabbed upward. It flickered along the rows of seats, and Molineaux stopped abruptly and crouched, the beam going over him. Then the light changed its direction. It went out across the arena, pinpointing the lighting controls. A moment later, Prape or Fearn reached the main switches, and the building was flooded by the overhead fluorescents.

They spotted Molineaux quickly then. Prape fired, the beam darting upward ; but the range was long and the drink had marred his accuracy. He didn't fire again—not for the moment. He gestured Fearn forward, and together, climbing a dozen yards apart, they closed in on Molineaux's position.

Molineaux looked around him, searching for, and finding, the stairs. But they were too far below him now to be reached without becoming an easy target for Prape.

He turned, whirling away from the two climbing men. They were close now—only a dozen rows below him—and suddenly he knew, as he'd known in the arena, that he only had one chance. This was another decision, but equally dangerous. There was a thirty-foot drop from the long windows to the street—but that was his only way out. Telekinesis was no help to him now. No psi mind in the universe could move flesh and blood, or anything in contact with it.

He turned again, then leapt forward, breaking cover. Prape fired, but the beam was wide of the mark. As he halted to steady the weapon on his arm, Molineaux threw himself upward and outward, head down, arms up to cushion the shock as he hurtled toward the windows . . .

The glass smashed and he went through. He felt the jagged, razor-sharp splinters rip and tear at his arms. For an instant he was stunned ; but he knew he was falling. He twisted in the air, and the sky spun above him as though in slow motion.

Then the blackness slammed toward him. He struck the roadway feet first, a giant hand smacked his legs from under him, he pitched forward, rolled, felt the blood running hot down his face. His shoulder jarred into the ground and the pain seared up through his shoulder, stabbing into his chest.

And now he wasn't moving. He was lying in the road, shaking and bleeding, but conscious. His mind was clear as he scanned the darkness ahead.

Awkwardly, clutching his shoulder, he got to his feet and began to run. Each step sent pain through his legs, but he went on. He crossed the road, and the safety of the park was ahead. He stumbled through the growth, spider branches lashing at his face. Finally he reached the ornamental pool that lay in glistening shadow at the centre of the park. He flung himself to his knees, scooping cool water into his burning face, feeling the rush of it down his neck and back.

He didn't know how long he crouched beside the pool, reluctant to move again because of the fire in his shoulder and legs. But finally he did get to his feet and stumble on, the water streaming from his clothes.

He broke out of the park on the other side of the square and he stood for a moment, alone in the half light, getting his bearings.

Then, far down the street, he saw the flashing indicators of a heliotaxi cruising in his direction. It was flying at regulation height, its comb-beams running along the pavement on either side of the road.

Molineaux ran toward it. When he was fifty yards away it stopped. He called out, waving his good arm, but the driver was already lifting his craft, soaring in search of more fruitful areas.

Molineaux swayed on his feet as the lights faded into the night. He was gasping for breath, his throat and lungs

burning. He rested for a moment, then stumbled on. He covered two blocks before he fell. He didn't get to his feet again for a long time.

The driver of the helio said, "You get into a fight or something?" He was taking his taxi along steadily, high over the centre of the city.

Molineaux was in the rear seat, probing his shoulder with careful fingers. It wasn't broken, but it was jarred and badly twisted. A smashed bone wouldn't have made it much worse.

The helio had picked him up a couple of minutes earlier. He was on his way to Susan's. He didn't know why—but something in his mind had forced him in this direction.

"I fell," he said. "I wasn't in a fight."

The driver grunted. He drove fast and silently, and when they began to descend, Molineaux remembered Prape's private helio. The chances were that Prape and Fearn would have reached the house before this.

"I want to use a phone," Molineaux told the driver. "Can you drop me somewhere round here?"

The driver shifted the roto-bar and the craft planed off at an angle. Below them the blue light of a visiphone box came into sight. The driver dropped down to street level and Molineaux paid him.

"You sure you don't want a hospital?"

"I'm okay," Molineaux said. "Thanks."

The driver nodded, grunted again, and lifted the helio. As it vanished into the night Molineaux walked to the phone box and dialled Susan's number.

He heard the house buzzer purring—the delicate nuance of tone indicating that the call was for her. But she didn't answer for a long time. He was about to put the phone down and risk walking the short distance to the house, when he heard the hard sound of the receiver being lifted.

He turned on the vision, the soft light of the booth illuminating his face. He said, "Susan?"

"Hu . . . Her voice seemed to come from a great distance. Molineaux tapped the vision screen, but she hadn't closed the circuit.

"Are you alone, Sue?"

Again, the voice from a distance. "Where are you, Hu?"

"Close to the house," he said. "At the visiphone box." He hesitated a moment. "Sue, is your father home yet?"

The voice was suddenly very close. "Father? No, he's not here. Is anything wrong, Hu?"

Very slowly Molineaux said, "I want you to come down to the corner . . . No, I can't come to the house. Sue, I've got to see you. I've been—hurt. I want you to get dressed and come down here . . ."

For a long moment she said nothing. Then, softly, "All right, Hu."

He hung up. He stayed in the box, with his back to the panel light, smothering it. Outside, in the blackness, there was nothing to see. He looked at his watch, but it had been broken in the fall from the amphitheatre. The hands were twisted crazily, the face smashed.

For perhaps five minutes there was no sound and no movement outside the box. Molineaux heard his own breathing, and nothing else. Then some distance down the street, he heard the sounds of a woman walking quickly.

At this time of night it could only be Sue.

He opened the door of the visiphone box and stepped on to the pavement. As he turned toward her, she passed under a light and he saw her face for a moment, pale and anxious. He started toward her, beginning to call her name.

He didn't see the unlighted streamcar until it was too late. He tensed as it came swooping down on him from the darkness beyond Susan. He whirled, backing away; but it was already stopping, and Prape was leaping out, his blaster flashing in his hand.

Molineaux began to run. He glimpsed Susan's face, frozen in terror. Weaving brokenly, he went toward her. It wasn't until he was within a yard of her, with Prape drawing a bead on his back, that he saw the glitter of her stunner-beam ring.

He saw the flash as she fired. Then nothing.

A soft light was shining in his face. A hotness was burning in his throat. A liquid. He jerked his head back sharply and some of the liquid spilt on his face. The light moved a little, seemed to draw suddenly close to him, then away.

He passed a hand over his eyes, shaking his head slowly. He was aware of pain in his shoulder and a cold numbness that had frozen his chest. But the numbness was receding now, as the fire of the drink reached down inside him. His eyes were open, but he couldn't see clearly. There were vague shapes

against a background of shadow, and somewhere out there he could see the circle of diffused light, held high, as a man would hold a lantern.

Molineaux thought in a vague, detached way, 'I'm crazy or I'm dead. Nobody's used lanterns for five hundred years.'

Then he shook his head and his eyes began to clear. A face came suddenly closer and a hand touched his lips for a moment, parting them. Then he felt the liquid burning in his throat again, and the fire of it brought him fully awake.

He was lying on a pallet in a low room that stretched off into blackness, like a tunnel. A dozen men were grouped inside the area of light, and close beside him, with a stone cup in her hand, was the girl in scarlet.

Molineaux jerked himself erect—and a hammer blow caught him in the chest. He clutched at himself. The skin was ice cold through his clothes.

"A stunner wound," the girl said softly. "You'll be all right in a while."

Molineaux got his legs over the edge of the pallet and held himself in a sitting position, with difficulty. He looked around at the pale, alien face. He remembered the stunner-beam ring on Susan's finger, and the flash as she had fired.

He shook his head helplessly. The girl in scarlet had been in the dome with Fearn. What the hell was she doing here?

"Where am I?" he said.

The girl handed him the cup and Molineaux saw now that it held the fiery liquid he had been drinking.

"You were here earlier," the girl said gently. "I remember you, Hu . . ."

She spoke English with a faintly Vegan accent. Molineaux drank some of the liquid and put the cup on the pallet beside him.

"I was in the amphitheatre."

"You are there now," said the girl, and her eyes, when they met his, were dull. "All of us are underground, in the ancient slave prisons that lead upward to the domes."

Involuntarily Molineaux glanced at the lantern. The girl followed his eyes. "We have no other lighting. The others found lanterns down here—relics of the past." She touched the stone cup. "We're given food, and sometimes fuel."

Molineaux was fitting pieces together again. There was a constriction in his throat that was anger and fear and a dry

flood of hopelessness. He said slowly, "These others, then—they're Scarlets? Survivors of three Encounters?"

There was a stir of hard laughter among the aliens. The girl pointed, then beckoned. A Rim humanoid shuffled into the light. A boy of twenty, with the manner of an old man.

"How many Encounters?"

The alien's eyes touched Molineaux.

"Seven."

Molineaux shook his head in disbelief. "Prape is holding back millions of credits!"

"Costumed and masked we're unrecognizable," the girl said. "We're used in the arena until we're killed. When others survive three Encounters they take our places. The universe is vast. Scarlets come from many worlds. Our baggage is removed from our hotels. Our families are notified that we died in the arena . . ." She was holding his eyes, her face pale and tired. "A year ago—they tell me—six men were killed because another tried to make contact with free Scarlets."

Molineaux dropped his eyes. His big hands were making fists. Through closed teeth he said, "I was almost part of it. They wanted a Teacher—a dumb spacer to hang the trouble on if they slipped."

"You knew nothing of this?"

Molineaux didn't answer. He was in the helio again, with Susan. The hard circle of the engagement ring was thrusting out at him again. No Teacher's job, no marriage. It made sense now.

Very softly then, almost to himself, Molineaux said, "The bitch!" The word was hard and tough in his throat. He said it again, savagely this time, and the girl recoiled. At the same moment there was a grating sound somewhere off down the tunnel, and the girl's face tightened. Before she could speak, a glare of light entered the tunnel. Silhouetted against the light were men with blasters in their hands. Molineaux could make out Olanigh, and a second Player he didn't recognize.

Then he saw Susan.

She came through the doorway, walking alone. She was unarmed, and her eyes were searching Molineaux out. When she saw him she ran forward. The men moved with her, covering the aliens with their blasters.

