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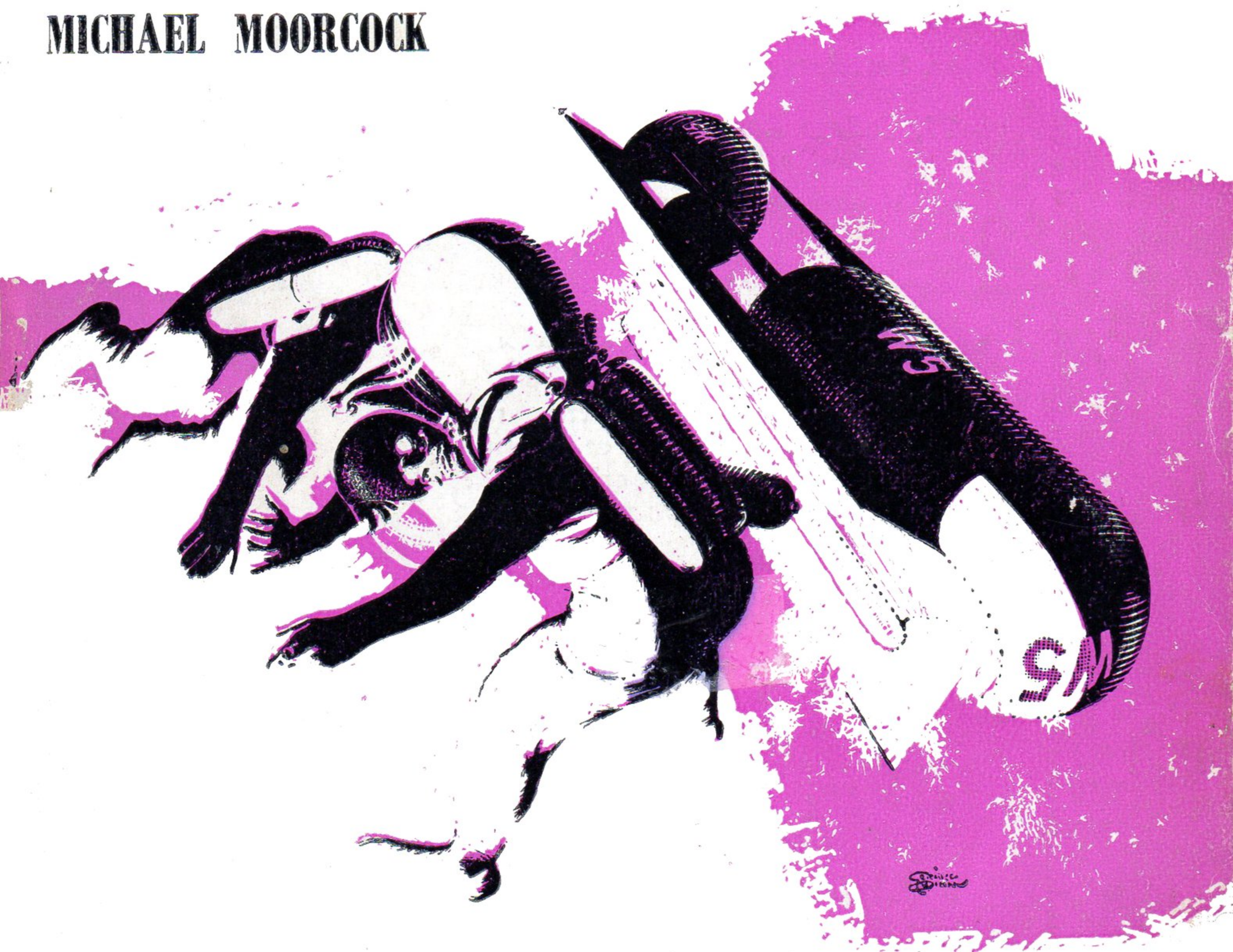
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VOLUME 6

The Blood Red Game

MICHAEL MOORCOCK



A Task For Calvi

LAN WRIGHT

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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 6

No. 32

1963

New Science Fiction Stories

Short Novel :

THE BLOOD RED GAME Michael Moorcock 2

The remnants of the human race, fleeing from their own contracting universe, find themselves in a more-than-hostile dimension. (A sequel to "The Sundered Worlds.")

Novelette :

A TASK FOR CALVI Lan Wright 70

Peter Calvi had a rendezvous with a man he had never met, to receive a message he knew nothing about. The man died before they made contact—which put Calvi in a difficult spot

Edited by JOHN CARNELL

Cover painting by GERARD QUINN

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If the annual British s-f convention offered a yearly award to the new author most likely to succeed (as the Americans do), we feel that young professional Michael Moorcock would easily qualify for 1962. The following story, a sequel to "The Sundered Worlds" in No. 29, is masterly in its approach to the rehabilitation of the human race in another dimension.

THE BLOOD RED GAME

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK

Prologue

There had been a man called Jon Renark and another called Asquiol of Pompeii. These were great figures of legend, looming large in the new history of mankind. But now there was only Asquiol.

Of the two that had saved the life of their race, only Asquiol remained to lead it away from danger. A dead universe lay behind them and they knew not where they were going. They were the human race.

And, it must be remembered, that in the great multiverse they were merely a scattering of seeds ; seeds that must survive many elements if they were to grow.

Finite, yet containing the stuff of infinity, the multiverse wheeled in its gigantic movement through space.

To those who could observe it from beyond its boundaries, it appeared as a solid construction, dense and huge. Yet within it there were many things, many intelligences who did not realise that they dwelt in the multiverse since, within itself, it was comprised of many universes, each one separated from the other by dimensions, like leaves between the layers. Here and there the mighty structure was flawed by fragments which moved *through* the dimensions, through the leaves, passing many universes; but on the whole the universes remained unknown to one another and those who dwelt within them believed that theirs was the only continuum. They did not realise that they were part of a composite structure of fantastic complexity. They did not realise their purpose or the purpose for which the multiverse had been created.

Only the chosen knew—and of them only a few understood.

So, fleeing from their own non-existent galaxy, the human race began its great exodus into a new space-time-continuum—pierced the walls of the dimension-barrier and came, at last, into a new universe.

Chapter One

Asquiol of Pompeii was no longer a man. He had become many men and was therefore complete. There was no better leader for the human fleet; no better mentor to guide it. For Asquiol was the New Man. Existing in a multitude of dimensions, his vision extended beyond the limitations of his fellows, and saw all that men could one day become—if they could make the effort.

Asquiol of Pompeii, captain of destiny, destroyer of boundaries, becalmed in detachment, opened his eyes from a reverie and observed the fleet he led.

His screen showed him a vast caravan of vessels of all kinds. There were space-liners and battle-ships, launches and factory-ships, ships of all kinds and for all purposes, containing all the machinery of a complex society on the move. There were ships of many designs, some ornate, some plain, yet they contained one part in common—the intercontinua-travelling device (known popularly as the IT drive) which had enabled them to journey between the different space-time-continua on their quest for a new home in a new universe.

Asquiol wished that Renark, his friend, had not elected to stay behind in the dying universe. Renark it had been who discovered the doom about to befall humanity. Renark's will had been a strong thing—it had taken him to unnatural worlds and strange regions to discover both the secret of the multiverse and the means of saving the race. But Renark and his will were in the past now. Asquiol had to find strength only from within himself—or perish. And if he perished, ceased to be what he was, then the danger of the race itself perishing would be heightened. Therefore, he reasoned, his survival and the survival of the race were linked.

Less than twenty-four hours of relative time had passed since the fleet left the home universe. Now they entered the fringes of a strange galaxy, not knowing what they might encounter or what danger might exist there.

On board the administration ships, men worked on the data which was pouring in. They charted the galaxy : they learned that, in construction, it was scarcely different from their own (this did not surprise Asquiol since he was aware that each layer of the multiverse differed only slightly from the next). Their Guide Sensors, men capable of sensing matter from a distance, investigated the nearer suns and planets, while telepaths explored the widespread systems for signs of intelligent life ; if they discovered such life they would then have to assess, if possible, its attitudes towards the refugee-invaders now entering the confines of its galaxy.

Flanking the fleet were the great battlewagons of the Galactic Police—the Geepees—upholders of the enlightened Legal Code brought from the galactic civilisation they had left behind. The Geepees were now entrusted with the guardianship of the mighty caravan as it plunged at fantastic speed through the scattering of suns that was the Rim of the spiral galaxy.

Hazy light filled space for several miles in all directions, the ships of the fleet swimming darkly through it. Beyond the fleet was the sharper darkness and beyond that the faint sparks of the stars. The light emanated from the ships—like a swirling, intangible nebula, moving constantly towards a destination it might never reach.

But Asquiol saw more than this. For Asquiol saw the multiverse. It required, in fact, a certain effort to devote his attention to only one plane of the multiverse. As soon as he

relaxed his attention, he felt the absolute pleasure of dwelling on all the planes simultaneously, of seeing around him all that there was in the area of the multiverse he now occupied.

It was like existing in a place where the very air was jewelled and faceted, glistening and alive with myriad colours, flashing, scintillating, swirling and beautiful.

This was a richer thing, the multiverse as a whole. In it Asquiol could see his own fleet and the far-away stars, but the space between everything was occupied. The multiverse was packed thick with life and matter, there was not an inch which did not possess something of interest. Vacuum was, in a sense, that which separated one layer from another. When all the layers were experienced as a whole there was no wasted vacuum, no dark nothingness. Here was everything at once, all possibilities, all experience.

He was suddenly forced to pull himself back from this individual experience (he, dead Renark and the Originators were the only beings in the multiverse capable of perceiving it). The special alarm over his laser-screen was shrilling urgently.

A face appeared on the screen. It was pouched and puffy, heavily jewelled like that of a bloodhound.

"Lord Mordan," Asquiol said to the Galactic Lord who was Captain-in-chief-of-Police.

"Asquiol." Even now Asquiol's power was virtually absolute, Mordan couldn't bring himself to call him 'prince' for the Galactic Council had relieved him of the title years previously and had not had time to restore it. Mordan spoke heavily: "Our Guide Sensors and Mind Sensors have come up with important information. We have located and contacted an intelligent species who appear to have noticed our entry into this space-time. They are a star-travelling race."

"How have they reacted to our entry?"

"We aren't sure—the Sensors are finding it difficult to adjust to their minds . . ."

"Naturally it will take time to understand a non-human species. Let me know if you have any further news."

Mordan had been screwing up his eyes while looking at Asquiol's image—there appeared to be several images, in fact, each containing a different combination of colours, overlapping one another. It was as if Asquiol looked out at Mordan through a series of tinted opaque masks covering his body and inter-

leaving on either side. The image that Mordan took to be the original lay slightly to one side of the multiple image and, for him, in better focus than the rest. He saw a lean, saturnine man, the face that of a fallen archangel, stern with the weight of leadership, the eyes sharp yet staring into a distance containing little that Mordan felt he could observe.

With his usual feeling of relief, he switched out and relayed Asquiol's message to the Senser team.

As he waited for further news, Asquiol did not exert himself by trying to contact the new species directly. That would come later. He decided to allow the Senses time to assemble as much general data as possible before he turned his full attention to the problem.

The Originators, creators of the multiversal seeding ground for their successors, had already warned Asquiol that certain intelligences were unlikely to receive the human race with anything but insensate hostility, but he hoped the universe they were in contained life that would welcome them and allow them to settle where they could. If the intelligences were hostile, the fleet was equipped to fight and, in the last resort, run. The ban on the anti-neutron cannon had been lifted and that devastating armament was thought invincible—there was no known screen that could withstand it. The fleet was already alerted for battle. There was nothing to do at the moment but wait and see.

Asquiol returned his thoughts to problems of a different nature.

Landing on and settling new planets within this galaxy would only be a minor problem compared with the task with which the Originators had entrusted him. Their purpose, they told him, was simply to exist—yet nothing was immortal and they were dying. The human race, of the many intelligent species they had placed in different layers of the multiverse, had proved to be the race with the greatest potential for overcoming its unaware state and of taking the Originators' place.

Asquiol, himself, compared the race to a chicken in the egg. Within the shell it was alive but aware of nothing beyond the shell, but with the act of breaking through the barrier of dimensions separating its universe from others, it had broken from its enclosing and stifling shell to some awareness of the multiverse and the exact nature of things. But a hatched chick, thought Asquiol, may believe the breaking of the shell to be the

ultimate action of its life—until the shell is smashed and the whole world is visible in all its complexity. Then it discovers the farm-yard and the countryside with all their many dangers. It discovers that it is only a chick and must act to survive if it is to grow to adulthood.

And what, Asquiol considered ironically, was the eventual fate of the average chicken? He wondered how many other races had got this far in the ages of the multiverse's existence. Only one would survive and now it had to be the human race, for if it did not attain its birthright before the Originators died, none would take its place, the multiverse would disintegrate back into the chaotic forces from which the Originators formed it.

Death and the stuff of death would engulf the cosmos, the tides of chance would roll over all existing things, the multiverse, bereft of guidance and control, would collapse and all intelligences, as the Originators and the creations understood it, perish!

It was this knowledge that enabled Asquiol to keep his objectives in the forefront—the race must not perish, the race must survive and progress, the race must achieve the marvellous birthright that was its promised destiny—the race must replace the Originators while there was still a little time.

If there *was* sufficient time. Asquiol didn't know. He had no way of knowing when the Originators would die. He had, in this case, to attempt to pack centuries of evolution into the shortest possible time. And his race, finally convinced of its peril, had allowed him to lead it on this first stage of its transformation. Whether, danger averted, it would allow him to continue with his mission, he did not know. Mankind could throw away its birthright and consequently the life of all ordered creation by one ill-judged or fear-inspired decision.

There were elements in the fleet, even now, who questioned his leadership, who questioned his vision, his motives. It was easy to understand this questioning, suspicious impulse which was at once Man's salvation and doom. Without it, he ceased to reason—with it he often ceased to act. To *use* the impulse objectively was the answer, Asquiol knew. But how?

Without warning, Mordan's face appeared on the laser. He stared into emptiness since he preferred, when possible, not to have to see Asquiol's image.

"These intelligencies are obviously preparing to attack us. I have alerted our battle force and all essential craft are now protected by energy screens—administration ships, farm ships, factory ships—these I intend to reassemble at the centre of our formation since they are necessary for survival. Around these I will put all residential ships. The third section comprises all fighting craft, including privately owned vessels with worthwhile armament. The operation is working fairly smoothly though there are a few recalcitrants I'm having difficulty with. We are forming to totally enclose your ship so that you are properly protected."

Asquiol drew a deep breath and said slowly: "Thank you, Lord Mordan. That sounds most efficient." His voice seemed to carry, like his image, intrinsic, far-away echoes that carried past Mordan and beyond him. "How do you intend to deal with these 'recalcitrants'?"

"I have conferred with the other members of the Galactic Council and we have come to a decision, subject to your approval."

"That is?"

"We will have to use more direct powers of action—make emergency laws to be declared null and void after the danger has passed."

"The example of history should deter you from such a decision. Powers of dictatorship, which you give me and yourselves, are liable to last beyond the circumstances for which they were devised. We have not employed coercion, force, anything like it—for centuries!"

"Asquiol—there is no time for debate!"

Asquiol made up his mind immediately. Survival, for the moment, was of prime importance. "Very well—take on these powers, force the recalcitrants to obey your orders and mine, but be sure not to abuse the powers or we will find ourselves weakened rather than strengthened."

"This we know. Thank you."

Asquiol watched, his mood brooding and disquieted, as the fleet re-deployed into a great oval shape with his own battered ship in the centre, the nut in an inordinately thick shell.

Chapter Two

Adam Roffrey was a psychopath, rebel without a cause, hater of state and organisation.

Adam Roffrey watched the ships re-forming about him, but remained where he was, refusing to answer the signal on his screen. His large head, made larger by the thick, black beard and hair covering it, had a dogged, insolent set. He was refusing to budge and he knew he was within his rights. The flexible laws of the galaxy had been bent by him many times, for the rights of the citizen were varied and complex. He could not be forced to take part in a war ; without his permission the authorities could not even contact him. Therefore, he sat tight, ignoring the urgent signal.

When Lord Mordan's bloodhound face appeared, unauthorised, on the laser-screen, Roffrey disguised his shock and smiled sardonically. He said lightly, as he always said things whatever the gravity of the statement :

"It's a lost cause, Lord Mordan. We can't hope to win. We must be fantastically outnumbered. Asquiol's forcing the race to commit suicide. Are we voting?"

"No," said Mordan, "we're not. For the duration of the emergency all citizen's rights are liable to be waived if necessary. You have no choice but to comply with the decision of Asquiol and the Galactic Council. Asquiol knows what's best."

"He doesn't know what's best for me. I'm the only lost cause I've ever backed and that's the way it's staying."

Lord Mordan regarded the black-bearded giant grinning out of the laser screen and he frowned.

"Nobody leaves the fleet, Roffrey. For one thing it is too dangerous and for another we've got to keep it tight and organised if we're to survive!"

He said the last few words to a blank screen. He whirled round in his control chair and shouted to a passing sergeant.

"Alert the perimeter guard—a ship may try to leave. Stop it!"

"How, Lord Mordan?"

"Force, if there is no other alternative," said Mordan, shocking the sergeant who in his whole career had never received such an order.

Adam Roffrey had been antisocial all his life. His living had been made on the fringes of the law. He wasn't going to give

in to the demands of society now. The chips were down for the fleet, that was his guess, and he had no reason for sticking around. He objected to the discipline required to fight complicated space-battles, he objected to the odds against the human race winning the battles, he objected to the fact that he was being personally involved. Personal involvement was not in his line.

So he broke the energy seals on his anti-neutron cannon and prepared to blast out. As he moved away from the rest of the fleet, several Geepee gunboats, alerted by Mordan, flitted towards him from nadir-north-west. He rubbed his hairy chin, scratched his hairy forehead and reached out a gauntleted hand to his drive control. At full power he retreated, away from the oncoming ships, away from the fleet into the unknown space of the unknown universe. He was prepared to take chances to avoid curtailment of his personal liberty.

But his ship, a peculiar vessel, at first sight an impossible old hulk, a space launch got up to look like a merchantman, fitted like a battlewagon, could not hope to outdistance the Geepee craft in the long run. Alread they were beginning to catch up.

Humming to himself, he debated his best course of action. There was one sure method of evading immediate danger as well as the alien threat already visible as a huge fleet of spherical vessels, seen on his screens, approached the fleet from the depths of space.

But to take that way out, although he had considered it much earlier in another context, could be highly dangerous.

The odds were that if he committed himself to it, he would never see another human being again.

The necessity to make a decision was increasing. His ship, like all those in the great cosmic caravan, was fitted with the IT drive enabling them to travel through the dimensions. He had already taken the trouble to learn all he could about multi-dimensional space and certain things existing in it. He knew, suddenly, where he was going. The idea had been in the back of his mind for years. Now he would be forced to go.

The Geepee ships were getting closer, their warnings blaring on his communicator. From a drawer below his control panel he took a bunch of charts, keeping a wary eye on the oncoming ships. Though the Geepees were nearer, the two embattled fleets were far behind. He saw faint splashes of coloured light on his screen. He was tense and was surprised to note that he

had a feeling half of relief, half of guilt that he had missed the battle. He wasn't a coward, but he had something else to do.

A quick glance at a sheet of equations and his hand was reaching for the crudely constructed controls of the IT drive. He pulled a lever, adjusted the controls and quite suddenly the Geepee ships seemed to fade away and forming into the place where they had been was a backdrop of great blazing suns that made his eyes ache.

Rapidly, as he operated the IT drive, the suns faded to be replaced by cold vacuum which was replaced by an agitation of gases heaving about in an unformed state, scarlet and grey. He was phasing quickly through the layers of the multiverse, through universe after universe with only a slight feeling of nausea in his stomach and a fierce determination to reach his destination.

The Geepee ships hadn't followed him. They had probably decided that their first priority was to aid the human fleet.

He travelled through space as well as time and the separating dimensions, and he was heading back in the direction where, in his home universe, the edge of the galaxy had been. He had all the bearings he needed and, as he moved on one level, he moved through others at reckless speed.

He knew where he was going—but whether he would make it was a question he couldn't answer.

Asquiol of Pompeii watched the battle on his screens with a feeling akin to helplessness. Mordan was conducting the war, needing only basic orders from him.

"Am I doing as much as I could?" he wondered. "Am I not accepting, too complacently, what I have discovered?" It was easy for him to dominate the fleet, for his mind had become at once flexible and strong and his physical presence overawed his fellows. There was a part of him, too, which was not at ease, as if he was a jigsaw complete but for the last piece and the section that would complete him was just out of reach. Somewhere in the multiverse he felt the piece existed—perhaps another intelligence that he could share his thoughts and experiences with—he knew it was out there, yet what it was and how he would find it he did not know. Without it, his picture of himself was incomplete. He felt that he functioned, but could not progress. Had the Originators, who had given him this power, deliberately done this to him? Or had they made a mistake?

The fleet's formation was lost as yet another wave of attackers pounced out of space with weapons cutting lances of bright energy. They were not impervious to anti-neutron cannon, but the two forces were fairly well matched as far as technology went. There were more of the aliens, however, and this was what primarily worried Asquiol.

Again, while Mordan sweated to withstand and retaliate to this fresh attack, he let his mind and being drop through the layers of the multiverse and contact the alien commanders. If they would not accept peace terms, he strove to arrange a truce.

To his surprise, this suggestion seemed acceptable to them. There *was* an alternative to open war—one which they would be delighted to negotiate.

That was ?

The Game, they said. Play the Game with us, winner takes all.

After he had got some inkling of the Game's nature, Asquiol deliberated momentarily. There were pros and cons . . .

Finally, he agreed and was soon watching the enemy ships retreating away into the void.

With some trepidation, he informed Mordan of his decision, and awaited its outcome.

This new development in their struggle with the aliens, disturbed Lord Mordan. War, he could understand. This, at first, he could not. All psychologists, psychiatrists, psiologists, physiologists, and kindred professionals had been ordered to the huge factory ship which engineers were already converting. From now on, according to Asquiol, the battle was to be fought from this single ship—and it had no armaments !

Asquiol was unapproachable as he conferred with the alien commanders in his own peculiar way. Every so often he would break off to issue strange orders.

Something about a game—yet what kind of game, wondered Lord Mordan, required experts in psychology as its players ? What was the complicated electronic equipment that technologists were installing in the great converted hold of the factory ship ?

'This is our only chance of winning,' Asquiol had told him. 'A slim one—but if we learn how to play it properly, we have a chance.'

Mordan sighed. At least the truce had allowed them time to regroup and assess damage. It was great. Two thirds of the

fleet had been destroyed. Farm ships and factory ships were working at full capacity to supply the fleet with necessities—but tight rationing had been introduced. The race was subsisting on survival rations. The initial joy of escape was replaced by gloomy desperation.

Roffrey could see his destination. He slammed the IT activator to the off-position and coasted towards the looming system ahead. It hung in empty space, the outlines of its planets hazy, following a random progression around a magnificent blue binary sun.

The legendary system rose larger on his laser screen. The unnatural collection of worlds came closer. It had been known by many names—Ghost Worlds, Shifter System—the Sundered Worlds.

Here, years before, Asquiol of Pompeii had followed his friend Renark in their search for a secret. Here they had found the secret of the multiverse, here Renark and Asquiol had become more than men when they met the Originators. Here they had discovered a means of saving the human race from destruction, of leading the race to its true birthright. Here, also, they had left those members of their party who had not had the courage or will to continue the quest.

Roffrey knew their names. Two names, a man's and a woman's. But dominant in his skull was another name—a woman's, the woman he had come to find.

If he did not find her this time, he told himself, then he would have to accept that she was dead. Then he would have to accept his own death, also. That was the intensity of his obsession.

As he neared the Sundered Worlds, he regarded them with curiosity. These planets defied all the laws of the multiverse. As well as following a comparatively normal progression in time and space, they shifted *through* the dimensions, moving from universe to universe in a weird and unnatural orbit.

His maps aided him to find the planet he wanted. Entropium, where criminals of many races had come to escape justice. There had been no justice on Entropium, no laws made by man, few made by nature. And this was the planet where Adam Roffrey knew he would find the two people who might help him find the third. The third was of great importance.

