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JACK VANCE

THE

HOUSES

OF ISZM



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BUMPER CROP OF PODS, PALACES, AND COSMIC PERILS

The people of Iszm lived in homes that were alive. Their dwelling places were elaborate, lush hollow trees, wherein the very walls, floors, ceilings, and even the furniture and plumbing, were all part of the living, thriving plant.

The Iszic, alone of all the people of the universe, possessed the secret of cultivating such a dwelling. The result was that they were holders of a gigantic, lucrative monopoly, exporting millions of such homes to all the other worlds.

For decades, aliens from other worlds, including Earth, had been desperately trying to steal a female house-seed in order to break the monopoly. The Iszic security force had squashed every attempt successfully.

This is the story of yet another plot—the most ingenious of all—to carry off a prize worth billions, just one seed from THE HOUSES OF ISZM.

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JACK VANCE, while not too often a contributor to the science-fiction field these days, is nonetheless a writer of deserved popularity. His vivid ability to depict unusual worlds and strange cultures is highly rated by readers.

Born in San Francisco, he is now in his middle forties, and says that he has "worked as a merchant seaman everywhere in the world, and as a writer in Europe, Mexico, Africa, Kashmir, and at home in Oakland." In addition to foraging about in remote lands, he lists his other special interests as the jazz cornet, ceramics and stained glass.

His novel **THE DRAGON MASTERS** (Ace F-165) won a Hugo award at the 1963 World Science Fiction Convention.

JACK VANCE

**THE
HOUSES
OF ISM**

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SON OF THE TREE

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I

IT WAS assumed as a matter of course that visitors came to Iszm with a single purpose: to steal a female house. Cosmographers, students, babes-in-arms, notorious scoundrels: the Iszic cynically applied the same formula to all—microscopic inspection of mind and body and detailed surveillance.

Only the fact that they turned up so many house-thieves justified the procedure.

From a distance, it seemed simple enough to steal a house. A seed no larger than a grain of barley could be sewn into a strap; a seedling could be woven into the pattern of a shawl; a young shoot could be taped to a rocket-missile and launched into space. There were a thousand fool-proof ways

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to steal an Iszic house; all had been tried, and the unsuccessful thieves had been conducted to the Mad House, their Iszic escorts courteous to the last. As realists, the Iszic knew that some day—a year, a hundred years, a thousand years—the monopoly would be broken. As fanatically secretive controllers of the monopoly they intended to postpone this day as long as possible.

Aile Farr was a tall, gaunt man in his thirties, with a droll, corded face, big hands and feet. His skin, eyes, and hair were a dust-colored monochrome. More important to the Iszic, he was a botanist, hence an automatic object of the utmost suspicion.

Arriving at Jhespiano atoll aboard the Red Ball Packet *Eubert Honoré*, he encountered suspicion remarkable even in Iszm. Two of the Szecr, the elite police, met him at the exit hatch, escorted him down the gangway like a prisoner, and ushered him into a peculiar one-way passage. Flexible spines grew from the walls in the direction of passage. A man could enter the hall, but could not change his mind and return. The end of the passage was closed by a sheet of clear glass and at this point Farr could move neither forward nor back.

An Iszic wearing bands of wine-red and gray stepped forward and examined him through the glass. Farr felt like a specimen in a case. The Iszic grudgingly slid the panel back and led Farr into a small private room. With the Szecr standing at his back, Farr turned over his debarkation slip, his health certificate, his bond of good character, his formal entry application. The clerk dropped the debarkation slip into a macerator, inspected and returned the certificate and bond, and then settled himself to a study of the application.

The Iszic eye, split into major and minor segments, is capable of double focus. The clerk read with the lower fraction of his eyes, appraising Farr with the top section.

“Occupation . . .” he turned both segments of his eyes on

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Farr, then flicking the bottom one back, read on in a cool monotone. “. . . research associate. Place of business—University of Los Angeles, Department of Botany.” He lay the application form to one side. “May I inquire your motives for visiting Iszm?”

Farr’s patience was wearing thin. He pointed to the application. “I’ve written it all down.”

The clerk read without taking his eyes from Farr, who watched in fascination, marveling at the feat.

“‘I am on sabbatical leave,’” read the clerk. “‘I am visiting a number of worlds where plants contribute effectively to the welfare of man.’” The clerk focused both eye fractions on Farr. “Why do you trouble yourself to this extent? Surely the information is conveniently available on Earth?”

“I am interested in first-hand observations.”

“To what purpose?”

Farr shrugged. “Professional curiosity.”

“I expect that you are acquainted with our laws.”

“How could I avoid it?” said Farr in irritation. “I’ve been briefed ever since the ship left Starholme.”

“You understand that you will be allowed no special privileges—no exhaustive or analytical study. . . . You understand?”

“Of course.”

“Our regulations are stringent—I must emphasize this. Many visitors forget, and involve themselves with severe penalties.”

“By now,” said Farr, “I know your laws better than I know my own.”

“It is illegal to lift, detach, cut, accept, secrete or remove any vegetable matter, vegetable fragment, seed, seedling, sapling or tree, no matter where you find it.”

“I intend nothing illegal.”

“Most of our visitors say the same,” responded the clerk.

"Kindly step into the next chamber, remove all your clothes and personal effects. These will be returned to you at your departure."

Farr looked at him blankly. "My money—my camera—my—"

"You will be issued Iszic equivalents."

Farr wordlessly entered a white enameled chamber where he undressed. An attendant packed his clothes in a glass box, then pointed out that Farr had neglected to remove his ring.

"I suppose if I had false teeth you'd want them too," growled Farr.

The Iszic quickly scanned the form. "You assert quite definitely that your teeth are integral to your body, natural and without modification." The upper segments regarded Farr accusingly. "Is this an inaccuracy?"

"Of course not," protested Farr. "They are natural. I merely put forward as a hypothesis . . . a joke."

The Iszic muttered into a mesh and Farr was taken into a side room where his teeth were given an exacting inspection. "I'll learn not to make jokes," Farr told himself. "These people have no sense of humor."

Eventually the medics, shaking their heads glumly, returned Farr to the outer chamber, where he was met by an Iszic in a tight white and gray uniform, carrying a hypodermic.

Farr drew back. "What's this!"

"A harmless radiant."

"I don't need any."

"It is necessary," said the medic, "for your own protection. Most visitors hire boats and sail out upon the Pheadh. Occasionally there are storms, the boats are blown off course. This radiant will define your position on the master panel."

"I don't want to be protected," said Farr. "I don't want to be a light on a panel."

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"Then you must leave Iszm."

Farr submitted, cursing the medic for the length of the needle and the quantity of radiant.

"Now—into the next room for your tri-type, if you please."

Farr shrugged and walked into the next room.

"On the gray disk, Farr Sainh—palms forward, eyes wide."

He stood rigid as feeler-planes brushed down his body. In a glass dome a three-dimensional simulacrum of himself six inches high took form. Farr inspected it sourly.

"Thank you," said the operative. "Clothes and whatever personal effects you may need will be issued in the next room."

Farr dressed in visitor's uniform: white soft trousers, a gray and green striped smock, a loose dark-green velvet beret that fell low over his ear. "Now may I go?"

The attendant looked into a slot beside him. Farr could see a flicker of bright characters. "You are Farr Sainh the research botanist." It was as if he had said, "You are Farr, the admitted criminal."

"I'm Farr."

"There are several formalities awaiting you."

The formalities required three hours. Farr was once more given to the Szecr, who examined him carefully.

He was finally allowed his freedom. A young man in the yellow and green stripes of the Szecr escorted him to a gondola floating in the lagoon, a long slender craft grown from a single pod. Farr gingerly took a seat and was sculled across to the city of Jhespiano.

It was his first experience in an Iszic city, and it was far richer than his mental picture. The houses grew at irregular intervals along the avenues and canals—heavy gnarled trunks, supporting first the lower pods, then masses of broad leaves, half-submerging the upper pod-banks. Something stirred in Farr's memory—an association . . . Yeasts or mycetoza under

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the microscope. *Lamproderma violaceum*? *Dictydium cancellatum*? There was the same proliferation of branches. The pods might have been magnified sporangia. There was the same arched well-engineered symmetry, the peculiar complex colors: dark blue overlaid with glistening gray down, burnt orange with a scarlet luster, scarlet with a purple over-glow, sooty green, white highlighted with pink, subtle browns and near-blacks. The avenues below drifted with the Iszic population, a quiet pale people, secure in the stratifications of their guilds and castes.

The gondola glided to the landing. A Szecr in a yellow beret with green tassels was waiting—apparently a man of importance. There was no formal introduction; the Szecr discussed Farr quietly between themselves.

Farr saw no reason to wait, and started up the avenue toward one of the new cosmopolitan hotels. The Szecr made no attempt to stop him; Farr was now on his own, subject only to surveillance.

He relaxed and loafed around the city for almost a week. There were few other off-world visitors; the Iszic authorities discouraged tourism to the maximum degree allowed them by the Treaty of Access. Farr tried to arrange an interview with the Chairman of the Export Council, but an under-clerk turned him away politely but brusquely, upon learning that Farr wished to discuss the export of low-quality houses. Farr had expected no better. He explored the canals and the lagoon in gondolas, and he strolled the avenues. At least three of the Szecr gave him their time, quietly following along the avenues and lounging in nearby pods on the public terraces.

On one occasion he walked around the lagoon to the far side of the island, a rocky sandy area exposed to the wind and the full force of the sun. Here the humbler castes lived in modest three-pod houses, growing in rows with strips of hot sand between the dwellings. These houses were

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neutral in color, a brownish gray-green with a central tuft of large leaves casting black shade over the pods. Such houses were not available for export and Farr, a man with a highly developed social conscience, became indignant. A shame these houses could not be made available to the under-housed billions of Earth! A whole district of such habitations could be provided for next to nothing: the mere cost of seed! Farr walked up to one of the houses, peered into a low-hanging pod. Instantly a branch dropped down, and had Farr not jumped back he might have been injured. As it was, the heavy terminal frond slapped across his scalp. One of the Szecr, standing twenty yards distant, sauntered forward. "You are not advised to molest the trees."

"I wasn't molesting anything or anyone."

The Szecr shrugged. "The tree thought otherwise. It is trained to be suspicious of strangers. Among the lower castes . . ." the Szecr spat contemptuously, "feuds and quarrels go on, and the trees become uneasy at the presence of a stranger."

Farr turned to examine the tree with new interest. "Do you mean that the trees have a conscious mind?"

The Szecr's answer was no more than an indifferent shrug.

Farr asked, "Why aren't these trees exported? There would be an enormous market; many people need houses who can afford nothing better than these."

"You have answered yourself," responded the Szecr. "Who is the dealer on Earth?"

"K. Penche."

"He is a wealthy man?"

"Exceedingly wealthy."

"Would he be equally wealthy selling hovels such as these?"

"Conceivably."

The Szecr turned away. "In any case, we would not

profit. These houses are no less difficult to root, nurture, pack and ship than the Class AA houses we choose to deal in. . . . I advise you not to investigate another strange house so closely. You might well suffer serious injury. The houses are not so tolerant of intruders as their inhabitants."

Farr continued around the island, past orchards bearing fruit and low coarse shrubs like Earth century plants, from the center of which sprouted a cluster of ebony rods as much as an inch in diameter and ten feet tall: smooth, glossy, geometrically straight. When Farr went to investigate the Szecr interfered.

"These are not house trees," Farr protested. "In any event, I plan no damage. I am a botanist and interested in strange plants."

"No matter," said the Szecr lieutenant. "Neither the plants nor the craft which has developed them are your property, and hence should be of complete disinterest to you."

"The Iszics seem to have small understanding of intellectual curiosity," observed Farr.

"To compensate, we have a large understanding of rapacity, larceny, brain-picking and exploitation."

Farr had no answer and, grinning wryly, continued around the beach and so back to the rich-colored fronds, pods and trunks of the town.

One phase of the surveillance puzzled Farr. He approached the lieutenant and indicated an operative a few yards away. "Why does he mimic me? I sit down, he sits down. I drink, he drinks. I scratch my nose, he scratches his nose."

"A special technique," explained the Szecr. "We divine the pattern of your thinking."

"It won't work," said Farr.

The lieutenant bowed. "Farr Sainh may be quite correct."

Farr smiled indulgently. "Do you seriously think you can predict my plans?"

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"We can only do our best."

"This afternoon I plan to rent a sea-going boat. Were you aware of that?"

The lieutenant produced a paper. "I have the charter ready for you. It is the *Lhaiz*, and I have arranged a crew."

II

THE *LHAIZ* was a two-masted barque the shape of a Dutch wooden shoe, with purple sails and a commodious cabin. It had been grown on a special boat-tree, one piece even to the main-mast, which originally had been the stem of the pod. The foremast, sprit, booms and rigging were fabricated parts, a situation as irking to the Iszic mind as mechanical motion to an Earth electronics engineer. The crew of the *Lhaiz* sailed west. Atolls rose over the horizon, then sank astern. Some were deserted little gardens; others were given to the breeding, seeding, budding, grafting, sorting, packing and shipping of houses.

As a botanist, Farr was most strongly interested in the plantations, but here the surveillance intensified, becoming a review of his every motion.

At Tjere atoll irritation and perversity led Farr to evade his guards. The *Lhaiz* sailed up to the pier and two of the crew passed lines ashore while the others furled sail and cradled booms. Aile Farr jumped easily from the after-deck down to the pier and set off toward the shore. A mutter of

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complaints came from behind; these gave Farr malicious amusement.

He looked ahead to the island. The beach spread wide to either side, pounded by surf, and the slopes of the basalt ridge were swathed in green, blue and black vegetation—a scene of great peace and beauty. Farr controlled the urge to jump down on the beach to disappear under the leaves. The Szecr were polite, but very quick on the trigger.

A tall strong man appeared upon the dock ahead. Blue bands circled his body and limbs at six inch intervals, the pallid Iszic skin showing between the rings. Farr slackened his pace. Freedom was at an end.

The Iszic lifted a single-lensed lorgnette on an ebony rod, the viewer habitually carried by high-caste Iszic, an accessory almost as personal as one of their organs. Farr had been viewed many times; it never failed to irritate him. Like any other visitor to Iszm, like the Iszic themselves, he had no choice, no recourse, no defense. The radiant injected into his shoulder had labeled him. He was now categorized and defined for anyone who cared to look.

“Your pleasure, Farr Sainh?” The Iszic used the dialect which children spoke before they learned the language of their caste.

Farr resignedly made the formal reply. “I await your will.”

“The dock-master was sent to extend proper courtesy. You perhaps became impatient?”