"Hu—"

Molineaux slammed his legs up on to the pallet and lay back. He didn't move. He didn't say anything. His face was hard. When Susan touched his arm he didn't move.

"I didn't know this was happening, Hu . . ."

Molineaux's hands were curling at his sides.

"I thought father was being generous. I hated you for wanting to disappoint him."

Molineaux said softly, viciously, "You were ready to marry me, so I could take the rap."

She started. He felt the movement through her hand. He shook her away. She said, "Can't you understand, Hu? I'm as much a prisoner as you. I'm free to move—they let me come down here—but I'm being watched—"

Molineaux said quietly, "Go run to Fearn, Sue."

She turned away angrily, her hand going to her lips. Still Molineaux didn't move. He heard the shuffle of feet as the men backed down the tunnel. The heavy door closed again, and there was only the lantern light then.

The girl in scarlet came close to him.

"She left something, Hu." She touched the pallet close to his arm, and Molineaux looked down.

Susan had returned the ring.

He picked it up slowly, held it for a moment. Then he threw it. It flashed bright, struck the darkness, and was gone. He didn't turn his head. He stared into nothing, motionless.

The girl said, "It's possible for a woman to change—"

Molineaux spat the words at her. "Her father gave her the orders—and she jumped! When I got away tonight I rang her from the corner. She came to help me all right. She brought her father with her!"

"If he wanted you, he'd know enough to follow her, Hu. She came here to see you—"

Molineaux held her eyes. "That wipes the slate clean?"

Anger sparked in the girl's eyes. She didn't say anything.

"Who do you think stunned me?" Molineaux said.

But the girl had gone.

Chapter Four

A long time had passed, and day had moved on into night again. There was food but Molineaux didn't eat. It was cold and the pain in his shoulder was bad. For some time now, there had been sounds overhead of a vast amphitheatre filling for the evening's Encounters, and Molineaux could no longer disguise his fear—even from himself.

The girl was beside him again, eating slowly. Molineaux glanced up into the darkness for a moment and she said softly, "The Game will begin soon, Hu."

He got to his feet then, and stood a moment, looking down at her.

"Tell me how it is," he said.

She was puzzled.

"In the dome," Molineaux said. "How does it feel?"

Understanding moved like a shadow in her eyes. She hadn't said anything, but she had known as surely as Molineaux.

She came erect, standing small beside him. "It's bad," she said.

"What are my chances?"

The girl said, "Perhaps they won't use you . . ."

"For God's sake!"

For an instant the girl's eyes flashed. "All right, Hu. A man of your bulk—untrained—has—"

"No chance."

The girl didn't move, but he knew this was the truth. He noticed that her eyes had softened again, quickly. They stood together, neither of them speaking, until a sound at the side of the tunnel turned Molineaux's head.

An alien was down on his haunches, his eyes vacant, his fingers sifting, sifting, where Molineaux had thrown the ring.

Molineaux's patience snapped. He started forward angrily. "For a whole damned day—"

But the girl's hand was on his arm. "He's been here a long time, Hu . . ."

At the same instant, with no warning at all, the door at the end of the tunnel was slapped open. Prape and Olanigh stood black against the light.

The girl cried out. A fist closed in Molineaux's belly.

Prape's blaster was trained on him.

"Move yourself, Molineaux! We want you out here!"

Molineaux stepped slowly away from the girl, walking forward. When he reached the doorway, Prape and Olanigh

backed away, their blasters levelled. They went out into a crumbling stone gallery and Molineaux followed.

"Close the door!"

Molineaux reached out with his good hand, half turning, beginning to pull the door shut. As he did so, he had a last glimpse of the tunnel and the aliens. And then, somewhere behind them, in the remaining fraction of a second before he raised his hand to the iron bolt, Molineaux saw something else.

A flare of light like the flash of a blaster. A single burst of whiteness that was shut off in almost the same moment as the door closed.

It had come from the spot where the alien had been searching for the ring.

Molineaux's mind was racing as he was forced along the gallery. Neither Prape nor Olanigh had seen the flash—but to Molineaux it had been clear—unmistakable.

A blast of energy. A weapon.

And Susan had worn a stunner-beam ring, effectively feminized. A ring barely different to the engagement ring . . .

The enormity of it burst in Molineaux's mind. The moment at the visiphone box, when Prape had leapt from the car, his blaster in his hand . . .

Susan, frozen in terror, would only have known one thing. Her father was going to kill Molineaux.

If Susan hadn't stunned him, Molineaux would have died!

They had reached the end of the gallery now. There was no visible exit—only a blank wall. But while Olanigh covered Molineaux, Prape went on. He depressed a control and a thin section of stone moved aside. Prape put his eyes to the slit and looked out. After a moment he shifted his foot and the wall swung aside.

The passagetube into which they stepped was modern, softly lighted. Molineaux recognized it instantly as one of the tunnels leading into the domes.

Prape and Olanigh had put their blasters out of sight. Prape brought out a red fabric hood. "Put it on!"

Molineaux slipped it over his head.

"You'll go with Olanigh to the preparation chamber," Prape said. "You'll be given a costume to wear." He smiled thinly. "One hint of trouble, Hu, and I give you my word that you and many of the aliens will die."

Molineaux, recognizing this as the truth, said nothing.

Dully, with the fear tight inside him, he moved slowly along the passage. Olanigh walked with him, slightly to the

rear. They went down the tube and turned left. Olanigh reached forward and pushed at a slide door and they stepped through into the bustling tension of the preparation chamber.

Molineaux changed in silence while Olanigh watched him from the opposite side of the chamber. The sounds from the arena were clearer now, and Molineaux knew that the time was running out. The steady roar of sound filled his ears as he forced the red Scarlet's jacket over the agony of his shoulder. Then, nightmarishly, there was a bell ringing somewhere above him, and for an instant all sound ceased, both in the chamber and outside in the amphitheatre itself.

Olanigh gestured Molineaux forward.

With another hooded Scarlet at his side, Molineaux stepped out into the passagetube again. Two paces ahead were their Players. Olanigh and another. Olanigh looked back often as they walked, and now his eyes were cold and detached, the way they had been when he had killed other men in the domes.

They passed little knots of officials, clustering with watches and papers in their hands. At the point where the tube split, they paused for a moment. Olanigh and the second Player bowed to each other, and the Scarlet at Molineaux's side spoke a word to him in Venusian, heavily accented. Then he was gone, flashing red: a Rimmer with the confidence bursting inside him. Olanigh stepped to one side and Molineaux went past him. Olanigh's hand was inside the jacket of his costume.

There was a thunder of sound as they stepped into the golden mesh tunnel that led directly to the dome. Molineaux glimpsed a moving sea of faces, then his eyes searched the opposite side of the arena and he saw Susan in the private box with her father and Fearn. As he moved forward, Prape, small with distance, leant toward Susan, speaking to her. Instantly she half rose—and was forced back into her seat by Prape.

Unconsciously Molineaux broke his stride. The arena had darkened now. He heard Olanigh growl a warning at his back, and he went forward again.

To his left now, was the other dome, the Player already on his dais. Above Molineaux was the familiar black ball that he had manipulated so often on alien worlds.

Tentatively now, he touched it with his mind—knowing as he did so that it was futile. Prior to an Encounter the massive sphere was tuned to accept the control of one mind—the Player's. No Scarlet could affect its deadliness.

Olanigh was on his dais. The preliminaries were racing by, as though the lust of the crowd was affecting time. Molineaux saw Olanigh bow stiffly. The tunnel was closed as attendants brought down the barrier.

The black ball dropped.

For an instant Molineaux thought that Olanigh was going to kill him then. But the ball stopped—as tradition ruled that it must—inches over his head. He didn't reach upward. He waited, the fear erasing the pain of his shoulder, wiping out all thought. His eyes remained fixed on that motionless ball. He could see the slight pitting of its surface, the tiny points of light shining bright against blackness . . .

Then the alarm sounded, and the Game began.

As the ball rose high, Molineaux threw himself forward. He knew Olanigh's style. The Player brought the ball crashing downward almost in the same instant. But Molineaux was clear. He whirled, went into a crouch, and sprang to his left as Olanigh swept the ball past him.

He heard it strike the mesh, gaining thrust. He was half around and he could hear the savage hiss of the mesh throwing it back at him. He fell to his knees and the ball passed inches above his head. He pivoted on his sound arm, caught a glimpse of Olanigh, crouched and tense on his dais, then pushed himself violently to one side as the ball swooped downward in a vicious arc.

The concussion when it struck the floor of the dome was tremendous. It bounced high, uncontrollable for a fraction of a second. Molineaux stumbled to his feet and ran toward the dais. But Olanigh saw his intention and cut him off. The ball lashed downward a yard ahead of him, then flashed forward, head high.

Again Molineaux fell to his knees. Olanigh anticipated, but not quickly enough. The ball dipped in the instant that it passed over Molineaux's head. He pushed himself forward again, and this time he reached the dais.

It was a common strategy. He pressed his back against the dais as Olanigh brought the ball in cautiously. An unwary Player could kill himself on this play. But Olanigh was experienced. He brushed Molineaux with the ball to calculate his margin of safety, then he swayed it away—and flung it forward.

Molineaux sprang to one side, dropping at the same time.

And the ball missed him. He never knew how. He broke

away from the dais and Olanigh took the ball up to the roof and let it hover.

Molineaux stood crouched, his eyes never moving from the ball. His lungs were burning and there was a film beginning to form over his eyes.

The ball shot downward.

Molineaux waited, waited—then sprang. Olanigh kicked the ball after him, and again it struck the mesh and came singing toward him. He feinted left, and went right. The ball hurtled by, lifted suddenly, began to swing back at him.

And Molineaux, moving to avoid it, fell heavily.

For an instant the ball seemed to hang motionless ; then it came on. Molineaux's eyes were fixed on it—but he couldn't move. It grew large in his mind, seemed to burst inside his head—an explosion of sound that came from a great distance . . .

And then, impossibly, the ball was shooting upward, was crashing into the roof magnet as the crowd came to its feet and every light in the amphitheatre flashed on.

Down on the floor, with the heat of fear still in his belly, Molineaux only knew one thing : the controller had stopped the Game.