He cruised into the Shifter's area warily for he knew enough to expect two kinds of danger. A race called the Thron,

natives of the Shifter, had waged implacable war on all other races when Renark and Asquiol were there. Secondly, the lawless nature of the Shifter meant that accepted natural laws were liable to exist there. Yet, wary as he was, it was impossible to observe either chaos or enemy as he swept down over Entropium, scanning the planet for the only city that had ever been built there.

He did not find that, either.

He found, instead, a place where a city had been. Now it was jagged rubble. And in that city, a handful of wretches, the remnants of the human population of Entropium. Something dreadful had happened on the planet and he wanted answers from the starving group confronting him.

A man with a fleshless head and huge eyes, fingered his scabs and said : " We're starving here. Have you got any supplies ?"

" What happened ?" Roffrey said, feeling sick. There was desolation everywhere. These human beings were banded together for protection against similar bands of aliens. Evidently only the fittest survived.

The ragged man pointed at the rubble behind him. " This ? We don't know. It just hit us . . ."

" Why didn't you leave here ?"

" No ships. Most of them were destroyed."

Roffrey grimaced and said : " Wait here."

A short time later he came stumbling back over the rubble with a box in his hands, his boots slipping and sliding on the uneven ground. They clustered around him greedily as he handed out vitapacks.

A woman separated herself from the group squatting over their food. The man with the fleshless head followed her. She said to Roffrey :

" You must be from the home galaxy. How did you get here ? Did—they—find how the Shifter worked ?"

" You mean Renark and Asquiol ?" Roffrey looked hard at the woman but didn't know her. He noted that she had obviously been beautiful, probably still was under the filth and rags. " They got through. They discovered more than they bargained for here—but they got through. Our whole universe doesn't exist any more—but the race—or the part which left—is still going. Maybe it's wiped out, now, I don't know."

The man with the fleshless head put his arm around the woman. They looked like a pair of animated skeletons and the man's action enhanced the bizarre effect.

"He didn't want you then and he won't now," he said.

Roffrey observed tension between them but couldn't tell why.

She said: "Shut up, Paul. Are Renark and Asquiol safe?"

Roffrey shook his head. "Renark's dead. Asquiol's okay—he's leading the fleet. The Gee Lords gave him complete leadership during the emergency. They work under him now."

Roffrey felt he could name both of them, now. He pointed at the man: "Are you Paul Talfryn?"

Talfryn nodded. He cocked his head towards the woman. She dropped her eyes. "This is Willow Kovacs, my wife. We sort of got married . . . Asquiol's mentioned us, eh? I suppose he sent you back for us?"

"No."

Willow Kovacs shuddered. Roffrey reflected that she didn't appear to like Talfryn very much, there was a kind of apathetic hatred in her eyes. Still, it was no business of his.

"What happened to the rest of the human population?" Roffrey said, concentrating on his own affairs. "Were they all killed?"

"Did you see anything when you came through the ruins?" Talfryn asked. "Little scuttling animal shapes, maybe?"

Roffrey had seen them. They had disgusted him though he didn't know why.

Talfryn said: "For some reason the Shifter stopped shifting—there was a long period of absolute madness before she seemed to settle down again. This happened—and that happened. All those little creatures were intelligent once, some of them human. When the trouble started they changed—devolved into those. Somebody said it was metabolic pressures combined with time-slips induced by the stop. but I didn't understand it. I'm not a scientist, I'm an astro-geographer. Unlicensed, you know . . ." he seemed to sink into detachment and then looked up suddenly. "The city just crumbled. It was horrifying. A lot of people went mad. I suppose Asquiol told you how—"

"I've never met Asquiol," Roffrey broke in. "All my information is second-hand. I came particularly to find another person. A woman—she helped Renark and Asquiol with information. Mary the Maze—a mad woman. Know of her?"

Talfryn pointed upwards to the streaked sky.

"Dead?" said Roffrey.

"Gone," Talfryn said. "When the city started breaking apart, she took one of the only ships and just spun off into space. She probably killed herself. She was like a zombie—quite crazy. It was as if some outside pressure moved her. I heard she wanted to get to Roth. I remember the ship—a nice one, Mark Seven Hauser."

"She was heading for Roth? Isn't that the really crazy planet?"

"Yes."

"You think there'd be a chance of her still being alive if she made it?"

"Maybe—Asquiol and Renark seemed to survive."

"Well," Roffrey turned away. "Thanks for the information."

"Hey!" The skeleton suddenly became animated. "You're not leaving us here! Take us with you—take us back to the fleet, for God's sake!"

Roffrey said: "I'm not going back to the fleet. I'm going to Roth."

"Then take us with you—anywhere's better than here!"

Chapter Three

Roffrey debated his next move, sitting hunched at the controls, while he checked the astrochart before him. It didn't quite tally with the Shifter as it now was, but it would do. Willow and Talfryn were cleaning up. They were both beginning to look better already. The ship was not tidy. It was not even very clean and there was a smell of the workshop about it—oil, burnt rubber, dirty plastic and old leather. Roffrey liked it that way.

Roffrey scowled. He didn't like company. I'm getting soft, he told himself.

Now that he was going to Roth he began to feel nervous at what he might find there.

Talfryn said: "We're ready!"

Roffrey activated the ship's normal drive and lifted off. He was tempted to burn the city to rubble as he passed, but he didn't. He got into space with a feeling of relief and headed, in a series of flickering hops used for short journeys, towards Roth, now hanging the farthest away from the parent binary, as if deliberately set apart from the rest of the system.

Roth was the ragged planet. Roth, more than any other planet in the Shifter, defied the very logic of the cosmos and existed contrary to all laws. Roth—nicknamed Ragged Ruth—still containing the impossible *gaps*—where pieces of her should have been but weren't. These pieces existed, instead, in dozens of alternate space-times. On Roth, the two saviours of the race had learned the secret of the multiverse and their race's place in it. Here, in a place they had called the Abyss of Reality, they had found the truth. They had become super-sane. But Mary, poor Mary who had helped them, she had found only madness there.

The planet was big, now. The screens showed nothing but the monstrous globe with its speckled aura, its shifting light-mist, its black blotches and, worst of all, the *gaps*. The *gaps* which were not so much seen as *unseen*—something *should* be there but human watchers could not see it.

Roffrey flung the ship down through Roth's erratically tugging gravisphere, swinging down towards the unwelcoming surface which throbbed below like a sea of molten lava, changing and shifting like the seas of Hell. There seemed, as well, to be no consistent gravity. His instruments kept registering different findings. He fought to keep the descent as smooth as possible, concentrating wholly on the operation, while Willow and Talfryn gasped and muttered, horrified by this vision of Hell.

He frowned, wondering what was familiar about the disturbing world. Then he remembered that the one time he had seen Asquiol of Pompeii he had possessed a similar quality, impossible to pin down, but it was as if the man's body had existed on different levels only just invisible to the human eye. Yet this place was ominous—Asquiol's image had been beautiful.

Ominous.

The word seethed around in his brain. Then, for one brief second, he passed through a warmth, a pleasure, a delight so exquisite yet so short-lived that it was as if he had lived and died in that moment. He couldn't understand it. He had no time to try as the ship rocked in response to the weirdly unbalanced tug of Roth's gravity. He navigated with desperate skill, gliding low over the flame-mist boiling on the surface, trying without success to peer into the *gaps*, all his instruments operating on full power, few giving him any sensible readings, and lasers scanning the unstable surface.

Had Mary, perhaps, tried, like Asquiol, to find the Originators? Had something driven her back to the world that had turned her mad? Then he spotted a ship on his screens, a ship surrounded by achingly disturbing light-mist. It was the Hauser. Mary's ship. And his energraph told him that the drive was active. That meant it had only recently landed or else was about to take off. He had to land fast!

He made planet-fall, cursing the sudden grip of gravity for which he only just succeeded in compensating, as he brought his ship close to the other vessel. His gauntleted fingers stabbed at buttons and he got into immediate contact with the Davidson on a tight laser beam.

"Anyone aboard?"

There was no reply.

Both Willow and Talfryn were peering at the screen, bending over his shoulder.

"This ship seems to have arrived only recently," he said.

It meant nothing to them and he realised that it meant little to him either. He was pinning his hopes on too thin a fabric.

He operated the laser, scanning, as best he could, the surrounding territory. Strange images jumped upon the screen, fading as rapidly as they appeared. Harsh, craggy, crazy Roth, with its sickness of rock and the horror of the misty, intangible, unnatural *gaps*. That men could survive was astounding to him. Yet evidently they could. Asquiol and Mary had been living evidence. But it was easy to see how they went mad, hard to know how they kept sane. It was a gaping, raw, boiling, dreadful world, emanating, it seemed, stark malevolence and baleful anger in its constant and turbulent motion.

Mary could easily have disappeared into one of the *gaps*, or perished in some nameless way. His lips tightened as he left the screen and opened the spacesuit locker. He climbed into a suit. He went to the airlock's elevator. "I'll keep my suit-phone on. If you see anything—any trace of Mary—let me know. Keep the scanners working."

"You're a fool to go out there!" Talfryn cried.

"You're a non-participant in this," Roffrey said savagely as he clamped his face-plate. "Don't interfere. If it's obvious that I'm dead, you've got the ship to do what you like with. I've got to see what's in the Hauser."

Now he was in the outer lock. Now he was lowering his body from the ship, into a pool of yellow liquid that suddenly changed to shiny rock as he stepped on to it. His lips were dry—the skin of his face seemed cracked and brittle. His eyes kept focusing and unfocusing. But the most disturbing thing of all was the silence. All his instincts told him that the ghastly changes taking place on the surface should make *noise*. But they didn't. This heightened the dreamlike quality of his motion over the shifting surface. In a moment his own ship could not be seen and he had reached the Hauser, noting that the lock was open wide. Both locks were open when he got inside. Gas of some kind swirled through the ship. He went into the cabin and found traces of the pilot. There were some figures on the chart-table, incomprehensible—but they were in Mary's writing !

A quick search through the ship told him nothing more. Hastily, he pulled himself through the cabin door and down the airlock shaft until he was again on the surface. He peered with difficulty through the shifting flame-mix. It was thoroughly unnerving. But he forced himself through it, blindly searching for a mad woman who could have gone anywhere.

Then two figures emerged out of the mist and, as suddenly, merged back into it. He was sure he recognised one of them. He called after them. They didn't reply. He began to follow, but lost sight of them.

Then a piercing shout blasted into his suitphone.

"*Asquiol ! Oh, Asquiol !*"

He whirled around. It was the voice of Willow Kovacs. Was Asquiol looking for him ? Had the fleet been defeated ? If so, why had the two men ignored his shout.

"*Asquiol ! Come back ! It's me, Willow !*"

But Roffrey wanted to find Mary the Maze ; he wasn't interested in Asquiol. He began to run, plunging through hallucinations, through shapes that formed silently around him as if to engulf him, through torquoise tunnels, up mauve mountains. In places gravity was low and he bounded along, in others it became almost impossible to drag his bulk.

It was whilst encountering one of the heavy patches that he first heard the voice and recognised it.

"*It's warm, warm, warm . . . Where now ? Here . . . but . . . Let me go back . . . Let me . . .*"

It was Mary's voice. For a moment he didn't respond to the shock. His mouth was dry, his features petrified. "Mary—where are you?" he said at length. It was as if he were experiencing an awful dream where menace threatened but he was unable to escape, where every step seemed to take every ounce of energy and every scrap of time he possessed.

Again he croaked: "Mary!"

But it was not for some minutes before he heard the reply: "*Keep moving! Don't stop. Don't stop!*"

He did as he was told. He began to sway and to fall down, but he kept moving. Then it was as if the whole planet was above him and he was like Atlas, slowly crumpling beneath its weight. He screamed.

Then Willow's voice blasted through: "*Asquiol! Asquiol!*"

What was happening? It was so confusing. He couldn't grasp . . . He felt faint. He looked up and saw several small figures scurrying across the planet he held with his hands. Then he was growing, growing, growing . . .

Again he screamed. A hollow, echoing roar in his ears.

His heart beat a frantic rhythm against his rib-cage until his ears became filled with the noise. He panted and struggled, crawling up over the curved surface of the planet, hanging on to it. He was a great giant, larger than the tiny planet—but at the same time he was a flea crawling through syrup and cotton-wool.

He laughed, in his madness. He laughed and stopped abruptly, grasping for the threads of sanity and pulling them together. He was standing in a light gravity patch and things looked as normal as they could on Roth. He glanced through a patch in the mist and saw Mary standing there. He ran towards her.

"Mary!"

"*Asquiol!*"

The woman was Willow Kovacs in a suit—Mary's old suit. Roffrey made as if to strike her down but the look of disappointment on her face stopped him. He pushed past her, changed his mind, came back. "*Willow! Mary's here, I know . . .*" Suddenly he realised the possible truth. "My God, of course. Time's so twisted and warped we could be seeing anything that's happened at any time in the past—or future!"

Another figure came stumbling out of the light-mist. It was Talfryn.

"I couldn't contact you from the ship. There's a woman there—she . . ."

"It's an illusion, man. Get back to the ship!"

"You come with me—it's no illusion. She entered the ship herself!"

"Lead the way back," Roffrey said. Willow remained where she was, refusing to budge. At length they had to lift her, squirming, and carry her back. It was only three yards away.

The woman wore a spacesuit. She was lying on the floor of the cabin. Roffrey bent over her, lifting the face plate. "Mary," he said softly. "Mary—thank God!"

The eyes opened. The big, soft eyes that had once held intelligence. For a short time intelligence was there—a look of incredible awareness. Then it faded and she formed her lips to say something, but they twisted downwards into an idiot grin and she subsided into a blank-eyed daze.

He got up wearily, his body bowed. He made a gesture with his left hand. "Willow—help her out of the suit. We'll get her into a bunk."

Willow looked at him with hatred: "Asquiol's out there—you stopped me."

Talfryn said: "Even if he was, he wouldn't want you. You keep pining for him, wishing you'd followed him earlier. Now it's no good."

"Once he sees me, he'll take me back. We loved each other a lot."

Roffrey said impatiently to Talfryn: "You'd better help me, then."

Talfryn nodded. They began getting her out of the suit.

"Willow," said Roffrey as they worked, "Asquiol wasn't out there—not now. You saw something that happened years ago, most likely. The other man was Renark—and Renark's dead. You understand?"

"I saw him. He heard me call him!"

"Maybe. I don't know. Don't worry, Willow, anyway. We're going back to the fleet if we can—and if it still exists. You'll see him then."

Talfryn wrenched off a piece of space-armour from Mary's body with a savage movement. His teeth were clenched, but he said nothing.

"You're going back to the fleet? But you said . . ." Willow was disconcerted. Roffrey noted a peculiar look, a mixture of eagerness and introspection.

"Mary needs treatment. The only place she'll get it is back there. So that's where I'm going. That should suit you."

"It does," she said. "Yes—it does."

He went over to the ports and closed their shutters so they couldn't see Roth's surface. It felt a little safer.

Talfryn said suddenly: "I get it Willow. I won't bother you from now on."

"You'd better not." Then she turned on Roffrey: "And that goes for you, too. I'm Asquiol's woman!"

"Don't worry," he grinned. "You're not my type."

She pushed back her lank hair, piqued. "Thanks," she said.

Roffrey smiled at Mary who sat drooling and crooning in her bunk. He winked at her. "You're my type, Mary," he said.

"That's cruel," Willow said sharply.

"That's my wife," Roffrey smiled, and then Willow saw at last a trace of what the smiling eyes and grin hid.

She turned away.

"Right," said Roffrey briskly. Now that he had made up his mind he wanted to waste no time in returning to the fleet. "Let's get going."

He couldn't guess how long Mary had been on Roth. Maybe only a few minutes of real time. Maybe a hundred years of Roth's time. He did not allow himself to dwell on this, just as he refused to consider the extent to which her mind was damaged. The psychiatrists in the fleet might soon be supplying him with all the information they could. He was prepared to wait and see. He went over to her. She shrank away from him, muttering and crooning, her big eyes wider than ever. Very gently he made her lie down in the bunk and strapped her into it with safety harness. It pained him that she didn't recognise him but he was still smiling and humming a little tune to himself as he climbed into the pilot's seat, heaved back a lever, adjusted a couple of dials, flipped a series of switches and soon the drone of the drive was drowning his own humming.

Then, in a flicker, they were off, into deep space and heading away from the Shifter System into the depths of the matterless void. It was such an easy lift-off, Roffrey felt, that it was almost as if a friendly hand had given them a push from behind . . .

It was with a sense of inevitability that he began the descent through the dimension layers, heading back to the space-time in which he'd left the fleet.

Now they were in the centre of a galaxy. Massed stars lay in all directions. He stared at them in wonder, noticing how, with every phase, the matter filling the space around them seemed to change its position as well as its nature. Then the stars were gone and he was passing through a turbulent mass of dark gas which seemed to form into horrible, half-recognisable shapes which sickened him so that he could no longer look but had to concentrate on his instruments.

What he read there depressed and shocked him. He was off-course. He chewed at his moustache, debating what to do. He didn't mention it to the others. The co-ordinates corresponded to those on the chart above the screen.

As far as the ship's instruments were concerned, they were in the space-time occupied by Asquiol and the fleet of mankind !

Yet it was totally different from what he remembered. Gas swirled in it, he could not see the stars of the galaxy.

Had the fleet been completely wiped out ?

There was no other explanation.

Then he cursed as the black gas suddenly became alive, a roaring and monstrous beast, many-tendrilled, dark blue, flame-eyed, malevolent. Willow and Talfryn gasped behind him as they saw it loom on the screen. Mary began shrieking, the sound filling the cabin. The ship was heading straight towards the monster. But how could something like this exist in the near-vacuum of space ?

Roffrey didn't have time for theories. He broke the energy seals of his anti-neutron cannon as an acrid smell filled the cabin and the beast rapidly changed from deep blue to startling yellow.

The guns swung on the beast and Roffrey stabbed the firing buttons, then backed the ship savagely away. The ship shuddered as the guns sent a deadly stream of anti-neutrons towards the monster. Meanwhile, the beast seemed, impossibly, to be absorbing the beams and new heads had grown on its shoulders—disgusting, half-human faces gibbering and yelling, and they could *hear* the cries ! Roffrey felt sick.

Talfryn was now bending over him, staring at the screen. "What is it ?" he shouted above Mary's screaming.

"How the hell should I know?" Roffrey said viciously. He righted the ship's backward velocity, stabbed the cannon buttons again. He heaved his big body round in the control seat and said: "Make yourself useful, Talfryn—see if the co-ordinates on that chart tally absolutely with those on this screen."

The monster lurched through the dark mist towards the little launch, its heads drooling and grinning. There wasn't time to wonder what it was, how it existed.

Roffrey aimed at its main head. He began to depress the firing button.

Then it had gone.

There were a few wisps of gas in the dark, sharp space of the galaxy Roffrey recognised. Replacing the monster was a squadron of fast spherical vessels; those he had glimpsed just before leaving the fleet. Were they the victors, cleaning up the last of the race? They were passing on the zenith-south-flank of Roffrey's battered launch. He trailed the ship round on a tight swing so that he was now directly facing the oncoming alien ships.

The launch was responding well, but the cabin shook and rattled as he stood his vessel on a column of boiling black fire and glided away from the round ships, having shot a tremendous burst towards them. Something was disturbing him, he found it hard to concentrate properly. Talfryn was obviously having the same trouble. A quick look behind him showed Mary's gaping mouth as she screamed and screamed.

Talfryn clung instinctively to the hand grip and shouted: "The co-ordinates tally perfectly."

"That's news!" Roffrey said lightly.

Willow had joined Mary and was attempting to comfort her. Mary was rigid, staring ahead of her with fixed, glazed eyes. It was as if she could see something that was invisible to the others. Her screams rang on, a horrible ululation in the confined cabin.

Willow peered through the badly lit cabin at the two men half-silhouetted up ahead, the one in the control seat, the other standing over him, their dark clothes picked out against the spluttering brightness of the screens and instruments, their faces in shadow, their hands white on the controls.

She looked out of the nearest port. Space was blank; suddenly colourless. She looked back at the men and her

vision was engulfed by a horrible disharmony of colour and noise, sense impressions of all kinds, obscene, primeval, terrible . . . throwing her mind into disorder so that she found it almost impossible to differentiate between her five senses.

Then, when she had completely lost the ability to tell whether she was smelling or hearing a colour, her head was filled with a single impression that combined as one thing to her senses : smell, sight, touch, sound and taste were all there, but the combination produced a unified sense that all were blood red.

She thought she was dead.

Roffrey shouted and the sound hung alone for a moment before he saw it merge into the blood red disharmony. He felt madness approach—and then recede—approach and recede—like a horrible tide—an encroaching tide, for with each sweep it came a little closer ; his body vibrated with the tension, sending out clouds of blood red trailers through the cabin which he saw as a—no he heard it as the note of a muted trumpet. It horrified him, for now something else was creeping through, something coming up from his oldest memories, something of which he hadn't even been aware.

He was immersed in self-loathing, self-pity—suddenly knowing what a debased thing he was . . .

But there was something—he didn't know what—aiding him in spite of his confusion, aiding him to cling to his personal being, sweat out the tumble of disordered impressions, of terrible thoughts—and hit back.

He hit back !

Mary was still quivering in Willow's arms, taut, tense, no longer screaming.

The waves began to peter out.

Willow struck, too. Struck back at whatever it was that was doing this to them.

The waves faded and, slowly, their senses were restored to normal.

Suddenly Mary's body relaxed. She had passed out. Talfryn was slumped on the floor and Roffrey was hunched in the control seat, growling.

He peered through the rapidly-fading pulsations, and saw with satisfaction that the anti-neutrons had done their job though he hadn't properly been able to direct them, neither had he been fully conscious of directing them. Some of the ships were making off, others were warped lumps of metal spinning

aimlessly in the void. He began whistling to himself as he adjusted controls. The whistling died as he said :

" You all right back there ?"

Willow said : " What do you think, superman ? Mary and Paul have passed out. Mary took it worse than any of us—she seemed to bear the brunt of it. What was it, do you think?"

" I don't know. Maybe we'll get our answers soon."

" Why ?"

" I've sighted our fleet !"

" Thank God," said Willow and began to tremble. She dared not anticipate her reunion with Asquiol.

Roffrey headed for the fleet—going back as fast as he'd left.

Chapter Four

The fleet had been badly depleted since he had left. It was still big—a sprawling collection of ships, stretching mile upon mile in all directions and resembling nothing so much as a vast scrap-yard, guarded by the cruising Geepee battlewagons which were like whales guarding a motley school of fish. In the centre of the fleet, a little distance from Asquiol's battered cruiser (easily recognised by its slightly out of focus outline) was a huge factory ship with the letter G emblazoned on its side. This puzzled Roffrey. Then the Geepee patrol had contacted him.

To his astonishment he had the pleasure of being received almost cordially. They began to guide him in to a position fairly close to the factory ship with the G on its side.

While Roffrey was getting his ship into line, a man in the loose unmilitary garb which was identical, save for rank insignia, with all other Geepee uniforms, appeared on the laser screen, his stern, bloodhound's face puzzled. The large band on his left arm also bore a letter G.

" Hello, Lord Mordan," said Roffrey with cheerful defiance.

Willow wondered at the vitality and control which Roffrey must possess in order to seem suddenly so relaxed and untroubled.

Lord Mordan smiled ironically. " Good morning. So you decided to return and help us after all ? Where have you been?"

" I've been on a mercy trip rescuing survivors from the Shifter," Roffrey said virtuously.

"I don't believe you," Mordan said candidly. "But I don't care—you've just done something nobody thought possible. As soon as we assemble our data I'll be getting in touch with you again. We need all the help we can get in this business—even yours. We're up against it, Roffrey. We're damn near finished." He broke off, as if to pull himself together. "Now, if you *are* carrying extra passengers, you'd better register them with the appropriate authorities." He switched out.

"What did all that mean?" said Talfryn.

"I don't know," Roffrey said, "but we may find out soon. Mordan obviously knows something. The fleet's evidently suffered from attacks such as we experienced. Yet there seems to be more order now—the battle or whatever it is seems to have taken a different course."

Willow Kovacs cradled Mary Roffrey's head in her arm and gently wiped a trickle of saliva from the mad woman's mouth. Her heart was beating swiftly and her stomach seemed contracted, her arms and legs weak. She was very frightened now at the prospect of a reunion with Asquiol. Surely he had remained faithful to her?