“My arrival is a small matter, please don't trouble yourself.”

The Iszic flourished his viewer. “A privilege to greet a fellow-scientist.”

Farr said sourly, “That thing even tells you my occupation?”

The Iszic viewed Farr's right shoulder. “I see you have no criminal record; your intelligence index is 23; your persistence level is Class 4 . . . There is other information.”

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"Who am I privileged to address?" asked Farr.

"I call myself Zhde Patasz. I am fortunate enough to cultivate on Tjiere atoll."

Farr re-appraised the blue-striped man. "A planter?"

Zhde Patasz twirled his viewer. "We will have much to discuss. . . . I hope you will be my guest."

The dock-master came puffing up. Zhde Patasz flourished his viewer and drifted away.

"Farr Sainh," said the dock-master, "Your modesty leads you to evade your entitled escort. It saddens us deeply."

"You exaggerate."

"Hardly possible. This way, Sainh."

He marched down the concrete incline into a wide trench, with Farr sauntering behind so leisurely that the dock-master was forced to halt and wait at hundred-foot intervals. The trench led under the basalt ridge, then became a subterranean passage. Four times the dock-master slid aside plate-glass panels, four times the doors swung shut behind. Farr realized that search-screens, probes, detectors, analyzers were feeling him, testing his radiations, his mass and metallic content. He strolled along indifferently. They would find nothing. All his clothing and personal effects had been impounded; he was still wearing the visitor's uniform, trousers of white floss, a jacket striped gray and green, and the loose dark green velvet beret.

The dock-master rapped at a door of corrugated metal. It parted in the middle into two interlocking halves, like a medieval portcullis. The passage opened into a bright room. Behind a counter sat a Szecr in the usual yellow and green stripes.

"If the Sainh pleases—his tri-type for our records."

Farr patiently stood on the disk of gray metal.

"Palms forward, eyes wide."

Farr stood quietly. Feeler-planes brushed down his body.

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"Thank you, Sainh." Farr stepped up to the counter. "That's a different type than the one at Jhespiano. Let's see it."

The clerk showed him a transparent card with a man-like brownish splotch on its middle. "Not much of a likeness," said Farr.

The Szecr dropped the card into a slot. On the counter-top appeared a three-dimensional replica of Farr. It could be expanded a hundred times, revealing finger-prints, cheek-pores, ear and retinal configuration.

"I'd like to have this as a souvenir," said Farr. "It's dressed. The one at Jhespiano showed my charms to the world."

The Iszic shrugged. "Take it."

Farr put the replica in his pouch.

"Now, Farr Sainh, may I ask an impertinent question?"

"One more won't hurt me."

Farr knew there was a cephaloscope focused on his brain. Any pulse of excitement, any flush of fear would be recorded on a chart. He brought the image of a hot bath to the brink of his mind.

"Do you plan to steal houses, Farr Sainh?"

Now: *the placid cool porcelain, the feel of warm air and water, the scent of soap.*

"No."

"Are you aware of, or party to, any such plan?"

Warm water, lie back, relax.

"No."

The Szecr sucked in his lips, a grimace of polite skepticism. "Are you aware of the penalties visited upon thieves?"

"Oh yes," said Farr. "They go to the Mad House."

"Thank you, Farr Sainh, you may proceed."

III

THE DOCKMASTER relinquished Farr to a pair of under-Szecz in pale yellow and gold bands.

"This way, if you please."

Climbing a ramp, they stepped out into an arcade with a glassed-in wall.

Farr stopped to survey the plantation; his guides made uneasy motions, anxious to proceed.

"If Farr Sainh desires—"

"Just a minute," said Farr irritably. "There's no hurry."

On his right hand was the town, a forest of intricate shapes and colors. To the back grew the modest three-pod houses of the laborers. They could hardly be seen through the magnificent array along the lagoon—houses of the planters, the Szecz, the house-breeders and house-breakers. Each was different, trained and shaped by secrets the Iszic withheld even from each other.

They were beautiful, thought Farr, but in a weird indecisive way they puzzled him, just as sometimes the palate falters on a new flavor. He decided that environment influenced his judgment. Iszic houses on Earth looked habitable enough. This was Iszm and any attribute of a strange planet shared the basic strangeness.

He turned his attention to the fields. They spread off to his left, various shades of brown, gray, gray-green, green,

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according to the age and variety of the plant. Each field had its long low shed where mature seedlings were graded, labeled, potted and packed for destinations around the universe.

The two young Szecr began to mutter in the language of their caste and Farr turned away from the window.

"This way, Farr Sainh."

"Where are we going?"

"You are the guest of Zhde Patasz Sainh."

Excellent, thought Farr. He had examined the houses exported to Earth, the Class AA houses sold by K. Penche. They would compare poorly with the houses the planters grew for themselves.

He became aware of the two young Szecr. They were standing like statues, staring at the floor of the arcade.

"What's the matter?" asked Farr.

They began to breathe heavily. Farr looked at the floor. A vibration, a low roar. Earthquake! thought Farr. The sound grew louder, the windows rumbled in resonance. Farr felt a sudden wildness, a sense of emergency. He looked out the window. In a nearby field the ground broke up, took on a crazy hump, and erupted. Tender seedlings crushed under tons of dirt. A metal snout protruded, grinding up ten feet, twenty feet. A door clanged open. Squat heavy-muscled brown men leaped out, ran into the fields, and began to uproot young plants. In the door a man, grinning in the extremity of tension, roared out incomprehensible orders.

Farr watched in fascination; a raid of tremendous scope. Horns rang out from Tjiere town; the vicious *fwipp-hiss* of shatter-bolts sounded. Two of the brown men became red clots. The man in the doorway bellowed, and the others retreated to the metal snout.

The port clanged shut; but one raider had waited too long. He beat his fists on the hull, but to no avail. He was

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ignored. Frantically he pounded and the seedlings he had gathered crushed in his grip.

The snout vibrated, then lifted higher from the ground. The shatter-bolts from the Tjiere fort began to chip off flakes of metal. A bull's-eye port in the hull snapped open; a weapon spat blue flame. In Tjiere a great tree shattered and sagged. Farr's head swam to a tremendous soundless scream. The young Szecr dropped gasping to their knees.

The tree toppled. The great pods, the leaf-terraces, the tendrils, the careful balconies—they whistled through the air and crashed in pitiful tangle. Iszic bodies hurled from the ruins, kicking and twisting.

The metal snout ground up another ten feet. In a moment it would shake loose the soil, then blast up and out into space. The brown man left outside fought for footing on the heaving soil, still pounding on the hull, but now without hope.

Farr looked at the sky. Three monitors were slipping down from the upper air—ugly, awkward craft, looking like metal scorpions.

A shatter-bolt smashed a crater in the soil beside the hull. The brown man was flung a looping sixty feet. He turned three cartwheels and landed on his back.

The metal hull began to churn back down into the soil, settling slowly at first, then faster and faster. Another shatter-bolt rang on the prow like a great hammer. The metal shriveled and fragmented into ribbons. The hull was under the surface; clods of soil caved in on top.

Another shatter-bolt threw up a gout of dust.

The two young Szecr had risen to their feet. They stared out across the devastated field, crying out in a tongue meaningless to Farr. One grasped Farr's arm.

"Come, we must secure you. Danger, danger!"

Farr shook them off. "I'll wait here."

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"Farr Sainh, Farr Sainh," they cried. "Our orders are to see to your safety."

"I'm safe here," said Farr. "I want to watch."

The three monitors hung over the crater, drifting back and forth.

"Looks like the raiders got away," said Farr.

"Nol Impossible," cried the Szecr. "It's the end of Iszm!"

Down from the sky dropped a slender ship, smaller than the monitors. If the monitors were scorpions, the new vessel was a wasp. It settled over the crater and sank into the loose dirt—slowly, gingerly, like a probe. It began to roar, to vibrate, then it churned out of sight.

Along the arcade came a dozen men, running with the sinuous back-leaning glide of the Iszic. On an impulse, Farr fell in behind them, ignoring the distress of the two young Szecr.

The Iszic fled across the field toward the crater. Farr followed. He passed the limp body of the brown man and halted. The man's hair was heavy, leonine; his features were broad, blunt; his hand still clenched the seedlings he had uprooted. The fingers fell limp even as Farr came to a halt. At the same time the eyes opened. They held full intelligence. Farr bent forward half in pity, half in interest.

Hands gripped him. He saw yellow and green stripes and furious faces with lips drawn back to show the pallid Iszic mouth, the sharp teeth.

"Here!" cried Farr, as he was hustled off the field. "Let go!"

The Szecr fingers bit into his arms and shoulders. They were obsessed by a murderous madness, and Farr held his tongue.

A deep far rumble underfoot sounded; the ground heaved.

The Szecr ran Farr toward Tjiere, then turned aside. Farr began to struggle, to drag his feet. Something hard

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struck the back of his neck. Half-stunned, he made no further resistance. They took him to an isolated tree near the basalt scarp. It was very old, with a gnarled black trunk, a heavy umbrella of leaves, and two or three withered pods. An irregular hole gaped into the trunk. Without ceremony they thrust him through.

IV

AILE FARR, screaming hoarsely, fell through the dark. He kicked and clawed at the air. His head scraped against the side of the shaft. Then his shoulder struck, then his hip, then he was in full contact. The fall became a slide as the tube curved. His feet struck a membrane that seemed to collapse, then another and another. Seconds later he struck a resilient wall. The impact stunned him. He lay quiet, collecting his wits.

He moved and felt his head. The scrape on his scalp smarted. He heard a peculiar noise, a hissing bumping rush of an object sliding down the tube. Farr scrambled to the side. Something hard and heavy struck him in the ribs; something struck the wall with a thump and a groan. There was silence except for the sound of shallow breathing.

Farr said cautiously, "Who's there?"

No answer.

Farr repeated the question in all his languages and dialects. Still no answer. He hunched himself up uneasily. He had no light, no means of making fire.

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The breathing became stertorous, labored. Farr groped through the dark and felt a crumpled body. He rose to his knees and laid the unseen figure flat, straightening the arms and legs. The breathing became more regular.

Farr sat back, waiting. Five minutes passed. The walls of the room gave a sudden pulse and Farr heard a deep sound like a distant explosion. A minute or two later the sound and the pulse occurred again. The underground battle was raging, thought Farr. Wasp against mole, an underground battle to the death.

A wave of pressure and sound rocked him; the walls heaved. He heard an explosion that had a feeling of finality. The man in the dark gasped and coughed.

"Who's there?" Farr called.

A bright eye of light winked into his face. Farr winced and moved his head. The light followed.

"Turn that damn thing away!" growled Farr.

The light moved up and down his body, lingering on the striped visitor's shirt. In the reflected glow Farr saw the brown man, dirty, bruised, haggard. The light issued from a clasp on the shoulder of his tunic.

The brown man spoke in a slow hoarse voice. The language was unknown to Farr and he shook his head in incomprehension. The brown man regarded him a moment or two longer in careful, if dubious, appraisal. Then he lurched painfully to his feet and ignoring Farr minutely examined the walls, floor and ceiling of the cell. Above, and inaccessible was the opening by which they had entered, to the side was a tightly knotted sphincter. Farr felt sullen and resentful, and the cut on his head smarted. The brown man's activity irritated him. Obviously there would be no easy escape. The Szecr were nothing if not painstaking in matters of this sort.

Farr watched the brown man and presently decided him

to be a Thord, the most manlike of the three Arcturian races. There were various disturbing rumors regarding the Thord, and Farr was not too easy at having one of the race for a cell-mate—especially in the dark.

The Thord completed his study of the walls, and returned his attention to Farr. His eyes glowed softly, deep, cool and yellow, like cabochons of topaz. He spoke once again in his halting husky voice. "This is not a true prison."

Farr was startled. Under the circumstances the remark seemed more than peculiar. "Why do you say that?"

The Thord studied him a full ten seconds before making a reply. "There was great excitement. The Iszt dropped us here for safekeeping. Soon they will take us elsewhere. There are no spy-holes here, nor sound receptors. This is a storage chamber."

Farr looked dubiously at the walls. The Thord uttered a low moaning sound which caused Farr new startlement, until he understood that the Thord was merely expressing some unearthly variety of amusement. "You wonder how I can be sure of this," said the Thord. "It is my ability to feel the weight of attention."

Farr nodded politely. The Thord's unwavering scrutiny was becoming oppressive. Farr turned half-away. The Thord began to mutter to himself: a crooning, monotonous sound. A lament? a threnody? The light dimmed but the Thord's lugubrious murmur continued. Farr eventually became drowsy and fell asleep. It was a troubled restless sleep. His head seemed to smart and burn. He heard confidential voices and hoarse cries; he was home on Earth, and on his way to see—someone. A friend. Who? In his sleep Farr twisted and muttered. He knew he was asleep; he wanted to wake up.

The hollow voices, the footsteps, the restless images dwindled, and he slept soundly.

Light streamed in through an oval gap, silhouetting the

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frames of two Iszic. Farr awoke. He was vaguely surprised to find the Thord gone. In fact, the entire room seemed different. He was no longer in the root of the gnarled black tree.

He struggled up in a sitting position. His eyes were dim and watery; he found it hard to think. There was no anchor for his thoughts. It was as if all the faculties of his mind were separate pieces falling free through the air.

"Aile Farr Sainh," said one of the Iszic, "may we trouble you to accompany us?" They wore bands of yellow and green: Szecr.

Farr struggled to his feet and stumbled through the oval door. With one of the Szecr ahead and one behind he walked along a twisting corridor. The foremost Szecr slid back a panel and Farr found himself in the arcade he had traversed before.

They took him out into the open, under the night sky. The stars glittered; Farr noticed Home Sun a few degrees below a star he knew to be Beta Aurigae. It aroused no pang, no home-sickness. He felt emotion toward nothing. He saw without attention. He felt light, easy, relaxed.

Skirting the tangle of the fallen house, they approached the lagoon. Ahead a great trunk grew from a carpet of soft moss.

"The house of Zhde Patasz Sainh," said the Szecr. "You are his guest. He holds to his word."

The door slid aside and Farr stepped into the trunk on flexible legs. The door slid quietly shut. Farr stood alone in a tall circular foyer. He clutched at the wall to steady himself, faintly annoyed with the looseness of his perceptions. He made an effort; his faculties drifted closer together, coalesced one by one.

A young Iszic woman came forward. She wore black and white bands and a black turban. The skin between the bands flushed faintly rose-violet. A black line around her

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head accented the horizontal division of her eyes. Farr became suddenly aware of his disheveled, dirty, unshaven condition.

"Farr Sainh," said the woman, "indulge me with your company."