Then he looked toward the dais, and saw that Olanigh was falling very slowly, a crumpling figure in white. And behind him, with the stunner-beam ring glittering in her hand, was the girl in scarlet.

The barrier across the tunnel mouth had been broken down, and there were aliens running with the girl now as she came toward Molineaux.

When she reached him, he had got to his feet. He stood facing her, and her eyes held his for a long time. Then, at last, she said softly, " Has she wiped the slate clean, Hu ?"

She raised her hand, pointing, and he turned, looking out across the arena.

A dozen aliens had taken Prape and Fearn in their private box. There was a swirl of action over there, and uniformed security police were moving swiftly down the aisles.

But Molineaux barely saw them ; and he didn't hear the girl in scarlet saying softly, " When they came to us again, we were able to use the ring . . ."

He was watching a single figure running toward him across the empty arena. A dark-haired Venusian girl, who had walked with him a long time ago on a planet called earth.

—David Rome

The Emporium was a great spider-trap for the unwary, especially women. Once within its seductive embrace it became harder and harder to get away—as Tod Asher discovered when he went to find his wife.

BABEL HAS 500 FLOORS

by W. T. WEBB

Chapter One

Black and white in the evening sunglow, a rabble of rooks and gulls clamoured behind Tod Asher as he drove the tractor towards the distant fence. He was lean, broadshouldered, and very tall. The sun had tanned the skin of his face until it was one shade darker than his hair. His blue eyes and firm, unwrinkled face, made him look much younger than his thirty-five years.

The wheel pummelled his huge palms in time with the tractor's rhythm. Wind cooled his face. Smells of oil and ploughed earth thrilled his nostrils.

His bungalow lay behind him now; and as he ploughed away from it he could see the valley covered with small farms like his own. Most were owned by other retired spacemen.

Funny how ten years in the Space Service made a man hanker for his own plot of land! They joked about it while they were serving, but when their contracts expired, the majority put their money into a farm.

Of course, as Tod soon discovered, it was no picnic. In an age of advanced technology they lived hand to mouth, as peasants always had done. But Tod for one, had seen enough modern technology to last a couple of lifetimes. It could provide everything a man desired. Everything except happiness. Here on the land he was happy. He had his farm and his wife. What more could a man *really* want?

After swinging the tractor round at the end of the field, he started back towards the bungalow. The rooks were walking over the ploughed loam with cocksure ease, but the gulls found their webbed feet an encumbrance.

In this direction the view was not so good. In fact the pastoral effect was ruined by the Emporium. A five hundred floor skyscraper, the Emporium, even at this distance, dominated the landscape, and made the valley look like its back garden.

Like a rectilinear Tower of Babel, the building covered half an acre and reached upwards nearly a mile. In the mornings its shadow lay like a blight over the valley, and after dark its hundred thousand windows poured a malevolent restlessness into the night. The valley-dwellers cursed its brazen glitter and kept wary eyes on their wives and daughters.

As usual, Tod Asher was glad when he had turned the tractor again and had the Emporium behind him. With only the farms to look at and the wheeling birds, it was possible to think that man was still a part of nature and not a slave to Molochs of his own creation.

Another couple of rows and he would call it a day and see what Ruth had dished up for supper.

Surprisingly, Ruth had been wonderful. Lots of spacemen had wife trouble when they took up farming. Used to modern luxuries, the women objected to living out in the sticks. Some left their husbands. Others nagged them to sign on for another contract with the service. But Ruth, for all her frivolity, never complained. She took to country life as a gull takes to the sea.

Tod Asher scraped the earth from his size fifteen boots and, ducking his head to avoid the top of the doorframe, walked into the kitchen. As soon as he did so he sensed something was wrong. A premonition of dread struck him like a blow.

At this time the table was invariably laid for the evening meal, and the little kitchen was usually filled with an appetising

smell of cooking. But now the table was bare. The cooker was dead. The kitchen deserted.

"Ruth!" He made an effort to keep his voice cheerful. But even to his own ears it sounded high-pitched and strained. Fighting a rising panic, he slung his jacket on a chairback, changed his footwear, and washed himself at the sink.

Then he searched the bungalow.

As he moved from the kitchen to the sitting-room the fear that Ruth had walked out on him increased; although he could hardly believe she would do such a thing, especially without any warning. In the bedroom he opened the wardrobe, and to his relief he saw that her clothes were still there.

On the dressing-table, her coloured photograph, the one she had taken just before their wedding, oggled him from its silver frame. It showed a young woman with butter-blonde hair, wide, blue, sophisticatedly innocent eyes, and lips too red and perfect to be true.

Tod had never liked the picture; but for some obscure feminine reason Ruth was very fond of it.

Anyway, she hadn't walked out on him. That much was pretty certain now. Bewildered, he sat down on the bed with his big-knuckled fingers folded over his knees and tried to imagine what could have happened to her. Maybe one of the neighbours had called her over.

Tod changed into his best blue suit, ran a comb through his hair, and hurried to the next farm. Mike Dallas answered his knock.

"Hello Tod!" Mike said in his husky whisper. Mike had been doing his second ten-year contract with the Service when a spacesuit accident had damaged his lungs and vocal-cords. Always keen for company and for a chance to yarn about old times, he was obviously delighted to see his visitor.

"Come in, Tod! Come on in! I had a case of beer delivered only this morning."

"Can't stop now, Mike. I'm looking for Ruth. I was wondering . . ."

The anxious face of Ethel Dallas appeared behind her husband's shoulder. She was a faded woman in her late thirties with a chronic frown of worry on her face. Whenever Tod saw her she was wearing an apron. She reminded him of a picture of Mrs. Noah in one of his nursery books.

"Isn't Ruth back yet?"

Living alone with Mike for so long had given her voice a whisper like Mike's own ; and whatever she said seemed charged with a plaintive urgency.

"Hello Mrs. Dallas ! No, Ruth's not at home. Any idea where she's got to ?"

Ethel Dallas nudged her husband gently aside and looked up at Tod from the centre of the doorway.

"Well, I suppose I shouldn't say anything, really."

Tod tried to grin. "What d'you mean, Mrs. Dallas ?"

"This afternoon," Ethel whispered. "Ruth went to the Emporium."

"The *Emporium* ?"

The woman nodded guiltily, as though she was in some way to blame. "She didn't want you to know. She's buying a present or something, and she wanted it to be a surprise."

"But what on earth made her go to the Emporium ?"

Ethel Dallas flushed slightly and shook her head. "I told her you wouldn't like her to go, but she wanted something special."

"Thank you, Ethel. I'll go and see if I can find her."

"If you take any money along," Mike wheezed, "mind they don't chisel it out of you !"

He drew his wife inside and shut the door.

Close up, the Emporium did not seem so gigantic as from a distance. As Tod approached the entrance he was not conscious of the hundreds of stories shooting up almost a mile into the sky. Perhaps if he had contemplated the thousands of rooms there, the hundreds of thousands of people, he would have despaired of locating his wife.

Resolutely he walked past the guards, pushed a glass door, and entered a carpeted vestibule whose walls were lined with little booths. This was his first visit to the place, and he looked round for some way into the departments without passing through one of the booths.

"Are you looking for something, sir ?"

He glanced down into the beery face of a uniformed commissioner. The man wore a Mars Medallion. Tod wondered if he was entitled to it.

"My wife's inside somewhere. I want to go in and find her."

The commissioner pointed to a booth.

"If you go in there, sir, you'll be directed into the sales-rooms."

A sleek blonde who looked like somebody's secretary sat at the desk inside the booth. Smiling icily, she pushed a yellow card towards him as he approached.

"Good evening, sir. Welcome to the Emporium. Your purchases will be recorded on this card ; and you will be asked to clear the card before leaving."

Tod looked at the card once and then ignored it.

"I've not come to buy anything. My wife's in here somewhere. I've come to get her away."

The girl froze another smile for him.

"Never-the-less sir, our rules state that you must accept a card before entering the Emporium. You are not obliged to buy anything, of course."

"I'll make darn sure I don't !"

With ill grace he snatched the card and the girl pointed a pearly finger at another door. It led to a lift which took Tod up one floor and deposited him in a large room filled with showcases and tables of merchandise.

Colours brighter and more varied than those of an Eastern bazaar shifted kaleidoscopically under lamps of tropical brilliance. Numerous attendants in lilac uniforms patrolled among the shoppers. Lively music bubbled from the loudspeaker system ; and, hearing it, Tod felt his spirits rise a little. Like most of the valley-folk he had come to regard the Emporium as something sinister. Something evil. A monster gintrap of concrete, plastic and glass, baited with luxury to snare the weak and unwary into mazes of debauchery and debt.

But now, watching the carefree shoppers, and listening to the catchy music, he felt confident that the Emporium was just an oversized department store and not the colossus of vice and exploitation the ministers declared it to be.

He approached a fresh-complexioned young attendant.

"I'm looking for a woman."

The attendant leered up at him knowingly.

"You mean some particular woman ?"

"My wife."

"Any idea which department she's likely to visit ?"

"Not the faintest."

The attendant waved a hand with the fingers extended.

"I suggest you look round for her, sir. Try the millinery department, or the lingerie. The latter is very interesting . . ."

Tod nodded and walked away. He wandered round tables laden with electric shavers, imitation jewellery, fountainpens, toys, leather-goods, cutlery, models of well-known spaceships.

It was to the shoppers, rather than to the goods on show, that he gave his attention, looking for Ruth, who was tall and golden-haired ; but every now and then his eyes rested on some small article that attracted him.

But he was determined to buy nothing. He had ten credits in his wallet, and he did not intend to turn any of it over to the Emporium.

Giving him a card when he came in was just one of their tricks to make him spend money. The Emporium was notorious for that sort of thing. The executives had developed the breaking-down of sales-resistance to a fine art. But Tod was determined not to be parted from any of his cash. Ten credits would buy him a year's supply of seed and chemicals in the village market ; here it would buy only rubbish.

As he strode between the tables in the vast room it occurred to him that it would be possible for him to be walking down one aisle while Ruth walked up another. He could easily miss her that way. To avoid that happening he followed the pointers to the exit from the room and waited there.