Roffrey locked the ship's controls and came aft, staring down at the two women with a light smile on his sensuous, bearded mouth. He began stripping off his overalls, revealing a plain quilted jacket of maroon plastileather and grubby white trousers tucked into soft leather knee-boots.

"How's Mary?"

"I don't know," Willow said. "She's obviously—not sane—yet there's a different quality about her insanity. Something I can't pin down."

"A doctor maybe will help," Roffrey said. He patted Willow's shoulder. "Contact the admin ship will you, Talfryn? Send out a general call till you get it."

"Okay," Talfryn said.

Worst of all, thought Roffrey as he stared down at his wife, had been the all-pervading red—blood red—it had been unmistakeable as blood red. Why had it affected him so badly? What had it done to Mary?

He scratched the back of his neck. He hadn't slept since he left the fleet. He was full of stimulants, but he felt the need for some natural sleep. Maybe later.

When Talfryn had contacted the Registration Ship which had as its job the classification of all members of the fleet so

that the business of administering the survivors if they at last made planet-fall would be easier, they were told that an official would be sent over in a short time.

Roffrey asked about a psychiatrist for Mary but was referred to a hospital ship. The doctor in charge shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid you won't get a psychiatrist for your wife. If you need medical treatment we'll put her on our list. We're overworked. It's impossible to deal with all the casualties . . ."

"But you've *got* to help her."

The doctor didn't argue. He switched out.

Roffrey, bewildered by this, swung round in his chair. Willow and Talfryn were discussing the earlier conflict with the alien ships.

"It's my guess that we were experiencing the force of one of their weapons," he said. "Maybe what happened to us on Roth made us more susceptible to hallucination."

"A weapon?" Talfryn said. "That's an idea."

The communicator buzzed. Talfryn went to it.

"Administration," said a jaunty voice. "Mind if I come aboard?"

He was a pale and perky midget with genial eyes and a very neat appearance. His gig clamped against Roffrey's airlock and he came bustling through with a case of papers under his arm.

"You would be Captain Adam Roffrey," he lisped, staring up at the black-bearded giant.

Roffrey stared down at him, half in wonder.

"I would be."

"Good—and you embarked with the rest of the human race roughly two weeks ago, relative time that is, I don't know how long it was in *your* time since it is not always possible to leave and return from one dimension to another and keep the time flow the same, kindly remember that."

"I'll try," said Roffrey, wondering if there was a question there.

"And these three are . . .?"

"Miss Willow Kovacs, formerly of Migaa . . ."

The midget scribbled in his notebook, looking prim at the mention of the planet Migaa. It had possessed something of a reputation in the home galaxy.

Willow gave the rest of her data. Talfryn gave his.

"And the other lady?" The midget said.

"My wife—Doctor Mary Roffrey, born on Earth, nee Ishenko, anthropologist, disappeared from Golund on the Rim in 457 Galactic General Time, reappeared from Shifter System a short while ago. The Geepees will have all her details prior to her disappearance. I gave them to the police—they didn't manage a thing . . ."

The midget frowned and darted a look at Mary.

"State of health?"

"Insane," said Roffrey quietly.

"Cureable or otherwise?"

"Cureable!" said Roffrey, and the word was savage.

The tiny official completed his data, thanked them all and was about to leave when Roffrey said:

"Just a minute—could you fill me in on what's happened to the fleet since I left?"

"As long as we keep it brief, I'd be pleased to. Remember I'm a busy little man!" he giggled.

"Just before we got here we had a tussle with some alien ships, experienced hallucinations and so on. Do you know what that was?"

"No wonder the lady is insane! For untrained people to withstand the pressure—it's amazing! Wait until I tell my colleagues! You're heroes! You survived a wild round!"

"What happened?" Roffrey said impatiently.

"Well I'm only a petty official—they don't come much pettier than me—but from what I've *gathered* you had a 'wild round.' That is," he said quickly, "anyone straying beyond the confines of the fleet is attacked by the aliens and has to play a wild round, as we call it—one that isn't scheduled to be played by the Gamblers. We're not really supposed to do that."

"But what *is* this Game?"

"I'm not sure, really. Ordinary people don't play the Game—only the Gamblers in the Game Ship. That's the one with the big letter G on it. It isn't the sort of game *I'd* like to play. We call it the Blood Red Game—and those playing it are psychologists and the like—Gamblers they're called . . ."

"How often is it played?"

"All the time, really. No wonder I'm a bundle of nerves. We all are. Citizen's rights have been waived, food supplies reduced . . . We're having a pause just at the moment but it won't last long. Probably they're recovering from your little victory?"

"Who'd know details about this Game?"

"Asquiol, of course, but it's almost impossible to see him. The nearest people ever get is to his airlock. You might try Lord Mordan, though he's not too approachable, either."

"Mordan seems interested enough to tell us, already," Roffrey nodded. "Thank you for your trouble."

"A pleasure," the midget enthused.

When he had gone, Roffrey went to the communicator and tried to contact Asquiol's ship. He had to get by nearly a dozen officials before he made contact.

"Adam Roffrey here, just in from the Shifter. Can I come to your ship?"

He received a curt acceptance. There had been no picture.

"Will you take me with you?" Willow asked. "He'll be surprised—I've been waiting a long, long time for this."

"Of course," he said. He looked at Talfryn. "He was a friend of yours, too. Want to come?"

Talfryn said: "No. I'll stay here and try and find out a bit more about what's going on." He took a long, almost theatrical, look at Willow and then turned away. "See you," he said.

Roffrey said: "Just as you like." He went to the medical chest and took out a hypodermic and a bottle of sedative, filled the hypo and pumped the stuff into Mary's arm.

Roffrey and Willow were allowed to board the battered ship which was Asquiol's, but they didn't get as far as the cabin. They saw the light of the internal viewer blink on as they waited in the airlock and they heard a brooding voice, a polite, far-away voice that seemed to carry peculiar echoes which their ears could not quite catch.

"Asquiol speaking—how may I help you?"

Willow, masked in her spacesuit, remained silent.

"I'm Adam Roffrey, just in from the Shifter system with three passengers."

"Yes." Asquiol's acknowledgement bore no trace of interest.

"One of them is my wife—you know of her as Mary the Maze—she helped you and Renark in the Shifter." Roffrey paused. "She sent you to Roth."

"I am grateful to her, though we didn't meet."

"I've tried to contact a psychiatrist in the fleet. I haven't succeeded." Roffrey said. "I don't know where they all are. Can you help?"

"They are all playing the Game. I am sorry. Grateful as I am to your wife, the first priority is to the race. We cannot release a psychiatrist."

"Not even to give me advice how to help her?" Roffrey was shocked. He had expected some response, at least.

"No. You must do what you can for her yourself—perhaps a medical man will be able to give you certain kinds of help."

Roffrey turned disgustedly back towards the outer lock. He stopped as Asquiol's voice came again: "I suggest you contact Lord Mordan as soon as you can."

The voice cut off.

Willow spoke—she felt as if she had died and the word was the last she would ever utter:

"Asquiol!"

At length, they returned to Roffrey's ship. Mary was sleeping peacefully under the sedative, but Talfryn had gone. They sat by Mary's bunk, both of them depressed for their own reasons.

"He's changed," Willow said flatly.

Roffrey grunted.

"He doesn't sound human any longer," she said. "There's no way of appealing to him. He doesn't seem to care about the approval of the rest of us."

Roffrey said: "He doesn't care about anything except this 'mission' he has—and everything is sacrificed and subordinated before that one aim. I don't even know how valid the mission is. If I did I might be able to argue—or even agree with him."

"Perhaps Paul could talk to him—I got scared. I meant to tell him who I was. I might be able to later."

"Save it. I'll see what Mordan wants with me first."

Roffrey moved over to his control panel and operated the screen.

"Lord Mordan."

"Mordan here." The Gee Lord's face appeared on the screen. He seemed disconcerted when he saw Roffrey.

"I was just going to contact you. You and Talfryn have been enlisted as Gamblers—subject to preliminary tests."

"What the hell, Mordan. Tell Talfryn about it—I've got a sick wife to think about."

"Talfryn's already here." Mordan's face was serious. "This is important—though it may not look like it. There's a war to the death on and we're up against it. I'm directly

responsible to Asquiol for enlisting any man I think will help us win. You've given us a great deal of trouble already. I'm empowered to kill anyone liable to disrupt our security. Come over to the Game Ship as soon as you can. If you refuse, we'll bring you over forcibly. Clear?"

Roffrey savagely switched out.

Defiantly, he waited by Mary's bed. She was beginning to show signs of improving, physically, but how her mind would be when she came out of the sleep, he didn't know.

Later, two Geepees demanded entry. Their launch was clamped fast against his. They threatened to hole his ship and enter that way if they had to. He opened the airlocks and let them in.

"What can one extra hand do?" he said.

One of them said: "Any man who can hold off an enemy attack virtually singlehanded is needed in the Game Ship."

"But I didn't . . ." Roffrey stopped himself, he was losing his grip.

The Geepee said with false patience: "You may not have realised it, Captain Roffrey, but you did something that was impossible—you held out under the combined attack of ten enemy ships. Most people couldn't have taken an attack from one."

The other Geepee drawled: "That means something. Look at it this way—we're damn near beaten now. We took a hell of a lambasting during the initial alien attacks. We're the last survivors of the human race and we've got to stay together, work for the common good. That's the only way you'll look after your wife in the long run. Don't you see that?"

Roffrey was still unconvinced. He was a stubborn man. There was an atavistic impulse in him which had always kept him away from the herd, outside the law, relying entirely on his own initiative and wits. But he was also an intelligent man so he nodded slightly and said:

"Very well—I'll speak to Lord Mordan, anyway." Roffrey turned to Willow. "Willow—if Mary shows any sign of getting worse, let me know."

"Of course, Adam."

"You'll stay with her—make sure she's all right?"

She looked into his face. "Naturally. But when she's under a sedative again, there's something else I've got to do."

"Yes. That's fair enough. I understand."

He shrugged at the Geepees who turned round and led him through the airlock.

Chapter Five

The Game Ship was bigger than a large battlewagon, even more functional-looking, a little barer of comforts. Yet it did not seem prepared for battle. There was an atmosphere of hushed silence aboard and their boots clanged loudly along the corridor which led to Lord Mordan's cabin. A sign on the door read : *Deputy Game Master, Lord Mordan, Strictly Private*. The letters were heavy black on the brilliant white door.

Inside, when the Geepee accompanying Roffrey knocked and was admitted, the cabin was cluttered with instruments. There were some Roffrey recognised—an encephalograph, an optigraph-projector—machines for measuring the power of the brain, equipment for testing visualising capacity, for measuring I.Q., potential and so on.

Talfryn was sitting in a comfortable chair on the other side of Mordan's desk. Both men had their hands clenched before them—Talfryn's in his lap, Mordan's stretched out across the empty desk.

"Sit down, Roffrey," said Lord Mordan. He made no reference to Roffrey's defiance of his orders. He seemed perfectly controlled. Perhaps over-controlled, thought Roffrey. For a moment, he sympathised—wasn't that his own condition ?

He sat down as the Geepee guard left.

"Okay," he said curtly. "Get on with it."

"I've been explaining to Talfryn how important you both are to this project," Mordan said crisply. "Are you prepared to go along with us on the first stage of our tests ?"

"Yes," he was almost responding to the decisive mood.

"Good. We've got to find out exactly what qualities you possessed which made defeat of that alien fleet possible. There is a chance, of course, that you were lucky, or that being unprepared for the sense-impression attack on you and having no understanding of its origin you were psychologically better prepared to meet that attack. We'll know the answers later. Let me recap on recent events first."

Mordan spoke rapidly :

"As you know, we entered this universe several weeks ago and encountered its inhabitants shortly after entry. These people are non-human, as might be expected, and regard us as invaders. That's fair enough, since we should think the same

in their position. But they refused to parley. You saw how quickly they had mobilised an attack on our fleet, before we ever had a proper chance to talk. There were several battles. We lost a great many ships of all kinds. Asquiol contacted them and intimated that we were quite prepared to settle on planets unsuitable for them and live in friendly co-operation with them. But they would not accept this. However, they came up with an alternative to open warfare." He sighed and waved his hand to indicate the massed equipment.

"We did not reckon with the predominant society existing here—it is based on a Code of Behaviour which we find, in parts, very difficult to grasp. In our terms it means that the status of a particular individual or group is decided by its ability to play a warlike game which has been played in this galaxy for centuries—we call it the Blood Red Game, since one of their prime 'weapons' is the ability to addle our sense-impressions so that we get a total sensory experience of the colour red. You already know this, I believe?"

Roffrey agreed. "But what, apart from confusing us, is it meant to do—and how does it work?"

"We believe that the aliens have come to rely, when disputes break out among themselves, on subtler weapons than energy-cannon or anything similar. If we wished, we might continue to use our familiar weapons to fight the aliens, as we did in the early days. But we should have only a slight chance of winning."

"So what's the alternative?" Roffrey asked.

"To play the Game according to *their* rules—or as many of their rules as we can understand."

"And the stakes?"

"If we win so many rounds of the game without relying on our ordinary armaments, the aliens will concede us the *right to rule in this galaxy*! They are large stakes, Captain Roffrey."

"They must be confident of winning."

"Not according to Asquiol. The fact that they *are* winning at the moment is obvious, but their love of playing this Game is so ingrained in them that they welcome any new variety. You see, both sides have got to do more than simply play the Game, they have the added difficulty of not understanding the opponent's capabilities, susceptibilities, psychology and so forth. In that, we're even. In other things, such as experience of playing the Game, they have the advantage."

"Where do we come into this?"

"We are hoping that you are the aces we need to win. Your ship was the only human ship which has ever succeeded in beating the fantastic odds against you. Somehow, you have something we need to beat the aliens!"

"And you don't know what it is?"

"Right."

"Do we possess it jointly—or does only one of us possess this protective 'shield-attack' quality, whatever it is?"

"We're going to find that out, Captain Roffrey. That's why we're testing you both. Although you were actually at the controls of your ship, Talfryn, I understand, was beside you."

Talfryn spoke slowly: "What we have to seek, I gather, is a *moral* advantage over the aliens. It is not a question of numbers but prestige. If we win, we gain sufficient status for them to accept our dominance . . . what?"

"If we lose, we won't care by that time. Our supplies are so short we cannot risk phasing into a new universe at this late stage." Lord Mordan turned his attention to Roffrey. "Do you see that, Captain—your wife is only one of a few victims of insanity in the fleet at the moment—but if we don't win the Game, we'll all be mad—or dead."

Roffrey understood the logic. But he was still suspicious of it.

"Let's get these tests over with," he said. "Then maybe we'll know where we're going. I'll make up my mind afterwards."

Mordan tightened his lips, nodding a trifle. "As you like," he said. He spoke towards his desk. "Ask the testing team to come here."

Three men entered Mordan's cluttered cabin.

Mordan stood up to introduce them.

"This is Professor Selinsky," he said. The tallest of the group detached himself and walked over to Roffrey and Talfryn. He stretched out his fat hand and smiled warmly.

"Glad you're here," he said. "It looks as if you and your friend may be able to help us out of our present difficulties." He shook hands with them and said: "These are my assistants—Doctor Zung," a small, gloomy man of Mongolian appearance, "and Doctor Mann," a young, blond-headed man who looked like an adventure-fiction hero.

"I've heard of you, professor," said Talfryn. "You used to hold the Chair of Physiology at Earth."

"That's right," Selinsky nodded, then he said: "We'll give you an ordinary test with the electroencephalograph first—then we'll put you to sleep and see if we can get at the subconscious. You're prepared to accept all our tests, I presume." He looked at Mordan who made no reply.

Roffrey said: "Yes—as long as it doesn't involve brain-washing."

Selinsky said sternly: "This is the fifth century, you know—not the fifth century pre-war."

"I thought Asquiol and Lord Mordan's motto had become Needs Must When The Devil Drives," Roffrey said, as he sat in the seat which Doctor Zung had just prepared for him. But the reference made no impression on Lord Mordan who had probably never heard it. Roffrey was given to obscure quotations—it was all part of his atavistic outlook. Mary had once accused him of being deliberately obscurist in his references, of reading old books in order to pick up unfamiliar quotations to fling at people he despised or disliked. He agreed—it was true. Part of her attraction, however, was that she, at least, knew what he was talking about.

A small glass-alloy helmet was now being fitted over his scalp. He hated such devices. He hated it all. As soon as this is over, he promised himself, I'll show them what independence really means.

Such thoughts and emotions gave the scientists some interesting, if hardly useable, readings.

Professor Selinsky appeared calm as he checked over the material so far gained from the sleeping men.

"All this will require careful analysis, of course," he said, "but frankly I can't find any clue at first sight as to what they've got that the men we're using haven't already got. They're both intelligent—Roffrey quite superlatively so, but there's only a grain of something out of the ordinary. Naturally, the quality would be subtle—we were expecting that—but Roffrey isn't the only psychopath in the human race and he isn't the only one with a high I.Q." He sighed.

"But their memories for sensory-experience are very good," Doctor Mann said eagerly, "at any event they will help swell the Gambling Strength."

"A poor second," said Zung disgustedly as he uncoupled electrodes and neatly placed his personal equipment in its cases. "I'll agree that we need all the Gamblers we can recruit—but these men were going to give us the answer to defeating the aliens. That's what we hoped, didn't we, professor?"

Selinsky said: "This project is wearing us all down, Zung. There's not a scrap of reason for your defeatist tones—or yours, Mann. We have a lot of work to do before we can analyse our findings. Meanwhile," he turned to Mordan who had been sitting in his chair with a look of indifference on his seamed, bloodhound's face. "I suggest we put these men on our regular strength. No need to waste them while we study their results."

"You're sure they'll work all right with the rest?" Mordan got up.

"Why shouldn't they? You know what the atmosphere in there's like, with O'Hara and everything," Selinsky pointed his thumb towards the door, but Mordan knew what he meant. "None of them is what you would call 'normal.' Our Gamblers are all neurotics these days, by definition. Normal people couldn't stand the strain—normal people couldn't hit back. We count on unusual physiological and psychological patterns to play the Game."

"I trust Talfryn," Mordan said, "he's much more susceptible to persuasion. But Roffrey's a born trouble-maker—I know, I've dealt with him more than once."

"Give Roffrey something important to handle, in that case," Selinsky swung the arm of the optigraph away from Roffrey's chair. The man stirred but didn't awake. "He's the kind who needs to be kept active—and who needs to feel that every action he makes is personally inspired."

"There never was such a thing," said Mordan walking over and staring down at his old enemy.

"Then don't tell him," Selinsky smiled faintly. "It's egocentricity of that order which has pushed humanity up the scale. Renark and Asquiol were the same—they may sometimes have the wrong information, but they get better results than we do."

"Of a kind," Mordan agreed reluctantly.

"It's the kind we need right now," Selinsky told him as he and his assistants bustled out of the cabin. "We'll send a couple of attendants to take care of them."

"You'll need the whole bloody police force to take care of Roffrey once he starts getting stubborn," Mordan said fatalistically. He liked Roffrey, but he knew Roffrey didn't like him. He'd come to the somewhat comforting conclusion that Roffrey didn't really like anyone—apart from his wife. It was a great pity that he'd found her, he reflected.

Selinsky and his assistants pored over their findings. Mann, although he was a good and clever scientist, was beginning to tire of the routine work. As they paused for coffee, he said to Selinsky :

"Something occurred to me, professor, which may mean nothing, but it's worth throwing out for discussion, I think."

Selinsky, who disapproved of Mann's weakness for theorising while on the job, said impatiently : "What is ?"

"Well, in the history we got from records, both Talfryn and Roffrey were on that planet in the Shifter they call Roth—the 'lattice planet' it's been called—parts of it exist in different continua, rather like Asquiol is supposed to do. Could this planet have exerted some kind of influence on them. Or perhaps if they stood the test of staying sane on Roth—it turned Roffrey's wife mad, remember—they are therefore better fitted for fighting the aliens."

Selinsky drained his coffee cup and ran a finger across his wet lips.

"There may be something there," he said, "Look I'll tell you what, work something out properly, in your spare time, and show me your ideas in a report."

"Spare time !" said Mann explosively, though he was pleased at Selinsky's encouragement, a rare thing in itself.

"Well you can't sleep *all* of those six hours," said Zung quietly, grinning to himself as he went back to his work.

Willow felt more resigned now. Roffrey had been away too long for there to be much chance of his coming back soon. She calmly filled the hypo and gave Mary another sedative but she didn't, after all, take one herself. In this calmer frame of mind her thoughts had again turned to Asquiol. She must contact him, she felt. At least she would have a clearer idea of how to act after she had seen him—whatever happened.

She experienced some difficulty in getting Roffrey's communications equipment to work but finally she contacted Mordan. The Gee Lord's sagging face appeared on the screen.

He was hunched over his desk apparently doing nothing. He looked incredibly tired. He must be keeping himself awake with stimulants, Willow decided.

He gave her a nod of recognition and said : " Miss Kovacs, if you're worried about Roffrey and Talfryn there's no need. They have been recruited as Gamblers and will no doubt be getting in touch with you during a rest period."

" Thanks," she said, " but there was something else."

" How important is it, Miss Kovacs ? You understand that I'm very—"

" I wish to contact Asquiol directly."

" That's impossible—and anyway you wouldn't find it desirable if you understood what he's like now. What do you want to say to him ?"

" I can't deal through someone else—it's a personal matter, Lord Mordan."

" Personal ?"

" We were very close on Migaa and on the Shifter worlds—I'm sure he would want to see me." She didn't sound as if she particularly believed her own words.

" Next time I report to him I'll pass your message on—that's all I can do I'm afraid." Mordan stared curiously at her but said nothing further.

" Will he contact me if he gets your message ?"

" If he wants to that's exactly what he will do. I'll tell him what you've said, I promise."

The screen shimmered and was empty again. Willow turned off the communicator and walked slowly back to where Mary was sleeping.

" What's going to happen to you in all this ?" she said softly. There was in Willow a large capacity for feeling sympathy with those in distress. Even now, with troubles of her own which she hadn't even counted on before she'd reached the fleet, she could turn her attention to Mary. But what had at first been a detached emotion of sympathy such as she could feel towards anyone in an unpleasant predicament was fast turning into a less healthy feeling—she was beginning to sense kinship with Mary. They were both very lonely women—the one lacking any contact with her fellows, trapped inside her disturbed and jumbled mind, veering between almost-sanity and complete madness, the other with a growing conviction that, in her moment of need, she had been deserted—not only by Asquiol, but by Talfryn and Roffrey too.

Chapter Six

They were seated in threes, each group before a large screen which mirrored the scene on the huge screen over their heads. The large chamber was dark, illuminated solely by light from instruments and screens. Below the small screens were even smaller ones, in two rows of six. Mordan who had brought Talfryn and Roffrey into the chamber explained in a soft voice what purpose they served.

He looked about him. Three sections of the circular chamber were occupied with the screens and seated before them each had its trio of operators, pale, thin men for the most part, living off nervous energy and drugs. The men had glass-alloy skull caps, similar to those the two newcomers had been made to wear during their tests. No one looked up as they came in.

"The screen above us is, as you can see, merely a wide-angle viewer which enables us to scan the space immediately around the fleet," Mordan was saying.

"Each group of operators—Gamblers, as we call them—is delegated a certain area of this space to watch for signs of an alien expedition. So far as we can gather, it is part of their code to come close—within firing range—to our fleet before beginning the round. Apart from that we are given no warning that a fresh round is about to commence, that's why we keep constant watch. When an alien expedition comes into sight, the team sighting it alerts the rest and they all concentrate on that area. The smaller rows of screens record the effect which we beam towards the aliens. They record hallucinatory-impulses, these are broken down into sections governed by the different senses, brain-waves of varying frequencies, emotional-impulses such as fear, anger and so on which we are capable of simulating. We have, of course, projectors, magnifiers and broadcasting equipment which is capable of responding to the commands of the Gamblers, but primarily, at the last resort, everything depends on the imagination, quick reactions, intelligence and ability to simulate emotions, thoughts, et cetera, which each Gambler possesses.

"Just as many of our emotions and impulses are unfamiliar and incommunicable to the aliens, the same applies to us. Presumably half the impressions and mental impulses we have flung at us do not have the effect the aliens desire, or would get in their own kind. But we have the same difficulty. These men

have been playing the Game long enough to recognise certain of the effects they send that are effective or not and can guard against those effects which are most dangerous to them. Winning the game, at this stage anyway, depends largely upon the extent to which we can assimilate and analyse what works and what doesn't work—this also, of course, applies to the aliens. You, for instance, had the hallucination of a monster beast which shocked not only your instincts, triggering fear, panic, and so on, but shocked your logical qualities since you knew that it was impossible for such a beast to exist in the vacuum of space."