She led him to an elevator duct. The disk lifted them a hundred feet and Farr's head swam with the movement. He felt the cool hand of the woman.

"Through here, Farr Sainh."

Farr stepped forward, halted, and leaned against the wall until his vision cleared.

The woman waited patiently.

The blur lifted. He stood in the core of a branch, the woman supporting him with an arm around his wrist. He looked into the pale, segmented eyes. She regarded him with indifference.

"Your people drugged me," muttered Farr.

"This way, Farr Sainh."

She started down the corridor with the sinuous gait that seemed to float her upper body. Farr followed slowly. His legs were stronger; he felt a little better.

The woman stopped by the terminal sphincter, turned, and made a wide ceremonial sweep of her two arms. "Here is your chamber. You shall want for nothing. To Zhde Patasz, all of dendronology is an open book. His groves fulfill every want. Enter and rejoice in the exquisite house of Zhde Patasz."

Farr entered the chamber, one of four connecting compartments in the most elaborate pod he had yet seen. This was an eating chamber. From the floor a great rib grew up and splayed to either side to form a table, which supported a dozen trays of food.

The next chamber, swathed in fibrous blue hangings, appeared to be a rest chamber, and beyond was a chamber

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ankle deep in pale green nectar. Behind Farr suddenly appeared a small obsequiously sighing Iszic, in the pink and white bands of a house servitor. Deftly he removed Farr's soiled garments. Farr stepped into the bath and the servant tapped at the wall. From small orifices issued a spray of fresh-smelling liquid which tingled coolly upon Farr's skin. The servant scooped up a ladle of the pale green nectar, poured it over Farr's head, and he was instantly covered with a prickling effervescent foam, which presently dissolved, leaving Farr's skin fresh and soft.

The servant approached with a husk full of a pale paste. This he carefully rubbed upon Farr's face with a wisp of bast, and Farr's beard melted away.

Directly overhead a bubble of liquid had been forming in a sac of frail membrane. It grew larger, swaying and trembling. Now the servant reached up with a sharp thorn. The sac burst and a soft aromatic liquid smelling of cloves drenched Farr, then quickly evaporated. Farr stepped into the fourth chamber where the servant draped fresh garments upon him, and then fixed a black rosette to the side of his leg. Farr knew something of Iszic folkways and was vaguely surprised. As the personal insignia of Zhde Patasz, the rosette conveyed a host of significances. Farr had been acknowledged the honored house-guest of Zhde Patasz, who thereupon undertook his protection against any and all of Farr's enemies. Farr was given liberty of the house, with a dozen prerogatives otherwise reserved to the house owner. Farr could manipulate any of the house's nerves, reflexes, triggers and conduits. He could make himself free of Zhde Patasz's rarest treasures, and in general was made an alter ego of Zhde Patasz himself. The honor was unusual, and for an Earthman perhaps unique. Farr wondered what he had done to deserve such a distinction. Perhaps it came by way of apology for the rude treatment Farr had experienced during the Thord raid. Yes,

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Farr thought, this must be the explanation. He hoped that Zhde Patasz would overlook his ignorance of the highly complex rituals of Iszic courtesies.

The woman who had conducted Farr to the chamber reappeared. She performed an elaborate genuflection. Farr was insufficiently familiar with the subtleties of Iszic mannerisms to decide whether or not there might be irony in the gesture, and he reserved judgment. His sudden change in status seemed highly remarkable. A hoax? Unlikely. The Iszic sense of humor was non-existent.

"Aile Farr Sainh," declared the woman, "now that you have refreshed yourself, do you wish to associate with your host, Zhde Patasz?"

Farr smiled faintly. "At any time."

"Then allow me to lead the way. I will take you to the private pods of Zhde Patasz Sainh, where he waits with great restlessness."

Farr followed her along the conduit, up an incline where the branch drooped, by elevator up the central trunk, and off along another passage. At a sphincter she paused, bowed, and swept wide her arms. "Zhde Patasz Sainh awaits you."

The sphincter expanded and Farr stepped dubiously into the chamber. Zhde Patasz was not immediately to be seen. Farr moved forward slowly, looking from right to left. The pod was thirty feet long, opening on a balcony with a waist-high balustrade. The walls and domed ceiling were tufted with trefoils of a silky green fiber; the floor was heavy with plum-colored moss; quaint lamps grew out of the wall. There were four magenta pod-chairs against one wall. In the middle of the floor stood a tall cylindrical vase containing water, plants and black dancing eels. There were pictures on the walls by ancient Earth masters, colorful curios from a strange world.

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Zhde Patasz came in from the balcony. "Farr Sainh, I hope you feel well?"

"Well enough," said Farr cautiously.

"Will you sit?"

"As you command." Farr lowered himself upon one of the frail magenta bladders. The smooth skin stretched and fitted itself to his body.

His host languidly seated himself nearby. There was a moment of silence while each surveyed the other. Zhde Patasz wore the blue stripes of his caste and, today, the pale narrow cheeks were decorated with glossy red disks. These were not haphazard decorations, Farr realized. Every outward attribute of the Iszic was meaningful to some degree. Zhde Patasz today was without the usual loose beret. The knob and ridges along the top of his scalp formed almost a crest, an indication of aristocratic lineage across thousands of years.

"You are enjoying your visit to Iszm?" inquired Zhde Patasz at last.

Farr considered a moment, then spoke formally. "I see much to interest me. I have also suffered molestation, which I hope will cause me no permanent harm." He gingerly felt his scalp. "Only the fact of your hospitality compensates for the ill treatment I have received."

"This is sorry news," said Zhde Patasz. "Who has wronged you? Provide me their names and I will have them drowned."

Farr admitted that he could not precisely identify the Szecr who had thrust him into the dungeon. "In any event they were excited by the raid, and I bear them no malice on this account. But afterward I seem to have been drugged, which I consider very poor treatment."

"Your remarks are well taken," Zhde Patasz replied in the most bland of voices. "The Szecr would normally administer a hypnotic gas to the Thord. It seems that through a stupid

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error you had been conveyed to the same cell, and so shared this indignity. Undoubtedly the parties responsible are at this moment beside themselves with remorse."

Farr tried to speak with indignation. "My legal rights have been totally ignored. The Treaty of Access has been violated."

"I hope you will forgive us," said Zhde Patasz. "Of course you realize that we must protect our fields."

"I had nothing to do with the raid."

"Yes. We understand that."

Farr smiled bitterly. "While I was under hypnosis you siphoned out everything I know."

Zhde Patasz performed the curious contraction of the filament dividing the segments of his eyes which Farr had come to recognize as a manifestation of Iszic amusement. "By chance I was informed of your misadventure."

"'Misadventure'? An outrage!"

Zhde Patasz made a soothing gesture. "The Szecr would naturally plan to subdue the Thord by use of a hypnotic atmosphere. The race has powerful capabilities, both physical and psychic, as well as notorious moral deficiencies, which presumably is why they were recruited to conduct the raid."

Farr was puzzled. "You think the Thord weren't acting on their own?"

"I think not. The organization was too precise, the planning too exact. The Thord are an impatient race and while it is not impossible that they mounted the expedition, we are inclined to think otherwise, and are extremely anxious to identify the instigator of the raid."

"So you examined me under hypnosis, violating the Treaty of Access."

"I assume the questioning covered only matters pertaining to the raid." Zhde Patasz was trying to conciliate Farr. "The Szecr were perhaps over-assiduous, but you appeared to be a conspirator. You must recognize that."

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"I'm afraid I don't."

"No?" Zhde Patasz seemed surprised. "You arrive at Tjiere on the day of the assault. You attempt to evade your escort at the dock. During an interview you make pointless attempts to control your reactions. Forgive me if I show you your errors."

"Not at all, go right ahead."

"In the arcade you once more evade your escort; you race out on the field, an apparent effort to take part in the raid."

"This is all nonsense," said Farr.

"We are satisfied of this," said Zhde Patasz. "The raid has ended in disaster for the Thord. We destroyed the mole at a depth of eleven hundred feet. There were no survivors except the person with whom you shared a cell."

"What will happen to him?"

Zhde Patasz hesitated. Farr thought he detected uncertainty in Zhde Patasz's voice. "Under normal conditions he would have been perhaps the least lucky of all." He paused, forming his thoughts into words. "We have faith in the deterrent effect of punishment. He would have been confined to the Mad House."

"What happened to him?"

"He killed himself in the cell."

Farr felt suddenly bewildered, as if this were an unexpected development. Somehow the brown man was obligated to him; something was lost. . . .

Zhde Patasz said in a voice full of solicitude, "You appear shocked, Farr Sainh."

"I don't know why I should be."

"Are you tired, or weak?"

"I'm collecting myself a little at a time."

The Iszic woman came with a tray of food—spice-nuts, a hot aromatic liquid, and dried fish.

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Farr ate with pleasure; he was hungry. Zhde Patasz watched him curiously. "It is strange. We are of different worlds, we evolved from different stock, yet we share a number of similar ambitions, similar fears and desires. We protect our possessions, the objects which bring us security."

Farr felt the raw spot on his scalp. It still smarted and pulsed. He nodded thoughtfully.

Zhde Patasz strolled to the glass cylinder and looked down down at the dancing eels. "Sometimes we are over-anxious, of course, and our fears cause us to over-reach ourselves." He turned. They surveyed each other a long moment: Farr half-submerged in the chair-pod, the Iszic tall and strong, the double eyes large in his thin aquiline head.

"In any event," said Zhde Patasz, "I hope you will forget our mistake. The Thord and their mentor or mentors are responsible. But for them the situation would not have arisen. And please don't overlook our intense concern. The raid was of enormous scope and a near-success. Who conceived, who planned so complex an operation? We must learn this. The Thord worked with great precision. They seized both seeds and seedlings from specific plots evidently charted beforehand by a spy in the guise of a tourist like yourself." And Zhde Patasz inspected Farr somberly.

Farr laughed shortly. "A tourist unlike myself. I don't care to be associated with the affair even indirectly."

Zhde Patasz bowed politely. "A creditable attitude. But I am sure you are generous enough to understand our agitation. We must protect our investment; we are businessmen."

"Not very good businessmen," said Farr.

"An interesting opinion. Why not?"

"You have a good product," said Farr, "but you market it uneconomically. Limited sale, high mark-up."

Zhde Patasz brought out his viewer and waved it indulgently. "There are many theories."

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"I've studied several analyses of the house trade," said Farr. "They disagree only in detail."

"What is the consensus?"

"That your methods are inefficient. On each planet a single dealer has the monopoly. It's a system which pleases only the dealer. K. Penche is a hundred times a millionaire and he's the most hated man on Earth."

Zhde Patasz swung his viewer thoughtfully. "K. Penche will be an unhappy man as well as a hated one."

"Glad to hear it," said Farr. "Why?"

"The raid destroyed a large number of his quota."

"He won't get any houses?"

"Not of the kind he ordered."

"Well," said Farr, "it makes little difference. He sells everything you send him anyway."

Zhde Patasz showed a trace of impatience. "He is an Earther—a mercantilist. We are Iszic and house-breeding is in our blood, a basic instinct. The line of planters began two hundred thousand years ago when Diun, the primordial anthrophib, crawled out of the ocean. With salt-water still draining from his gills he took refuge in a pod. He is my ancestor. We have gained mastery over houses; we shall not dissipate this accumulated lore, or permit ourselves to be plundered."

"The knowledge eventually will be duplicated," said Farr, "whether you like it or not. There are too many homeless people in the universe."

"No." Zhde Patasz snapped his viewer. "The craft cannot be induced rationally—an element of magic still exists."

"Magic?"

"Not literally. The trappings of magic. For instance, we sing incantations to sprouting seeds. The seeds sprout and prosper. Without incantations they fail. Why? Who knows? No one on Iszm. In every phase of growing, training and

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breaking the house for habitation, this special lore makes the difference between a house and a withered useless vine."

"On Earth," said Farr, "we would begin with the elemental tree. We would sprout a million seeds, we would explore a million primary avenues."

"After a thousand years," said the Iszic, "you might control the number of pods on a tree." He walked to the wall and stroked the green fiber. "This floss—we inject a liquid into an organ of the rudimentary pod. The liquid comprises substances such as powdered ammonite nerve, ash of the frunz bush, sodium isochromyl acetate, powder from the Phano-dano meteorite. The liquid undergoes six critical operations, and must be injected through the proboscis of a sea-lympid. Tell me," he glanced at Farr through his viewer, "how long before your Earth researchers could grow green floss into a pod?"

"Perhaps we'd never try. We might be satisfied with five or six-pod houses the owners could furnish as they liked."

Zhde Patasz's eyes snapped. "But this is crudity! You understand, do you not? A dwelling must be all of a unit—the walls, the drainage, the décor grown in! What use is our vast lore, our two hundred thousand years of effort, otherwise? Any ignoramus can paste up green floss, only an Iszic can grow it!"

"Yes," said Farr. "I believe you."

Zhde Patasz continued, passionately waving his viewer. "And if you stole a female house, and if you managed to breed a five-pod house, that is only the beginning. It must be entered, mastered, trained. The webbings must be cut; the nerves of ejaculation must be located and paralyzed. The sphincters must open and close at a touch.

"The art of house-breaking is almost as important as house-breeding. Without correct breaking a house is an unmanageable nuisance—a menace."

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"K. Penche breaks none of the houses you send to Earth."

"Pah! Penche's houses are docile, spiritless. They are without interest. They lack beauty, grace." He paused. "I cannot speak. Your language has no words to tell what an Iszic feels for his house. He grows it, grows into it. His ashes are given it when he dies. He drinks its ichor; it breathes his breath. It protects him; it takes on the color of his thoughts. A spirited house will repel a stranger. An injured house will kill. And a Mad House—that is where we take our criminals."

Farr listened in fascination. "That's all very well—for an Iszic. An Earther isn't so particular—at least, a low income Earther. Or as you would put it, a low-caste Earther. He just wants a house to live in."

"You may obtain houses," said Zhde Patasz. "We are glad to provide them. But you must use the accredited distributors."

"K. Penche?"

"Yes. He is our representative."

"I think I will go to bed," said Farr. "I am tired and my head hurts."

"A pity. But rest well, and tomorrow, should you choose, we will inspect my plantation. In the meantime, my house is yours."

The young woman in the black turban conducted Farr to his chambers. She ceremoniously bathed his face, his hands, his feet, and sprayed the air with an aromatic scent.

Farr fell into a fitful slumber. He dreamt of the Thord. He saw the blunt brown face, heard the heavy voice. The abrasion on his scalp stung like fire, and Farr twisted and turned.

The brown man's face disappeared like an extinguished light. Farr slept in peace.