The room was awlirl with eager shoppers, mostly women, and he watched them intently, looking for his wife. As each purchase was made it was registered on the shopper's card, to be settled at the exit from the Emporium. He wondered how many customers spent more that way than they would if they had to pay ready cash.

While keeping an eye open for his golden-haired wife he amused himself by noting some of the devices by which sales-resistance was attacked. Most of the goods were brightly coloured, and nearly all were ostensibly reduced in price. Many items were packed in unnecessarily large boxes ; and wherever possible the product was associated with some feminine symbol.

And as he watched, it suddenly struck him that there was a definite pattern in the traffic round the tables. The lines of shoppers would keep moving for several mintes and then many of them in various parts of the room would stop at the same moment to buy things. He was trying to figure out the cause of this when two burly assistants pushed up to him. They were

as tall as he was, and each could give him a good ten pounds in weight.

"Keep moving mister !" one of them said, jabbing a thumb towards the door. "We don't like shoplifters in this department."

The accusation was so unexpected that Tod Asher could think of no adequate reply. Burning with fury he stepped through the exit on to a moving floorway, and before he could gather his wits he found himself in the lingerie department.

Women gushed everywhere. A couple of salesgirls, all hairdye and eye-shadow, were looking at him saucily. Six feet two in height, he knew he was conspicuous among so many women. He felt completely embarrassed and out of his depth. He'd rather face a Venusian jungle any day.

But Ruth was as likely to be here as anywhere else in the place. So he squared his shoulders, set his jaw grimly, and joined the parade of femininity down the central aisle.

This room was as large as the one he had just left, but the atmosphere was markedly different. The music was lighter, more delicate ; and the symbols were more obvious and more in evidence.

What puzzled Tod Asher for a while was the fact that the symbols were still female ones. Pictures of voluptuous females in suggestive attitudes postured above every table and showcase like a squaw-watching Space-cadets pinup gallery. Tod had given up Squaw-watching as a hobby a long time ago.

He thought they would have used the male figure now and then, until he realised that the appeal was to that side of women that wanted to attract the male. The aphroditic pin-ups flattered the plump maids and matrons who patronised the department—suggested that they, too, could be as seductive as harlots.

The music, the perfume, and the very atmosphere of the room, were those of a high-class bawdy-house.

Although a steadfast member of the Baptist congregation, Tod was no bigotted puritan, but he was indignant when he realised that the sales offensive of the lingerie department was a wholesale corruption of womanhood.

Still no sign of Ruth !

Once again he made his way to the department exit and watched to see if she would appear. Very soon he noticed the same pattern of movement he had noticed in the other room.

At one moment everyone was walking round the tables. The next moment, as though directed by some cryptic signal, a number of shoppers in various parts of the room stopped, made purchases, and had them registered on their cards.

He soon got tired of watching the process.

The next hour he spent travelling through numerous departments ; the hardware, the delicatessen, the toy-department, the baby-wear, and one huge room devoted to the sale of clocks and watches.

Tick-tock-tick ! His head throbbed. His eyes ached from gazing at too many glittering lights and garish colours, too many dials and flowers and cellophane wrappings and female curves.

Suddenly he thought of the enormity of his task. At the most he had visited a dozen rooms, and already he was tired. A dozen rooms ! And how many thousands were there still to visit ? Looking for Ruth in this vast establishment was like searching a mile-high haystack, not for a needle, but for a particular wisp of hay. He might as well go home. For all he knew Ruth might be there by now, wondering what had happened to him.

Beyond a laden table he saw a door marked Exit, and he walked through it to another moving floorway. This route, however, took him through innumerable departments of the Emporium, and at every turn an attractive poster solicited him to spend money.

Chapter Two

At the farm-implement department he saw an auto-cultivator reduced to five credits. He wondered how they could sell it at such a price. The cultivator was perched on a pedestal, and behind it rose a painting of a young woman wearing only a flimsy green skirt. She was depicted operating a similar cultivator in a field of rich earth. Her figure was full and golden in the sun, and her long, blonde hair streamed in a graceful sweep behind her.

The music was exciting now, and in the background he seemed to hear a girl's voice whisper seductively, "For you. For you . . ." And then faintly, as though from a great distance the same voice said : "Only for thee is my heartsfire kindled."

Tod Asher, gazing at this symbol of fertility, and thrilled beyond measure by the voice, forgot his headache ; forgot his search for his wife. The desire to possess the auto-cultivator and the girl pictured with it, had driven all other considerations from his mind.

As he fingered his wallet he felt a hand on his shoulder. Startled, he looked round into the grim face of a man he had not seen for years.

"Pete Soames !" he said. "What the devil are you doing here ?"

Soames was a head shorter than Tod Asher ; but his broad build and aggressive vitality made him look a big man. His well-tailored grey suit gave him the appearance of a business executive.

"You too, spaceman !" he said with the hard-bitten grin that Tod remembered as characteristic of him. "Small solar-system, isn't it ?"

"I'm looking for my wife. You remember Ruth, don't you?"

Pete nodded. He had the face of a man who thought a lot and didn't like it.

"She's in here somewhere," Tod said unhappily. "I want to find her before she runs up a bill that will bankrupt me. You know how the women fall for the salesmanship in these places!"

"And not only the women !" Pete said with a grim smile at the cultivator. "Let's go for a drink before that earth-goddess persuades you to part with five well-earned creds !"

Pete Soames seemed to know his way round the Emporium. He guided Tod into the amusement department and they went into a saloon. Pete had been a live-wire agitator in the old days ; and the last Tod heard of him was that he had taken an official job with the Spaceman's Guild.

"So you bought a farm after all ?" Pete said when he had carried the drinks over.

"How did you know that ?"

Pete laughed bitterly. "Nine out of ten spacemen buy farms when they leave the Service. And what's more ten out of ten of them who visit this Emporium fall for that picture of the earth-goddess peddling her auto-cultivator. I stand there day after day and see the same thing happen."

"Oh." Tod Asher gulped at his drink. He was rather taken aback to think that he was not acting under his own volition

but in accordance with some general pattern. And he was aware now that he had no real use for an auto-cultivator.

"What are you doing here?" he asked weakly.

"I live here. This place is really a huge hotel—several hotels—as well as a department store. Some people spend their whole lives here."

Tod felt bewildered.

"I didn't know that."

"Lots of people would like to get out and can't. After a time they give up trying."

"How does that happen?"

"They come in to look round, maybe; or just to get out of the rain. And they spend more money than they've got. When they try to get out again they find they can't clear their cards. So they stay in one of the hotels here and get a job in one of the factories . . ."

"Factories, too?"

"Sure. How d'you think the prices are kept so low? That cultivator would set you back ten credits anywhere else. Here you get it for five."

"Let me buy you a drink?"

Pete grinned. "Go ahead. But for heaven's sake don't register more on your card than you've got cash to pay for, or I'll have another ex-spaceman on my hands."

Tod bought two five-cent beers and watched the barman stamp the bill on his card and on a kind of ticker-tape gadget that recorded the sale in some central office.

"What were you saying about ex-spacemen?"

Pete took his beer and drank before replying.

"The Spaceman's Guild is worried about the number of ex-spacemen who drift into this place and never see the light of day again. So I've been sent here to explain the set up to any of the boys I can contact, and . . ."

"What exactly is the set up?"

"Exploitation in its most ruthless form . . ."

While Pete Soames spoke, Tod looked round the saloon. The lingerie department had reminded him of a high-class bawdy-house. This place was not high-class.

Behind the bar spread a huge mural which could only be described politely as a study in gynaecology. Numerous girls

sat on high stools round the bar. One of them, an attractive brunette, kept looking in his direction.

"The sales-methods here," Pete was saying, "go to extremes which amount to coercion. As soon as a person enters any department he is subjected to almost irresistible pressure to buy and buy . . ."

"That sort of thing has always gone on."

"Agreed—but since the invention of *sensonics* the customer hasn't a chance."

"*Sensonics*?"

"A special combination of music and words. The music is scientifically composed to create a condition of susceptibility. And at certain intervals the words are superimposed just within the level of audibility. The words are chosen by a team of semantic experts, who make use of mythology, folk-lore, and the poetry of the ages. The customer hears the words without being consciously aware of it—and in many cases it acts as an hypnotic compulsion. Watch carefully and you'll see lots of people stopping to buy things at the same moment."

"I noticed that."

"That's an example of *sensonics* in action. And *sensonics* is only a part of the sales-technique. Paintings, decor, shapes, perfumes, colours, layout—everything is designed for one purpose—to assault the senses, diminish responsibility, in short to make the customer buy more than he can pay for. Once he's done that he's in their clutches."

"Whose clutches?"

Pete did not reply. He was looking across the saloon, and Tod saw that his attention was upon a hunchback who had just entered. The hunchback came over to them, walking jerkily, like a wounded gull, and Pete turned to introduce him to Tod.

"Hello, Hucko! Meet Tod Asher, an old buddy of mine from the Space Service."

The hunchback had a sallow complexion and a pair of very dark eyebrows which met in a curved point above his hump-backed nose. He wore a shapeless tweed jacket made for a man twice his size. The sleeves of the jacket had been shortened and sewn up clumsily; but the hands below the sleeves were strangely delicate, like the hands of a deformed surgeon.

"Tod, this is Hucko—the artist who painted that earth-goddess that nearly persuaded you to buy an auto-cultivator."

Hucko glanced briefly at Tod and made a movement with his eyebrows. Then he turned to Pete. "You're wanted down in the Bearpit, brother, right away."

Soames drained his glass.

"Cheerio, Tod. Take care of yourself. Remember what I told you. Don't let them sell you anything you don't want!"

What was the Bearpit, Tod wondered as he watched Pete and Hucko hurry out of the saloon. They had barely passed through the door when he saw the girl who had been looking at him leave the bar and high-heel over to him. He turned his back on her, but she was not to be put off as easily as that.

"Hello you big spaceman!"

She was a good-looker all right, with dark hair, big eyes, and all the fittings. She was young, barely out of her teens; but in spite of this and her dark beauty, she had an aura of concupiscence which attracted Tod even while it repelled him.