Renark and Talfryn agreed.

"This sort of effect is what the aliens are relying on—although in the general run of things these days they have learned to be much more subtle, working directly on the subconscious as they did, to a large extent on you after the beast-image didn't get the result they wanted. Therefore our psychologists and other researchers are gathering together every scrap of information which each round gives us, trying to get a clear picture of what effects will have the most devastating results on the alien's subconscious. They are evidently doing the same. Here, as I mentioned, we are fairly well matched—our minds are as alien to them as theirs are to us.

"The prime object in playing the Blood Red Game, therefore, is to find the exact impulse necessary to destroy the qualities which we term self-respect, strength of character, intrinsic confidence and so on." Mordan breathed out heavily. "The number of losses we've had can be assessed when I tell you that we've got two hundred men and women alone who are curled up into foetal balls in the wards of our hospital ships."

Talfryn shuddered. "It sounds disgusting."

"Forget that," Mordan said curtly. "You'll lose all sense of moral values after you've been playing the Game for a short time. The aliens are helping us do what philosophers and mystics have been preaching for centuries. Remember it—know thyself, eh?"

He shook his head, staring grimly around the chamber where the grey-faced Gamblers watched the screens concentratedly.

"You'll get to know yourselves here, all right. And I'm sure you won't like what you know."

"Easier on the brooder," Roffrey said.

"How deep can one man go in probing his innermost impulses before he pulls back—out of self-protection if nothing else?" Mordan said sharply. "Not far in comparison to what the aliens can do to you. But you'll find out."

"You're giving an attractive picture," Roffrey said.

"Damn you, Roffrey—I'll talk to you after your first round. This may, now I come to think of it, do you an awful lot of good!"

They were now joined by a third individual. He had obviously been a Gambler for some time. They were beginning to recognize the type. He was tall, thin and nervous.

"Fiodor O'Hara," he said, not bothering to shake hands. They introduced themselves in the same manner.

"You will be in my charge until you become familiar with the Game," said O'Hara. "You will obey every order I give you. Try not to resist me—the sooner you are trained, the sooner you will be able to play the Game without my direction. I believe you are what they call an individualist, Roffrey. Well, you will have to conform here until you have mastered the Game—then your individualism will, I am sure, be of great use since we depend on such qualities. Most of the people here are trained in some branch of psychology but there are a few like yourselves, laymen, who have a sufficiently high I.Q. to be receptive, almost instinctively, to the needs of the Game. I wish you luck. You will find it a great strain to keep your ego free and functional—that is really all you have to learn as a beginner—you will carry out a defensive strategy, as it were, until you are adept enough to begin attacking the enemy. Remember, both of you, physical strength and daring mean absolutely nothing in this war—and you lose not your life, but your sanity—at first, anyway."

Roffrey scratched the back of his neck.

"For God's sake, let's get started," he said impatiently.

"Don't fret," Mordan said as he left them, "you'll soon know when another round begins."

O'Hara took them to a row of empty seats. There were three seats, the usual screen and the miniature screens beneath it. Immediately in front of them were small sets of controls which were evidently used to operate the sense-projectors and other equipment.

"We have a short vocabulary which we shall use later for communication while the Game is in progress," O'Hara said, settling the skull-cap on his head. "Switch-sound, for instance, means that if, at a certain moment, you are concentrating on taste sensations I have decided that sounds would be more efficient against the enemy. If I say : Switch-taste, it means that you send taste-impressions—that is simple—you understand?"

They showed their assent. Then they settled themselves to await their first—and perhaps last—round of the Blood Red Game.

The morality of what they were doing—invading this universe and attempting to wrest dominance of it from the native race—had bothered Asquioli little.

"Rights?" he had said to Mordan when the Gee Lord had relayed the doubts of some of the members of the fleet. "What rights have they—what rights have we? Because they exist here doesn't mean that they have any special right to exist here. Let them or us *establish* our rights. Let us see who wins the Game."

Asquioli had more on his mind than a squabble over property, dangerous as that squabble could be for the race.

This was man's last chance of attaining his birthright—something which Asquioli had almost attained in his ability to perceive simultaneously the entire multi-dimensional universe—to take over from the Originators.

Somehow he had to teach his race to tap its own potential. Here, those Gamblers who might survive, would be of use.

The race had to begin on the next stage of its evolution—yet the transition would have to be so relatively sudden that it would be virtually revolution.

And there was the personal matter of his *incompleteness*, the torturing frustration of knowing that the missing piece that would make him whole was so close, he could sense it. But what was it?

Dwelling in thought, Asquioli was grave.

Even he could not predict the eventual outcome if they won the Game. More able to encompass the scope of events than the rest of the race, in some ways he was as much in a temporal vacuum as they were—quite unable to relate past experience with present—or present with whatever the future was likely to be.

He stopped this reverie abruptly. In this respect he was a pragmatist. He could not concern himself with such pointless speculation. There was a lull in the Game—the coming of Roffrey's ship and its defeat of the aliens had evidently non-plussed them for a while. But Roffrey, so far, had not experienced the real struggle which was between minds, trained minds capable of performing the most savage outrage there could be—destroying the id, the ego, the very qualities that set man above other beasts.

For a moment he wondered about Talfryn, but stopped the train of thought since it led to another question troubling him.

Asquiol allowed his concentration to cease for a moment as he enjoyed the rich nourishment that experience of dwelling on all planes of the multiverse gave him. He thought: I am like a child in a womb, save that I know I am in the womb. Yet I am a child with a part missing, I sense it. What is it? What will complete me? It is as if the part would not only complete me, but complete itself at the same time.

As was happening increasingly, he was interrupted by a sharp signal from the communicator.

He leaned forward in his chair, the strange shadows and curious half-seen images dancing about him. As he moved, the area of space between him and the communicator seemed to spray apart, flow and move spasmodically like water disturbed by the intrusion of an alien body. This happened whenever he moved, although he himself was only aware of passing his arm through many objects which exerted a very faint pressure upon his limbs.

He could not only see the multiverse, he could also feel it, smell it, taste it. Yet this was little help in dealing with the aliens, for he found it almost as difficult as the rest of his race to understand the actual psychology of the non-human attacks.

The communicator came to life.

"Yes?" said Asquiol.

Again, Mordan had not turned on his own screen so that whereas Asquiol could see him, he need not subject himself to the eye-straining sight of Asquiol's scintillating body.

"A few messages." Mordan went through them quickly. "Hospital ship OP8 has disappeared. We heard that the IT field was becoming erratic. They were repairing it when they just—faded out of space. Any instructions?"

"I saw that happen. No instructions—if they're lucky they will be able to rejoin the fleet if they can adjust their field."

"Roffrey and Talfryn, the two men who succeeded in withstanding the BR effect so successfully, have been subjected to all Professor Selinsky's tests and he is studying the results now. In the meantime they are being taught how to play the Game."

"What else?" Asquiol noted Mordan's worried expression.

"There were two women on Roffrey's ship. One of them was the mad wife—Mary. The other calls herself Willow Kovacs. I have already forwarded this information to you, you remember."

"Yes. Is that all?"

"Miss Kovacs asked me to pass a message on to you. She says that you were—um—personally acquainted on Migaa and later in the Shifter. She would like it if you could spare the time to get in touch with her. The ship is on 050 L metres for tight contact."

"Thank you."

Asquiol switched out and sat back in his seat. There was in him still some part of the strong emotion he had once felt for Willow. But he had had to rid himself of it twice—once when she had declined to continue the search through the Shifter, once after he and Renark had met the Originators. His impression of her was, by now, a little vague, even. He had had to dispense with many valuable emotions when he assumed control of the fleet. This was out of no spirit of ambition or will to dominate—it was simply that his position demanded maximum control of his mind. Therefore emotions had had to be sacrificed where they could not directly contribute to what he was doing. He had become, in so far as human relations were included, a very lonely man. His perception of the multiverse had more than compensated for the breaks in human contact he had been forced to make but he rather wished that he had not had to make those breaks.

He never acted on impulse—yet now he found himself turning his communicator dial to the wavelength 050 L metres. When it was done he waited. He felt almost nervous.

Willow saw her screen leap into life and she quickly adjusted her own controls with the information indicated above the screen. She acted hurriedly, excitedly, and then the sight she

saw froze her for a moment. After that her movements were slower as she stared fascinatedly at the screen.

"Asquiol?" she said in a faltering voice.

"Hello, Willow."

The man still bore the familiar facial characteristics of Asquiol who had once raged through the galaxy spreading chaos and laughter in his wake.

She remembered the insouciant, moody youth she had loved, but this—this Satan incarnate sitting in its chair like some fallen archangel—this golden sight bore no relation to him as she remembered him.

"Asquiol?"

"I'm deeply sorry," he said and smiled at her with a melancholy look for an archangel to wear.

Her face reflected the peculiar dancing effect which the image on the screen produced. She stepped back from it and stood with her shoulders drooping and now she had only the memory of love.

"I should have taken my chance," she said.

"There was only one, I'm afraid. If I'd known, I perhaps could have convinced you to come with us. As it was I didn't want to endanger your life."

"I understand," she said. "Tough for me, eh?"

He didn't reply. Instead he was glancing behind him.

"I'll have to switch out—our opponents are starting another round of the Game. Goodbye, Willow. Perhaps if we win we can have another talk?"

But she was silent as the golden, brilliant image faded from the screen.

Chapter Seven

O'Hara turned to his companions. "This is your trial," he said, "get ready."

There was a faint humming sensation in the huge circular chamber. O'Hara had adjusted his screen so that he could now see the alien ships swimming through space towards them. Only a few miles from the fleet they came to a stop and remained, in relation to the fleet, in a fixed point.

Roffrey suddenly found himself thinking of his childhood, his mother, what he had thought of his father and how he had

envied his brother. Why should he suddenly decide to—he pulled himself out of this reverie, feeling slightly nauseated by a thought that had begun to creep into his conscious brain. This was akin to what he'd experienced earlier, but not so intense.

"Careful, Roffrey—it's beginning," said O'Hara.

And that was only a mild beginning.

Whatever the aliens had learned of the human subconscious, they used. How ever they had gained such a store of information, Roffrey would never know—though the human psychiatrists had a similar store of 'weapons' to use against their enemies.

Every dark thought, every unhealthy whim, every loathsome desire that they had ever experienced was dredged up by the alien machines and shoved before their conscious minds. The trick, as O'Hara had said, was to forget values of good and evil, right and wrong and to accept these impressions for what they were—desires and thoughts shared by everyone to some degree. But Roffrey found it hard going.

And this was not all. The alien means of triggering these thoughts was spectacular and mind-smashing in its incredibly clever intensity. He found it difficult to define between what was sight or smell, taste or sound. And pervading it all, in the aching background of everything was the swirling, whirling, chattering, shrieking, odorous, clammy, painful colour—the blood-red sense. It was as if his mind had exploded and was gouting its contents, awash with blood and the agony of naked thoughts, unclothed by prejudice. There was no comfort in this world he had suddenly entered—no release, no rest or hope of salvation—for the alien sensory-projectors were forcing him further and further into his own mind, jumbling what was there when it did not suit their purpose to show it to him as it really was. All his conscious senses and thoughts were scrambled and jellied and altered. All his subconscious feelings were hauled before him and he was forced to look.

In the back of his mind was a small spark of sanity which repeated over and over again: "Keep sane—keep sane—hang on—it doesn't matter—it's all right." And at times he heard his own voice blended with dozens of others as he howled like a dog and cried like a child.

Yet in spite of all this that was flung against him and the rest, in spite of the loathing he began to feel for himself and his fellows, there was still the spark which kept him sane. It was

this spark at which the aliens aimed their main concentration—just as the more experienced Gamblers in the human ranks aimed to destroy the little sparks of sanity alive in their opponents.

Never in the history of the human race had such dreadful battles been fought. This was more like a war between demons than between material creatures.

It was all Roffrey could do to keep that spark alive as he sweated and struggled against the columns of sound, the vast, booming waves of smells, the groaning movement of colour.

And as if in keeping with this battle-ground, the blood-red mingling of senses swam and ran and convulsed and heaved themselves through his racked being, hurled themselves along his neural tracts, hacked past his cortical cells, mauled his synapses and shook body and brain into a formless, useless jelly of garbled receptions.

Blood red—there was nothing now save the blood red shrilling of a pervading, icy, stinking taste and a washed-out feeling of absolute self-loathing that crept in everywhere, in every cranny and corner of his mind and person so that he wanted nothing more but to shake it aside, to escape from it. But it trapped him—the blood red trap from which he could only escape by retreating right back down the corridors of his experience, to huddle comfortably in the womb of . . .

The spark flared and sanity returned completely for a moment. He saw the sweating, concentrated faces of the other operators. He saw Talfryn's face writhing and heard the man groaning, saw O'Hara's thin hand on his shoulder and grunted an acknowledgement. He glanced at the tiny screens which were fluttering with dancing graphs and pulsating light.

Then he was reaching for the small control panel before him and his bearded face bore a twisted half-smile as he shouted :

"Cats—and they crawl along your spines with their claws gripping your nerves. Tides of mud, oozing. Drown, creatures, drown !"

He was attacking now. Using the very emotions and impressions which the aliens had released. And he had grasped some understanding of how they could react to these things, for there had been in their attack several impressions which had meant nothing to him, translated into his own terms. These he flung back with a will and his own screens began to leap to the horrid rhythms of his savagely working mind.

First he sent the blood-red impressions back, since these were obviously a preliminary attack which formed the basis of the Game. He didn't understand why this should be, but he was learning quickly—and one of the things he had learned was that reason played little part while the Game was on—that instinct had to be turned into a fighting tool. Later the experts could analyse results.

But then he felt the hysteria leave him and there was silence in the chamber. O'Hara was tapping him on the back. "Stop! Roffrey—stop! It's over—they won. Christ! We haven't got a hope now!"

"Won? I haven't finished . . ."

"Look—"

Several of the Gamblers were sprawled on the floor, mewling and drooling insanely. Others were curled into tight foetal balls. Attendants rushed in to tend to them.

"We've lost seven—that means the aliens won. We got perhaps five. Not bad. You nearly had your opponent, Roffrey, but they've pulled back now. You'll probably get another chance. You did well."

Talfryn was insensible when they turned their attention to him.

O'Hara appeared unconcerned. "He's lucky—it looks as if he's only blacked out. I think he's tough enough to take a few more rounds now he's got used to the Game."

"It was—filthy . . ." Roffrey said. His whole body was tight with strain, his nerves were bunched and his head ached terribly. He even found it hard to focus on O'Hara.

Seeing his trouble, O'Hara took a hypodermic from a case in his pocket and gave Roffrey an injection before he could protest.

Roffrey began to feel better. He still felt tired, but his body started to relax and the headache was less intense.

"So that's the Blood Red Game," he said after a moment.

"That's it," said O'Hara.

Selinsky studied the papers Mann had prepared for him.

"You may well have something here," he said. "It is possible that the Shifter exerts a particular influence on the human mind that equips it for withstanding the attacks of the aliens." He looked up and spoke to Zung who was fiddling with some equipment in one corner of the room. "You say that Roffrey stood up particularly well in his first round?"

"Yes," the little Mongolian nodded, "*and* he resumed the attack without direction. That's rare."

"He's valuable enough without having any special characteristics," Selinsky agreed.

"What do you think of my suggestions?" Mann said, almost impatiently, wanting to get back to his own line of enquiry.

"Interesting," Selinsky said, "but still nothing very definite to go on. I think we might ask to see Roffrey and Talfryn and find out what we can about their experiences in the Shifter."

"Shall I ask them to come here?" Zung suggested.

"Yes, will you?" Selinsky frowned as he studied Mann's notes.

From the turmoil that was her ruined brain, Mary was emerging. Half afraid, for the knowledge of her insanity preyed always on her sane mind, she was reassembling her reason.

Suddenly there was no more confusion. She lay there, eyes seeing nothing at all—no sights of disordered creation, no threatening creatures, no danger. All she heard was the slight scuffling sound of somebody moving about near her.

Very carefully, she thought back. It was hard to distil a sense of time out of the chaos of memory. It had been as if she had spent most of her life in a whirlpool, performing such meaningless actions as piloting a ship, opening airlocks, making equations on pads that flowed away from her and disappeared. There had been periods when the turmoil of the whirlpool had abated—sane periods where she had hovered on the brink of insanity but never quite succumbed. There had been the first arrival at the Shifter, looking for the knowledge she had found on Golund. There had been a landing on Entropium and then a chaotic journey among the planets, through space that contained no laws, a turbulent inconsistency, landing, finding nothing, keeping a hold on her sanity which kept threatening to crack, and finally to Roth where her mind had gone completely. Aware of warmth. Away from Roth in a manner she could never remember, back to Entropium, a man who asked her questions—Jon Renark—and the horror of half-sanity finally smashed by the cataclysm that had turned Entropium into rubble, the dash for the Hauser, crashing on a peaceful planet—Ekiversh, perhaps?—and resting, resting—then on to Roth . . . chaos . . . warmth . . . chaos . . .

Why?

What had kept pulling her back to Roth so that, every time she returned, her sanity had given out a little more? But the last time—there had been something extra—a turning point as if she had gone full circle, on the road *back* to sanity. She had met entities there, things of formless light that had spoken to her. No, they were probably hallucinations . . .

With a healthy sigh, she opened her eyes. Willow Kovacs stood over her. Mary recognised the woman who had comforted her. Mary smiled . . .

"Where's my husband?" she said quietly, and composed her features.

"Feel better now?" Willow said. The smile she gave in reply was sorrowful, but Mary saw that it was not her that Willow pitied.

"Much—is Adam . . .?"

"He's been recruited to play this Game." Briefly Willow explained what she knew. "He should be getting in touch soon."

Mary nodded. She felt rested, at peace. The horror of her madness was a faint memory which she pushed further and further back into her. Never again, she thought. That was it—I'm all right now. That was the last time. She felt herself drifting into a deeper, natural sleep.

Roffrey and Klein entered Selinsky's lab. Roffrey, huge and powerful, his black beard seeming to bristle with vitality, said :
"More tests, professor?"

"No captain, we wish merely to question you on one or two points which have cropped up. To tell you the truth, neither of you appears to possess any strong trait which can account for your beating so many opponents. We have discovered that the reason you were able to beat those ships with such apparent ease was that *every* one of their Gamblers was beaten—put out of action by some force so powerful that it crossed space without any sending equipment to aid it. Their receivers turned the emanations into a force which destroyed their minds completely. But you possess no qualities of sufficient strength, which could account for this. It is as if you had an—amplifier—of some kind. Can you explain that?"

Roffrey shook his head, "No."

But Talfryn was frowning and said nothing, he appeared thoughtful. "What about Mary?" he said slowly.

"Yes, that may be it!" Zung looked up from his notes.

"No it isn't," Roffrey said grimly.

Talfryn broke in : "She's the one. Your wife, Roffrey. She was absolutely crazy on Entropium—she travelled between the Shifter's planets when space was wild and chaotic. She must have a tremendous reserve of control somewhere in her if she could stand what she did. She could have picked up all kinds of strange impressions that worked on her brain. She did, in fact. She's our amplifier !"

"Well, what about it ?" Roffrey turned round and looked at the three scientists. Selinsky sighed.

"I think we're right," he said.

Mary stared out at the hazy light of the fleet dropping through darkness towards the far-off stars gleaming like lights at the end of a long, long tunnel.

"Adam Roffrey," she said aloud and wondered what she would feel when she saw him.

"How did you get to the Shifter ?" Willow asked from where she sat.

"I ran away from Adam—I tired of his restless life, his constant hatred of civilisation. I even tired of his conversation and his jokes. Yet I loved him, still do. I'm an anthropologist by profession and had heard of Golund on the Rim—the planet with signs of having been visited by a race from another galaxy. I went there and could get no further—so I went to the Shifter when it materialised in our space-time, hoping to find some clue there. I searched the Shifter system, I searched it and clung to my sanity by a thread. But Roth was the last straw. Roth finished me."

She turned back to look at Willow. She smiled : "But now I feel saner than I've ever done—and I'm thinking of settling down if I can—becoming a good little wife to Adam. What do you think of that, Willow ?" Her eyes were serious.

"I think you're nuts," Willow said tactlessly. "Don't sell out for the easy life—look at me . . ."

"It's been hard, though," said Mary, staring at the floor. "Far too hard, Willow."

"I know," she said.

The communicator whistled. Mary went to it, operated the control.

It was Roffrey.

"Hello, Adam," she said. Her throat felt constricted. She put her hand to it.

"Thank God," he said, his weary face impassive.

She knew she still loved him. That alone was comforting.

"You got a doctor . . .?" he said.

"No," she said smiling. "Don't ask me how—just accept that I'm sane. Something happened—the fight with the aliens, something on Roth, maybe just Willow's nursing, I don't know. I feel a new woman."

His face softened as he relaxed. He grinned at her. "I can't wait," he said. "Can you and Willow come over to the Game Ship right away? That's what I contacted you for—before I knew."

"Certainly," she said. "But why?"

"The people here think that all four of us, as a sort of team, managed to beat off the alien sense-impression attack. They want to give you a few routine tests, along with Willow—okay?"

"Fine," she said, "send over a launch to collect us and we'll be with you."

She thought she saw him frown just before he switched out.

Much later, Selinsky screwed up his tired face and pushed his hand over it. He shook his head briskly, as if to clear it staring at the two women who, under sedatives, lay asleep in the esting chairs.

"There's certainly something there," he said, rolling a small light-tube between his palms. "Why couldn't we have tested all four of you together? A stupid oversight." He glanced at the chronometer on his right index finger. "I've no idea why—but Asquiol is to broadcast to the entire fleet in a little while—about the Game, I think. I hope the news is good, we could do with some."

Roffrey was ill at ease, brooding, paying scant attention to the scientist. He stared down at Mary and he suddenly felt weak, ineffectual as if he no longer played a part in her life, could hardly control his own. An unusual feeling, connected, perhaps, with the shape that events seemed to be taking . . .

Now she remembered. As she slept, physically, her mind was alert. She remembered landing on Roth, of stumbling over the surface, of falling down an abyss that took her upwards, of the strange, warm things that had entered her brain . . . She remembered all this because she could sense something similar, quite close to her. She reached out to try and contact it, but failed—only just failed. She felt like a climber on a cliff-face

who was reaching for the hand of the climber just above, the fingers stretching out carefully, desperately, but not quite touching.

There was somebody out there—somebody like her—but more like her than she was, that was the impression she got. Who was it? Or was it a person, such as she defined the word, or something else?

Adam? No. It wasn't Adam. She realised she had spoken his name aloud.

"I'm here," he said, smiling down at her. She felt his big hand grasping her firmly, encouragingly.

"Adam—there's something—I don't know . . ."

Selinsky appeared beside her husband. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine, physically. But I'm puzzled." She sat up in the chair, dangling her legs, trying to touch the floor. "What did you find out?"

"Quite a bit," he said. "And we'll be needing you—are you willing to take the risk and help us play the Game?"

"I'll take the risk." She wondered why her husband was so quiet.

Chapter Eight

This time, Asquiol realised, he would have to visit the Game Ship personally, for the time he had feared had come.

The aliens had virtually won the Blood Red Game.

Jewelled, the multiverse spread around him, awash with life, rich with pulsating energy, but it could not compensate for his mood of near-despair. Coupled with the empty ache within him, the ache for the missing piece which seemed so close, it threatened to control him. He still could not trace the source, but it was there. Something, like him but not so developed, was in touch with—almost—the multiverse. He began to put out feelers of his mind into the multiverse, searching.

But then his conscience made him withdraw from this and concentrate once more on the immediate problem. As had happened on past occasions, he had been in communication with the alien leaders. This time they had found it hard to disguise their jubilation, for the Game had taken firm shape.

They were winning. Even with the setback they had received from Roffrey's ship, their score had mounted enormously. Asquiol still found it difficult to comprehend their method of scoring, but he trusted them. It was unthinkable for them to cheat.

His way of communicating with them was the way he and Renark had learned from the Originators—not telepathy—it relied on no exact human sense but involved the use of waves of energy which only one in complete awareness of the multi-verse might sense and utilise.