V

THE FOLLOWING day Farr awoke to the sighing whispering sounds of Iszic music. Fresh clothing hung close at hand, which he donned and then went out on the balcony. The scene was one of magnificent eerie beauty. The sun, Xi Aurigae, had not yet risen. The sky was an electric blue and the sea a plum-colored mirror, darkening to a tarnished black at the horizon. To right and left stood the vast and intricate houses of the Tjiere aristocrats, the foliage in silhouette against the sky, and the pods showing traces of muted colors: dark blue, maroon, deep green, like old velvet. Along the canal dozens of gondolas drifted. Beyond spread the Tjiere bazaar where goods and implements from the industrial systems of South Continent and a few off-world items were distributed by some apparently casual means of exchange not completely clear to Farr.

From within the apartment came the sound of a plucked string. Farr turned to find two attendants carrying in a tall compartmented buffet laden with food. Farr ate wafers, fruits, marine tubers and pastes while Xi Aurigae bulged gradually over the horizon.

When he finished, the attendants reappeared with a promptness that caused Farr a twinge of wry amusement. They removed the buffet, and the Iszic woman who had greeted Farr the previous evening now entered. Today her

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normal costume of black ribbons was augmented by a complicated head-dress of the same black ribbons which concealed the knobs and ridges of her scalp and gave her an unexpectedly attractive semblance. After performing an elaborate ceremonial salute she announced that Zhde Patasz awaited Farr Sainh's pleasure.

Farr accompanied her to the lobby at the base of the great trunk. Here Zhde Patasz waited in the company of an Iszic whom he introduced as Omon Bozhd, a general agent for the house-growers' cooperative. Omon Bozhd was taller than Zhde Patasz, his face was rather broader and less keen, and his manner was almost imperceptibly brisker and more direct. He wore bands of blue and black, with black cheek disks, a costume Farr vaguely understood to indicate one of the upper castes. Zhde Patasz's manner toward Omon Bozhd seemed a peculiar mixture of condescension and respect, insofar as Farr could define it. Farr ascribed Zhde Patasz's attitude to the discord between Omon Bozhd's caste and his pallid white skin which was that of a man from one of the southern archipelagoes, or even South Continent, and which lacked the pale blue tinge distinguishing the aristocratic planters of the Pheadh. Farr, sufficiently perplexed by the extraordinary attention he was receiving, gave him no great attention.

Zhde Patasz conducted his guests to a charabanc with padded benches, supported by a hundred near-silent whorls of air. There was no attempt at embellishment or decoration, but the pale shell of the structure, grown in one piece along with the curved and buttressed railings, the arched seats and the dangling fringe of dark brown fiber, were sufficiently striking in themselves. A servant in red and brown bands straddled a prong protruding forward and worked the controls. On a low bench to the rear sat two other servants who carried the various instruments, emblems and accoutrements

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of Zhde Patasz, serving purposes which Farr for the most part could not guess.

At the last minute a fourth Iszic joined the group, a man in blue and gray bands whom Zhde Patasz introduced as Uder Che, his "chief architect."

"The actual Iszic word," said Zhde Patasz, "of course is different, and includes an array of other meanings or resonants: biochemist, instructor, poet, precursor, one who lovingly nurtures, much else. The end effect, nonetheless, is the same, and describes one who creates new sorts of houses."

Behind, as a matter of course, came a trio of the ubiquitous Szecr riding another smaller platform. Farr thought he recognized one of the group as his escort at the time of the Thord raid, the author of the various indignities to which he had been subjected. But he could not be certain. To his alien eye all Iszic looked alike. He toyed with the idea of denouncing the man to Zhde Patasz, who had sworn to have him drowned. Farr restrained the urge; Zhde Patasz might feel impelled to make good his word.

The platform glided off under the massive tree-dwellings at the center of town, out along a road which led beside a series of small fields. Here grew the gray-green shoots Farr recognized as infant houses. "Class AAA and AABR houses for the work-supervisors of South Continent," explained Zhde Patasz with a rather patronizing air. "Yonder are four- and five-pod trees for the artisans. Each district has its unique requirements, the description of which I will not burden you. Our off-world exports of course are not of such critical concern, since we only sell a few standard and easily grown structures."

Farr frowned. It seemed that Zhde Patasz's patronizing manner had become more pronounced. "You could increase your off-world sales tremendously if you chose to diversify."

Zhde Patasz and Omon Bozhd both exhibited signs of

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amusement. "We sell as many trees off-world as we choose. Why strive further? Who appreciates the unique and exceptional qualities of our houses? You yourself tell us that the Earther regards his house as hardly more than a cubicle to ward off the weather."

"You misunderstood me—or perhaps I expressed myself poorly. But even if this were wholly true—which it isn't—the need still exists for a whole variety of houses, on Earth, as well as on the other planets to which you sell houses."

Omon Bozhd spoke. "You really are irrational, Farr Sainh, if I may invest the word with its least offensive aura of meaning. Let me expatiate. On Earth you claim that a need exists for housing. On Earth there is also a surplus of wealth—a surplus so great that vast projects are generated by the impounded energy. This wealth could solve the problem of deficient housing in the twinkling of an eye—if those who controlled the wealth so desired. Since you understand this course of events to be unlikely, you turn your eye speculatively upon us relatively poor Iszics, hoping that we will prove less obdurate than the men of your own planet. When you find that we are absorbed in our own interests, you become resentful—and herein lies the irrationality of your position."

Farr laughed. "This is a distorted reflection of reality. We are wealthy, true enough. Why? Because we constantly try to maximize production and minimize effort. The Iszic houses represent this minimizing of effort."

"Interesting," murmured Zhde Patasz. Omon Bozhd nodded sagely. The glide-car turned and rose to drift above a tangle of spiky gray bushes overgrown with black spheres. Beyond, across a fringe of beach, lay the calm blue world-ocean, the Pheadh. The glide-car nosed out over the low surf and slid toward an off-shore islet.

Zhde Patasz spoke in a solemn, almost sepulchral, voice.

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"You are now to be shown what very few are permitted to see: an experimental station where we conceive and develop new houses."

Farr tried to make a suitable reply, expressing interest and appreciation, but Zhde Patasz had withdrawn his attention and Farr became silent.

The platform heaved across the water, the whorls of air creating a seethe of white spume astern. Light from Xi Aurigae glittered on the blue water and Farr thought what an Earthly scene this might have been—but for the oddly-shaped glide-car, the tall milky-white men in stripes beside him, and the peculiar aspect of the trees on the island ahead. Those visible were of a type he had not seen previously: heavy, low, with densely matted black branches. The foliage, fleshy strips of brown tissue, seemed in constant motion.

The glide-car slowed, coasted toward the beach, and halted twenty feet offshore. Uder Che, the architect, jumped into the knee-deep water and cautiously walked ashore, carrying a black box. The trees reacted to his presence, at first leaning toward him, then recoiling and unlacing their branches. After a moment there was a gap wide enough for the glide-car, which now proceeded across the beach and through the gap. Uder Che followed and boarded the car; the trees once more joined branches to create an impenetrable tangle.

Zhde Patasz explained that, "The trees will kill anyone who attempts to pass without manifesting the proper safe-signal, which is radiated from the box. In the past, planters often mounted expeditions against each other—no longer the case, of course—and the sentry trees are perhaps not strictly necessary. But we are a conservative lot and maintain our old customs."

Farr looked around him, making no attempt to conceal his interest. Zhde Patasz watched him with patient amusement.

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"When I came to Iszm," said Farr at last, "I hoped for an opportunity like this, but never expected it. I admit that I'm puzzled. Why do you show me these things?" He searched the pale ridged face, but inevitably could read nothing from the Iszic's expression.

Zhde Patasz reflected a moment before he answered. "Conceivably you demand reasons where none exist, beyond the normal solicitude of a host for an honored guest."

"This is a possibility," admitted Farr. He smiled politely. "But perhaps other motivations also exist?"

"Conceivably. The raid of the Thords still troubles us and we are anxious for more information. But let us not concern ourselves with such matters today. As a botanist, I believe you will be interested in the contrivances of myself and Uder Che."

"Oh indeed." And for the next two hours Farr examined houses with buttressed pods for the high-gravity worlds of Cleo 8 and Martinon's Fort and loose complex houses with pods like balloons for Fei, where gravity was only half that of Iszm. There were trees comprised of a central columnar trunk and four vast leaves, arching out and over to the ground to form four domed halls illuminated by the pale green transmitted light. There was a tough-trunked tree supporting a single turret-like pod, with lanceolate foliage spiking outward at the base: a watch-tower for the feuding tribesmen of Eta Scorpionis. In a walled enclosure were trees with varying degrees of motility and awareness. "A new and adventurous area of research," Zhde Patasz told Farr. "We play with the idea of growing trees to perform special tasks, such as sentry duty, garden supervision, mineral exploration, simple machine tending. As I say, we are merely amusing ourselves at the moment. I understand that on Duroc Atoll, the master planter in residence has created a tree which first produces colored fibers, and from these weaves rugs of

characteristic pattern. We ourselves have performed our share of bizarre feats. For instance, in yonder cupola, we have achieved a conjunction which might be thought impossible, if one did not understand the basis of the adaptation."

Farr made a polite sound of wonder and admiration. He noted that both Omon Bozhd and Uder Che were giving particularly respectful attention to the planter's words, as if they signified something portentous. And suddenly Farr realized that whatever the motive for Zhde Patasz's elaborate hospitality, it was now about to be made clear to him.

Zhde Patasz continued in the harsh, crisp accent of the aristocratic Iszic, "The mechanism, if I may call it that, of this conjoining is in theory not difficult. The animal corpus depends upon food and oxygen, plus a few subsidiary compounds. The vegetable system, of course, produces these substances, and recycles the waste products of the animal. It is tempting to try for a closed system, requiring only energy from an external source. Our achievements, while I think you will find them dramatic, still fall far short of elegance. There is no little real mingling of tissue: all interchange is done across semi-permeable membranes which isolate plant fluids and animal fluids. Nevertheless a start has been made." As Zhde Patasz spoke he moved toward a pale yellow-green hemisphere above which tall yellow fronds swung and fluttered. Zhde Patasz gestured toward an arched opening. Omon Bozhd and Uder Che stayed discreetly to the rear. Farr looked at them, dubiously.

Zhde Patasz bowed once more. "As a botanist I am sure you will be fascinated by our achievement."

Farr studied the opening, trying to assess its implications. Within was something which the Iszics intended him to see, some stimulus which they intended him to experience. . . . Danger? They had no need to trick him; he was in any

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case at their mercy. Zhde Patasz moreover was bound by the universal laws of hospitality, as firmly as any Bedouin sheik. Danger there would be none. Farr stepped forward and passed into the interior of the dome. At the center was a slightly raised bed of rich soil, on which rested a large bubble, a sac of yellow gum. The surface of this sac was veined with glistening white strings and tubes of membrane which at the apex merged to form a pale gray trunk, which in turn supported a symmetrical crown of branches and wide heart-shaped black-green leaves. So much Farr glimpsed in an instant, though from the moment of his entry his attention was fixed on that which was contained in the capsule of gum: a naked Thord body. The feet rested in a dark yellow sediment at the bottom of the sac, the head was close up under the trunk, the arms were raised shoulder high and terminated, not in hands, but in tangled balls of gray fiber, which then became ropes rising into the trunk. The top of the scalp was removed, revealing the mass of orange spherules which comprised the Thord brain. About the exposed brain hung a nimbus which Farr, moving closer, saw to be a mesh of near-invisible threads, likewise knotting into a rope and disappearing into the trunk. The eyes were covered by the shutter of a dark brown membrane which served the Thord for eyelids.

Farr took a deep breath, fighting to control intense revulsion mingled with pity and a peculiar urgency he could not define. . . . He became aware of the attention of the Iszics and turned sharply. The double-segmented eyes of all three were riveted upon him.

Farr suppressed his emotions as best he could. Whatever the Iszics expected, he would make certain to disappoint them. "This must be the Thord with whom I was locked up."

Zhde Patasz came slowly forward, his lips twisting in and out. "You recognize him?"

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Farr shook his head. "I hardly saw him. He is an alien, and looks to me much like any other of his race." He peered more closely into the sac of amber gum. "Is he alive?"

"To a certain degree."

"Why do you bring me here?"

Zhde Patasz was almost certainly disturbed, perhaps even angry. Farr wondered what sort of complex plan had gone awry. He stared into the sac. The Thord—had it moved? Omon Bozhd, standing at his left, apparently had noticed the same almost imperceptible twitch of muscle. "The Thord have great psychic resources," said Omon Bozhd, moving forward.

Farr turned to Zhde Patasz. "It was my understanding that he had died."

"So he has," said Zhde Patasz, "for all practical purposes. He is no longer Chayen, Fourteenth of Tente, Baron of Binicristi Castle. His personality is departed, he is now an organ, or a nodule, attached to a tree."

Farr looked back to the Thord. The eyes had opened, and the face had taken on an odd expression. Farr wondered if the Thord could hear words, could understand. In Omon Bozhd beside him, there was a tension, a straining of perplexity. A quick glance showed the same rigidity now in Zhde Patasz and Uder Che. All stared in wonder at the Thord. Uder Che uttered a sudden staccato burst of Iszic, pointed to the foliage. Farr looked up to find that the leaves were shivering. There were no draughts, no currents of air within the dome. Farr looked back to the Thord, to find the eyes fixed on his own. The face strained, the muscles around the mouth had corded. Farr could not tear his gaze away. Now the mouth drooped, the lips quivered. Overhead the heavy branches creaked and groaned.

"Impossible!" croaked Omon Bozhd. "This is not a correct reaction!"

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The branches swayed and lurched. There was a terrifying crack and down swept a whistling mass of foliage, to fall upon Zhde Patasz and Uder Che. There was another groaning of tortured wood; the trunk split, the entire tree wavered and toppled. The sac burst, and the Thord sprawled out upon the floor, half-supported by the fiber bundles into which his arms terminated, His head lolled back and his mouth split into a ghastly grin. "I am no tree," he croaked in a throaty, gurgling voice. "I am Chayen of Tente." Trickles of yellow lymph oozed from his mouth. He coughed convulsively and fixed his gaze upon Farr. "Get hence, get hence. Leave these cursed tree-dwellers. Go, do what you must."

Omon Bozhd had leaped to assist Zhde Patasz from under the toppled tree; Farr looked toward them uncertainly. The Thord sank back. "Now I die," he said in a guttural whisper. "I die not as a tree of Iszm, but as a Thord, as Chayen of Tente."