"How did you know I was a spaceman?"

She laughed and wriggled close enough to give him a noseful of heady perfume.

"You've still got the spacesuit marks behind your ears." She rested a finger lightly under his chin. "Aren't you going to buy me a drink, hero?"

"Sorry, lovely. I'm on a shoestring budget and I've just eaten the shoestring."

He still had his card in his hand, and she looked at it and smiled seductively. "You've only spent ten cents, hero! You've got a yellow card, too. That means you can run up a bill of thirty creds."

"Doesn't everyone get a yellow card?"

She laughed. "Of course not, silly! You must have come down in the last rocket! It's according to your productive potential. With a red card you can spend up to twenty creds. With a black card you can only spend one."

Her voice was high-pitched and faintly husky; and as she spoke a smile played about her mouth and her eyes glanced bewitchingly from one part of his face to another.

"Who gets the black cards?"

"The blags of course. The sick, lame and lazy. They get black cards and we call them blaggards, or just blags. But don't let's talk about them."

Tod suddenly remembered he had not eaten since noon. He felt famished, and the drink he had swallowed on an empty stomach was already having its effect.

"Don't let's talk at all !" he said, fighting against the girl's allure. "I'm looking for my wife."

"Your wife ? She may be at the fair."

"Where's that ?"

Before he could protest she had taken his hand and was leading him towards the door.

"I'll show you."

They went along a moving floorway into a large amusement hall. The centre of the hall was reserved for dancing. A hundred or so couples clung together there, moving dreamily under the glitter of slowly revolving spotlights. The music, which seemed to come from the level of the looking-glass floor, was an evocative blues tune.

Moving spotlights of blue, red, white and green, picked out momentarily, here a girl's cheek partly covered by a lock of hair, there a leg curving from a split skirt, and there a bare shoulder or a half-revealed bosom. Daemonic red and leprous white glowed the faces of the dancers.

In spite of the spotlights the centre of the floor was comparatively murky, but round the sides of the hall various shows were housed in booths with brilliantly lit facades, designed and coloured with Picassoesque extravagance.

The music, the lights, the dazzling colours, and the words on the posters combined to give him a feeling of unreality. He felt he had stumbled into something between a De Quincey opium dream and a riotous mardi gras. Almost without him knowing how it happened, he found himself on the dance floor with the bar-girl in his arms. The touch of her was almost overpowering. The huge looking-glass was a lake on which they glided without a ripple.

Round and round with the music he whirled ; round and round with the bar-girl under the circling lights, over the looking-glass floor.

Close to them now was a palm-frond garnished archway with a banner across it proclaiming it to be the Tunnel of Love. The girl tightened her hold.

"Do you want to go into the Tunnel of Love, spaceman ?"

Love, till dawn sunder night from day with fire,

Dividing my delight and my desire . . .

The couplet from the erotic poetry of Swinbourne rang clearly among his jumbled thoughts. He had forgotten all that Soames had told him about sensonics ; and he was about to acquiesce when the white spotlight picked out a tall girl with golden hair standing on the fringe of the dancers.

Ruth !

Ruth ?

No.

No, it wasn't Ruth ; but the realisation that Ruth might actually be around to see him making a fool of himself with a tramp he had picked up in a bar, gave him a sobering shock.

Abruptly abandoning the girl on the dance floor, he darted away. Dancers whirled round him. He stumbled to the door. Running, he sped breathlessly through various sections of the amusement department, trying to find the way out.

Tower of Babel ! he thought. Sodom and Gomorrah !

After a time he found himself on a moving floorway which followed a line of arrows marked General Exit. The floorway ended in a small hall with a flight of steps leading to a door covered by a bead curtain.

Pushing through this, Tod Asher found himself in a room decorated like a tropical garden. White clad waiters served drinks at small tables among lantern-hung trees. Dark girls in hula skirts mingled with the drinkers at the tables. A Hawaiian guitar sobbed among the drooping leaves.

This is the deflowered Garden of Eden, he thought. With the serpent and the tree of evil and the deadly fruit.

Ignoring the greetings of a grass-skirted Eve, he pushed his way through the garden and through another door. Beyond this gloomed a bleak hall with a drab stone floor. It was chilly here after the warmth of the amusement department. Tod, who felt very hungry and tired, thought with misgivings of the long walk to his farm. It would be far easier to slip back into the tropical garden and rest awhile. But he knew where his duty lay.

A dozen grim-faced guards patrolled the exit hall. In six glass-walled offices six cashiers waited for people to hand in their cards and the money they had spent in the Emporium.

A notice read : General Exit—have your cards and cash ready ! Have you forgotten anything ? There is always something more to see in the Emporium.

Tod looked at his card and felt thankful he had only spent ten cents. Once or twice he had been on the point of spending more. He winced when he thought of it. It had been touch and go ; and he knew it had been more luck than will-power that had saved him from squandering the money he had saved for next year's seed and fertiliser supplies.

Stepping towards one of the cash-offices, he put his hand in his pocket for his wallet.

But it was not there. His wallet, with the ten credits which was all he had to his name, had vanished.

For a moment his thoughts were chaotic. To steady himself he went over to a worn bench and sat down. Desperately he went through each of his pockets three times. Not a cent ! He was flat broke.

His main feeling now was that what had happened had been inevitable. He remembered entering the kitchen of his bungalow at the end of his day's ploughing and sensing immediately that something was wrong. At that time he had a premonition of disaster. This was the outcome. He was stranded in the Emporium with no cash to clear his card.

Although he was convinced that no good would come of it, he went into one of the offices and explained his position to the cashier, a dyspeptic looking man with the shadow of a beard tattooed beneath his shaven jowls.

The cashier opened his mouth and probed a tooth-cavity with his tongue. He looked at Tod Asher. Tod knew that look. The look of a bully. Of a little man with a little power. He had seen that look on the stupid face of many a sergeant in the service ; and he knew he was wasting his time.

"Lofty ; if only you knew how many times a day I hear that hard luck story you'd think up something original."

"Original or not, it happens to be the truth."

The cashier stifled a yawn. "That's what they all say, Lofty. And I always say no dice !"

"But I only owe ten cents, and . . ."

"Then what you got to worry about ? That yeller card allows you to run up a bill of thirty creds. A room for the night will set you back five cents. And tomorrow you can make up two creds in one of the factories. You don't know when you're well off !"

"Where do I find the hotel ?" Tod asked resignedly. He had not felt so belly-kicked since his first night in the Space Academy. It was homesickness then ; and so it was now. The individual torn from a cosy environment and thrust into one that is unfamiliar and oppressive.

The cashier looked at him unsympathetically and pointed his pencil through the glass wall of the office.

"Through that door there. On the third level you'll get good hotel accommodation for a cred. But down on the

ground floor you can get a room for five cents—if you don't mind mixing with blags."

"O.K. I'll be seeing you tomorrow soon as I get my pay."

The cashier yawned again.

"I can hardly wait to see you," he said as Tod left the office.

The five-cent hotel was no palace. It consisted of a line of cubicles opening off a coridor. The cubicles had no lights, but each door had a thick glass window through which some light from the coridor could enter. With each cubicle went a bed, a bucket, and a wooden chair.

It was more like a jail than a hotel, but Tod Asher, as a spaceman and a small farmer, was used to living rough. He booked his room and then went to the restaurant at the end of the coridor and ate his first meal since noon.

The few other customers in the restaurant looked like tramps. When Tod presented his yellow card to the man at the counter to record the price of his meal the man stamped the card quickly and passed it back over the counter under cover of his hand.

After peering suspiciously round Tod's shoulder he leaned forward confidentially and said: "Don't let any o' them blags see the colour of your card or they'll be round on the scrounge."

"Right; thanks for the tip!"

The music was cheerful and the food tasty. When he had eaten he felt a little more capable of facing up to the fix he was in. Earlier he had felt demoralised with the whole set up. But now he could almost see the funny side. Once it was all over he and Ruth would laugh like drains about it. He finished off his meal with a glass of beer. Then he bought a packet of cigarettes and went back to his room.

Chapter Three

For the first hour in the factory next morning he stood behind a little leprechaun of a man known as Midge and watched him operate. The workers sat beside a conveyor belt along which marched an endless column of decorated tins. As each tin arrived in front of Midge he pulled down the handle of a sliding press, kept the handle down for about a second, and then released it. Whereupon the handle sprang back and returned to its original position.

Midge had wispy red hair, close-set eyes, and a wide mouth with a big upper lip which gave him the appearance of a rather battered ventriloquist's dummy. He did the job with one hand, apparently automatically. At the same time he kept glancing round the factory and making scurrilous remarks about those on whom his eyes rested.

In the Service Tod had heard some language, but no space-man he ever met was a match for little Midge when it came to cussing.

"What are you actually doing to those tins?" Tod asked.

Midge glared at him with crazy eyes and let out a string of words that would shock a drill sergeant.-

"Didn't I just tell you?" he demanded, emphasising every other word with an obscenity. "When each tin comes along you pull the handle down and wait for the click. Then you let the handle go again."

"Yes, but what does that do?"

"What does it do? It earns me two creds for an eight hour shift," Midge said with embellishments.

When Tod Asher took over, Midge stood behind him for a while, volunteering lurid advice and information. Then Tod was on his own; pulling the handle down on tin after tin, tin after tin, until his vision became blurred, his arm ached, and his whole body felt cramped through bending over a belt made low enough for the reach of the smallest worker. By the time lunch break arrived he could understand how Midge had developed his colloquial style of conversation.

Most of the workers went to the canteen for lunch, but Tod felt he wanted to get away from them for a while. He thought of his own little bungalow kitchen. It seemed incredible that this time yesterday he was sitting there with Ruth, looking over the valley patchworked with farms like his own.

On the second floor he found a diner and spent fifty cents on a meal. His card now registered one credit forty. A cigar and a beer put it up to one credit seventy, and that was as high as he intended his bill to go. For a day's work his wage would be a bare two credits. He was still thirty cents in the clear, but he decided to keep a safe margin and not spend any more.