It did not use words but used pictures and symbols. It had been by an analysis of some of these symbols which Asquiol had passed on to them that the psychiatrists had managed to devise 'weapons' for use against the aliens.

Asquiol still had no idea of what the aliens called themselves and did not even have a clear impression of their physical appearance. But their messages were easy enough to interpret and the fact remained that the human race had reached a crisis point.

Only one more round of the Game would decide the issue !

Then, if the human race refused to accept the decision and began open war again, Asquiol knew they were doomed, for their fleets were depleted. News had recently reached him that a number of farmships had broken down, others had been lost completely or been destroyed in their early physical encounters with the aliens. Less than a thousand ships of all kinds remained in the fleet. A vast enough caravan by any ordinary standards—but nearly a quarter of a million ships had originally left the home universe.

It was in a mood bordering on hopelessness that he stretched out a scintillating arm and put his communicator on to a general broadcast wavelength to inform the race of what he had learned. It was rare for him to do this since direct contact with members of his race was becoming increasingly less attractive. He began :

"Asquiol here. Please listen attentively to my message. I have recently been in contact with our attackers and they have informed me that, as far as they are concerned, the game is virtually won—and that they are confident that they will be the victors. This means that our position is very nearly hopeless.

"We have, at most, enough supplies to last us for a month. Unless we make planet-fall on some habitable world soon you will all be dead. The only way in which we can survive is to win, decisively, the last round of the Game. The aliens have a five per cent advantage over us and feel that they can, in the next round, increase this to the required ten per cent necessary to decide the victor. Our Gamblers are weary and we have no more recruits. Our scientists are still working to devise a new way of beating the aliens but I must tell you that time is running very short. We have to make up a fifteen per cent win in order to defeat them and, at best and at our freshest we have never been higher than nine points even per cent. Those among you not directly involved in playing the Blood Red Game had best make what plans you can bearing my information in mind. To the Gamblers and all those attached to the Game Ship I can only ask for a greater effort, knowing you have worked at full capacity for many days. Remember what we can win—*everything*! And remember what we stand to lose—*everything*."

Asquiol sat back, his message still unfinished, and as he breathed in the exotic scents of the multiverse, he saw the hull of his ship a stark outline against an overpoweringly beautiful background of space alive, sensed again that peculiar feeling of kinship with another entity. Whose was it? In this universe or another?

Then he continued:

"I myself will not be directly affected by the outcome, as many of you have guessed, but this is not to say I am not affected by my trust—to lead the race to safety in the first instance, and to something more in the second. There are those among you who ask what became of my companion Renark, my original leader. You wonder why he stayed behind in the contracting universe—and this question is one I cannot directly answer. However, it may have been that he had sensed his role to be finished and that mine had begun. Perhaps that is an arrogant thing to say. Renark was a brave man and a visionary. He was confident that Man, by his efforts, could avoid, destroy or survive all danger—he was a believer in human will conquering all obstacles—physical, intellectual and metaphysical. In this, perhaps, he was naive. But without that idealism and naivete our race would not have survived.

"However, what saved us from one form of peril may not be able to save us from another. Different problems require different solutions—will alone is not now sufficient to win the Blood Red Game. It must be remembered that the circumstances applying to us in our present predicament are much more complete than they were when Renark and I went on our quest. We must be totally ruthless now—we must be strong and courageous—but we must also be devious, cautious and sacrifice any idealism which made us embark on this voyage—sacrifice it for survival—and the survival of a greater ideal."

Asquiol wondered whether to continue. But he decided he had said sufficient for the moment.

Again, he sat back, allowing himself to experience full unity with the multiverse.

"*Where are you . . . ?*" he said, half-aloud. "*Who are you ?*"

The need was tangible in him—disconcerting, distracting his attention from the matter he must give all his mind to.

He had already been in contact with the Game Ship and now waited impatiently for the signal which would tell him a vessel was ready to take him there.

He rose and paced the cluttered cabin, the light shivering and breaking apart into rays of shining blue, gold and silver; shadows quivered around him and at times there seemed to be several ghostly Asquiols in the cabin.

At length the launch clamped against the side of his ship and he passed through his airlock and into the cramped cabin of the launch. Quickly it cruised over to the Game Ship and eased sideways into a receiving bay. The greater outer doors closed swiftly down and Asquiol stepped out to be greeted by Lord Mordan.

"Perhaps," he said, "with your aid, Asquiol . . ."

But Asquiol shook his iridescent head. "I have little special power," he said. "I can only hope that my aid will help the Gamblers to hang on a little longer."

"There is something else—Selinsky wants to see you. It appears that all four of those people who came in from the Shifter have some kind of group power . . ."

They were striding along the corridors, their boots clanging on metal.

Asquiol said : "I'll speak to Selinsky now."

He stopped as Mordan paused beside a door. "This is Selinsky's lab."

"Is he in?"

Mordan turned a stud and entered. Selinsky looked up, blinking as Asquiol followed Moran in.

"An honour . . ." he said, half-cynically.

"Lord Mordan tells me, professor, that you are on to some new development."

"Yes—that's so. The woman—Mary Roffrey. She's not only sane now she's—what?—super-sane! Something was done to her mind on Roth. The whole nature of it altered, is very different from anyone else's."

Asquiol felt excitement creeping through him.

"Is she, then, like me—as you see me?"

Selinsky shook his head. "She seems perfectly normal—until you analyse her brain structure. She's what we need all right."

Asquiol was beginning to see the pattern now. Was this woman the missing piece in his existence? Had the Originators done something to her brain in order to form her into what she potentially was—a weapon? He could only guess.

Selinsky said: "She wasn't a product of the alien attack at all—she was a product of *more* than just a series of madness-inducing hallucinations on Roth. Something or somebody has actually tampered with her brain—it's the most delicately balanced thing I've ever seen."

"What do you mean?" Asquiol asked.

"One way—utter madness; the other way—unguessable sanity." Selinsky frowned. "I'd hate to be in her position. We've got her doing a quick training course with O'Hara at the moment—but playing the Game could ruin her mind for good, tip the balance once and for all."

"You mean she'd be totally insane?"

"Yes."

Asquiol pondered. "We must use her," he said finally, "too much is at stake."

"Her husband is against the idea—but she seems to be taking it all right."

"He's the trouble-maker—Roffrey," Mordan said.

"Will he give trouble in this business?"

"He seems resigned," said Selinsky. "A strange mood for him. Playing the Game seems to have wrought a change in him. Not surprising . . ."

"I must see her," Asquiol said with finality and turned to leave the laboratory.

They began the long walk down the corridor to the Game Chamber.

Now Asquiol wanted to see Mary Roffrey. Wanted to see her desperately. As he strode along his mind worked quickly. Ever since he and Renark had gone to the Shifter, years before, their paths had indirectly crossed. He had never met her—yet she had been the person to supply Renark with a lot of important information without which they might never have reached the home of the originators. What was she—some puppet of the Originators which they were using to aid the race? Or was she something more than a puppet?

She must be the missing factor in his existence. Yet obviously she had no direct contact with the multiverse. She had the power to strike devastatingly back at the aliens—and he had no power comparable. There were things that linked them, yet there were qualities that separated them, also. It was as if they both represented certain abilities which Man was capable of possessing. She had something he didn't have and he had something she didn't have. How similar were they?

This, perhaps, he would find out in a moment.

He went over the information he had. Mary's mind had been primarily responsible for disorientating the aliens in a 'wild round' of the Game. At that stage she had acted as a conductor for the rest. All of them having been on Roth, they were probably that much more capable of fighting the aliens than anyone else in the fleet. Therefore they would use the other three as well as Mary.

But uppermost in his mind was what Selinsky had just told him.

Mary's mind could improve—or snap irreparably under the stress of this last round.

He knew what he would have to do, now. But it was a heavy weight. As he contemplated it, the light around him seemed to fade, become colder and less frenetic in its movement. Sadness, such as he had never thought to experience again, filled him and he fought it unsuccessfully. He might, in essence, have to murder a woman—and cut himself off from the power she possessed.

It was getting late. Too late for anything but immediate action. The time of the last round was nearing.

They reached the door of the Game Chamber . . .

Chapter Nine

In the main chamber, Mary was seated between Willow and O'Hara, the instructor, listening to O'Hara's briefing. Around them, the other Gamblers were readying themselves for the last round. They looked ill at ease and weary. Many of them did not look up even when Asquiol came in, flinging the door of the main chamber open and striding quickly across the great room. The light flowed about the many facets of his body and streamed away behind him.

Mary turned round, and saw him.

"You!" she said.

A look of puzzlement crossed Asquiol's face. "We've met?" he said. "I don't remember." . .

"I saw you with Renark several times—on Roth."

"But we left Roth years ago."

"I know—but Roth is a strange planet. Time is non-existent there. Anyway, it wasn't only that."

"Then how else did you recognise me?"

"I've—sensed—you've been here all the time. Even before we reached the fleet, I think."

"But obviously you do not exist, as I do, in the entire multiverse. What could the link be, I wonder?" Then he smiled. "Perhaps our mutual friends the Originators could tell us?"

"Probably it's simpler than that," Mary replied. The sense of empathy with Asquiol was like nothing she had ever before experienced. "Because we have seen them and gained from the contact we recognise it in each other."

"That probably is the truth," he nodded and then suddenly noticed that Willow was staring at him, her eyes full of tears. He took control of himself and said briskly: "Well, we had better get ready. I'm going to be in control of this project. You, Mary, will work under my direction using—as power, as it were—the other three, Roffrey, Talfryn and Willow. It's quite simple—a sort of gestalt link."

She looked at the others who had crossed the room from where Selinsky and his team were working on a mechanism. "Did you hear that?" Adam had the look of a dumb beast in pain as he stared at her for a moment before dropping his eyes.

"We heard it," he said. "All of it."

She glanced at Asquiol as if for advice, but he could not help her. Both of them were now in a similar position—Mary with Roffrey and Asquiol with Willow.

The time was nearing, Mary felt, when she would have to sever her ties with her husband.

The time had passed, Asquiol reflected, when he and Willow could have been united by the common bond which he and Mary now possessed.

As they looked at one another they seemed to convey this without need of speech.

O'Hara interrupted them.

"Get ready, everyone! Remember, we need a fifteen per cent win in the round that is to follow. This round will be the last we have to play. Winning it will be decisive!"

The five people, Asquiol and Mary in the lead, went towards the specially prepared panel.

They composed themselves to play.

Both Willow and Adam Roffrey had to force themselves to concentrate, but both were motivated by a different fear. Willow feared that Mary would become extra-sane through her ordeal. Roffrey feared she would become insane while he hated the alternative which would break their relationship before it ever had a chance to resume.

Asquiol was his rival now, Roffrey saw. Yet Asquiol hardly knew it himself.

Only Talfryn was not afraid of the possible results. Either way, he felt, he stood to win, so long as Mary was effective in helping the Gamblers win the Game.

Asquiol bent close to Mary and whispered: "Remember I am in the closest possible touch with you and you with me. However close you feel you are coming to insanity do not panic, I will keep you on the right course."

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Asquiol."

The tension rose as they waited.

It was so delicate, the first probe. As delicate as a slicing scalpel.

O'Hara shouted: "Don't wait for them. Attack! Attack!"

In contact with Mary, now, Asquiol began to dredge up Mary's memories from the deepest recesses of her subconscious, doing to her what only a totally evil man might do. Yet, even as she slipped into the giddy, sickening whirlpool of insanity, it was obvious to her that Asquiol was not evil. There was no

malice in him at all. It was taking fantastic control for him to force himself to continue. But he did continue—he worked at her mind, slashing at it, tearing at it, working it apart in order to remould it, and he did it in the full knowledge that he might, in the final analysis, be committing a dreadful crime.

Beside him, the trio seated, feeding power to Mary that was channelled by Asquiol and directed by him at the alien attackers.

"There they are, Mary—you see them !"

Mary turned glazed eyes towards the screen. Yes, she saw them.

She sobbed and mewled and lashed back at the pouring stream of demons and hobgoblins that came prancing and tumbling down the long corridor of her mind. They laughed and fingered her brains and her body and pulled her nerves about, enjoying their sport, caressing the parts of her they had captured.

She lashed back as the whole scene became pervaded with the blood red sense that had always been there. She knew it. She was familiar with it and she hated it more than anything else.

Gone were emotions—gone self-pity—gone love—gone yearning and jealousy and impotent sadness. The trio linked and locked and lent their strength to Mary. Everything that she felt, they felt. Everything she saw and did, *they* saw and did. And at times, also, so close were the five blended, they saw something of what Asquiol saw and it lent them strength to pass on to Mary.

On and on they went, driving at the aliens, hating them and sending back impression after impression from the multiple brain.

To the alien players of the Game, it was as if they had suddenly been attacked by an atomic cannon in a war that had been previously fought with swords. They reeled beneath the weight of the attack. They reeled, they marvelled and, in their strange way, they admired. But they fought back even harder, playing, after the initial shock, coolly and efficiently.

Roffrey broke contact at the sound of a voice outside. It was O'Hara shouting : " We're winning ! They were right. Somehow she has the key to the whole mastery of the Game. She does something with her mind that sends exactly the thing most

loathsome to them back to them. There's a twist there somewhere that no human experience could have made. She's doing it !"

Roffrey stared at him for a moment, as if in panic, and then returned his attention to the Game. For a moment, O'Hara watched him before he returned his own attention. Their gains were slowly mounting—and Mary's inspiration seemed to be encouraging the rest of the Gamblers to give their best.

"This is our greatest hour," said O'Hara thankfully: "Our greatest hour."

And as he passed her he saw Mary's twisted and distorted face with the sweat and saliva all over it, wreathed in the same flickering images that surrounded Asquiol's intent face.

Now she knew she was winning. *Now* she could see they were reeling back. *Now* she felt victory within her reach. Although the madness was frenzied and all-consuming, there was behind it all the confidence that Asquiol's presence gave her and she kept sending, though her mind and body ached with searing agony.

Then, quite suddenly, she blacked out, hearing a voice call from a long way off:

"*Mary ! Mary !*"

Asquiol, knowing that he had aided her to reach this state, could hardly bear to continue. But he had to. He put a hand to her sweat-wet hair and dragged the head back to stare into the vacant eyes.

"*Mary—you can send them away. You can !*" He began to communicate with her. He forced her attention to the screens.

She threshed in the chair. For a second she stared at him. To his relief he saw sanity there.

"*Asquiol,*" she said. "*What is it we were ?*"

"*We can be the same, Mary, now !*"

And then she was bellowing in his face, her laughter seeming a physical weight battering around his head so that he wanted to fling up his hands to ward it off, to run and escape, to hide from what he had created. But again he forced control on himself and pushed her face towards the screens.

Roffrey, pain-drunk, glared at him, but did nothing.

Finally, she was roaring and tearing. Asquiol couldn't make contact with her. One of her hands flailed out, the nails slashing against his face. Roffrey saw the blood come and was

half-astonished. He had forgotten that Asquiol was in many ways as mortal as himself. Somehow it made the feeling in him worse.

Asquiol fought to direct this rage, turn it against the aliens. He battled to resume empathetic contact with her.

She stirred, her name formed and curled and buzzed through the darkness. She reached out for it.

Elsewhere, many of the Gamblers had already succumbed to the force of the alien impressions. Tidal waves of garbled sense-impression were being flung against them and even the strongest were finding it hard to resist, to keep the spark of sanity alive and retaliate.

Asquiol used his communicating-sense, the one that allowed him to contact the aliens and 'converse' with them. He did this to Mary. He shoved impressions and pictures into her mind, things taken from his own memory. And so real did they become, in such close empathy was he with the woman, that he felt his own sanity slipping away. But he was the controlling part of the team, he had to keep aware. He held on for as long as he could, then straightened his back, gasping. The watchers saw the light surrounding him skip erratically and dim suddenly. Then it became brighter, like a flaring explosion.

And the light seemed to make contact with Mary. The same thing seemed to happen to her body. Her image split and became many images.

Asquiol ! ASQUIOL ! A S Q U I O L !

Hello, Mary.

What is it ?

Rebirth. You're whole now.

Is it over ?

By no means !

Where are we, Asquiol ?

On the Ship.

But it's . . .

Different, I know. Look.

She saw, through facet after facet, her husband, the girl and the other man. They were staring at her in astonishment. Angled, opaque images surrounded every space they did not occupy.

"Adam," she said, "I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Mary. I'm not. Good luck—like I said." Roffrey was actually smiling.

A new image swam into focus. O'Hara gesticulating.

"I don't know what's happened to the woman and I don't care. Get your attention back to the Game, or it's lost!"

She turned, and the horrifying impressions came back but it was as if they were passed through a filter which took away their effect on her mind. Carefully she searched her being. She felt Asquiol beside her, felt the warmth of his encouragement. She lashed back, with deliberate and savage fury, searching out weaknesses, using them, splitting the alien minds to shreds. Asquiol guided her, she could feel it. Talfryn, Willow and Adam supplied power and extra impressions which she took and warped and sent out.

More of the Gamblers were dropping out and attendants were kept busy clearing them from the chamber. There were only five complete teams left.

But it was victory. Mary and Asquiol could feel it as they worked together, oblivious of everything else, to defeat the aliens. They felt, at that moment, as if they knew everything about their opponents, to such an extent that they were in danger of giving up out of sympathy.

They fought on, riding a tide of conquest. Soon the entire alien complement was finished. They retreated back and stared around them.

"Asquiol—what happened?"

Asquiol and Mary saw Willow looking up at them. They smiled at her and said:

"This was the Originators' plan, Willow. They obviously did not allow for human weakness quite enough—but they did not count on the human spirit either. Please don't suffer, Willow. You have done more today for Humanity than you could ever have done for any single person."

They turned to regard the others.

"You, too, Roffrey—and, you Talfryn. Without you it is unlikely that we could have defeated the alien intelligences."

"What exactly has happened?" Lord Mordan interrupted. "Have you become one entity or what?"

"No," Asquiol spoke with a slight effort. "It is simply that, existing on the multiversal level, we are capable of linking minds to form a more powerful single unity. That was how we finally defeated our opponents. Obviously this was part of the Originators' plan—but they never do anything for us—at best, they merely put certain aids in our path. If we can make use

of them—assuming we realise what they are—so much to the good. If we can't, we suffer. We were near complete defeat there. If we had not got some hint of Mary's nature when we did, the plan would have come to nothing. As it was, we were lucky."

Mary said: "I must have been watched by the Originators right from the start—even before I met *you*, Adam."

Asquiol continued: "The Originators make things especially difficult for people they think are—material—for the new, multiversal, race. Simply—only the fittest survive."

Lord Mordan said obsequiously, yet hastily: "But the aliens—can we not discover what our peace terms are? We must hurry—the farm-ships . . ."

"Of course," Asquiol nodded. "Mary and I will return to my ship and contact them from there."

Mary and Asquiol moved towards the exit, gave one last glance at the three others, and left.

"What the hell have you got to smile about, Roffrey?" Talfryn said accusingly.

Roffrey felt at peace. Maybe it was the mood induced by weariness, but he didn't think so. There was no more pain in him, no more jealousy, no more hatred. He moved over to the big blank screen and stared up at it. The place suddenly brightened as assistants switched on the central lights and began clearing up the mess the Gamblers had left . . .

Roffrey didn't answer.

"I give up," Talfryn shook his head, perplexed.

"That's the trouble," Willow said, "so many of us do, don't we?"

Asquiol of Pompeii took Mary the Maze back to his ship. They felt more at ease there, since the ship bore similarities to their own metabolic state.

Here, with Asquiol acting again as a guide for Mary, they pulled their resources together and contemplated the radiant multiverse around them. They put out a tendril of thought along the familiar layers, seeking the alien minds.

Then they were in contact !

Absolute defeat—lost spirit—utter hopelessness—concede all rights you wish to take . . .

This was astonishing, the defeated mood of the alien commanders was sufficient to add almost the last pressure on

their already weary minds. A great pity welled up in them as they communicated their terms to the conquered.

Accept terms—any terms acceptable—we have no status—you have all status—we are nothing but your tools to use . . .

These people were so conditioned to the code applying to the Game they had played for centuries, perhaps millenia, that they could let an unknown opponent, such as the human race, do as it liked. They were conditioned to obeying the victor. They could not question the victor's right. Their shame was so intense that they threatened to die of it—yet there was no trace of bitterness—no trace of resentment . . .

Asquiol and Mary resolved to help them, if they could. But would they ever see them? They sent out a polite impression that congratulated them on their ingenuity and courage, but it met with no response at all. They were beaten—no praise could alter that. They gave them positions of planets suitable for human occupation—they were totally unsuited for themselves, anyway—and then they fled.

They did not go to nurse grudges, for they had none. They did not plot retaliation for such a thing was inconceivable. They went to hide—to reappear only if their conquerors demanded it.

They were a strange people, perhaps in some ways an over-civilised people since an artificial code had obviously completely superceded natural instincts.

Asquiol and Mary broke their contact with the aliens.

"I'd better inform Mordan—he'll be delighted, anyway." Asquiol said, operating the laser. He told the Gee Lord of their discoveries.

"I'll start the fleet moving towards some habitable planets right away. Give me an hour." Lord Mordan smiled tiredly. "We did it, Prince Asquiol. I must admit I was close to accepting defeat."

"We all were," Asquiol smiled. "How are the other three?"

"They've gone back to Roffrey's ship. I think they're okay—Roffrey and the girl seem quite happy, strangely. Do you want me to keep tabs on them?"

"No," Asquiol shook his head, and as he did so the light broke and reformed around it, the images scattering and merging. Asquiol stared at Mordan's weary face for a moment.

The Gee Lord shifted uncomfortably beneath the fixed stare.

"I could do with some natural sleep," he said at last, "but I've got to get the fleet in order first. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing," said Asquiol and switched out.

There was a subdued mood of victory about the re-forming fleet as he and Mary watched it from one of the ports.

"There's a lot to do, Mary," he said. "I once compared the race to a chick smashing out of its shell. The comparison still applies. We've broken the shell, we've survived our first period in the multiverse—but will we survive the second and the third? Is there a huge farmer with an axe somewhere thinking of serving us up for dinner when we're plump enough?"

She smiled. "You're worn out," she said. "So am I. Give yourself time to think properly. It's the reaction—you're depressed. That kind of emotion can harm a lot of the work we still have to do."

He looked at her in surprise. He was still unused to having company that he could appreciate, someone who could understand what he felt and saw.

"Where are we going?" He said. "We need to plan carefully. The degraded condition of the fleet can't be allowed to continue once we make planet-fall. Galactic Law will have to be re-established. Men like Lord Mordan will have to be taken out of positions of power. We've become a grim race in the last few weeks, Mary, out of necessity. If we let matters slide, the race could easily degenerate back into something worse than its pre-exodus state. If that happened—our destiny might be out of reach for good. There isn't much time. The Originators made that clear when Renark and I first met them."

He sighed.

"With me to help you," she said, "the hard work will be easier. I know it's going to be harder—but there are two of us now. Soon, in a couple of generations, perhaps, there will be more until there are enough of us to take the place of the Originators."

"Most people are happy as they are—who can blame them?—it will be an uphill climb."

"That's the best way to climb hills," she smiled.

Around them, as they sat in contemplation, the multiverse flowed, thick and solid, so full. And this could be the heritage of their race.

He laughed slightly. "There's a scene in Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth* where Falstaff learns that Prince Hal, his old

drinking partner, has become king. He gathers his friends about him and tells them that they must follow him for he is 'Fortune's Steward' and they can now behave as they like with impunity. But King Henry banishes him for a buffoon and he realises, then, that instead of becoming better, things are going to be worse. I sometimes wonder if, perhaps, I'm not 'Fortune's Steward'—leading the whole race towards a promise I can't keep . . ."

Mary's multi-faceted face smiled encouragingly :

"Man has had to act without being able to foresee the outcome of his actions ever since he began the long climb upward. He is a stumbler, he has to convince himself of the results he will achieve without ever knowing if he can do it. We have a long way to go, Asquiol, before we shall ever be able to know, for certain, the outcome of our actions. Meanwhile, we keep going. We're probably the most optimistic race in the multiverse !"

They laughed together. The multiverse, agitated, swirled and leapt and delighted them with its flourish of colour and variety. All possibilities existed there, all promise, all hope.

Michael Moorcock

Special Notice . . .