Farr turned away, and gave assistance to Omon Bozhd and Zhde Patasz, who were trying to extricate Uder Che from under the foliage. But to no avail. A broken branch had driven through the architect's neck. Zhde Patasz gave a cry of despair. "The creature has wounded me in death as he troubled me in life. He has killed the most accomplished of architects." Zhde Patasz turned away and strode from the dome. Omon Bozhd and Farr followed.

The party returned to Tjiere Town, in gloom and silence. Zhde Patasz conducted himself toward Farr with no more than bare civility. When the glide-car slid into the central avenue, Farr said, "Zhde Patasz Sainh, the events of this afternoon have troubled you deeply, and I think it best that I no longer trespass on your hospitality."

Zhde Patasz responded curtly. "Farr Sainh must do as he thinks best."

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"I will carry with me forever the memory of my stay on Tjiere Atoll," said Farr fulsomely. "You have given me an insight into the problems of the Iszic planter, and for this I thank you."

Zhde Patasz bowed. "Farr Sainh may rest assured that we, on our part, will keep him ever fresh in our minds."

The glide-car stopped at the plaza beside which grew the three hotels and Farr alighted. After a moment's hesitation Omon Bozhd did likewise. There was a final exchange of formal thanks and equally formal disclaimers, and then the glide-car moved on.

Omon Bozhd went up to Farr. "And what are your plans now?" he inquired gravely.

"I will rent a room at the hotel," said Farr.

Omon Bozhd nodded, as if Farr had uttered a truth of great profundity. "And then?"

"My boat is still under charter," said Farr. He frowned. He had little desire to investigate the plantations of other atolls. "I'll probably return to Jhespiano. And then . . ."

"And then?"

Farr shrugged fretfully. "I'm not sure."

"In any event, I wish you a pleasant voyage."

"Thank you."

Farr crossed the plaza, registered at the largest of the hotels, and was shown to a suite of pods similar to those which he had occupied at the house of Zhde Patasz.

When he came down to the restaurant for his evening meal, the Szecr were once more in evidence, and Farr felt stifled. After the meal, a typical Iszic repast of marine and vegetable pastes, Farr walked down the avenue to the waterfront, where he ordered the *Lhaiz* made ready for immediate sailing. The captain was not aboard; the boatswain protested that dawn of the following day was the earliest possible time of departure, and Farr had to be content. To

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pass the evening he went to walk along the beach. The surf, the warm wind, the sand were like those of Earth, but the silhouettes of the alien trees and the two Szecr padding behind threw everything into a different context, and Farr felt a pang of homesickness. He had journeyed enough. It was time to return to Earth.

VI

FARR BOARDED the *Lhaiz* before Xi Aurigae had fully cleared the horizon, and with the freedom of the Pheadh before him his spirits lifted. The crew was at work, reeving halyards, unfolding sails; there was about the *Lhaiz* the electric sense of immediacy of a ship about to sail. Farr tossed his meager luggage into the after cabin, looked about for the captain, and gave orders to sail. The captain bowed, then called various orders to the crew. Half an hour passed, but the *Lhaiz* had not yet cast off. Farr went to the captain, who stood far forward. "Why the delay?"

The captain pointed below, to where a seaman in a punt worked on the hull. "A leak is being repaired, Farr Sainh. We will soon be underway."

Farr, returning to the elevated fan-tail, seated himself in the shade of an awning. Another fifteen minutes went by. Farr relaxed and began to take pleasure in the surroundings, the activity of the waterfront, the passers-by in their stripes and bands of various colors. . . . Three Szecr approached

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the *Lhaiz* and came aboard. They spoke to the captain, who turned and gave orders to the crew.

Sails bellied to the wind, mooring lines were cast off, rigging creaked. Farr jumped from his chair, suddenly furious. He started forward to order the *Szecz* ashore, then restrained himself. It would be an exercise in pure futility. Fuming with repressed rage, Farr returned to his chair. Bubbling, breasting through the blue water, the *Lhaiz* put out to sea. Tjiere Atoll dwindled, became a shadow on the horizon, then vanished. The *Lhaiz* scudded west, with the wind astern. Farr frowned. To the best of his recollection he had given no instructions as to their destination. He summoned the captain.

"I have given you no orders. Why do you sail west?"

The captain shifted the gaze of one segment of his eyes. "Our destination is Jhespiano. Is this not Farr Sainh's desire?"

"No," said Farr from sheer perversity. "We will head south, toward Vhejanh."

"But, Farr Sainh, should we not make directly for Jhespiano, you may well miss the departure of the spaceship!"

Farr could hardly speak for astonishment. "What is this to you?" he said at last. "Have I expressed a desire to board the spaceship?"

"No, Farr Sainh. Not to my hearing."

"Then kindly make no further assumptions regarding my wishes. We will sail for Vhejanh."

The captain hesitated. "Your orders, Farr Sainh, of course must be weighed carefully. There are also the commands of the *Szecz* to be considered. They desire that the *Lhaiz* proceed to Jhespiano."

"In that case," said Farr, "the *Szecz* can pay the charter fee. You will collect nothing from me."

The captain turned slowly away and went to consult the

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Szecz. There was a brief discussion, during which the captain and the Szecz turned to examine Farr who sat aloof on the fan-tail. At last the *Lhaiz* swung south on a reach, and the Szecz went angrily forward.

The voyage proceeded. Farr's relaxation soon vanished. The crew was as vigilant as ever, and less punctilious. The Szecz watched his every move and searched his cabin with an insolent casualness. Farr felt more like a prisoner than a tourist. It was almost as if he were being subjected to deliberate provocation, as if the aim were to make him disgusted with Iszm. "No difficulty in that case," Farr told himself grimly. "The day I leave this planet will be the happiest day of my life."

Vhejanh Atoll rose above the horizon, a group of islands which might have been the twin of Tjiere. Farr forced himself to go ashore but found nothing more interesting to do than sit on the terrace of the hotel with a goblet of *narciz*, a sharp, faintly salty beverage derived from seaweed, consumed in quantities by the Iszics of the Pheadh. As he departed he noticed a placard displaying a photograph of a spaceship, and a schedule of arrivals and departures. The *SS Andrei Simic* was scheduled to leave Jhespiano in three days. There was no other scheduled departures for four months. Farr considered the placard with great interest. He then returned to the dock, resigned his charter of the *Lhaiz*, after which he took air passage to Jhespiano.

He arrived the same evening, and at once booked passage aboard the *SS Andrei Simic* to Earth, whereupon he felt great comfort and peace of mind. "Ridiculous situation," he told himself in half-humorous self-contempt. "Six months ago I could think of nothing but travel to strange planets; now all I want is to go home to Earth."

The Spaceport Hotel at Jhespiano was an enormous rambling growth of a dozen interlinked trees. Farr was

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assigned a pleasant pod overlooking the canal leading from the lagoon into the heart of Jhespiano Town. With the time of his departure established Farr once more began to enjoy himself. His meals at the restaurant, pre-packaged and imported, were again palatable. The guests were a varied group, with representatives of most of the anthropoid races, including a dozen Earthers.

The sole annoyance was the continued surveillance by the Szecr, which became so pervasive that Farr complained first to the hotel management, then to the Szecr lieutenant, in both cases receiving only bland shrugs for his trouble. He finally marched across the compound to the little concrete bungalow which housed the office of the District Treaty Administrator, one of the few non-organic buildings on Iszm. The Administrator was a pudgy little Earther with a beak nose, a ruff of black hair and a fussy manner, to whom Farr took an immediate aversion. Nevertheless he explained his grievance in a reasonable measured manner and the Administrator promised to make inquiries.

Farr called the next day at the Administrative Mansion, a massive and dignified house overhanging the central canal. On this second visit the Administrator was only formally cordial, although he grudgingly asked Farr to lunch. They ate on a balcony, with boat-pods laden with fruit and flowers passing along the canal below.

"I called the Szecr Central about your case," the Administrator told Farr. "They're ambiguous, which is unusual. Usually they say bluntly, so-and-so is objectionable; he has been spying."

"I still don't understand why they should persecute me so intensely."

"Apparently you were present when a company of Arc-turians—"

"Thord."

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The Administrator acknowledged the correction. “. . . when the Thord made a massive raid on Tjiere plantation.”

“I was there, certainly.”

The Administrator fiddled with his coffee cup. “This has been enough, evidently, to arouse their suspicions. They believe that one or more spies in the guise of tourists have planned and controlled the raid, and apparently have selected you as one of the responsible parties.”

Farr leaned back in his chair. “That’s incredible. The Szecr dosed me with hypnotics, questioned me. They know everything I know. And afterwards the head planter at Tjiere had me as his house-guest. They *can’t* believe that I’m involved! It’s unreasonable!”

The Administrator gave a wry, noncommittal shrug. “This may be. The Szecr admit they have no special charge to bring against you. But, in some way or another you’ve managed to make yourself an object of suspicion.”

“And so, guilty or innocent, I have to be molested by their attentions? This isn’t either the letter or the spirit of the Treaty.”

“That may well be.” The Administrator was annoyed. “I fancy that I am as familiar with the provisions of the Treaty as you are.” He passed Farr a second cup of coffee, darting a curious glance at him as he did so. “I assume you’re not guilty. . . . But perhaps there’s something you know. Did you communicate with anyone they might suspect?”

Farr made an impatient motion. “They threw me into a cell with one of the Thord. I hardly spoke to him.”

The Administrator was obviously unconvinced. “There must be something you’ve done to bother them. The Iszics, no matter what you care to say, have no interest in harassing you or anyone else from sheer caprice.”

Farr lost his temper. “Who are you representing? Me? Or the Szecr?”

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The Administrator said coldly, "Try to see the situation from my viewpoint. After all it's not impossible that you are what they seem to think you are."

"First they have to prove it. And even then you are my legal representative. What else are you here for?"

The Administrator evaded the question. "I only know what you've told me. I spoke to the Iszic Commandant. He is noncommittal. Perhaps they regard you as a dupe, a decoy, a messenger. They may be waiting for you to make a false move or lead them to someone who will."

"They'll have a long wait. In fact, I'm the aggrieved party, not the Iszics."

"In what sense?"

"After the raid, they dropped me into a cell. I mentioned that they imprisoned me—threw me down a hollow root into an underground cell. I banged my head rather badly. In fact I'm still wearing scabs." He felt his scalp, where hair at last was beginning to grow, and sighed. It was evident that the Administrator would take no action. He looked around the balcony. "This place must be tapped for sound."

"I have nothing to conceal," said the Administrator stiffly. "They can listen night and day. They probably do." He rose to his feet. "When does your ship leave?"

"In two or three days, depending on cargo."

"My advice is to tolerate the surveillance, make the best of it."

Farr extended perfunctory thanks and departed. The Szecr were waiting. They bowed politely as Farr stepped out into the street. Farr drew a deep breath of resignation. Since there would evidently be no amelioration to the situation, he might as well make the best of it.

He returned to the hotel and showered in the translucent nodule attached to his pod. The liquid was a cool fresh-scented sap, issuing from a nozzle disturbingly like a cow's

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udder. After dressing in fresh garments provided by the hotel, Farr descended to the terrace. Bored with his own company he looked around the tables. He had formed some slight acquaintance with the other guests: Mr. and Mrs. Ander-view, a pair of peripatetic missionaries; Jonas Ralf, and Wilfred Willeran, engineers returning to Earth from Capella XII's great Equatorial Highway and now sitting with a group of touring school teachers only just arrived on Iszm; three round Monagi commercial travelers, Earth stock, but after a hundred and fifty years, already modified by the environment of Monago, or Taurus 61 III, to a characteristic somatic type. To their right were three Nenes, tall slender near-men, agile, voluble and clairvoyant, then a pair of young Earthers Farr understood to be students, then a group of Great Arcturians, the stock from which after a million years on a different planet the Thord had evolved. To the other side of the Monagis sat four Iszic in red and purple stripes, the significance of which Farr was ignorant, and not far distant, drinking a goblet of *narciz* with an air of intense preoccupation, another Iszic in blue, black and white. Farr stared. He could not be sure—all Iszic seemed much alike—but this individual almost certainly was Omon Bozhd.

Seeming to sense Farr's attention the man turned his head, nodded politely to Farr, then rose to his feet and came across the terrace. "May I join you?"

Farr indicated a chair. "I had not expected the pleasure of renewing our acquaintance so soon," he said dryly.

Omon Bozhd performed one of the bland Iszic gestures the significance of which was beyond Farr's understanding. "You did not know of my plans to visit Earth?"

"No, certainly not."

"Curious."

Farr said nothing.

"Our friend Zhde Patasz Sainh has asked me to convey to

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you a message," said Omon Bozhd. "First he transmits through me a correct Type 8 salute and the sense of his shame that disturbance marred your last day at Tjiere. That the Thord had psychic force sufficient for such an act is still almost incredible to us. Secondly, he counsels you to choose your associates with great caution during the next few months, and thirdly, he commends me to your care and hospitality on Earth, where I will be a stranger."

Farr mused. "How could Zhde Patasz Sainh know that I planned to return to Earth? When I left Tjiere this was not my intent."

"I spoke with him only last night by telecom."

"I see," said Farr grudgingly. "Well, naturally I'll do what I can to help you. Which part of Earth will you visit?"

"My plans are not yet complete. I go to inspect Zhde Patasz's houses at their various plantings, and no doubt will travel considerably."

"What do you mean 'choose my associates with caution'?"

"Just that. It seems that rumors of the Thord raid have reached Jhespiano, and have been enlarged in the process. Certain criminal elements might on this account be interested in your activities—but then, I speak too freely." Omon Bozhd rose to his feet, bowed, and departed. Farr stared after him in utter perplexity.

On the next evening the hotel management, taking cognizance of the large number of Earther guests, arranged a musical soiree, with Earth-style music and Earth-style refreshments. Almost all the guests, Earthers and otherwise, attended.

Farr became mildly intoxicated on Scotch-and-soda, to the extent that he found himself behaving with great gallantry toward the youngest and prettiest of the touring teachers. She seemed to return his interest and they strolled arm in arm along the promenade overlooking the beach.

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There was small talk, then suddenly she turned him an arch look. "If I may say so, you certainly don't seem the type."

"Type? What type?"

"Oh—you know. A man capable of fooling the Iszics and stealing trees right out from under their very noses."

Farr laughed. "Your instincts are correct. I'm not."

Again she turned him a quick sidewise look. "I've heard differently on ever so reliable authority."

Farr tried to keep his voice light and casual. "So? What did you hear?"

"Well—naturally it's supposed to be secret, because if the Iszics knew, you'd be sent to the Mad House, so obviously you wouldn't be particularly keen to talk about it. But the person who told me is quite reliable, and of course I'd never say a word to anyone. In fact, my reaction is, cheers!"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," said Farr in an edgy voice.