That afternoon seemed to last for about three weeks. Tin after tin of identical shape came along with torturing regularity. As each one arrived in front of him he pulled down the handle,

waited for the click, released the handle, and watched the press slide back again. His eyes now were playing tricks on him. Each tin that came along seemed to be followed by a ghost tin. He let each ghost tin slide past and then brought the handle down on the material tin which followed it.

At one period he wondered what would happen if he stamped the ghost tins and let the others slide past untouched. By the time the bell rang at the end of the shift he was sitting like a man in a trance, with his hand automatically pumping the handle.

His relief touched him on the shoulder, and he got up wearily, cramped in every joint.

Lethargically accepting his pay-packet he followed a crowd of workers out of the factory and eventually drifted towards the general exit.

Joining a queue to one of the cash-offices he examined his wage-packet. The amount typed on the front of it was one credit sixty cents. There's been a mistake, he thought. The amount on his yellow card now read one credit seventy. If he did not get the mistake rectified he would be in exactly the same position as last night.

Running against the tide of workers he made his way back to the factory. There was a long line at the pay office now. Tod looked round for some official. His eyes rested on little Midge who was making for the end of the line.

Midge looked up at him furiously. "There's no—mistake ! You don't get full pay on the first day 'cos you're only—learning. What d'you want ? Jam on it ?"

"Nobody told me anything about that."

Midge came up with the kind of remark expected of him and joined the queue to the pay office.

If you were three feet taller, Tod thought, I'd wipe the floor with you.

Watching the little man, with loathing combined with pity, Tod Asher lost the lethargy caused by his day in the factory. He felt it falling away from him like a discarded spacesuit, leaving him furious and intent. It was bad enough them spitting on me, he thought. Now they're rubbing it in ! He was in a fighting mood. He folded his big, work-hardened fingers

into fists and looked round for someone to tackle. No use picking on the officials, the cashiers, or the guards. They were mere lackeys carrying out orders. Somebody was responsible for all this. Somebody gave the orders. Somebody raked in a very big pile of creds.

He decided to find out who it was. It would be no use asking anyone round here. Maybe in the Bearpit he would get some information.

It was one thing to decide to visit the Bearpit. It was another to find it. The first person he asked was a motherly woman. She looked astounded and walked away without replying, as though the question was an insult and she was going to call a cop.

Tod repeated his question to a guard.

"Bearpit? We've got no bearpits here. There's a menagerie of some sort in the amusement department."

"Thanks," Tod said. "You've cheered me up no end !"

A moving floorway took him to a room where a hundred or more children played with gymnastic equipment. An instructor supervised a line of boys vaulting a box-horse.

"I'm looking for the Bearpit," Tod told him.

The instructor swung round belligerently. Biceps bulged from his chainbreaker singlet. A red, fanatical face with a moustache spiked like a cactus, glared at Tod over a puffed-out chest.

"We'll have no talk of the Bearpit here," he said, clenching his teeth. "These are all decent lads from the fourth level. We don't have any truck with blags."

"Stand at ease !" Tod said. "Or you'll burst a blood-vessel !"

He went out and drifted along floorways and down lifts. Soon he was completely lost. Wire-fronted store-houses rose on either side, huge deserted rooms filled with bales and packing-cases. At length he came to a wall and knew that he could progress no further in that direction.

Returning along his tracks he found a flight of stairs. They led to a powerstation. The air throbbed with dynamos. There were smells of oil and labouring metal, gleams of burnished steel and glossy paint. A glance convinced him he would not find the Bearpit down there.

"You looking for something, mister ?"

Tod turned, startled. He had thought himself alone. Now he saw a giant of a man standing beside a switchboard with a spanner in his hand. Tod rarely encountered a man so much taller than himself, and he had never before seen a boiler-suit of such capacity.

"The Bearpit. That's what I'm looking for."

"You don't look like a blag to me." A note of suspicion timbred the man's deep voice. "What you want with the Bearpit?"

"I'm an ex-spaceman. There's a Guild representative I want to contact."

The huge man grinned. In his grin shone friendliness, admiration, and two big teeth. "A spaceman, eh? I'm never too busy to help a spaceman."

He stuffed two banana-size fingers into his mouth and let out a piercing whistle. Immediately another huge man who might have been his twin appeared from behind one of the machines. The man who had whistled spoke to the second man and handed him the spanner. Then he turned to Tod Asher. "Come on, spaceman! You'll never find the Bearpit on your own."

Immediately on entering the Bearpit, Tod was forcibly reminded of an old film he had seen of a refugee camp. The basement room was so vast, and so dimly lighted that he could see none of the walls. A colonnade of wide pillars stretched into an interminable distance. Tod got the impression that the place extended over the full area of the base of the Emporium. In little groups among the pillars the denizens of the Bearpit lay and squatted among a litter of papers, tins and rubbish.

After a brief pause inside the door he walked down the colonnade. The people he saw were the very old, the very young, the sick and the destitute; the kind of people who were never seen in the slick salesrooms. Many of them were in rags, and their meagre possessions were gathered round them in bundles and packing-cases.

He saw a child with a muddy face and bare buttocks, an old man with a livid sore amid the whiskers on his cheek, a skinny, big-eyed woman feeding a monkey-like baby.

Although he must have been conspicuous in his good suit among that raggle-taggle gathering, no one took any notice of him as he walked carefully among the belongings of the various groups.

No wonder so many people did not admit to knowing about the Bearpit, he reflected. This mess of destitution was the rotting compost on which the Emporium flowered ; the disease concealed within the harlot's gaudy finery.

Presently he heard someone call his name, and turning, he saw Pete Soames beckoning him over to one of the huge pillars.

"You're just in time for supper," Pete said with the minimum of welcome in his voice.

Tod followed him behind a screen of draped blankets. A woman served soup to about a dozen men sitting round a trestle table.

"Welcome to Spaceman's Corner," Soames said with a bitter smile.

While the woman provided another plate and a hunk of bread, Tod Asher looked round the table but did not see anyone he recognised. Most of the men were a good twenty years older than he ; and they had about them the uneasy timidity of once proud men living perforce on charity.

"Take a seat," Pete said. "I'll have a yarn with you after supper."

The meal was eaten in a silence broken only by the sound of ladling spoons. When it was over, Tod joined Soames on an upturned box.

"So you couldn't stay out of their clutches !" Pete said, giving him a cigarette.

"Don't think I'm taking this lying down," Tod assured him. "There's still such a thing as the law ; and the law doesn't allow a man to be detained against his will."

"This place has its own by-laws : read the back of your card !"

Tod took out his card. The Guildman pointed to some small print on the back of it.

"The acceptance of this card signifies that the holder is willing to abide by the rules of the Emporium."

"How much do you need to clear your card ?" Soames asked.

"Another ten cents, I—"

"Ten cents ! That won't take much settling. I'll give you ten cents right away and you can get yourself out of here pronto. Most of these fellows owe thirty creds."

Pete took a handful of plastics from his pocket and picked out two five-cent counters. Tod refused them.

"No, Pete. I can't accept charity. The whole set-up here is one dirty big swindle ; and I intend to find out who's responsible and tell them just what I think."

Pete shook his head. "It's too big for you, Toddy. You'd just as well bang your head against that pillar. How's Ruth, by the way ? Found her yet ?"

"No. Ruth'll look after herself. I'm just mad at being kicked around, that's all. Maybe I'm a peasant now ; but once I was a spaceman !"

He said the word spaceman so violently that several of the men at the table looked round. For a moment they raised their heads as though proud to belong to such a fraternity. Tod looked at them eagerly. Maybe he could get a deputation ! A deputation of ex-spacemen ! That would be something !

But as he watched, the men at the table looked away one by one, lowering their heads again. They were beaten men. That's how he would end up if he did not get out of this place pretty soon. He'd get out all right. Nothing would stop him. But before he went he would let the bosses know what he thought of them.

The Guildman rested a hand on his shoulder. For a moment the bitter lines on his face relaxed.

"Come along and see Hucko ! He's got a grudge against the Emporium ; and he's got his own ideas about getting even."

Tod followed Pete through the blanket screen and along a path between another two massive rows of pillars. Still no walls in sight. The ceiling, too, was invisible. They seemed to be walking in an endless nightmare forest without a sky.

Away from the central colonnade there were few lights ; and some of the groups of outcasts illuminated their immediate surroundings with camp fires or with torches made of oily rags. Others huddled in the darkness, waiting, it seemed for the final darkness of death.

The air was thick with smoke and the smells of filth and the hardly less rancid smells of crude cooking.

But although there were signs of misery in every square yard of the Bearpit, there were some signs of enjoyment. A circle of children danced round holding hands and reciting their adaptation of an ageless jingle.

My mother said

I never should

Play with the Blaggars in the wood . . .

And not far away a group of adults held a campfire sing-song accompanied by an old man with a battered guitar.

They found Hucko in the section of the Bearpit he had made into his studio. The hunchback was reclining on a pile of blankets when Pete Soames and Tod Asher walked in. The studio consisted of a large hut constructed from sheets of hard-board. Three high-wattage lamps hung from a cable across the ceiling, making the place dazzlingly bright in contrast to the outside gloom. Painted canvasses covered the walls. Some of them were vaguely suggestive of the works of Lautrec or the early Picasso. Others had a surrealist touch reminiscent of Salvador Dali and Hieronymus Bosch.

"Tod Asher here has a gripe against the Emporium," Pete said without any preamble. "He plans to make a protest to the management."

Hucko raised thick eyebrows and made a noise down his nose which might have been intended as a laugh.

"Lot of good that will do !"

"What do you propose to do then ?" Tod asked.

Hucko looked at him contemptuously but made no reply. Pete, who had been examining a freshly-painted canvas, answered for him.

"Hucko belongs to the Revolutionary Brotherhood. He thinks the Emporium would be better if it was run by the blags."

"You needn't sneer," Hucko said. He looked from Pete's face down to his well-heeled shoes and then back to his face again as though contemptuous of his gentlemanly attire. "You see those destitute people out there every day same as I do. Yet all you do is help those who happen to be ex-spacemen."

"I'm employed by the Spaceman's Guild."

Hucko nodded indignantly.