We regret to inform readers that this is the last issue of *Science Fiction Adventures* we shall be publishing, at least for the time being. Well-liked though the magazine is in certain circles, sales no longer warrant keeping it on our lists. Subscribers are offered a choice of either *New Worlds Science Fiction* or *Science Fantasy* to fill out their existing subscriptions. Write us immediately with your instructions.

Meanwhile, this decision in no way affects *New Worlds Science Fiction* or *Science Fantasy*, both of which are going from strength to strength, and readers should watch out for some fine stories coming shortly in both of them.

The Editor

The trouble really was that Calvi did not know what his task was to be—and the man who came to tell him about it was killed before he passed the instructions.

A TASK FOR CALVI

by LAN WRIGHT

Chapter One

The green waters of a tideless sea lapped lazily on an artificial shoreline whose rocks had been emulsified into ornamental patios over which multi-coloured umbrellas spread themselves like giant mushrooms.

As a vacation centre for rich Terrans, Norval Two had no equal, and the part about it that Peter Calvi found annoying was its similarity to Earth.

Rich men paid thousands of credits to do on Norval Two those things which they could have done just as well on Earth. The beaches of North Africa, the South Sea Islands and South America had as much to offer as did the terraformed shores of Norval Two. Acapulco, Rio, New Tripoli—these and a score of other places shared one disadvantage that made them unacceptable to the monied aristocrats of Earth—they were not on Norval Two. For that reason alone Norval was unique;

for another, the amount of money that passed through Norval Two in the course of a Terran year totalled almost fifteen per cent of Earth's total Galactic budget.

Here and there along the sea shore the brown-muscled bodies of younger people beautified the scene, but for the most part the bodies were aged and flabby, unhealthily pale or viciously red from the rays of the brilliant Norval sun. In general it was a sight that Calvi found disgusting, and he turned on his stomach to expose his already blackened back to the burning rays.

He looked over his folded hands, down the steps of the patio to the sea some fifty yards distant. It lapped slowly and gently, with few waves to disturb its even surface, and the smooth, sandy bottom spread from the shoreline away into the distance, quite clear and white, until only increasing depth robbed the eye of its vision.

The boredom of the past ten days had spread from Calvi's mind to his body, and he had an overwhelming desire to run into the sea and swim and swim until the sheer fatigue of exercise brought him back to the shore. But that would have been out of character. He was rich and idle, suave and dissolute—at least, to outward appearances. He spent a great deal of money on drink, and an even greater amount on the large number of young women who frequented Norval City. He tried to seduce all of them in just the manner that any man of his wealth and station would have tried, and when his efforts met with success—as they invariably did—he accepted that success as merely another proof of the character he was trying to build.

And while that character was being created, Peter Calvi watched and waited, and did nothing to damage the illusion.

The lack of a satellite made Norval Two a world of tideless seas. The shoreline had been, as a result, all rock and stone, for there had never been tides and heavy seas to pound the rocks into pebbles and the pebbles into sand. Such sand as there was, now adorning the beaches and the sea bed, was yet another evidence of the vast amounts of money that had been poured into Norval Two for the business of terraforming its natural beauty. On a world where the climate was always too good to be true, the skies were always blue, the rain was light and refreshing, the seas were so smooth and full of salt that

no-one could ever drown in them. One of the more off-colour jokes that greeted newcomers to Norval concerned a pair of lovers who had, in a blissful halo of passion, swum and drifted out of sight of land, and then starved to death in the middle of the ocean.

Calvi lay and brooded as he had done these many days past. There was always the new excitement to be found in a fresh task, and there followed the inevitable excitement of the climax, but in between there was the vacuum of inaction during which he had to absorb the local colour, and, in turn, be absorbed by it. On Norval he had become as innocuous as any other rich playboy, but only Calvi knew how hard he had had to work on the illusion in the short time at his disposal.

The only consolation was that action could not be long delayed, since his original routing to Norval on Bureau business, had come so rapidly that it had almost smacked of panic. Had he not been only two short days flight away from Norval when the call had come he might have been back on Earth revelling in a well deserved vacation. Instead, he was here, on Norval, enjoying a pseudo vacation that was palling rapidly.

"Peter. I've been looking for you all over." The girl's voice was at once accusing and wheedling.

Calvi sighed to himself and rolled over on his back to look up at the bronzed near nudity of one of his recent conquests.

"Chita ! I tried to call you this morning."

"Liar. You promised to call me yesterday and you didn't."

"My angel, I was busy—"

"I can just imagine. What about tonight, honey?"

"Well—" Calvi smiled and tried to temporise. The sheer inanity of the wretched girl was a plague on his life, though he had to admit that she was better than some with whom he had dallied during the past ten days.

"Please, Peter."

At that, he thought, he might need some cover tonight, for he had little doubt that the climax to his stay on Norval was close at hand. The unerring instinct born of years of hard experience was seldom wrong.

"We could have dinner in my suite—"

"Yes. I will make myself especially beautiful. Eight o'clock?"

"I'll be waiting."

Calvi watched her move away from him, and reflected that her brain was hardly fit company for such a beautiful body.

He closed his eyes and lay dozing in the warm sun, his mind pleasantly dulled and empty, and, as he lay there, he felt the first faint tingle of contact. He awoke at once to full awareness, and it came like a whisper in his mind, a wind that rose and fell. Suddenly he was enormously aware of the tiny, white scar at the back of his neck, the only evidence of the micro-unit inserted at the base of his skull. At moments like this the scar seemed to expand and grow in size, so that it shrieked to be seen by any near observer, and yet he knew that only a trained surgeon could pick out the faint line of its existence.

Within his brain the signals stirred and were born, and within his body excitement stirred, and that, too, was born. The vacuum was ended.

The whispers rose and surged and were translated into thoughts that imprinted themselves on his awareness.

"Calvi . . . Egon Bray is the man you seek. He arrives on the Terran cruiser tomorrow. His identity . . ."

The words died and were lost for a fraction of a second during which Calvi had time to wonder what was wrong with his contact, and then there followed a blast of mental pain that stiffened his whole body in a paroxysm of agony. Anyone close enough would have seen the muscles of his body tense into rigid bulges that strained and moved as if with independent life, while the mind which normally controlled them fought a battle against pain and chaos such as Calvi had never believed could exist. The mental shriek was momentary, the pain an explosion that died as quickly as it had been born—but it was enough.

Calvi lay on the sand, apparently as he had done bare moments earlier, yet his body was almost lifeless as the muscular spasms passed and left him limp and only semi-conscious.

And in his mind was a blank that would never be filled. An aching void in which only the name of Egon Bray rang like an echo from a vast distance. Egon Bray—that alone—and no more.

Calvi scarcely recalled how he struggled to his feet, pulled on his light sun cape, and made his way back to the peace of his hotel suite. His body moved like an automaton, controlled

by a mind that was aware only of the blinding agony that enveloped his being. There were kaleidoscopic images of the route that led from the seashore, and although the distance was but a few score yards he seemed to walk for an age before the cool darkness of his room engulfed him, and he was able to fall, face down, on the softness of his bed.

Slowly, in the quietness and the dark, the pain lessened and some coherence returned to his thoughts. The memories grew from nebulous beginnings, fleeting and inconsistent, to greater reality, and all of them coalesced into one concrete fact—a fact that ruled all else—the name of Egon Bray.

At last Calvi was able to stagger into his bathroom and swallow a couple of tablets that killed the greater part of the pain within his head. They made him light headed, and his whole body ached, but at least he was able to think with a reasonable degree of clarity even though his stomach threatened to rebel at any moment against the sick, dead feeling that was so much like a monumental hangover.

As he sat miserably on the edge of his bed, he was aware of another feeling, an emptiness in his brain, a void that he had never known before. Slowly, his fingers lifted to probe gently at the all but invisible mark at the base of his skull. The flesh felt cold to his touch—no, not cold—it was dead, lifeless, numbed by something that had torn and blasted at the minute bulk of the micro-unit.

For the first time that he could ever recall, panic welled within Calvi. He felt naked and alone, cut off from all that held comfort and reassurance. Always, previously, there had been the sure and certain knowledge that the Bureau was not far away; it was only as far as the instantaneous panic call that he could scream out through the micro-unit—the panic call that no agent ever made, for once he had made it he was finished, useless, a back number who had reached the end of the knife edge existence that depended largely upon courage and resource. The agent who made a panic call was no longer an agent.

Calvi licked his lips and rubbed his hands across his aching eyes. The moment had come and gone. The call had not been made and now the panic was dying within him. There was another way which would accomplish the same end—a simple, innocuous request for a repetition of the information that had

never reached him. He needed the details that had been smothered in the blinding mental holocaust, and there was only one way of getting them.

He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, concentrating on the task of activating the micro-unit. The mental tap that he had to turn was not hard to achieve, and the mere increase in mental activity caused by the single-minded concentration was enough to activate the unit for transmission purposes.

Calvi forced himself to calmness, sending details of his request with a detached nonchalance that was far removed from his physical tension. If all was well, only a few seconds would elapse before the acknowledgement and the repetition of the details which he so badly needed to know.

But the seconds ticked away into minutes and nothing came.

He tried again and yet again, the perspiration standing out on his white, strained face as the intensity of his concentration tightened every muscle in his body.

And still there was only silence.

Calvi sat up and swung his legs to the floor, aware that he was trembling in every limb as realisation of his plight was forced upon him. The unit was dead, destroyed by whatever disaster had hit him for the one terrible moment—shattered by a force that he could not even begin to guess at. And now he was cut off from all that was necessary to him, isolated and alone, with only one small fact at his disposal.

As he sat and thought about it, Calvi knew all too well what had happened. Someone, somewhere had been able to break into the tight chain of communication that linked Bureau agents. The possibility had always been there, a bogey at the back of every agent's mind, a bad dream that was a possibility but, as yet, had been no more than just a possibility—only now it was a fact, and it had happened to Peter Calvi under circumstances that carried with them frightening implications.

On the table beside the bed the extension visiphone buzzed, jerking Calvi from his reverie. He reached out and pressed the receiver button.

"Peter, darling?" The wheedling voice of Chita crackled in his ears. "They won't let me in."

Calvi's eyes flashed to the clock beside the phone. It was seven-thirty, and the darkness in the room was the darkness of night, not the darkness of closed shutters. Four hours had

elapsed since those blinding moments on the beach, and Calvi had little idea or knowledge of where most of that time had gone.

"Peter?"

"Chita—I am sorry. I—I've got a touch of the sun. I—"

"Peter, you promised." The wheedle had left her voice to be replaced by the sharp note of anger that Calvi recognised as the danger signal preceeding an even more spectacular display of emotion.

"Darling, I am sorry—more sorry than I can say. Look, you go out tomorrow and buy yourself something—anything you like—and send the bill to me. All right? And perhaps I shall feel better in a day or so and we will have our date then."

"Well—" He could see her brain ticking up the plus signs, and the smile which tinged the ends of her lips told him that he had judged the position correctly. "Well, all right. How about the day after tomorrow? Same time?"

"All right," Calvi agreed without any attempt at argument. "Tell the manager as you leave now, and he will show you straight up. Eight o'clock, the day after tomorrow."

He broke the connection and turned on the room lights. At least the call had broken in on an introspective reverie that was accomplishing nothing. All he had at his disposal was the certain knowledge that someone didn't want him to know that a man called Egon Bray was arriving on the Terran cruiser next day, but that someone had been just a little late in blocking the information. Perhaps those few vital seconds would be the key on which his whole future plan of action might rest.

Calvi lifted his hand to the cold, dead patch at the base of his skull. Just how much damage had been done? The unit was useless, that much was clear, but had he himself suffered any permanent damage as a result? His head still ached, but it was not so bad as to incapacitate him for long. A good night's sleep perhaps, and then tomorrow the Terran cruiser would arrive, and on it would be the man who would settle all problems.

And there, thought Calvi, he would pick up the threads that now hung so limply in his grasp.

Chapter Two

Calvi slept deeply that night. He dosed himself heavily with drugs and allowed them to do their work fully and efficiently. It was almost noon when he awoke, and he felt a great deal better than he had the night before.

A check with the landing office told him that the Terran cruiser had arrived an hour earlier, and Calvi dressed and took a leisurely toilet before leaving the hotel and taking the main travel way out of the city towards the spaceport. The moving road wasn't the quickest way—a copter would have done the trip in half the time—but Calvi was in no hurry at this stage of the proceedings. All he had to do was to locate the man he sought, to pinpoint his whereabouts—after that—well, he would see.

At the spaceport he went straight to the arrival bureau and asked to see the officer in charge, a lean-faced Terran named Marcus Clay with whom Calvi had become acquainted. Clay had expensive tastes in living which did not match his income, and Calvi—ever alive for an opportunity of imposing a debt that might be useful—had helped him out of an embarrassing position in one of the local casinos.

As he entered Clay's office he noticed with amusement the apprehensive flicker of the man's cold, grey eyes, and that anxiety was mirrored in his voice as he said, "Calvi! What do you want?"

"You, Clay." Calvi smiled disarmingly, aware that his terse but smiling response would only add to the man's tension.

Clay licked his lips but said nothing, and Calvi transferred his attention to the neat but functional furnishings. None of them did anything to enhance his opinion of the position which Clay held. He was a small cog in a large machine. The one good feature of the room was the single wide sweep of window which showed the entire stretch of the field outside. Away in the distance the upward folds of the mountains marked the end of the coastal plain that held Norval City and its immediate surroundings.

"A lovely view you have here, Clay," Calvi commented.

"If it's about the loan—I can't pay just now."

"Loan?" Calvi turned back to smile at Clay and waved an airy, negligent hand. "Really, I'm not worried about that."

He sat down in a chair on the other side of the desk, noting the relief that spread across the man's face.

"Then—?"

Calvi chuckled ruefully. "I was supposed to meet someone from the Terran cruiser this morning—a friend travelling on vacation. I—er—had a bit of a heavy night last night and I overslept. I wondered if he had enquired about my whereabouts—you see, I forgot to tell him where I was staying."

Clay shook his head. "No, Calvi, no-one has enquired—"

"Can you be so sure?"

Clay gestured angrily. "Yes, I am sure. There's been so much trouble here that I would have remembered such a request. Do you know that every passenger from the Terran ship has passed through this office?"

"Really?" Warning lights ticked within Calvi.

"It is not half an hour ago that the Law Squad left." Clay gazed sombrely at Calvi. "There was a dead man aboard that ship."

Calvi allowed his jaw to drop in amazement. "But—"

"He was murdered," Clay announced with knowing pomposity. "The Squad was waiting for the ship when it landed, and they used my office to interrogate all the passengers before they allowed them to leave."

"Great heavens! Clay, what was the dead man's name?"

"Polaine—Robert Polaine." As he said the words, Calvi was aware that Clay was watching him closely to see what his reaction might be. "Mean anything to you?"

Calvi shook his head, aware that relief was strong within him. "No my friend was named Bray—Egon Bray. Which hotel did he go to? I must find him."

"You know the regulations," Clay told him. "The landing records are governed by internal field security. I can't divulge such information without the agreement of the Law Squad—especially in view of what has happened."

"Really, this is too bad."

"Ask the Law Squad—they'll tell you."

"And get tied up in a murder enquiry?" Calvi shook his head decisively. "You know them, Clay, they'll be at my hotel every day and all day for the rest of my stay here. I won't get a moment's peace."

Clay shrugged. "Then you'd better call every hotel in Norval City until you find him—"

"Hah ! That would cost twice as much as that loan I made to you Clay," Regan cocked a pleading eye, "I might be able to cut that loan in half—" He let the suggestion hang on the air, and watched the play of emotion across the man's face.

"Well—"

"That's a good fellow !"

"Wait here a minute."

Clay left the office and Calvi relaxed in his chair, glad that he was in a position to avoid contact with the Law Squads, and thankful that the bread he had spread on the water had paid such an early dividend. Once he knew where Bray was—!

The office door opened and Clay returned. He held a sheaf of papers in one hand, and his face was grim, thin lipped, with an air of suspicion that Calvi didn't like one little bit.

"What did you say your friend's name was, Calvi ?"

"Bray—Egon Bray."

"There is no such name on the passenger list."

The surprise that registered on Calvi's face was almost the genuine article, and for once he was glad that he was able to show real amazement. "But—but that's ridiculous—"

"I assure you, I checked most thoroughly."

"But I know he was coming on this ship—"

"Look, Calvi, I've done my best. I can't help it if he changed his mind. There were fifty-two passengers on the Terran cruiser, and Egon Bray wasn't one of them. Now, about that loan—"

Calvi waved an irritable hand. "The offer still holds. It isn't your fault, Clay."

"I am most grateful—"

Calvi rose to his feet. All he wanted now was to get away somewhere quiet and think.

Already, at the back of his mind, the last two words of the broken, shattered message were recalled and remembered . . . "his identity—" and then there had been only pain and chaos. There was the sting in the tail that he had not been looking for, and he knew that he had not been thinking and acting as clearly and logically as he normally would, otherwise he would have realised that Egon Bray would not have been using his real name.

"Anything I can do, Calvi—"

"You have been most kind."

Calvi took his leave of Clay and headed back to his hotel on the travel way.

It was now long past midday, and Calvi realised that he had not eaten for almost twenty-four hours. His lunch the previous day had lasted a long time, and the pangs of hunger were replacing the queasy sickness that had been left by the drugs and the overheavy night's sleep. He left the travelway once it had reached the outskirts of the city, and ate a quiet, leisurely lunch in a small but exclusive restaurant. He welcomed the break as much for the relaxation that it brought as for the food, for he needed time to think and consider quietly what he should do. His course of action was not hard to see, but the manner in which it might be accomplished—that was something else again.

It was essential that he locate Egon Bray, and that as quickly as possible. The outside chance that Bray might not be on Norval Two was something he did not even begin to consider, for he was too sure of the Bureau's efficiency to doubt that whatever information they disseminated was accurate to the ultimate degree. If they said that Egon Bray was landing from the Terran cruiser, then they knew beyond all possible doubt that the information was correct.

Could he be a crew member? For an instant Calvi's heart rose, but as he thought about it he knew that it was a remote possibility. His whole train of thought led back to one answer—Bray was using another name, one which Calvi would have learned about if the message had not been broken off at such a vital point.

He reached the end of the meal with the shocked realisation that he had not tasted one mouthful of the exquisite food that had been placed before him. The emptiness in his stomach had been replaced by a feeling of comfortable repleteness, but the memory of the food had been lost under the greater concentration of questions and answers that had flooded through his mind.

Calvi left the restaurant and rejoined the travelway. He headed directly back to his hotel, still uncertain what he could do.

The hotel lobby was crowded as he approached it, and he noticed the presence of several uniformed Law men guarding the main entrance. He was tempted to turn and head away from the hotel until he found out what the cause of the disturbance was, but he knew that such an action—now that he was so close—might easily be registered by the trained eyes

of the alert guards. They made no move to stop him as he passed inside, and as he got into the main hall it was clear that something was very much amiss. The atmosphere was charged with tension; grim faced men moved purposefully hither and thither, and most of them—despite neat lounge suits and immaculate appearance—had Law man written all over them.

Calvi crossed to the main desk, looking curiously around him, and as he approached the clerk he was aware that the man was staring at him in open-mouthed surprise. The fingers of apprehension tingled Calvi's spine, but it was too late for him to turn back now. By the time he had reached the desk the man's face had run the gamut of emotions from sheer surprise to grim faced excitement that was totally misplaced.

"Mister Calvi. We thought—that is—"

"Yes?" enquired Calvi politely. "What is the trouble? All these Law men—"

"Perhaps you would be kind enough to step into the office of the manager."

The red light of danger pulsed more strongly than ever, but he could do nothing save register surprise and follow the clerk through the door that led to the manager's office.

The man opened the door and ushered Calvi through and into a room that was far removed from the neat, quiet oasis that Calvi had visited previously. There were half a dozen men standing around the desk, all of them talking with an animation that only confirmed Calvi's previous apprehension.

"Mister Calvi !" The clerk spoke quite loudly to cut across the babble of talk, and as he did so the room quietened abruptly and six pairs of eyes swivelled towards Calvi as he stood diffidently inside the door. The only one of the six who was known to Calvi was the manager, a plump, middle-aged man whose efforts to retain his youth had resulted in an incongruous suntan that made him look as if he had applied some skin-darkening lotion. His eyes widened as he saw Calvi, but he was the first to recover his poise.

"Mister Calvi !" He hurried from the other side of the desk and shook Calvi's hand with a vehemence that was as astonishing as it was out of character. "We thought—er—that is—"

"You have been out of the hotel?" The man who interrupted was a thick-set, heavily-built Terran with a tight-jawed face in which were set the most intense blue eyes Calvi had ever seen. They were hard and unemotional, incapable of surprise

it seemed, yet there was surprise on the face from which they looked so bleakly. "You were not in your room?"

"In my room?" Calvi felt his bewilderment increase. "No, why should I be?"

"The young lady who was here last night," said Heller, the manager, "she told me that you were suffering from too much sun, and that you should not be disturbed."

"That's true, but—"

"Please, Mister Calvi." The ice blue eyes cut across the conversation. "My name is Langert. I am an Inspector in the Law Squad."

Calvi inclined his head politely.

"Would you mind telling me where you have been?" asked Langert.

"Of course. I went to the spaceport to greet an old friend from Earth, but he had already left." Calvi smiled and shrugged. "I slept late because of my indisposition, and I missed the arrival of the Terran cruiser."

"How did you leave the hotel?"

"I went out of the side entrance and took the moving way."

"You didn't call a copter?"

"No."

"Yet you knew you were late for the ship's arrival."

"I thought my friend would wait for me." Calvi felt the tension rising within him. "Look, what is all this about?"

"Please." Langert waved him to silence. "Mister Calvi, someone called the front desk here about noon and asked if you were in the hotel. The manager told them that you were—an assumption he made because of the fact that you had not been into the restaurant for breakfast, that you were not seen to leave the hotel, and that you were confined to your room with sunstroke."

"And so?"

"The caller said that he had sent you a most important package by express postal tube, and he requested it be sent to your room immediately it arrived so that you would receive it when you awoke."

"I still don't see—"

"The package was delivered ten minutes later through the normal tube service, and it was sent up to your room by the hotel pneumotube. Five minutes later," the blue eyes bored

implacably into Calvi's own, "your room, and those on either side, were completely destroyed by an explosion—"

"What?"

"—three people are missing, though we had thought that it might be four."

"I—I don't understand—" Calvi had no need to invent the emotions that he expressed both by his words and by his facial reactions. The speed with which the thing had happened, the narrowness of his escape—all these combined to make him grimly aware that he was in an untenable position. "I just don't understand."

"It is really quite simple, Mister Calvi," commented Langert quietly, "someone is trying to kill you."

Chapter Three

It was late afternoon before the dust had died away, and the hotel had reverted to some semblance of normality. Calvi was moved to another suite, and hotel messengers had replaced most of the things that he had lost in the explosion. Langert had taken his leave grimly and with an air of suspicion that said quite plainly he didn't believe Calvi to be so naive as not to know who his enemies were.

The Norval night drew sweetly down and Calvi paced the wide floor of his new suite and pondered. Already one thing was clear—there had to be some connection with the dead man on the Terran cruiser and with Egon Bray. What was the man's name? Polaine—that was it—Robert Polaine. Was it Bray travelling under a pseudonym? It was possible, and if it was so, what then? His mission on Norval—whatever it was—had ended before it was begun. But that still did not explain the attempt on his life which had taken place within a remarkably short time after the arrival of the Terran cruiser.

Whoever had engineered the attempt had known just where to find Calvi and had tried to get in the first telling punch before Calvi even knew what was going on.

More than ever did Calvi realise how isolated was his position. The one comforting fact was the possibility that the Bureau knew he was out of communication, and with that fact known then another agent would be sent post haste to Norval to investigate. But the nearest available agent might be two or three weeks away, and only two or three days might be enough

for the Norval situation to reach its climax—a climax that Calvi could not even begin to think about.

The sound of the door buzzer broke into his thoughts, and he stopped his pacing to call, "Who is it?"

The door communicator said, "Langert," in faithful reproduction of the Law man's laconic gruffness.

Calvi said, "Enter," and the door slid open to reveal Langert's bulky form. The Law man stepped through and the door slid shut behind him.

"Good evening, Mister Calvi."

Calvi nodded in response and waved Langert to a chair.

"More questions, Langert?"

The Law man gestured deprecatingly. "People have died, Mister Calvi. Of course there will be questions."