"No, I suppose you'd never really dare admit it," said the young woman regretfully. "After all, I might be an Iszic agent—they do have them, you know."

"Once and for all," said Farr, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The raid on Tjere," said the young woman. "It's going around that you're the brains behind the raid. That you're smuggling trees out of Iszm for delivery on Earth. Everybody is talking about it."

Farr laughed sadly. "What utter nonsense. If this were true, do you imagine I'd be at large? Of course not. The Iszics are considerably more clever than you give them credit for. . . . How did this ridiculous idea get started?"

The young woman was disappointed. She would have preferred a daring tree-thief to plain ordinary innocent Aile Farr. "I'm sure I don't know."

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"Where did you hear it?"

"At the hotel. Some of the people were talking about it."

"Anything for a sensation," said Farr.

The young woman sniffed and her demeanor was noticeably cooler as they returned to the terrace.

No sooner had they seated themselves than four Szecr, with head-dresses betokening high rank, marched across the room. They stopped at Farr's table, and bowed curtly. "If Farr Sainh pleases, his presence is requested elsewhere."

Farr sat back, half of a notion to defy the group. He looked around the terrace, but saw only averted faces. The teacher was in a transport of excitement.

"Where is my presence desired?" demanded Farr in a voice stiff with fury. "And why?"

"There are a few routine inquiries to be made, in connection with your professed business on Iszm."

"Can't it wait till tomorrow?"

"No, Farr Sainh. Please come at once."

Seething with indignation Farr rose to his feet, and surrounded by the Szecr, walked from the terrace.

He was taken a quarter-mile to a small three-pod tree near the beach. Within an old Iszic sat on a divan. He motioned Farr to sit opposite, and introduced himself as Usimr Adislj, of the caste comprising savants, theoreticians, philosophers and other formulators of abstract principles. "Learning of your presence in Jhespiano, and your almost immediate departure, I felt it my duty to make your acquaintance as expeditiously as possible. I understand that on Earth you are professionally connected with the field of knowledge that is one of our major preoccupations?"

"That is true," said Farr shortly. "I am immensely flattered by your attention, but I could have wished for its manifestation in less emphatic terms. Everyone at the hotel is certain

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I have been arrested by the Szecr for the crime of house-stealing."

Usimr Adislj gave an uninterested shrug. "This craving for morbid sensation is a general trait of those hominids of simian descent. It is an emotion I believe may best be countered by lofty contempt."

"Indeed," said Farr. "I agree. But was it necessary to send four Szecr with your invitation? It was less than discreet."

"No matter. Men of our stature cannot be bothered with such trifles. Now tell me of your background and your special interests."

For four hours he and Usimr Adislj discussed Iszm, Earth, the universe, the variations of man and the direction of the future. When the Szecr, their number and quality now reduced to a pair of underlings, finally escorted Farr back to the hotel, he felt that he had passed a highly rewarding evening.

The next morning, when he appeared on the terrace for breakfast, he was greeted with something like awe. Mrs. Anderview, the pretty young wife of the missionary, said, "We thought for sure you'd been taken away—to jail. Or even the Mad House. And we wondered if we shouldn't arouse the Administrator immediately."

"It was unimportant," said Farr. "Just a mistake. But thank you for your interest."

The Monagi also questioned him. "Is it a fact that you and the Thord have completely outwitted the Szecr? Because if so, we can make you a very handsome offer for any female tree of which you chance to find yourself in possession."

"I am capable of outwitting no one," declared Farr. "I own no female tree, by chance or otherwise."

The Monagi nodded and winked knowingly. "Naturally, naturally, not on Iszm where even the grass has ears."

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The next day the SS *Andrei Simic* dropped down from the sky, and departure hour was posted precisely: nine o'clock of the morning two days hence. During these final two days Farr found the Szecr possibly even more assiduous in their watchfulness. The night before departure one of them approached and with great punctilio delivered a message. "If Farr Sainh can spare the time, he is asked to call at the embarkation office."

"Very well," said Farr, resigning himself to the worst. He dispatched his luggage to the space-terminal, and presented himself at the embarkation office, expecting an examination to end all examinations.

The Szecr completely confounded him. He was conducted into the pod of the Szecr sub-commandant, who spoke bluntly and to the point.

"Farr Sainh—you may have sensed our interest during the last few weeks."

Farr expressed agreement.

"I may not divulge the background to the case," said the Szecr. "The surveillance was motivated by concern for your safety."

"My safety?"

"We suspect that you are in danger."

"Danger? Ridiculous."

"Not so. Quite the contrary. On the night of the musicale, we removed a poisoned thorn from your seat. On yet another occasion, while you drank on the terrace, poison was introduced into your goblet."

Farr's mouth dropped in astonishment. Somewhere, somehow, a terrible mistake was being made. "How can you be sure of all this? It seems—incredible!"

The Iszic flickered the filament dividing his double eyes in amusement. "You remember formalities connected with arrival at Iszm. They allow us to maintain a quarantine upon

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the import of weapons. Poison is a different matter. A speck of dust can be infected with ten million virulent bacteria, and can be concealed without difficulty. Hence, any out-worlorder planning murder must employ strangulation or poison. The vigilance of the Szecr prohibits acts of physical violence, so we must only be alert for poison. What are the vehicles? Food, drink, injection. When we classify the various means and devices to achieve these ends, we find one of the subdivisions to read: 'Poisoned thorn, splinter or barb, calculated to penetrate or puncture the thigh, haunch, or buttock, through vertical impingement under force of gravity.' Hence, our surveillance at all times includes the chair or benches where you are likely to sit."

"I see," said Farr in a subdued voice.

"Poison in your drink we detect by means of a reagent which darkens when a change of any sort is made in the mother solution. When one of your Scotch-and-sodas became unusually murky, we removed it and provided a substitute."

"This is extremely bewildering," said Farr. "Who would want to poison me? For what reason?"

"I have been authorized to communicate only this warning."

"But—what are you warning me against?"

"The details will contribute nothing to your safety."

"But—I've done nothing!"

The Szecr sub-commandant twirled his viewer. "The universe is eight billion years old, the last two billion of which have produced intelligent life. During this time not one hour of absolute equity has prevailed. It should be no surprise to find this basic condition applying to your personal affairs."

"In other words—"

"In other words—tread soundlessly, look around corners, follow enticing females into no dark chambers." He plucked a taut string; a young Szecr appeared. "Conduct Aile Farr

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Sainh aboard the *Andrei Simic*. We are waiving all further examinations."

Farr stared in disbelief.

"Yes, Farr Sainh," said the Szecr. "We feel you have demonstrated your honesty."

Farr left the pod in a daze of perplexity. Something was wrong. The Iszic waived examination of no one and nothing.

Alone in his cubicle aboard the *Andrei Simic*, he eased himself down on the elastic panel that served as his bed. He was in danger. The Szecr had said so. It was an unsettling idea. Farr had a normal quota of courage. In fighting tangible enemies he would not disgrace himself. But to learn that his life might be taken, to be ignorant of the hows and whys and wherefores—it brought a queasy turmoil to his stomach. . . . Of course, thought Farr, the Szecr sub-commandant might be in error; or he might have used the mysterious threat to speed Farr away from Iszm.

He rose to his feet and searched his cabin. He found no overt mechanisms, no spy-cells. He arranged his possessions in such a way that he would notice a disturbance. Then, sliding aside the fiber panel, he looked out upon the catwalk. It was a ribbon of striated gray glass—empty. Farr stepped out and walked hurriedly to the lounge.

He examined the roster. There were twenty-eight passengers including himself. Some of the names he recognized: Mr. and Mrs. Anderview, Jones Ralf, Wilfred Willeran and Omon Bozhd; others, approximate renderings of alien phonemes, meant nothing.

Farr returned to his cabin, locked the door, and lay down on the bed.

VII

NOT TILL the *Andrei Simic* was space-borne and the captain came to the lounge for the routine reading of the ship's regulations did Farr see his fellow passengers. There were seven Iszic, nine Earthers, the three Monagi savants, three Codain monks performing a ritual pilgrimage around the worlds, five others of assorted worlds, most of whom had arrived at Iszm with the ship. Except for Omon Bozhd, the Iszic wore the gold and black stripes of planter's agents, high-caste austere men, more or less of a type. Farr presumed that two or perhaps three were Szecr. The Earthers included a pair of talkative young students, a grizzled sanitary engineer on leave to Earth, the Anderviews, Ralf and Willeran, and Carto and Maudel Wlewska, a young couple on tour.

Farr assessed the group, trying to picture each in the role of a potential assassin and finally admitted himself at a loss. Those who had already been aboard the ship seemed automatically eliminated from suspicion, as did the Codain monks and the cherubic Monagi. It was wildly unreasonable to suspect the Iszics, which more or less left the Earthers—but why should any of these seek to harm him? Why should he expect harm from anyone? He scratched his head in perplexity, disturbing the scab he still carried from his slide down the Tjiere root-tube.

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The voyage settled into routine—steady identical hours broken by meals and sleep-periods at whatever rhythm the passenger chose. To while away the tedium, or perhaps because the tedium provided nothing else to think of, Farr began an innocent flirtation with Mrs. Anderview. Her husband was engrossed in writing a voluminous report regarding the achievements of his mission at Dapa Coory, on the planet Mazen, and was seen only at meal-times, leaving Mrs. Anderview much to herself—and to Farr. She was a graceful woman, with a rich mouth and a provocative half-smile. Farr's part in the affair extended no further than a frame of mind, a warmth of tone, a significant glance or two—a lukewarm matter at best. He was correspondingly surprised when Mrs. Anderview, whose first name he did not know, came quietly into his cabin one evening, smiling with a kind of shy recklessness.

Farr sat up blinking.

"May I come in?"

"You're already in."

Mrs. Anderview nodded slowly and slid the panel shut behind her. Farr noticed suddenly that she was far prettier than he had let himself observe, that she wore a perfume of indefinable sweetness: aloes, cardamon, limone.

She sat beside him. "I grow so bored," she complained. "Night after night Merritt writes, it's always the same. He thinks of nothing but his budget. And I—I like fun."

The invitation could hardly have been more explicit. Farr examined first one side of the situation then the other. He cleared his throat, while Mrs. Anderview, blushing a little, watched him.

There was a rap at the door. Farr jumped to his feet, as if he were already guilty. He eased the panel open. Waiting outside was Omon Bozhd.

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"Farr Sainh, may I consult you for a moment? I would consider it a great favor."

"Well," said Farr, "I'm busy right now."

"The matter transcends business."

Farr turned to the woman. "Just a minute, I'll be right back."

"Hurry!" She seemed very impatient. Farr looked at her in surprise and started to speak.

"Sh," she warned him. Farr shrugged and stepped out into the corridor.

"What's the trouble?" he asked Omon Bozhd.

"Farr Sainh—would you like to save your life?"

"Very much indeed," said Farr, "but—"

"Invite me into your cabin." Omon Bozhd took a step forward.

"There's hardly room," said Farr. "And anyway—"

The Iszic said earnestly, "You understand the pattern, do you not?"

"No," said Farr. "I'd like to—but I'm afraid I don't."

Omon Bozhd nodded. "Your gallantry must be forgotten. Let us enter your cabin. There is not much time." Sliding back the panel, he stepped through. Farr followed, sure he was a fool, but not sure exactly what kind of fool.

Mrs. Meritt Anderview jumped to her feet. "Oh," she gasped, flushing. "Mr. Farr!"

Farr held out his hands helplessly. Mrs. Anderview started to march from the cabin, but Omon Bozhd stood in her way. He grinned, his pale mouth split, showing his gray palate and his arch of pointed teeth.

"Please, Mrs. Anderview, do not leave, your reputation is safe."

"I have no time to waste," she said sharply. Farr saw suddenly that she was not pretty, that her face was pinched, her eyes angry and selfish.

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"Please," said Omon Bozhd, "not just yet. Sit down, if you will."

A rap-rap on the door. A voice hoarse with fury. "Open up, open up in there!"

"Certainly," said Omon Bozhd. He flung the panel wide. Anderview stood framed in the opening, the whites of his eyes showing. He held a shatter-gun, his hand was trembling. He saw Omon Bozhd, his shoulders sagged, his jaw slackened.

"Excuse me for not asking you in," said Farr. "We're a little crowded."

Anderview reorganized his passion. "What's going on in here!"

Mrs. Anderview pushed out upon the catwalk. "Nothing," she said in a throaty voice. "Nothing at all." She swept down the corridor.

In a negligent voice Omon Bozhd spoke to Anderview. "There is nothing for you here. Perhaps you had better join your lady."

Anderview slowly turned on his heel and departed.

Farr felt weak in the knees. Here were depths he could not fathom, whorls of motive and purpose. . . . He sank down on the bunk, burning at the thought of how he had been played for a sucker.

"An excellent pretext for expunging a man," remarked the Iszic. "At least in the framework of Earth institutions."

Farr glanced up sharply, detecting a sardonic flavor to the remark. He said grudgingly, "I guess you saved my hide—two or three square feet of it, anyway."

Omon Bozhd moved his hand, gesturing with a non-existent viewer. "A trifle."

"Not to me," Farr growled. "I like my hide."

The Iszic turned to go.

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"Just a minute," said Farr. He rose to his feet. "I want to know what's going on."

"The matter is surely self-explanatory?"

"Maybe I'm stupid."

The Iszic examined him thoughtfully. "Perhaps you're too close to the situation to see it in its whole."

"You're of the Szecr?" asked Farr.

"Every foreign agent is of the Szecr."

"Well, what's going on? Why are the Anderviews after me?"

"They've weighed you, balanced your usefulness against the danger you represent."

"This is absolutely fantastic!"

Omon Bozhd focused both fractions of his eyes on Farr. He spoke in a reflective key. "Every second of existence is a new miracle. Consider the countless variations and possibilities that await us every second—avenues into the future. We take only one of these; the others—who knows where they go? This is the eternal marvel, the magnificent uncertainty of the second next to come, with the past a steady unfolding carpet of denouement."

"Yes, yes," said Farr.

"Our minds become numbed to the wonder of life, because of its very pressure and magnitude." Omon Bozhd at last took his eyes off Farr. "In such a perspective this affair has intrinsic interest no more or less than taking a single breath."

Farr said in a stiff voice, "I can breathe as many times as I care to. I can die only once, so there does seem a certain practical difference. Apparently you think so too—and I admit to being in your debt. But—why?"

Omon Bozhd swung his absent viewer. "Iszic rationale is of course different to that of the Earther. We, nevertheless, share certain instincts, such as reverence for vitality and the impulse to aid our acquaintances."