"That's right—a paid lackey. You do just what you're paid for and nothing more."

"If I did any more I'd be out of a job and you'd have another blag in the headline. That wouldn't help ex-spacemen or anyone else."

"Goodnight !" Hucko made a brush-off gesture with his strangely vital-looking fingers.

"Is Hucko always like that ?" Tod asked as they made their way back to the Spaceman's Corner.

"He's very bitter," Soames said without rancour. "Once he had a top-flight job here as a commercial artist. Among

other things he painted that earth goddess I saw you ogling yesterday. Some people considered him the best artist on the payroll. Then one day he gave it up—just like that ! Said he was prostituting his art and he'd be better off painting fences."

"He's got guts ; I'll say that for him."

"Guts are no good without commonsense. Look, Toddy, are you sure you won't accept this ten cents ? After all, it's not from me, but from the Guild. You paid your dues for ten years ; so it's not charity. The Guild always tries to help its ex-members ; you know that !"

"No thanks, Pete. The Guild's a fine institution, and I'm not slighting it. In fact I think the guild-movement is one of the few decent, sane things in these crazy times. But I've got a protest to make ; and I'm going to make it. You can help me by telling me where I'll find the real bosses of this place."

Pete Soames rubbed his brow wearily.

"This is a five hundred storey skyscraper, spaceman. And you'll find the bosses up there on the top floor. But believe me, you'll never get close enough to speak to them."

"We'll see about that," Tod said.

Tod Asher stood in the deserted corner of the basement and looked up the lift-shaft which rose floor after floor to the top of the Emporium. In the basement the shaft was as wide as his bungalow, but it rose up and up, narrowing in perspective until it was a mere hairline disappearing into the faint streak of light in which the vertical row of floor-lamps could no longer be distinguished. Even to look at it made him faint and dizzy.

At the side of the shaft ran the emergency stairs in a narrowing zigzag which eventually lost itself in the heights. He could not risk the lift. He would have to climb those stairs, if it took him a week to do so.

After a final glance round the visible part of the basement, he started to climb ; counting the flights as he ascended. The steps were of plastic, and the dust on them bore evidence to the fact that they were rarely used.

On floor eighteen he paused for a while and rested. When he went to the side of the staircase and looked down he seemed incredibly high ; but when he looked up it seemed as though he had never left the basement.

On the landing above the twenty-fifth flight a dusty window opened in the wall of the Emporium. Tod glanced at the outside world for the first time since entering the building. A

cloudy moon bleared above the valley. He tried to pick out his own farm, but everything was too vague and the viewpoint too unfamiliar.

Up, up, he went ; climbing, resting, climbing. Steps, steps, steps. They were as monotonous as the tins on the conveyor belt. All the same size, the same shape, the same dusty grey. He remembered the other evening when he was driving his tractor. He had noticed the Emporium towering above the valley. If anyone had told him then that within forty-eight hours he would be climbing up the inside of the building he would have laughed his head off.

Somewhere past the first hundred floors he lost count. But that did not matter. All he had to do was climb and climb.

During one rest period he slept for a while and dreamed he had reached the top only to be met by a man without a face who flung him over the side of the staircase. He was falling . . .

He woke painfully and experienced a momentary vertigo during which he clutched at the floor of the landing with dust-caked hands.

Some time before dawn he first heard the lift working. There was a humming. He wondered what it was. Then he realised that the noise was coming from inside the lift shaft. The lift was going down. About twenty minutes later the lift rose again ; and he wondered who would be moving around at that hour in the morning. Maybe there was someone on guard up there. He must watch out for that when he reached the top. But there was plenty of time before he need worry about it.

He judged that he was over half way to the top when the first light of day silvered the windows. His thighs ached dreadfully. The balls of his feet felt as though his socks were lined with hot sandpaper.

He glanced through the next window he came to, hoping to get a glimpse of the valley, but the valley was invisible under a white candy floss of cloud.

Turning from the window he saw two uniformed guards coming towards him from a landing door at the bottom of the flight of stairs. The guards were both elderly, and under normal circumstances he could easily have run away from them but his legs felt rigid as stilts.

The first guard to speak was a thin-faced man with a grey moustache. "What are you doing up here ?"

"I didn't know there was a law against it," Tod said, and to his surprise the guard was smiling.

"How the devil did you get up here?"

"I flew up; how d'you think?"

They were both grinning. His eyes felt gritty; his mouth tasted as though he had been chewing copper filings.

"We'd better take him to see Mr. Quince," said the second guard, who had stained teeth and an unhealthy purplish tint to his face.

"Yes," Grey Moustache chuckled. "Mr. Quince will be glad to see him."

Chapter Four

Tod Asher had to wait several hours before he was taken to see Mr. Quince. In the meantime he had a shower and was given breakfast by the two guards, who seemed amused at the fact that he had climbed the three hundred flights from the basement. After the meal he glanced through a pile of comics, the only reading material, if such it could be called, that the guards possessed.

When Mr. Quince was ready to see him, Tod was taken to the office, a sumptuous room on the three hundredth floor with a wide window giving a view of the coastline some fifteen miles away. The room, Tod realised, looking round, was bigger than all the rooms of his bungalow put together.

Quince had the air of a scholarly aristocrat. His features were delicate as a girl's, his eyes were light blue, and his hair shone silver. After dismissing the guards, he ushered Tod into a chair, and gave him a cigarette from a silver box.

"You've a complaint, Mr. Asher. May I hear it?"

Tod stumped his cigarette in an ashtray and got to his feet. After his shower and breakfast he felt none the worse for his all night climb. Without pulling any punches he told Quince exactly what he thought of the Emporium.

Quince heard him in silence. Then he leaned back in his chair and said: "Mr. Asher; I agree with you entirely so far as you've gone. But before you pass judgment on this enterprise I'd like to remind you that you have only seen what goes on on the lower floors."

Before Tod could formulate a reply, Quince rose and strode briskly over to a TV screen which stood beside a huge model of the Emporium. He pressed a button on one of the lower floors

of the model and immediately the TV screen presented a view of a salesroom filled with shoppers.

"The salesrooms provide the money which makes the whole of the Emporium possible." Quince pressed another button and the screen showed some artists painting in a studio. "This is floor 101. Here we see a group of artists at work in one of our advertising studios. And on floor 212 . . ." He switched the picture on the screen. ". . . we run advanced university courses in technology and the arts."

For perhaps an hour he kept changing the picture on the screen and showing Tod Asher section after section of the Emporium . . . a hospital, a church, an art-gallery, a maternity home, a huge library, a kindergarten, a book-publishing department, and a laboratory equipped with the latest apparatus.

"So you see," Quince said, switching off the screen and returning to his desk, "the Emporium is much more than a catchpenny bazaar."

"Maybe you're doing good work here," Tod said. "But I still think your methods down there in the factories and salesrooms are inhuman. Sensonics, for example—it seems a pretty dirty way of doing business."

"Sensonics," Quince said, with an unruffled glance through the window, "appeals to the sensual side of men and women. Only the most sensual people will get really involved with it. Our methods here weed out the depraved and the over-sensual and bog them down in the mire of their own bestiality, while allowing the more intelligent element to develop their potentialities to the full."

Tod grinned wryly.

"I don't think I'm abnormally depraved, Mr. Quince. But once or twice I found myself getting a little involved with your sensonics."

"No man is free from sensuality," Quince said, dabbing his silver hair with a delicate hand as though he liked the feel of it. "You perhaps gave in to temptation once or twice. You wouldn't be human if you didn't. But you did not allow it to enslave you. You still had almost thirty credits to spend on your card. And yet you turned your back on the fleshspot and came up here. You walked up three hundred flights of stairs to lodge a complaint. That speaks of determination, Mr. Asher. And there's a well-paid job at the Emporium for you any time you want one."

Tod shook his head.

"No thank you, Mr. Quince. I'll get back to my farm as soon as possible. If you'll tell me how I can earn ten cents I'll square my debt and get on my way."

"A day's work in the science library on Floor 257 will earn you ten credits," Quince said, pressing a push on his desk.

The science library proved an ideal place in which to work. The job of unpacking new volumes and sorting them into the shelves in their catalogued positions was pleasant and easy. Moreover he was sufficiently interested in the new works to remain alert and wakeful after his almost sleepless night. His two companions, Mr. Outram and Miss Betts provided scholarly companionship. It was astounding to think he was getting ten credits for a day's work here, while yesterday he received less than two credits for an eight hour shift in that dreadful factory. There was something radically wrong with their scale of values.

After he had been in the library about an hour it suddenly occurred to him that he had not done what he intended. He had planned to go to the top floor and protest to the bosses ; but he had reached only the three hundredth floor, and his complaint had been heard by Mr. Quince, a mere employee.

Who the bosses were he still did not know. Quince had shown him TV pictures of places on the lower floors and on the floors immediately above them. But what went on on Floor 500 ? There had been no pictures of that.

By falling for Quince's flattery and the offer of a well-paid job he had been side-tracked from his purpose. But now, in the studious atmosphere of the science library, his purpose no longer seemed clear cut. After a day's work he would be able to leave the Emporium with almost as much money as he had come in with. Why should he grouse ?

When the day at the library was done, Tod collected his pay and took the lift down to the General Exit. He felt in good spirits. His sojourn in the Emporium was nearly over. He had certainly learnt his lesson. Smiling inwardly he imagined himself recounting his adventures to Mike Dallas, while Ethel hovered in the background whispering exclamations of surprise and disgust.

In the cash-office he presented his card to the cashier and watched him press the button that would check his yellow card with the duplicate on which his transactions had been recorded.

The cashier suddenly stopped what he was doing and read something on his memo pad.

"Oh, Mr. Asher ; I've got a note here from Mr. Quince. He'd like a word with you before you leave. If you'll kindly wait a few minutes I'll let him know you're here."

It occurred to Tod to tell the cashier and Mr. Quince to go to hell on a tandem. But his curiosity got the better of him. What did Quince want now ? Had he a better job still to offer ?

He glanced through the outer doorway at some men playing hoses on the ground and at a couple of guards hurrying away with a stretcher. Above them a flock of gulls and rocks squawked hungrily.