"Well?"

"It occurred to me after I left here earlier, that there might be some connection between you and the dead man on the Terran cruiser."

Calvi showed no emotion. He had almost expected it from the beginning. His only surprise was that Langert should have been so slow in reaching that conclusion.

"After all," went on Langert easily, "your friend—Bray?—was due to arrive on that ship, but he never got here."

"He may never have started."

"It is possible. On the other hand perhaps he was travelling incognito—perhaps he was using the name of Polaine."

"Without telling me?"

"Polaine is dead," snapped Langert with sudden harshness. "And an attempt has been made to kill you. Do you expect me to believe that those two facts may have no connection? Really, Calvi, even I can add two and two. What was your connection with this man, Bray?"

"I already told you. He was merely a friend with whom I intended renewing contact when he came here on holiday."

"You've only been here ten days, Calvi, and yet in that short time you have created quite a reputation as a playboy, a social satyr with too much time and money to play with." Langert eyed Calvi speculatively. "It is a reputation that should have taken much longer to gain, and—reputation apart—no one knows anything about you."

Grimly, Calvi realised that Langert was no one's fool, and he cursed, too, the necessity that had forced him into haste. The need for rapid movement had always been a disadvantage, and in Langert he had met a man who was able to read motives into the tiniest of errors.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Calvi temporised.

"It has been my experience, Calvi, that people in your sphere of wealth and influence are usually well-known to each other—by repute if not by personal contact. Yet no one whom we have questioned has ever heard of a rich family named Calvi." He shrugged. "Of course that might mean that you are only a small fish in a sea of whales, but it could mean something else."

Calvi decided that Langert was too smart by half; he said nothing.

"It could mean that you have adopted a pose, that you are not exactly what you seem to be. And if that is so, then I have another portion to add to the puzzle." He waved away Calvi's attempted interruption. "Oh, I know—the puzzle isn't very clear, even to me. All I have is a mysterious death aboard an interstellar cruiser, an attempted murder in one of the best hotels on Norval, and a mysterious playboy whose friend failed to arrive on the death ship." He smiled tauntly at Calvi. "Well, it is a beginning, not very much, but a beginning nevertheless." He turned away as if to cross to the door, and then swung back towards Calvi, taking his hand from his jerkin pocket and extending its open palm towards Calvi.

In the centre of the open hand lay a tiny, blue jewel, no larger than a small pea. It had a red centre that glowed iridescent under the room lighting, and it lay in Langert's hand as if it was a living thing that would burst into life at any moment.

"Have you ever seen anything like this before, Calvi?"

Calvi looked at it unemotionally, and reached out a hand to take it from Langert, but the Law man withdrew it from his reach.

Calvi glanced at him in surprise. "What is it?"

Langert sighed and shook his head regretfully. "Have you ever heard of the Stellar Bureau?"

"No."

"The dead man on the Terran cruiser was an agent of the Bureau."

Calvi shrugged, struggling hard to retain his calm detachment. "You're speaking in riddles, Langert. What is this—this Bureau?"

"It is an extra-legal organisation built up over the years for the purpose of usurping the normal practices of Law and Legal method," said Langert. "The fees for its services are astronomical, and it operates with some success because of one supreme advantage which it enjoys—an advantage which is likely to slip away from it before very long—"

"What is the point of all this?" demanded Calvi angrily.

"The advantage it possesses," went on Langert calmly, "is the secret of rapid interstellar communication. The agents of the Bureau can communicate with one another instantaneously over vast distances, and because of that they are in a position to do things which no other organisation—legal or otherwise—can even dream of doing. If they liked, Calvi, the Bureau could disrupt the Terran-dominated Galaxy."

"I still don't see what this has to do with me," snapped Calvi.

"There is a Bureau agent on Norval."

"So?"

"Calvi, this is meant to be a warning. I can do nothing unless I have proof—that is another disadvantage which I have that is not forced upon Bureau agents. But I can have suspicions, and I can follow hunches. I have a hunch that you are a Bureau agent—that Polaine, the dead man, was in touch with you—"

"This is ridiculous—"

"Is it? My Department received a communication from the Central Terran Security Agency by way of the Terran cruiser. It concerned an unexpected development within the Stellar Bureau—a development, we believe, that could mean the end of the Bureau as a Galactic force. That is an event greatly to be desired, for the Bureau is far too dangerous for the good of the Galaxy. Polaine may have contacted you. If he did then you know as much about all this as I do, but if he didn't—"

Langert turned again towards the door, and it slid open as he approached it.

"I hope, Calvi, that I don't have to investigate your death as well."

The door slid shut behind him, and the breath came from Calvi's lungs in a long deep sigh as he allowed his emotions to have full reign for one essential moment.

His hand went to his left breast, the fingertips probing through the thin material of his shirt to feel the small, hard lump concealed by the nipple—a lump that was indistinguishable to all but the most searching medical examination—the sort of examination that could only be made by surgical means.

The lump concealed a jewel just like the one which Langert had shown him barely three minutes earlier.

It was his pass, his recognition signal, the one thing by which agents of the Bureau could recognise each other. It was tuned with hairline accuracy to the neural linkages of the man who owned it, and when its bearer came within ten feet of just such another jewel it told him what he needed to know—that the man at his side was another Bureau agent. Once removed from its bearer—as was the one in Langert's hand—it died and could never be born again.

Calvi sat down grimly on the bed, aware that one question had been answered. He knew who Polaine was; he knew how Langert had come into possession of the jewel; he knew that he was in deadly danger—and there was nothing he could do about it.

Polaine had been the man who had contacted him as he lay on the beach. Polaine had died in the mental holocaust that had enveloped Calvi, and the one thing that had protected Calvi had been his distance from the centre of the disturbance. It didn't take much thought for him to realise that the disturbance had been centred on the cruiser itself, that someone had been waiting for the moment when Polaine attempted to make contact with another agent. And when that moment came Polaine was a dead man—and Calvi was on his own.

He shuddered slightly and poured himself a drink.

Suddenly, the night outside his room was very dark indeed.

In the cold light of dawn with a sleepless night behind him, Calvi realised that his one line of action was to find Egon Bray, and to do that he would have to take a risk that might not be entirely justified.

His reasoning told him that the fifty-two passengers of the Terran cruiser could be split into various groups. There would be a sprinkling of accredited businessmen who were visiting

Norval Two on legitimate and easily checked trade trips. There would be a much larger group of rich people, well known and elderly, who would be spending the next month or so enjoying the pleasures of the planet. Probably a few honeymoon couples—young and eager, too much in love to be aware of anything save each other.

Once these groups were eliminated Calvi could seek for Egon Bray among the few who remained.

He ate breakfast in his room—a reasonable action after the excitement of the previous day—and it was mid-morning before he made his leisurely way down to the wide foyer of the hotel.

The head clerk greeted him with a nervous smile as he approached the front desk, and Calvi had the brief impression that the management would have preferred that he take his patronage elsewhere, only they were too embarrassed to say so.

“Your suite is satisfactory, Mister Calvi?”

Calvi smiled easily. “Eminently, thank you.”

“Anything we can do sir—”

“You are very kind. In fact, there is one thing, but it has nothing to do with the business of the hotel.” Calvi allowed his face to harden slightly as he fixed the clerk with a grim stare. “You are a member of the Guild of Hoteliers, of course?”

“Oh, yes.” The clerk gestured with one hand. “It is the custom.”

“I know, and as a Guild member you know, or have contact with, all the other hotels in Norval City.”

“Yes.”

“So that if I offered you—say—two hundred credits to get me some information from those other hotels—” Calvi let the words hang tantalisingly in the air.

The man licked his lips nervously and glanced hurriedly to the other end of the desk as if to make sure that no one else was listening.

“It would depend—”

“On what?”

“On the information.”

Calvi smiled and allowed the grimness to fade from his face. The bait had been partially swallowed. “It is a small thing, but one which is very important to me. I wish to get in touch with a friend who arrived on the Terran cruiser yesterday—”

"His name?"

"He is travelling incognito, and is probably registered under the name in which he landed from the cruiser."

"Can you describe him?"

"No!"

The clerk's eyes opened wide, and Calvi saw plus signs ticking up in the man's mind as he said, "It may be difficult—"

"Three hundred credits."

"Well—"

"It will be enough if you can narrow the field down to a few possibles." Calvi leaned on the desk. "You can eliminate all those who are well known here, on Norval, the rich men and their women, the businessmen who come here regularly. I am seeking a man who is probably travelling alone, not known as a regular visitor, not readily identifiable by his credentials, and who is probably staying at one of the less pretentious establishments. I want a list of not more than four who will fill that bill, and another four who are outside candidates. If you can do that for me today there will be another hundred in it for you."

"Today?" The clerk's eyes widened. "But it will take time. I am on duty here until this evening—"

"Then go sick—make out you're unwell," snapped Calvi. "I want that information by four this afternoon, or I'll find someone else."

The man's face tightened in sudden resolution at the thought of four hundred credits going somewhere else. He nodded. "I'll call your room at four—"

"No, you won't. The call will have to come through the hotel and you might be recognised. Where can we meet?"

"There is a bar along the block called the Treetop Room—"

"Four o'clock." Regan turned away abruptly. His fish was hooked and to prolong the interview would only give the man time to formulate doubts.

He was well aware that he might be throwing money away, but it was the one chance he had of making progress at all. The destruction of his hotel room would make him a marked man so far as any enquiries he made himself were concerned. The fact of Langert's suspicions about his activities was another factor that tilted the scales against him, for he had no doubt that he would be closely watched by the Law Squads.

There were early evidences of his suspicions as he left the hotel, and before he had gone a hundred yards he knew that he

was under close surveillance. It was being done quietly and efficiently in such a manner that anyone who was not a trained observer would never have noticed anything untoward. Calvi accepted the position and made no effort to take any evasive action for he knew that any successful move to lose his followers would only serve to heighten Langert's already strong suspicions.

The result was a wasted day as far as he was concerned. He ate a leisurely lunch at an expensive restaurant, and felt a morbid pleasure that it was costing his shadower a small fortune to keep up with him. After lunch he sunbathed on the beach patios until mid-afternoon, and then he returned to the hotel to dress for his appointment with the hotel clerk who, he was happy to see, had vanished from the front desk.

He made his way to the Treetop Room, arriving just before four after deciding that he could do nothing about his shadower before the rendezvous. Langert would read more into an attempted evasion than into an apparently harmless meeting with an insignificant local resident who stood some chance of being unidentified.

Chapter Four

The Treetop Room was a typical tourist trap, garishly decorated, exotically bedecked to resemble a terran forest, and expensively priced. It was doing good business despite the peculiarity of the hour, and that fact told Calvi that it was enjoying a small, temporary boom—the sort of popularity that would pay handsome dividends until someone else turned up with another eye-catching idea that would lure tourists away and make the Treetop Room just another bizarre drinking place.

The clerk was nowhere to be seen.

Calvi took a seat in one of the vacant booths that stood along one wall, a position from which he could see the rest of the large room as well as the entrance. The booths were made of bamboo and imitation palm fronds, and were sufficiently private to offer a degree of privacy to those who desired it. He ordered a drink and when it came the time was just four. People came and went with too great a frequency for him to be able to decide who his follower might be—not that the knowledge would be of much use to him.

He sipped his drink and watched the minutes tick away on leaden feet. The scene around him changed as tables emptied and filled; the tension built within him even though he continued to sit quietly and apparently at ease. It was four-fifteen—how long could he afford to wait? Half an hour? Three quarters? Certainly no longer or his shadower would become suspicious and a quick message to Langert would bring the Inspector hot foot to the Treetop Room and he would most certainly recognise the clerk when he showed up. A short, unpleasant interrogation would soon wrest from the man the reasons for his rendezvous with Calvi.

Suddenly he was there.

Calvi felt a weight lift from his stomach as the man came through the ornate entrance and hesitated while his eyes sought nervously this way and that until they lit on Calvi sitting quietly in the shelter of the booth.

He crossed the room, threading his way between the tables, his face creased in a smile of self-satisfaction that gave Calvi preliminary confirmation that the man had done what was required of him.

Fifteen feet away the smile faded; the man's legs slumped at the knees as he stumbled slightly and his eyes widened in sudden horror. Calvi could see the upward roll of the wide-spread eyes as he crashed to the floor dragging a table and two chairs into confusion around him.

When Calvi reached him he was dead.

The suddenness with which it had happened spread a blanket of silence across the room as all eyes turned towards the scene of the disturbance. Calvi moved rapidly.

The smile on the face of the clerk had told him all he needed to know, and he had only bare-seconds in which to act before a Law man took control of the proceedings. He was on one knee beside the body with his hands reaching rapidly and expertly for pockets of the dead man when he saw it—a small slip of paper gripped tightly in the right hand. That hand had been in the jerkin pocket when the clerk came through the door, and it had been snatched out as the man collapsed on the floor in his last agony.

The paper vanished in the side of Calvi's shoe as he knelt there, and then he stood up, aware that others were gathering like vultures around a carrion feast.

"He's ill," Calvi announced. "Look after him—I'll call a doctor."

He pushed his way through the gathering throng, desperately anxious to look at the paper before Langert's follower caught up with him—but on the outskirts of the crowd he stopped dead, frozen in his tracks.

The tiny jewel below his left breast had tingled into life.

Somewhere, not ten feet away, was a Bureau agent.

The tingle died as suddenly as it had been born, even though Calvi himself remained stock still. His eyes sought wildly, looking for anyone, man or woman, who was standing still—as he was—their eyes seeking contact, a contact that was vital to Calvi.

There was no one.

The seconds dragged by, and Calvi knew that at any moment his immobility would be noticed. Somewhere in the crowd was Langert's man, struggling to get at him and hold him until Langert arrived. The piece of paper tucked in the side of his shoe seemed to burn like a large stone on which he had been walking for a long time. Desperately he plunged towards the line of visibooths and slid the door of the first one shut behind him. With one hand he jabbed the emergency call button, and with the other he pulled out the piece of paper.

The small screen blurred to life and a voice demanded, "What is the emergency—we know your position."

"A man collapsed. I think he is dead."

"Help will be with you in two minutes. What is your name?"

"Peter Calvi." With sinking heart Calvi realised that he could do no other than give his true name. And that meant he was definitely pinned to another murder—for murder it was without question.

The paper bore three names and three hotels—that was all. His eyes drank them in greedily, and his mind assimilated the information so thoroughly that he would not forget them until the day he died; and then the paper was gone, chewed into a soggy mush that was swallowed painfully and sickeningly—gone, destroyed, the one thing apart from sheer coincidence that tied him in with the mousy, anonymous desk clerk who lay dead in the seething confines of the Treetop Room.

He slid open the door of the booth and stepped outside, quite unsurprised to see the stubby, dark-skinned man approaching with purposeful determination. He paused as he saw Calvi.

"Mister Calvi." It was a statement not a question.

Calvi registered surprise. "Yes?"

"What were you doing in that booth?"

"Calling the emergency services. Really, I don't see what it has to do with you."

"Law Squads." The man flashed a red identity card at him.

"Oh, well, in that case—"

"What else were you doing?"

Calvi gaped at him. "Else? Else? Dammit, there's a man dead out there—"

"How do you know he's dead? He may have fainted."

"I can feel a pulse as well as the next man."

"So quickly? You were kneeling beside him for barely five seconds."

"Really," Calvi protested, "this is too much. I don't see any reason for such an interrogation—"

"Save it for Inspector Langert. You know him, I think, and he will be here shortly."

Calvi followed the man back into the main room, aware that his plan of action had misfired disastrously even at the moment when success was in his grasp. To have had the fifty-two passengers reduced to three was more than he had ever hoped for, but now that he had something to work on he was involved in a situation that might make it impossible for him to go any further forward.

Langert arrived soon afterwards, his square-jawed face set in a grim angry line, his eyes glittering slightly as he greeted Calvi with an ironic, "So, we meet again. You have a remarkable proclivity for finding trouble, Mister Calvi."

Calvi shrugged and managed a disarming smile that was quite contrary to his inner feelings. "You have a naturally suspicious mind, Langert."

"With reason, I think. What were you doing here?"

"Drinking."

"Is it coincidence that this man is the head clerk in the hotel at which you are staying?"

"The hotel is just along the road," Calvi pointed out. "I imagine that this is the nearest place where he could get a drink when he came off duty."

"He reported sick at ten-thirty this morning."

"Then no doubt he had recovered and was on his way to report for duty."

Langert pursed his lips and shook his head. "Your answers are too neat, Mister Calvi, and you are too smooth, you do not have that fear of being involved which I would expect from an ordinary citizen, and you are too closely involved with too many peculiar incidents for it to be sheer coincidence."

"Are you accusing me of complicity?" asked Calvi icily.

Wearily, Langert shook his head. "No Mister Calvi. I fear that coincidence is not sufficient. Why was this man meeting you here?"

"Meeting me? What makes you think that?"

"When he came in he looked around, and then crossed straight to you."

"How do you know that?"

Langert reddened slightly, and Calvi knew that he had touched a raw spot. "Because one of my men was sitting on the other side of the room—"

"Watching me?" Calvi prodded gently.

"Why was he meeting you?" rasped Langert angrily.

"He wasn't. He probably saw me and crossed to say hello."

"And then he was shot."

"Shot?"

"In the back of the head with a needle gun."

"I see. And are you going to search me for the weapon?"

Langert shook his head, clearly retaining a vestige of dignity with the greatest difficulty. "He was facing you when he was shot. Whoever did it followed him into the bar. Did you see who came in after him?"

Calvi shook his head, but behind the blank mask his mind was striving to recall what had happened after the clerk had entered the bar, paused, and then crossed towards Calvi. But he knew dully that all his attention had been focused on the man's approach—he hadn't noticed anything beyond that.

"And what are you going to do now?"

Calvi glanced at Langert in surprise. "Go back to the hotel and dress for dinner, I suppose. Unless you have any other plans."

"I see. No, I have no other plans," The Law man studied him with brooding intensity. "Just remember what I told you at our last meeting—I don't want to investigate your death."

Calvi's relief at being allowed to pass on his way was tempered by his desire to avoid further trouble. Despite his remark to Langert that he was going back to the hotel, such a course of action was far removed from his mind. Langert might come after him again, and a few hours freedom were essential if the dying gift of the hotel clerk was to be of any use to him.

This time Calvi made no effort to lull any shadowing Law man into a sense of security, and he set out at once, with cold deliberation to lose anyone who might be on his trail. Ten minutes ducking and dodging were quite enough to convince him that no one now knew where he was.

He relaxed in a small restaurant on the outskirts of the city and ate an early dinner of salad and cold meat washed down by a bottle of expensive Terran wine. It was falling dusk again, and Calvi thought wryly of Chita and her date later that evening. He put the thoughts aside and concentrated on the more urgent problem of how to use the information at his disposal.

There was another problem, too, that nagged at him. The tingling jewel at his left breast was something he had not dared to contemplate too closely until he could do so calmly, quietly and with uninterrupted objectivity.

It had long been standard practice for two agents meeting in a crowd to stand quite still and to look around for someone else who was standing still and looking around. The small preliminary warning prickle was enough to have frozen Calvi on the edge of the seething crowd inside the Treetop Room, but it hadn't had a like effect on the other agent. In fact, the agent had moved away as soon as contact had been made. For one vital second he—or she—had revealed his presence to Calvi, and had retreated before recognition could be effected.

Calvi swirled the last of his wine in the bottom of the glass and thought about the implications. To have moved out of contact the person must have known in which direction to move, therefore the contact had been entirely accidental—possibly caused by the crush of people all moving towards the scene of the murder; possibly it had been caused by Calvi's hurried departure towards the visibooth. The important thing was that the other person had known at once which direction he should take to get out of contact range.

And that meant he knew Calvi.

He struggled to wonder why that fact should be so important. Why should a Bureau agent be on Norval and not wish to contact another agent? Who had killed the hotel clerk? Who had tried to kill Calvi? Who had killed Pôlaine?

The questions were building up in a mammoth and unanswerable way—or were they quite unanswerable? At the back of the whole affair loomed the person of Egon Bray.

Calvi paid his bill and left the restaurant. Outside it was quite dark now, only the brilliance of the city lighting keeping back the groping fingers of the night. Calvi wandered idly through the wide, almost deserted streets, and thought about the three names locked in his mind, the last bequest of a dying man. One of them could be Egon Bray—if his reasoning was correct, and if the desk clerk had carried out his instructions correctly. The problem now was to put the information to good use; the only certain way was the direct way—and Calvi took it.

He stopped at a row of public visibooths on one of the main streets and looked up the number of the Charlemaine Hotel. When he got it he asked for the man whose name had been first on the list, one Jorgen Dann.

The screen swam mistily and cleared to reveal the head and shoulders of a middle-aged man who had clearly been drinking too much.

"Jorgen Dann?" asked Calvi.

"Yeah. Who wants me?"

"My name is Calvi."

"So?" In the background Calvi could hear a woman's voice raised plaintively. "All right, all right." Dann turned away from the screen momentarily, and then fixed Calvi with an owlish, puzzled gaze. "So what? Your name's Calvi—good luck to you, buster."

"At least it is my real name," said Calvi. "Mister Dann—"

"Huh?" The surprise was clear in the man's eyes, and it was replaced almost instantly by angry realisation. "I get it. So she found out where I am. Well, by the time you can get word to her, buster, I'll be long gone, and the money goes with me."

The screen died and Calvi was left with the rueful realisation that he had uncovered at least one reason for a man to be on Norval Two under an assumed name.

He deleted the name of Jorgen Dann from his mental list.

Chapter Five

The second call was to the Excelsior and a man called Roger Sivard—and was no less successful or unsuccessful. Sivard was clearly the man's real name, and his display of surprise, anger and belligerent antagonism was far too realistic to be other than genuine—unless Calvi had lost all sense of judgment under the strain of the past days.

Of course, his whole idea could be way off course, but if that was so why had the desk clerk been murdered? The answer was simple enough as he thought about it. The man's enquiries had been spotted, and he had been trailed to his rendezvous with Calvi. Whoever trailed him had realised that he was about to pass on whatever he had learned, and had taken the only way out—only they had taken it too late.

Calvi hesitated for a long second before he made his last call. If this one was wrong . . . he thought about the name, Melvin Garcia, then, slowly, he called the number of the Hotel del Sol and asked to be connected with the suite of Melvin Garcia.

The face that swam small upon the screen was lean and hard, the eyes were deepset, and even on the tiny screen they glowed with a burning, remorseless flame that only accentuated the thin, taut mouth beneath them.

"Who is it?" Garcia demanded.

Calvi pressed the button so that he could be seen at the other end, and was rewarded by the slight, almost unnoticeable flaring of the man's nostrils. It was so little, so very little—but it was enough.

"I thought you should know, Bray," he said calmly, "that you killed the man too late."

"What are you talking about? Who are you?"

Calvi shook his head wearily, and smiled. "It won't do, Bray. You lost the initiative the day you tried to destroy me. If that hadn't happened I might still be blundering about in the dark. As it was you started me thinking about what I must do in order to survive, and once a man starts thinking in terms of survival he becomes a much more efficient being."

"I don't know you—"

"What is more important is the fact that I know you—now," Calvi snapped back. "I think I should warn you that I am informing the Law Squads of your masquerade. It will remove you from my back if they become interested in your movements this afternoon, and if they can get a court order for a

cerebral check of your recent movements—well, I don't need to elaborate."

Calvi broke the connection and left the booth with something close to elation bubbling within him. The seed had been sown, Bray knew that Calvi knew—and that was all that mattered.

He took the roller road back across the city to his hotel. He had been free long enough to accomplish what he had set out to do and there was no point in antagonising Langert further. He wondered wryly if Chita would be waiting for him, and he found a certain adverse pleasure in the thought that he would have to placate her—it was long after eight.

As he travelled across the city one thing became clear. Bray had killed an agent—Polaine—and he had almost killed Calvi. Therefore Bray was a dangerous man who deserved the death the Bureau would ultimately hand to him. But, at the moment, Calvi had no idea why the Bureau wanted Bray. It might be that a sentence of death had already been passed on the man by the Bureau, and that Polaine or Calvi was to be the executioner; but if that were so then Polaine would have had no need to contact Calvi from the Terran cruiser. Calvi reasoned that Bray was needed alive for some reason that the Bureau had wanted to pass on to him via Polaine, but the reason had never reached Calvi. He realised that he was in a difficult position. He had Bray on one side and Langert on the other; Bray would kill him if he had the slightest chance, and Langert would be on the spot to arrest Calvi should he show the slightest sign of stepping out of line.