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"I see," said Farr. "Your action then was merely a friendly good turn?"

Omon Bozhd bowed. "You may regard it as such. And now I will bid you good night." He left the cabin.

Farr sat numbly upon his bed. In the last few minutes the Anderviews had metamorphosed from a kindly, rather remote, missionary and his attractive wife to a pair of ruthless murderers. But why? *Why?*

Farr shook his head in abject puzzlement. The Szecr subcommandant had mentioned a poisoned thorn and a poisoned drink: evidently their responsibility as well. Angrily he jumped to his feet, strode to the door, which he slid back and looked along the catwalk. To right and left glimmered the gray glass ribbon. Overhead a smiliar ribbon gave access to the cabins next above. Farr quietly left the cabin, walked to the end of the catwalk, and looked through the arch into the lounge. The two young tourists, the sanitary engineer, and a pair of Iszic were playing poker. The Iszic were ahead of the game, with one fraction of their eyes focused on the cards, the other on the faces of their opponents.

Farr turned back. He climbed the ladder to the upper deck. There was silence except for the normal half-heard sounds of the ship—the sigh of pumps, the murmur of circulating air, the subdued mutter from the lounge.

Farr found the door with a placard reading *Merritt and Anthea Anderview*. He hesitated, listening. He heard nothing, no sounds, no voices. He put his hand out to knock, then paused. He recollected Omon Bozhd's dissertation on life, the infinity of avenues to the future. . . . He could knock, he could return to his cabin. He knocked.

No one answered. Farr looked up and down the catwalk. He could still return to his cabin. He tried the door. It opened. The room was dark. Farr put his elbow to the

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moulding; light filled the room. Merritt Anderview, sitting stiffly in a chair, looked at him with a wide fearless gaze.

Farr saw he was dead. Anthea Anderview lay in the lower bunk, relaxed and quite composed.

Farr made no close inspection, but she was dead too. A shatter-gun vibrating at low intensity had homogenized their brains; their thoughts and memories were brown melange; their chosen avenues into the future had come to a break. Farr stood still. He tried to hold his breath, but he knew the damage had already been done. He backed out and closed the door. The stewards would presently find the bodies. . . . In the meantime—Farr stood thinking with growing uneasiness. He might have been observed. His stupid flirtation with Anthea Anderview might be common knowledge, perhaps even the argument with Merritt Anderview. His presence in the cabin could be easily established. There would be a film of his exhalations on every object in the room. This constituted positive identification in the court-rooms, if it could be shown that no other person aboard the ship fell into his exhalation group.

Farr turned. He left the cabin and crossed the lounge. No one appeared to observe him. He climbed the ladder to the bridge and knocked at the door of the captain's cabin.

Captain Dorristy slid the panel back—a stocky taciturn man with squinting black eyes. Behind Dorristy stood Omon Bozhd. Farr thought that his cheek muscles tightened and that his hand gave a jerk as if he were twirling his viewer.

Farr felt suddenly at ease. He had rolled with whatever punch Omon Bozhd was trying to deliver. "Two passengers are dead—the Anderviews."

Omon Bozhd turned both eye-fractions on him: cold animosity.

"That's interesting," said Dorristy. "Come in."

Farr stepped through the door. Omon Bozhd looked away.

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Dorristy said in a soft voice, "Bozhd here tells me that you killed the Anderviews."

Farr turned to look at the Iszic. "He's probably the most plausible liar on the ship. He did it himself."

Dorristy grinned, looking from one to the other. "He says you were after the woman."

"I was politely attentive. This is a dull trip. Up to now."

Dorristy looked at the Iszic. "What do you say, Omon Bozhd?"

The Iszic swung his non-existent viewer. "Something more than politeness brought Mrs. Anderview to Farr's cabin."

Farr said, "Something other than altruism brought Omon Bozhd to my cabin to prevent Anderview from shooting me."

Omon Bozhd feigned surprise. "I know nothing whatever of your liasons."

Farr checked his anger and turned to the Captain. "Do you believe him?"

Dorristy grinned sourly. "I don't believe anyone."

"This is what happened. It's hard to believe but it's true." Farr told his story. ". . . after Bozhd left, I got thinking. I was going to get to the bottom of it, one way or the other. I went to the Anderviews' cabin. I opened the door, saw they were dead. I came here at once."

Dorristy said nothing, but now he was examining Omon Bozhd rather than Farr. At last he shrugged. "I'll seal the room. You can sweat it out when we get to Earth."

Omon Bozhd obscured the lower half of his eyes. He swung the absent viewer nonchalantly. "I have heard Farr's story," he said in a thoughtful voice. "He impresses me with his frankness. I believe I am mistaken. It is not likely that he performed the crime. I retract my accusation." He stalked from the cabin. Farr gazed after him in angry triumph.

Dorristy looked at Farr. "You didn't kill them, eh?"

Farr snorted. "Of course not."

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"Who did?"

"My guess would be one or another of the Iszics. Why? I have no idea."

Dorristy nodded, then spoke gruffly from the side of his mouth, "Well—we'll see when we put down at Barstow." He glanced sidewise at Farr. "I'll take it as a favor if you keep this matter quiet. Don't discuss it with anyone."

"I didn't intend to," said Farr shortly.

VIII

THE BODIES were photographed and removed to cold storage; the cabin was sealed. The ship buzzed with rumor and Farr found the Anderviews a difficult topic to avoid.

Earth grew closer. Farr felt no great apprehension, but the uncertainty, the underlying mystery remained: why had the Anderviews waylaid him in the first place? Would he run into further danger on Earth? Farr became angry. These intrigues were no concern of his; he wanted no part of them. But an uncomfortable conviction kept pushing up from his subconscious: he was involved, however bitterly he rejected the idea. He had other things to do—his job, his thesis, the compilation of a stereo which he hoped to sell to one of the broadcast networks.

And there was something else, a curious urgency, a pressure, something to be done. It came at odd moments to trouble Farr—a dissatisfaction, like an unresolved chord in

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some deep chamber of his mind. It had no direct connection with the Anderviews and their murderer, no link with anything. It was something to be done, something he had forgotten . . . or never known. . . .

Omon Bozhd spoke to him only once, approaching him in the lounge. He said in an offhand voice, "You are now aware of the threat you face. On Earth I may be unable to help you."

Farr's resentment had not diminished. He said, "On Earth you'll probably be executed for murder."

"No, Aile Farr Sainh, it will not be proved against me."

Farr examined the pale narrow face. Iszic and Earther—evolved from different stock to the same humanoid approximation: simian, amphibian. But there would never be a rapport or sympathy between the races. Farr asked curiously, "You didn't kill them?"

"Certainly it is unnecessary to iterate the obvious to a man of Aile Farr's intelligence."

"Go ahead, iterate it. Reiterate it. I'm stupid. Did you kill them?"

"It is unkind of you to require an answer to this question."

"Very well, don't answer. But why did you try to pin it on me? You know I didn't do it. What have you got against me?"

Omon Bozhd smiled thinly. "Nothing whatever. The crime, if crime it was, could never be proved against you. The investigation would delay you two or three days, and allow other matters to mature."

"Why did you retract your accusation?"

"I saw I had made a mistake. I am hominid—far from infallible."

Sudden anger threatened to choke Farr. "Why don't you stop talking in hints and implications? If you've got something to say—say it."

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"Farr Sainh is himself pressing the matter. I have nothing to say. The message I had for him I delivered; he would not expect me to lay bare my soul."

Farr nodded and grinned. "One thing you can be sure of—if I see a chance to spike the game you're playing—I'll take it."

Every hour the star that was Home Sun brightened; every hour Earth was closer. Farr found himself unable to sleep. A sour lump formed in his stomach. Resentment, perplexity, impatience compounded into a malaise whose effects were physical. In addition, his scalp had never healed properly; it itched and smarted. He suspected that he had contracted an Iszic infection. The prospect alarmed him. He pictured the infection spreading, his hair falling out, his scalp bleaching to the watered-milk color of the Iszic skin. Nor did the mysterious inner urgency diminish. He sought through his mind. He reviewed the days and months, he made notes and outlines, synthesized and checked without satisfaction. He bundled the whole problem, all the notes and papers, into an angry ball and cast it aside.

And at last, after the longest, most exasperating voyage Farr had ever made the *SS Andrei Simic* drifted into the Solar System.

IX

SUN, EARTH, the Moon: an archipelago of bright round islands, after a long passage through a dark sea. Sun drifted off to one side, Moon slipped away to the other. Earth expanded ahead: gray, green, tan, white, blue—full of clouds and winds, sunburn, frosts, draughts, chills and dusts, the navel of the universe, the depot, terminal, clearing-house, which the outer races visited as provincials.

It was at midnight when the hull of the *Andrei Simic* touched Earth. The generators sang down out of inaudibility, down through shrillness, through treble, tenor, baritone, bass, and once more out of hearing.

The passengers waited in the saloon, with the Anderviews like holes in a jaw from which teeth had been pulled. Everyone was taut and apprehensive, sitting forward in their seats or standing stiffly.

The pumps hissed, adjusting to the outer atmosphere. Lights glared in through the ports. The entrance clanged open; there was a murmur of voices, Captain Dorristory ushered in a tall man with blunt, intelligent features, cropped hair and dark-brown skin.

"This is Detective Inspector Kirdy of the Special Squad," said Dorristory. "He will investigate the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Anderview. Please give him your cooperation; we'll all be at liberty the sooner."

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No one spoke. The Iszic stood like statues of ice to one side. In deference to Earth convention they wore trousers and capes. Their attitude conveyed suspicion, distrust, as if even on Earth they felt impelled to protect their secrets.

Three subordinate detectives entered the room, stared around curiously, and the tautness in the room increased.

Inspector Kirdy spoke in a pleasant voice, "I'll delay you as little as possible. I'd like to speak to Mr. Omon Bozhd."

Omon Bozhd inspected Kirdy through the viewer, which he now carried, but Detective Inspector Kirdy's right shoulder blazed into no banner of various lights; he had never visited Iszm; he had never ventured past Moon.

Omon Bozhd stepped forward. "I am Omon Bozhd."

Kirdy took him to the Captain's cabin. Ten minutes passed. An assistant appeared in the door. "Mr. Aile Farr."

Farr rose to his feet and followed the assistant from the saloon.

Kirdy and Omon Bozhd faced each other, a study in contrasts: the latter pale, austere, aquiline; the other dark, warm, blunt.

Kirdy said to Farr, "I'd like you to listen to Mr. Bozhd's story, tell me what you think of it." He turned to the Iszic. "Would you be kind enough to repeat your statement?"

"In essence," said Omon Bozhd, "the situation is this. Even before leaving Jhespiano I had reason to suspect that the Anderviews were planning harm to Farr Sainh. I communicated my suspicions to my friends."

"The other Iszic gentlemen?" asked Kirdy.

"Exactly. With their help I installed an inspection-cell in the Anderviews' cabin. My fears were justified. They returned to their cabin, and here they themselves were killed. In my cabin I witnessed the occurrence. Farr Sainh of course had no part in the matter. He was—and is—completely innocent."

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They scrutinized Farr. Farr scowled. Was he so obviously ingenuous, so undiscerning?

Omon Bozhd turned a fraction of his eyes back to Kirdy. "Farr as I say, was innocent. But I considered it wise to have him confined away from further danger, so I falsely accused him. Farr Sainh, understandably, refused to cooperate, and forestalled me. My accusation was arousing no conviction in Captain Dorristy, so I withdrew it."

Kirdy turned to Farr. "What do you say to all this, Mr. Farr? Do you still believe Mr. Bozhd to be the murderer?"

Farr struggled with his anger. "No," he said between his teeth. "His story is so—so utterly fantastic that I suppose it's the truth." He looked at Omon Bozhd. "Why don't you talk? You say you saw the whole thing. Who did the killing?"

Omon Bozhd swung his viewer. "I have glanced over your laws of criminal procedure. My accusation would carry no great weight; the authorities would need corroborative evidence. That evidence exists. If and when you find it, my statement becomes unnecessary, or at best supplementary."

Kirdy turned to his assistant. "Take skin-scrapings, breath and perspiration samples of all the passengers."

After the samples were collected, Kirdy stepped into the saloon and made a statement. "I will question you separately. Those who so desire will be allowed to give their evidence with the cephaloscope as an adjunct, and these responses will naturally take on more weight. I remind you that cephaloscope evidence can not be introduced in court to prove guilt—only to prove innocence. The cephaloscope at worst can only fail to eliminate you from the suspects. I remind you further that refusal to use the cephaloscope is not only a privilege and a right, but considered by many a moral duty. Hence those who prefer to give evidence

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without cephaloscope verification incur no prejudice. Use of the instrument is optional with you."

The interrogations lasted three hours. First to be queried were the Iszic. They left the saloon one at a time, returning with identical expressions of bored patience. The Codain were interviewed next, then the Monagi, then the various other non-Earthers, and then Farr. Kirdy indicated the cephaloscope. "Use of the instrument is at your option."

Farr was in a bad humor. "No," he said. "I despise the contraption, you take my evidence as I give it or not at all."

Kirdy nodded politely. "Very well, Mr. Farr." He consulted his notes. "You first met the Anderviews at Jhespiano, on Iszm?"

"Yes." Farr described the circumstances.

"You had never seen them before?"

"Never."

"I understand that during your visit to Iszm you witnessed a tree-raid."

Farr described the event and his subsequent adventures. Kirdy asked one or two questions, then allowed Farr to return to the saloon.

One at a time the remaining Earthers were interrogated: Ralf and Willeran, the Wlewskas, the young students, until only Paul Bengston, the gray-haired sanitary engineer remained. Kirdy accompanied the students back to the saloon. "So far," he said, "either the cephaloscope or other evidence had cleared everyone I have interviewed. The other evidence consisting principally of the fact that the breath components of no one I have interviewed match the film detected on the wrist-band worn by Mrs. Anderview."

Everyone in the room stirred. Eyes wandered to Paul Bengston, who went white and red by turns.

"Will you come with me, sir?"

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He rose, took short steps forward, looked left and right, then preceded Kirdy into the Captain's cabin.

Five minutes passed. Kirdy's assistant appeared in the lounge. "We are sorry to have kept you waiting. You are all at liberty to debark."

There was talk around the lounge—a sputter and hum. Farr sat silent. A pressure began to build up inside him: anger, frustration, humiliation. The pressure grew, and finally burst up, to flood his mind with fury. He jumped to his feet, strode across the lounge, and climbed the steps to the Captain's cabin.

Kirdy's assistant stopped him. "Excuse me, Mr. Farr. I don't think you'd better interrupt."