"What's going on there ?"

"Where ?" Languidly the cashier looked up.

"Outside. Those fellows with the hoses and the stretcher."

"Another suicide, I expect," the cashier said casually.

Before Tod could make a further remark Mr. Quince breezed into the office oozing silver-haired charm and personality.

"Sorry to detain you, Mr. Asher. But there's someone on the tenth floor who'd like to see you."

"Lead the way."

Tod walked beside the silver haired man out of the exit hall and into a lift. They stepped out into a foyer furnished with easy chairs, large paintings, and potted shrubs. The atmosphere was one of quiet luxury discretely perfumed with cosmetics, furniture-polish and the smoke of good cigars.

Urbanely returning the salutes of various menials, Mr. Quince led Tod out of the foyer and along a corridor with a thick carpet. He tapped on a door. A second later it was opened by a tall girl with golden hair.

"Ruth !"

As Tod took his wife in his arms, Mr. Quince slipped tactfully away.

"Thank heavens I've found you, Ruth. But whatever are you doing up here ?"

Ruth stepped back and examined herself in a full-length mirror.

"Tod, darling ! You haven't said if you like my new dress."

"Fine ! But what are you doing here ?"

"You remember Molly Faye don't you ? She went to Pondene with me."

Accustomed as he was to the butterfly-flitting of his wife's conversation, Tod, at that moment, felt particularly irritated with it. After all, she had practically deserted him for two days, and now all she could talk about was her new dress and her old schoolfriend.

"Yes. I remember Molly."

"What's wrong, darling? Aren't you pleased to see me?"

"Look, Ruth! I last saw you at lunch-time two days ago. When I came in for supper you were missing . . ."

"You seem to think I'm only fit to get your meals. Listen to me . . ."

"Not at all, but I think I'm entitled . . ."

"If you must know, I came here to buy you a present."

"I appreciate that very much, Ruth. But this is no place for you and me. Let's get back to the farm!"

Ruth's eyeballs were suddenly swimming in tears.

"But they won't let me out, Tod. I still owe twenty beastly creds." Wearily he turned away from her, running his fingers through his hair. "Oh my god! Now I'm in their clutches as deep as ever."

"It's not so very bad," Ruth consoled. "Molly's living next door with her husband. They've got me a job in an advertising office. I'm earning twenty creds a week."

"Forget about that!" Tod said with sudden determination. "You stay right here. I'll go back to the valley and get a loan from Mike Dallas to clear your card."

"But darling!" She came to him, her arms raised pleadingly, her lips pouted like a little girl's. "You're not going to leave me already. You've only just found me. I've been so miserable without you."

"I won't be long."

"Tod!" Her voice had a ring of desperation. "Don't you know what day it is?"

"Thursday isn't it? You lose track in this blasted place!"

"You silly! It's our anniversary."

Without taking her eyes from him she walked sideways to the dressing table, and came back with a wristwatch.

"Your present, dear. They had nothing worth buying in the village."

The tears had stopped. Her wet cheeks were smiling. Tod found it impossible to stay angry with her.

"It's a beauty!" He took the watch and strapped it on.

"But you shouldn't have bothered, darling."

Ruth went to the dressing table and began to make up her face.

"I was ordering a meal when you came in," she said, watching him in the mirror. She rubbed lipstick on her top lip. "We'll have a little dinner to celebrate. Then we'll decide what to do. Tod! Where are you going?"

"Down for a drink. I feel I need one."

He took a lift down to the exit hall and with some difficulty found his way to the saloon where he had gone two evenings ago with Pete Soames. The pornographic mural still sprawled above the counter where the bar-girls lurked; but there was no sign of the girl who had taken him to the fair, and whom he suspected of lifting his wallet.

Wanting someone to talk to, he hoped Pete Soames would be there. It occurred to him then that he rarely had any satisfactory conversation with Ruth; and he wondered how many married men were in the same position.

It was a case of semantic incompatibility, he reflected. All words had marginal associations. The associations of any particular word depended upon your education and way of life. A word that had a certain meaning for one person would mean something else to another.

Women and men could rarely converse satisfactorily because each spoke a different language. Women, because of the need to conceive, bear, and succour children, were concerned with different things to men. This coloured their outlook, and subtly changed the meanings of their words. Sensonics was probably more effective with women; so how could he blame Ruth for getting into debt? Oh hell!

After his first glass of whisky he was about to order another when Hucko entered the saloon.

"Hello spaceman!" Hucko said with surprising cheerfulness. "Order one for yourself as well, will you?"

"Make that two!" Tod told the barman. He pushed his yellow card across the bar.

"Did you make your protest?" Hucko asked, raising his saturnine brows and looking at Tod steadily with dark, mocking eyes.

"I didn't see any of the bosses if that's what you mean."

Hucko sipped his drink.

"I could have told you that and saved your trouble. No one ever sees the bosses. No one knows who they are. You saw Queenie Quince I suppose?"

Tod nodded uneasily.

Hucko moved his lips as though he was going to spit.

"And I suppose he offered you a job at fifty creds a week?"

"He did."

"That's standard procedure. Anyone likely to make trouble is elevated to the hundredth floor. I've had dozens of offers."

"Why did you turn them down?"

Hucko swilled the whisky round in the bottom of his glass and looked at it dubiously as though he was considering whether to drink it or toss it in someone's face.

"This Tower of Babel," he said at length, "is basically anti-human. It follows that a man can't be happy on any level of it. If you go up a hundred floors you don't find happiness. You find the same problems as in the Bearpit, and a few extra ones thrown in. The original Tower of Babel was a flop because it was too big and because the people in it didn't understand each other. This cubic mile of idiocy will flop for the same reasons."

He tossed his drink back quickly and fished a black card from his pocket. "Let me buy you a drink, brother."

Tod stared, fascinated, at the black card held in the misshapen yet delicate fingers of the hunchback.

"No thanks, Hucko. My wife's in here now. I'll get back to her."

"Your wife, eh? Brother! Have you got problems!"

"I can handle them."

"Sure! We can all handle our own problems. At least we think we can. But don't forget—you can always join the Revolutionary Brotherhood if you get round to feeling the way I do."

"I'll keep that in mind," Tod said, turning for the door.

He lifted to the tenth floor. On opening the door of the suite in which he had left Ruth less than an hour ago he thought at first he had come to the wrong place. Music blared. A party seemed to be in progress. Then he saw Ruth on the arm of an easy chair, and a couple leaning against each other beside a tapeplayer with drinks in their hands. The woman was Molly Faye. The man was her third husband.

Ruth brought Tod a drink.

"Try one of these cocktails, darling!"

"What's going on?"

"I just asked Molly and Eric in for a little celebration."

Tod carried his drink to a corner seat and sat gloomily down.

Molly was a loudmouthed blonde addicted to huge hats and fancy spectacles. Eric was pop-eyed and hairy, with a taste for smut.

Tod disliked the pair of them. Why, he wondered, out of all the rooms in this town-sized skyscraper, did they have to be in this room with him and Ruth?

"What's the matter, Toddy-pet?" Ruth said, mussing his hair. "Why don't you relax and enjoy yourself. You're only middle-aged once." She seemed a little drunk.

"Dammit Ruth!" he almost shouted. "I shan't relax till I'm back home."

Ruth brought her face close to his. She was not smiling.

"Tod Asher! Don't you dare make a scene when we've got company!"

He repeated one of Midge's overworked words.

Ruth raised her eyebrows. Then she replaced her smile and handed round more drinks and some plates of chicken and salad.

"How much did that little bunfight cost you?" Tod demanded when at long last the visitors had staggered away.

She turned on him furiously.

"Do I have to account to you for every cred I spend?"

"You'll have to account to the cash-office before you can clear your card."

Fingers trembling, she lit a cigarette.

"Who said I wanted to clear my card? Molly and Eric have owed twenty creds each for two years now. Nobody bothers them about it."

"But, Ruth! We're not going to be here for two years. We're not going to be here for two hours if I can help it. We're going home!"

She walked stormily across the room and jabbed her cigarette into a plate.

"I think, Tod, it's about time you heard a few home-truths. Up to now you've been blind enough to think I was content to live on that crummy little farm. Well, I wasn't. I hated it. I hated every moment . . ."

Tod listened incredulously. Ruth had always seemed happy on the farm. It was a shock to think that all the time she had been waiting for a chance to get away from it. He listened in silence. Then he walked to the door.

"Where are you going now?"

"This is it, Ruth. This is where I say goodbye."

She looked at him in scornful amazement.

"Don't you love me any more?"

"I don't know what that means," he said hoarsely. "I'm going home."

"Tod!" She stepped towards him and for a moment he thought she would try to detain him by force. But she collapsed in the middle of the room and lay still.

At first he thought she was putting on an act, but when he felt her forehead it was cold and filmed with perspiration. Her eyes were open but the pupils had almost disappeared behind the lids.

Tod rang for an attendant and asked him to call a doctor.

Dr. Hawke was big and jolly. His bulging, scarlet waistcoat gave him the appearance of a preposterously large robin. With much twittering and cajolling, he brought Ruth back to consciousness and assisted her into bed.

Tod left them together and went into the other room and smoked a cigarette. Just his luck for Ruth to be ill now. He could not very well walk out on her. Then there would be the doctor's fee. The bill for medicine! Hell's bells! He saw himself getting deeper and deeper into the clutches of the Emporium.

Doctor Hawke left the bedside still wearing his bedside manner. An old-fashioned stethoscope hung from his neck and gleamed like a jewel on his scarlet waistcoat. He went into the bathroom and scrubbed his hands and came out fussing with the cuffs of his jacket.

Tod thought of Hucko. "Brother! Have you got problems!" The hunchback didn't know half of it.

"Congratulations, Mr. Asher!" Dr. Hawke was saying. "Your wife is two months on the way with a baby."

"Oh no!"

"Nothing to worry about," Doctor Hawke soothed. "Childbirth is no difficulty these days. We have an excellent maternity ward on level thirteen. And the fees are quite moderate."

When Tod Asher showed the doctor to the door he walked clumsily, like a seagull on a ploughed field.

—W. T. Webb

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