But what would Bray do now that he was unmasked ?

Calvi stepped off the roller road a short distance from the hotel, and made one more call from a visibooth. He called Clay, the spaceport official, at his home address.

Clay did not look particularly pleased as he answered the call and saw who it was. "What do you want, Calvi?" he demanded.

"Really, Clay, that's hardly a polite greeting," admonished Calvi. "When is the next flight out from Norval?"

"Tomorrow. The Terran cruiser heads back to Earth."

"What about ships headed in other directions?"

"Do you want a booking? Call the main office."

"No, Clay, I don't want a booking. Just information."

Clay looked disappointed. "Well, there's a trading vessel heading for Canopus Two Seven—limited passenger accommodation. That leaves soon after the Terran cruiser. Then there's a regular passenger run from here to Rigel Seven day after tomorrow—"

"That'll do for now," Calvi interrupted. "How would you like to work off the rest of that debt?"

For the first time Clay showed some interest in the conversation, as he asked, "How?"

"Let me know if a man named Bray or Garcia books passage on any of those ships. Let me know if you have a booking from the Hotel del Sol under any name whatsoever, and let me know if you get a single booking for a man travelling alone under any name at all."

"Why? What's all this about?"

"None of your business," Calvi smiled sweetly, "but if you do it then the debt is cancelled."

He broke the connection before Clay could ask any more awkward questions.

The hotel was only a short distance from the visibooth and Calvi walked through the wide foyer at eight forty-five exactly. He smiled to himself as he detected a movement in one of the quiet corners of the foyer, and guessed that it would not be long before details of his reappearance on the scene would be relayed to Langert. He wondered if Chita would still be there—perhaps Langert would interrupt them, and that would upset the girl even more. The thought of her probable reactions brought a wry twist to the smile on his face.

As he approached the desk the relief clerk greeted him with a sombreness suited to the knowledge that they both shared concerning the man's erstwhile colleague.

"The young lady is waiting for you, sir."

Calvi nodded resignedly. "How long?"

"Almost an hour. The manager authorised her entrance to your suite since he knew of your—ah—appointment."

Calvi nodded and passed on to the elevator.

The electronic key opened the door to his suite, and he saw to his surprise that the lounge was in darkness. He paused for a moment, and, as his eyes grew accustomed to the blackness, he made out the door to the bedroom; it was open and that room, too, was in darkness.

So—Chita had grown tired of waiting; well, he wasn't sorry. He switched on the room lighting and crossed towards the bedroom with the prospect of a shower and an early night pleasantly before him.

Calvi stopped dead in his tracks.

The jewel at his breast had woken into sudden life, and it brought chaos to his stomach by its tingling. From the darkened bedroom door a voice said, "Good evening, Calvi."

The lights in the bedroom came on and a man stepped into view, smiling easily, with a needle gun held unwavering in his left hand. He was short and stocky, built on powerful, chubby lines with the body movements of a cat rather than of the ape whom he so closely resembled.

And still the jewel tingled its warning message.

"Who are you?" demanded Calvi.

"Does the jewel tell you nothing?"

"It does not tell me enough. Was it you whom I contacted yesterday in the Treetop Room?"

The man nodded. "My name is Carolan. I was diverted here from another mission when you—ah—fell silent two days ago."

"So, the Bureau knew something had gone wrong." Calvi relaxed a little. "I hadn't expected such a rapid contact."

"Lucky for you I was close enough to divert. I was on a Bureau ship headed for Beta Secondi and we were barely a day's flight away when the call came." Carolan chuckled sardonically. "I got in yesterday with orders to kill you."

"What?" Calvi looked at the slim body of the needle gun with mounting horror—an emotion which died only fractionally as the gun was hefted lightly in the man's hand, and then slid from sight into a jerkin pocket.

"Don't worry. The order is countermanded. I learned enough these past twenty-four hours to exonerate you from this business. By the way." He nodded back towards the bedroom. "Who's the girl?"

"Girl?" Calvi's heart jumped. He crossed to the bedroom in three rapid strides and pushed passed Carolan to look beyond and into the lighted room. Chita lay on the bed, her hair a glowing halo upon the white pillow, her eyes closed and her body relaxed and easy as if she slept.

"She's dead," said Carolan coldly. "A needle gun at close quarters. I think perhaps it happened as she opened the outer door. There is a blood spot on the floor."

Calvi turned away, his stomach sickened and his mind desecrated by the fact of her death. It didn't need much thought to realise what had happened. Bray had taken fright after Calvi had called him from the other side of town, and had come hurriedly to Calvi's hotel in an effort to stop him carrying out his threat. Chita had got in the way—oh, quite innocently. Perhaps she had opened the door and seen Bray standing there, and the very fact that she had seen Bray and could describe him accurately, could place him at Calvi's apartment at a certain time, these had sealed her death.

It should have been Calvi—but, instead, it had been Chita.

The mounting rage in Calvi's heart was mirrored in his white, set face as he turned on Carolan.

"I know who did it—"

"And I can guess."

"Can I kill him?"

Carolan nodded. "Yes, now that we are sure he is alone."

"Alone?" Calvi gaped at him. "You mean—?"

"We thought you were his accomplice."

"Me? But why?"

"Because Bray—or Garcia—is a Bureau agent."

Calvi stared, dumbfounded, at Carolan. Bray, a Bureau agent, it didn't make any sense at all.

"When the Bureau couldn't get in touch with you after Polaine's death, they thought that you must be in with Bray. They decided that he was heading for Norval Two because he had help waiting for him—"

"But I was only sent to Norval after Bray had left Earth because of the fact that I was the only the agent near enough to Norval who could take effective action. Even I didn't know what was going on until Polaine tried to contact me when the Terran cruiser was a day out from Norval."

"What should the Bureau have done?" countered Carolan. "If you were out of contact they had to assume the worst—either that you were dead, or that you were in this with Bray. There could be no half measures. With Polaine dead—"

"And I nearly so," broke in Calvi grimly. "I nearly went the same way. Only distance saved me." Briefly he told Carolan what had happened. "That was why I was out of touch. The only question that I need answered is, how did Bray do it?"

Carolán shrugged. "We have an idea, but it's mostly guesswork until we get our hands on Bray. And when we do—"

On the table the visiphone buzzed cutting across his comments, and Calvi murmured a brief, "Excuse me," before pressing the receiver button.

On the screen the face of Clay, the spaceport agent, swam into bright focus, and Calvi frowned in surprise as he said, "Clay. What do you want?"

"I thought you should know, Calvi," Clay's face was thin-lipped and taut. "A private vessel made an unscheduled stop at the spaceport an hour ago—"

"An hour?"

"I called you as soon as I heard," Clay bridled. "It has tabled a departure time for ten tonight, and registered one outgoing passenger in accordance with proper procedure."

Calvi glanced at the wall clock. It was just nine and his eyes moved on to meet the grim gaze of Carolán. He knew what the man was thinking.

"Thank you, Clay, you've done well." Calvi turned back to the phone. "The debt is cancelled. Goodbye." He broke the connection.

"So that's it," breathed Carolán. "A rendezvous here on Norval—"

"And he'll be long gone in an hour," snapped Calvi. "We can still stop him."

"How?"

"Coptercab from the roof. Come on."

He made for the door and slid it open—to reveal the bulky figure of Langert standing on the far side.

Calvi's heart dropped. Under the stress of the events of the past quarter of an hour he had entirely forgotten about Langert and the agent who had been waiting in the hotel lobby for his return. For seconds the two men stood and looked at each other, and then Langert stepped casually through the door.

"So, Calvi. I am just in time for a cosy chat. Who is this gentleman?"

"A friend. His name is Carolán. Carolán, this is Inspector Langert of the Law Squad." At least there was no harm in letting Carolán know what they were up against.

"Why did you throw off the shadow this afternoon?"

"Why did you have me watched?" countered Calvi. "Langert, I have an urgent appointment—"

"I know about the ship that landed at the spaceport," broke in Langert icily, "and your appointment will have to wait. You are under arrest, Calvi."

As Langert spoke the words Calvi didn't feel any surprise at all. Almost wearily he asked, "Why?"

"The euphemistic term is that you are a material witness to murder—though for your own peace of mind I must confess that there is another reason." The Law man eyed Calvi speculatively. "You may recall our chat, here in this room, when I asked you about the Stellar Bureau."

"What of it?"

"I think I can prove that you are an agent of the Bureau, and if I can—" He let the words hang in the air, but Calvi knew what lay behind his implications. As a material witness his examination by cerebral check could be ordered by Langert, and if that happened . . .

He was aware of Carolan standing close beside him and saying, "Unfortunately, Inspector, Mister Calvi is engaged on a most important mission. His arrest would be most untimely."

Langert's face was pale with anger, his lips pursed into a grim line, and Calvi saw his hands lift slowly in the age-old gesture of surrender as Carolan held the needle gun unwaveringly upon him.

"Then you are Bureau agents?" snapped Langert.

Carolan nodded amiably. "We have that honour."

"Then I shall know whom to look for," Langert rasped. "The law cannot be flouted, especially by such as you—"

"The law," sneered Calvi. "The law is hamstrung by its own inefficiency. Langert, space is too big and planets too insular for the law to operate with any speed or efficiency. You know that—every Law man admits it, yet nothing has been done. The Bureau is the one thing that keeps the planets of Mankind stable—"

"And the Bureau will do anything if the price is right," glibed Langert.

"The Bureau never condones or aids a crime against humanity," replied Carolan. "No one who seeks their aid has reason to worry if the cause is a just one."

"The knights errant of the twenty-third century, is that it?" Langert's eyes glittered with dislike.

Calvi shook his head. "The Bureau operates for profit—that is never denied. But it fills a need—a gap—in the affairs of man that should have been filled by the co-ordinated forces of law and order, a force that should be outside planetary limitations, Langert. A force which men like you could establish and maintain if only someone had the foresight and the initiative to go about it in the proper manner. Until that happens the Bureau is the only force in the Galaxy capable of moving with speed enough to prevent a collapse of inter-planetary commerce—"

"We're wasting time," broke in Carolan. "The bedroom, I think, Calvi." He waved Langert across the lounge and through the open door. The Law man stopped dead in his tracks as he saw the dead, slack form of Chita lying on the bed. He turned his head and looked questioningly at Calvi.

"No, Langert." Calvi shook his head. "Not I. She was killed by a man whom we seek here on Norval—the man who killed the hotel clerk and Polaine—the man who tried to kill me. The only difference between you and I is that I know who the man is and where to find him. If you get to him first he will be arrested, tried, recommended for psychological treatment; there will be legal battles because he is not a citizen of Norval; there will be postponements, delays, appeals—all the sordid paraphernalia of your kind of law and order, and then, in a year or two he will be free." Calvi shook his head. "If I get to him first, Langert, he will die. There is nothing you can do to stop me."

He took the gun from Carolan and held it steadily on Langert while the other man tied the Inspector firmly with strips torn from the bedding. Before he did it Carolan searched Langert with a mistrustful thoroughness and relieved him of two tiny communicator sets, a wrist watch, his red identity card, and several other articles that could possibly have been used to facilitate his escape from the room.

"What about the copter roof?" Carolan asked as they left the suite. "Will Langert have anyone up there?"

"We'll have to risk it," replied Calvi. "If he has then they may be looking for one man only—not two. It will be dark, so there is a chance we'll not be stopped."

Chapter Six

No one bothered them as they made their way up to the roof, and although there were several people in view when they reached it there was no attempt to halt their progress. There were copters waiting for fares, and they climbed aboard the one nearest to them. Calvi told the pilot to take them out to the space field, and felt some relief as the roof top fell away below them and the small craft became lost in the pirouetting traffic of the airways.

"Now, what of Bray?" demanded Calvi as they settled in their seats.

"Later," said Carolan, nodding to the pilot who sat barely four feet in front of them.

Calvi sighed and glanced at his watch. It was nine-fifteen and it would be after nine-thirty by the time they got to the spacefield. He wondered if Bray had made it and was already aboard the newly arrived ship. If he was then they would have a job getting at him. If he was not—speculation wasn't a great deal of use and Calvi knew it. This was an occasion when he and Carolan would have to play things as they came, and that was a position which should present no problems to an agent of any experience at all. And if they dealt with Bray—what then? Langert would remain tied up in the bedroom for only a limited time, and there would still be the problem of getting off Norval before the local Law Squad caught up with them.

The city lights thinned below them, and the towering spires of the buildings fell away and behind the speeding craft. The landscape was dark now, with only scattered lights to reveal outlying buildings and roads.

"See, there." Carolan pointed ahead, and Calvi could see the grouped lights of the space-field shining against the night sky. "We should be down in ten minutes."

"Which will leave us barely half an hour."

"Time enough."

"Not if Bray is already aboard."

The copter swooped from the night sky and lit gently and neatly in the centre of the landing roof over the main block. Calvi paid the pilot and together he and Carolan made their way down the transit bureau on the ground floor. There were few people about at this time of night, especially as there

were no regular flights due until the next day. Only the night staff were in evidence, a couple of sleepy clerks at the main desk, several uniformed security men, and a handful of others who were not identifiable.

Calvi pointed to the office which was Clay's sanctum. It was brightly lit, and shadows moved against the opaque glass of the walls.

"I think my friend Clay has come to see that there's no trouble," he told Carolan. "He'll tell us what has happened."

He went into the office without knocking, and found Clay nervously pacing the floor in front of his desk.

"Ah, Calvi. Now, look, I don't want any trouble—" He broke off as he saw that Calvi was not alone.

"There will be none," Calvi assured him.

"I hope not—my position—" his voice trailed off nervously.

"Has anyone gone aboard yet?"

Clay shook his head. "No, he's not arrived."

"Leaving it to the last minute, Carolan," commented Calvi.

"I don't want any trouble." Clay was wringing his hands in sheer desperation.

"Don't you worry, Mister Clay." Calvi stepped forward and showed Clay the thin red identity card which he had taken from Langert, and Calvi almost burst out laughing as he saw the effect it had upon Clay. The worry disappeared from his face, and a thin relieved smile took its place.

"Oh, well, of course. That's all right—"

"You just stay out of the way," Carolan told him. "We'll be outside between the departure bureau and the ship. Just you be sure that he isn't made suspicious when he arrives."

Clay nodded.

"Come on, Calvi." Carolan led the way out of the office.

Calvi followed him out of the building and into the darkness of the field itself. Far off, brilliantly lit by powerful arc lights, stood the silver needle of the ship that was waiting for Egon Bray. It was ready for takeoff, that much could be seen, for the fuelling bays were closed and only the single dark opening of the main hatch marred the gleaming silver of the sleek hull. To the left as they stood outside the building Calvi could see the neat row of small runabouts that were used to take the passengers and their luggage from the departure bureau out to the waiting ships. Here the lights were bright,

illuminating the end of the luggage ramp down which came the cases and trunks from the main loading bay.

He turned to Carolan. "Why out here?"

"Because the further away from Norval City and the nearer to the ship he gets, the more confident Bray will become," said Carolan. "Also, he'll be coming out of brilliant light into semi-darkness, and we shall have the advantage of him."

"What do we do?"

"He will probably be carrying one large case—"

"There is the luggage chute," protested Calvi.

Carolan shook his head. "Not for this case. He won't trust it out of his sight. If I judge correctly he will get here within five minutes of takeoff, after first checking with the space-field that there is nothing amiss."

"Clay will play his part," said Calvi grimly, "or I'll know the reason why."

"When he comes through that door," went on Carolan, "we will challenge him, take possession of the case and destroy it—"

"Destroy it!" Calvi gaped at Carolan.

"That case contains the end of the Stellar Bureau—unless it is destroyed and its owner along with it. And even when that is done," shrugged Carolan, "we may only be postponing the end of the Bureau by a few short years."

Calvi eyed the other grimly in the semi-darkness. "Hadn't you better tell me all of it?"

"You would have known it from Polaine had he lived. Calvi, do you know why the Bureau has operated so successfully over the past century? Do you know why the normal forces of the Law have failed to meet the challenge that this century has set them?"

Wordlessly, Calvi shook his head.

"In one word—communication. Do you know that the quickest way to send a message across the Galaxy from one planet to another is by spaceship? Has it ever come home to you that the Bureau's method of inter-agent communication is unique?"

"Of course it has. Every agent knows that—"

"And do you know why it is unique? How it's done?"

"I've thought about it."

"So have we all—it is the greatest secret in the Galaxy today. It is a secret which governments, Law Squads and

industrial empires would give their eye-teeth to get hold of, and the longer it remains a secret the greater are the chances that it will cease to be a secret." Carolan paused. Then he said mildly, "Only the upper echelon of the Bureau know what that secret is, and Egon Bray was one of that upper echelon."

Calvi was stunned. The thought that Bray might be a traitor to the Bureau was almost unthinkable, and yet . . .

"Go on," he said softly.

"A long time ago, just before the Bureau was founded, a man discovered the method by which the latent possibilities of human telepathy could be boosted by mechanical means. Who he was is not important now, but he saw how it could be used to bring order into the chaos of the human-dominated Galaxy. Out of that one discovery was born the Stellar Bureau."

"Why the Bureau? Why not hand it over to the normal forces of law and order?"

"Who knows? Probably because such a course of action would have needed interplanetary agreement, and even today that sort of co-operation and agreement is very hard to achieve. Whatever the reasons, Calvi, the tiny scar at the back of your neck and of mine are the marks of our profession, these are the marks that have maintained the status quo within the Galaxy for almost a century while others have sought the more normal methods of interplanetary communication. They've tried faster-than-light micro waves, sub-space radio, and a score of other methods, and while they have sought their answers the Bureau has built up the one stable force for the control of Galactic crime and subversion. Oh, I know our ways have been bad at times, and you know it, too, but drastic situations demand drastic actions, and the men who founded the Bureau knew that they had to act—and act quickly. The normal forces of law and order were too slow moving, too ponderous, and when the Bureau stepped in and called a halt the breakdown of Galactic commerce and affairs was just around the corner."

"And all of this was built on one tiny piece of equipment?" Calvi's hand went up to the dead, cold spot at the back of his ear.

"All of this," agreed Carolan. "But our monopoly is coming to an end. The Bureau knows this. Sometime, some-

where, someone is coming up with an answer, and once that happens the very fact of the Bureau's existence and success will speed the natural development of things along the lines which we have laid down."

"And where do you fit in?"

Carolán chuckled. "I judge that you do not think my knowledge was well come by. I, too, am a member of the upper echelon of the Stellar Bureau. Bray and I were colleagues before he turned traitor for his own ends."

"And Bray?"

"He knew that the end of the Bureau could not be many years hence, just as we all knew it. But he was a scientist with all the impracticalities that the scientific mind can be heir to. He started a line of research into telepathic communication, and his experiments developed into a means of attack against our lines of communication. He developed a device which could home upon the telepathic communications between two people and destroy either or both of them—"

"So that was how Polaine died—how I nearly died too."

"We want that weapon, Calvi, and we want Bray before he has a chance to sell us out."

"He has the secret of the—thing in my head?"

"Yes, and he'll sell to the highest bidder—to the person or group of persons who has sent that ship here, to Norval, to pick him up. And he'll do it because he thinks he is saving humanity from itself."

So now Calvi knew it all.

He felt cold inside, a small, lost mote in the vastness of the Galaxy. Earth was a long way off, and his heart was shouting for the mother planet. Never before in all his years as an agent had Calvi felt the desire to return so strong within him. He felt it now, with all the plaintive longing of a child who has been separated from its mother.

"There's a copter landing on the roof," said Carolán softly. "It's six minutes to ten—he's cutting it fine."

Calvi's muscles tensed slightly. "I'm unarmed," he said flatly.

"Then leave Bray to me. Move to the side of the exit and be ready to grab the case from him. And Calvi—" Carolán's voice was harsh and cold, "—either that case is destroyed and Bray along with it—or the Bureau is dead, finished."

The seconds ticked by on leaden feet. Calvi moved over to the shadowed area beside the main exit. In the gloom he could make out the figure of Carolan standing squarely in front of the exit and some thirty yards from it. His position was well chosen, for Bray, when he emerged, would have to turn half right towards the line of cars that would ferry him out to the ship, and that would mean that he would pass between Calvi and Carolan, so that his attention would be divided.

"I see him." Carolan's voice was a whisper in the darkness that only just reached Calvi's ears.

He tensed, every atom of his being concentrating on the bright doorway through which Bray would, at any second, emerge. When he came he was alone, a tall, lean figure hurrying through the dark of the night as if aware that someone was not too far behind him—only, thought Calvi, that someone was ahead of him. He waited tensely for Carolan's next move, and it came suddenly and without warning—a deep throated shout, "Bray, stand where you are."

The figure of Bray stiffened into instant immobility and Calvi could see his head moving slowly as his eyes, dazzled by the light from which he just emerged, strove to pick out the form of Carolan.

"Who is there?" Bray's voice was deep and cold; there was an edge to it that bespoke action.

"It is I, Bray. Carolan!"

"Carolan! You, here?" The surprise was clear in Bray's voice, and his next move took Calvi entirely by surprise. The action which threatened as he first spoke came with the rapidity of a lightning fork. His ears must have told him in which direction Carolan stood and his eyes, probing the gloom, must have caught a glimpse of his adversary against the distant lights of the takeoff area. He dropped the case and fell on one knee with a speed that was hard to follow. Calvi didn't see his hand move but he did hear, clearly through the night silence the sudden plop of a needle gun. Once, twice, in quick succession it came, then there was a pause, and to his horror Calvi could see the figure of Carolan swaying like a tree in the wind.

Slowly, Bray came to his feet, and as he did so Carolan steadied for a second, and the tiny, multiple sounds of a needle gun on full automatic spat across the intervening space. Bray came up straight, a rigid figure outlined in the light from the

departure bureau, and with death written in every taut line. He fell face down on the pathway across the case which he had so recently set down, and twenty yards away Carolan slumped in an untidy heap.

Calvi stood frozen for seconds, unnerved by the suddenness with which it had all happened. Ten seconds—no more—had elapsed since Carolan had spoken, and now two men lay dead or dying under the night sky.

"Calvi ! Calvi !" The hoarse whisper barely reached him, but it was enough to send him hurrying across the scant yards to where Carolan lay.

He dropped on one knee beside the man, "How bad is it?"

"Never mind me. Get that case and search Bray's pockets for his forms of identity. Quickly now."

It took Calvi bare seconds to hurry back and search through the dead man's pockets. Wounded as he was, Carolan had grouped his shots so perfectly that Bray had been dead before his body hit the ground. Calvi crammed the documents hurriedly into his own jerkin, picked up the case and went back to Carolan.

"What now ? Can you walk?"

He saw the weak movement of the other's head as he shook it negatively. "I'm no good to you now, Calvi. One of the needles hit my spine—paralysed—no one knows what's happened—it's dark out here—may not spot us for an hour or more—"

"I can—"

"Don't argue—no time. Anyway," Carolan rasped a horrible chuckle, "I outrank you considerably. Get that case aboard the ship—you can do it—you've got his identity and they're only wanting one passenger—you can prove you're Egon Bray. Once they've taken off you'll be safe—"

"They may guess—"

"Crew of four—no more." Carolan coughed harshly.

"In my pocket, Calvi, piece of paper—no, no—the other one."

"I've got it."

"Co-ordinates for rendezvous in two days with a Bureau ship—best we could manage at short notice—once you're in space get the crew together and then make sure only one of them is left to fly the ship—you can do it—take my gun. Once you make the rendezvous you'll be safe." Carolan's voice

was weak and his breathing was getting faster as he strove to get out all the information he had before it was too late. "Calvi, if you don't think you'll make it, destroy that case and everything in it—that way—may be all right—" The voice died away and the body of Carolan slumped from its semi-seated position. Calvi knew he was dead.

He laid the man gently on the ground and picked up the case, hefting it in his left hand. He slid the needle gun out of sight in his jerkin pocket, and glanced at his watch in the dim light. It was four minutes to ten, and ahead of him, bathed in the arc lights, stood the ship that would be his salvation. To his right stood the line of cars, and he crossed to the one at the head of the group, swinging it from its resting place and heading out across the dark area of the field.

He passed within ten yards of the slumped body that had been Carolan, and there was a lump in his throat as he wondered if the man might not have died in vain.

He set his face towards the ship, determined that it should not be so.

Lan Wright

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