"I don't care what you think," snapped Farr. He yanked at the door. It was locked. He rapped. Captain Dorristy slid it open a foot and pushed his square face out. "Well? What's the trouble?"

Farr put his hand on Dorristy's chest, pushed him back, thrust open the door, and stepped inside. Dorristy started a punch for Farr's face. Farr would have welcomed it as an excuse to strike back, to smash, to hurt. But one of the assistants stepped between.

Kirdy stood facing Paul Bengston. He turned his head. "Yes, Mr. Farr?"

Dorristy, seething, muttering, red in the face, stood back. Farr said, "This man—he's guilty?"

Kirdy nodded. "The evidence is conclusive."

Farr looked at Bengston. His face blurred and swam and seemed to alter, as if by trick photography, with the candor and mild good humor becoming deceit and cruelty and callousness. Farr wondered how he could have been deceived. He bent a little forward; Paul Bengston met his eyes with defiance and dislike.

"Why?" he asked. "Why did all this happen?"

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Bengston made no answer.

"I've got a right to know," said Farr. "Why?"

Still no answer.

Farr swallowed his pride. "Why?" he asked humbly, "Won't you please tell me?"

Paul Bengston shrugged, laughed foolishly.

Farr pled with him. "Is it something I know? Something I've seen? Something I own?"

An emotion close to hysteria seemed to grip Bengston. He said, "I just don't like the way your hair is combed." And he laughed till the tears came.

Kirdy said grimly, "I haven't got any better from him."

"What could be his motive?" asked Farr plaintively. "His reason? Why would the Anderviews want to kill me?"

"If I find out I'll let you know," said Kirdy. "Meanwhile—where can I get in touch with you?"

Farr considered. There was something he had to do. . . . It would come to him, but in the meantime! "I'm going to Los Angeles. I'll be at the Imperador Hotel."

"Fool," said Bengston under his breath.

Farr took a half-step forward. "Easy, Mr. Farr," said Kirdy.

Farr turned away.

"I'll let you know," said Kirdy.

Farr looked at Dorristy. Dorristy said, "Never mind. Don't bother to apologize."

X

WHEN FARR returned to the lounge, the other passengers had debarked and were passing through the immigration office. Farr hurriedly followed them out, almost in claustrophobic panic. The *SS Andrei Simic*, the magnificent bird of space, enclosed him like a clamp, a coffin; he could wait no longer to leave, to stand on the soil of Earth.

It was almost morning. The wind off the Mojave blew in his face, aromatic with sage and desert dust; the stars glinted, paling in the east. At the top of the ramp, Farr automatically looked up and searched out Auriga. There: Capella, there—the faintest of glitters—Xi Aurigae beside which swung Iszm. Farr walked down the ramp and planted his foot on the ground. He was back on Earth. The impact seemed to jar an idea into his head. Of course, he thought, with a feeling of relief, the natural thing to do, the obvious man to see: K. Penche.

Tomorrow. First to the Hotel Imperador. A bath in a hundred gallons of hot water. A hundred gallons of Scotch for a nightcap. Then bed.

Omon Bozhd approached. "It has been a pleasure knowing you, Farr Sainh. A word of advice: use vast caution. I suspect that you are still in great danger." He bowed, then walked away. Farr stood looking after him. He felt no disposition to scoff off the warning.

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He passed immigration quickly and dispatched his luggage to the Imperador. By-passing the line of helicabs, he stepped down the shaft to the public tube. The disk appeared under his feet (always a thrill in the shaft, always the thought: suppose the disk doesn't come? Just this once?).

The disk slowed to a stop. Farr paid his fare, summoned a one-man car to the dock, jumped in, dialed his destination, and relaxed into the seat. He could not marshal his thoughts. Visions seeped through his mind: the regions of space, Iszm, Jhespiano, the many-podded houses. He sailed in the *Lhaiz* to Tjiere atoll. He felt the terror of the raid on the fields of Zhde Patasz, the fall down the root into the dungeon, the confinement with the Thord—and later, the terrible experience on Zhde Patasz's experimental islet. . . . The visions passed; they were a memory, far away, farther than the light years to Iszm.

The hum of the car soothed him. His eyes grew heavy; he started to doze.

He pulled himself awake, blinking. Shadowy, phantasmagorical, this whole affair. But it was real. Farr forced himself into a sober frame of mind. But his mind refused to reason, to plan. The stimuli had lost their sting. Here in the tube, the sane normal underground tube, murder seemed impossible. . . .

One man on Earth could help him: K. Penche, Earth agent for the Iszic houses, the man to whom Omon Bozhd brought bad news.

The car vibrated, jerked, and shunted off the main tube toward the ocean. It twisted twice more, threading the maze of local tubes, and coasted finally to a stop.

The door snapped open and an uniformed attendant assisted him to the deck. He registered at a stereoscreen booth; an elevator lofted him two hundred feet to the surface, then another five hundred feet to his room level. He

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was shown into a long chamber, finished in pleasant tones of olive green, straw, russet and white. One wall was sheer glass looking over Santa Monica, Beverly Hills and the ocean. Farr sighed in contentment. Iszic houses in many ways were remarkable, but never would they supersede the Hotel Imperador.

Farr took his bath, floating in hot water faintly scented with lime. Rhythmical fingers of cooler water jetted and surged, massaging his legs, back, ribs, shoulders. . . . He almost fell asleep. The bottom of the tub elevated, angled gently to vertical, and set him on his feet. Blasts of air removed his wetness; sunlamp radiation gave him a quick pleasant scorch.

He came out of the bath to find a tall Scotch-and-soda waiting for him—not a hundred gallons, but enough. He stood at the window, sipping, enjoying the sense of utter fatigue.

The sun came up; golden light washed in like a tide across the vast reaches of the world-city. Somewhere out there, in the luxury district that had once been Signal Hill, dwelt K. Penche. Farr felt an instant of puzzlement. Strange, he thought, how Penche represented the solution to everything. Well, he'd know whether that was right or not when he saw the man.

Farr polarized the window and light died from the room. He set the wall clock to call him at noon, sank into bed, and fell asleep.

The window depolarized, and daylight entered the room. Farr awoke, sat up in bed, and reached for a menu. He ticked off coffee, grapefruit, bacon, eggs. Then he jumped out of bed and went to the window. The world's largest city spread as far as he could see, white spires melting into the tawny haze, everywhere a trembling and vibration of commerce and life.

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The wall extruded a table set with his breakfast. Farr turned away from the window, seated himself, ate and watched news on the stereoscreen. For a minute he forgot his troubles. After his long absence, he had lost the continuity of the news. Events which he might have overlooked a year ago suddenly seemed interesting. He felt a cheerful flush. It was good to be home on Earth.

The news-screen voice said, "Now for some flashes from outer space. It has just been learned that aboard the Red Ball Packet *Andrei Simic* two passengers, ostensibly missionaries returning from service in the Mottram Group . . ."

Farr watched, his breakfast forgotten, the cheerful glow fading.

The voice recounted the affair. The screen modeled the *Andrei Simic*: first the exterior, then a cutaway, with an arrow directing attention to "the death cabin". How pleasant and unconcerned was this commentator! How remote and incidental he made the affair seem!

". . . the two victims and the murderer have all been identified as members of the notorious Heavy Weather crime-syndicate. Apparently they had visited Iszm, third planet of Xi Aurigae, in an attempt to smuggle out a female house."

The voice spoke on. Simulacra of the Anderviews and Paul Bengston appeared.

Farr clicked off the screen and pushed the table back into the wall. Rising to his feet, he went to look out over the city. It was urgent. He must see Penche.

From the Size 2 cupboard he selected underwear, a suit of pale blue fiber, fresh sandals. As he dressed he planned out his day. First, of course, Penche . . . Farr frowned and paused in the buckling of his sandals. What should he tell Penche? Come to think of it, why would Penche worry about

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his troubles? What could Penche do? His monopoly stemmed from the Iszic; he would hardly risk antagonizing them.

Farr took a deep breath and shrugged aside these annoying speculations. It was illogical, but quite definitely the right place to go. He was sure of this; he felt it in his bones.

He finished dressing, went to the stereoscreen, and dialed the office of K. Penche. Penche's symbol appeared— a conventionalized Iszic house, with vertical bars of heavy type, reading *K. Penche-Houses*. Farr had not touched the scanning button, and his own image did not cross to Pench's office, an act of instinctive caution.

A female voice said, "K. Penche Enterprises."

"This is—" Farr hesitated and withheld his name. "Connect me to Mr. Penche."

"Who is speaking?"

"My name is confidential."

"What is your business, please?"

"Confidential."

"I'll connect you to Mr. Penche's secretary."

The secretary's image appeared—a young woman of languid charm. Farr repeated his request. The secretary looked at the screen. "Send over your image, please."

"No," said Farr. "Connect me with Mr. Penche—I'll talk directly to him."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," said the secretary. "Quite contrary to our office procedure."

"Tell Mr. Penche that I have just arrived from Iszm on the *Andrei Simic*."

The secretary turned and spoke into a mesh. After a second her face melted and the screen filled with the face of K. Penche. It was a massive powerful face, like a piece of heavy machinery. The eyes burned from deep rectangular sockets, bars of muscles clamped his mouth. The eyebrows

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rose in a sardonic arch; the expression was neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

"Who's speaking?" asked K. Penche.

Words rose up through Farr's brain like bubbles from the bottom of a dark vat. They were words he had never intended to say. "I've come from Iszm; I've got it." Farr heard himself in amazement. The words came again. "I've come from Iszm . . ." He clamped his teeth and refused to vocalize. The syllables bounced back from the barrier.

"Who is this? Where are you?"

Farr reached over, turned off the screen, and sank weakly back into his chair. What was going on? He had nothing for Penche. 'Nothing' meant a female house, naturally. Farr might be naive but not to that degree. He had no house, seed, seedling or sapling.

Why did he want to see Penche? Pent-up common-sense broke through to the top of his mind. Penche couldn't help him . . . A voice from another part of his brain said, Penche knows the ropes, he'll give you good advice. . . . Well, yes, thought Farr weakly. This might be true enough.

Farr relaxed. Yes, of course—that was his motive. But, on the other hand, Penche was a businessman, dependent on the Iszic. If Farr were to go to anyone it should be to the police, to the Special Squad.

He sat back rubbing his chin. Of course, it wouldn't hurt to see the man, maybe get it off his chest.

Farr jumped to his feet in disgust. It was unreasonable. Why should he see Penche? Give him just one good reason. . . There was no reason whatever. He came to a definite decision: he would have nothing to do with Penche.

He left the room, descended to the main lobby of the Imperador, and crossed to the desk to cash a bank coupon. The coupon was screened to the bank; there would be a wait of a few seconds. Farr tapped his fingers on the counter

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impatiently. Beside him a burly frog-faced man argued with the clerk. He wanted to deliver a message to a guest, but the clerk was skeptical. The burly man began to bite off his words in anger; the clerk stood behind his glass bulwark, prim, fastidious, shaking his head. Serene in the strength given him by rules and regulations, he took pleasure in thwarting the large man.

"If you don't know his name, how do you know he's at the Imperador?"

"I know he's here," said the man. "It's important that he get this message."

"It sounds very odd," mused the clerk. "You don't know what he looks like, you don't know his name . . . You might easily deliver your message to the wrong party."

"That's my look-out!"

The clerk smilingly shook his head. "Apparently all you know is that he arrived at five this morning. We have several guests who came in at that time."

Farr was counting his money; the conversation impinged on his consciousness. He loitered, adjusting the bills in his wallet.

"This man came in from space. He was just off the *Andrei Simic*. Now do you know who I mean?"

Farr moved away quietly. He knew quite clearly what had happened. Penche had been expecting the call; it was important to him. He had traced the connection to the Imperador, and had sent a man over to contact him. In a far corner of the room he watched the large man lurch away from the desk in rage. Farr knew he would try elsewhere. One of the bell-boys or a steward would get him his information for a fee.

Farr started out the door and turned to look back. A nondescript middle-aged woman was walking toward him. He happened to meet her eyes, she looked aside, faltered the

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smallest trifle in her step. Farr had already been keyed to suspicion, or he might not have noticed. The woman walked quickly past him, stepped on the exit-band, and was carried through the Imperador orchid garden and out upon Sunset Boulevard.

Farr followed, watching her melt into the crowds. He crossed to a traffic umbrella and took the left to the helicab deck. A cab stood empty beside the shelter. Farr jumped in and picked a destination at random. "Laguna Beach."

The cab rose into the southbound level. Farr watched from the rear port. A cab bobbed up a hundred yards astern, followed.

Farr called to the driver, "Turn off to Riverside."

The cab behind turned.

Farr told his driver, "Put me down right here."

"South Gate?" asked the driver, as if Farr were not in his right mind.

"South Gate." Not too far from Penche's office and display yard on Signal Hill, thought Farr. Coincidence.

The cab dropped him to the surface. Farr watched the pursuing cab descend. He felt no great concern. Evading a pursuer was a matter of utmost simplicity, a technique known to every child who watched the stereos.

Farr followed the white arrow to the underground shaft and stepped in. The disk caught him and bumped to a gentle halt. Farr called over a car and jumped in. The underground was almost made to order for shaking off a shadow. He dialed a destination, then tried to relax into the seat.

The car accelerated, hummed, decelerated, halted. The door snapped open. Farr jumped out and rode the lift to the surface. He froze in his tracks. What was he doing here? This was Signal Hill—once spiked with oil derricks—now lost under billows of exotic greenery: ten million trees, bushes,

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shrubs, merging around mansions and palaces. There were pools and waterfalls and carefully informal banks of flowers: scarlet hibiscus, blazing yellow banneret, sapphire gardenia. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were as nothing. Bel-Air was frowzy in-contrast and Topanga was for the parvenus.

K. Penche owned twenty acres on the summit of Signal Hill. He had cleared off his land, ignoring protests and court orders, winning law-suits. Signal Hill now was crowned by Iszic tree houses: sixteen varieties in four basic types—the only models Penche was allowed to sell.

Farr walked slowly along the shaded arcade that once had been Atlantic Avenue. Interesting, he thought, that coincidence should bring him here. Well, he was this close, perhaps it might be a good idea to see Penche. . . .

No! said Farr stubbornly. He had made the decision, no irrational compulsion was going to make him change his mind. An odd matter, that in all the vast reaches of Greater Los Angeles, he should wind up almost at K. Penche's front door. Too odd, it went beyond mere chance. His subconscious must be at work.

He glanced behind him. No one could possibly be following, but he watched for a moment or two as hundreds of people, old and young, of all shapes, sizes and colors passed. By a subtle evaluation he fixed on a slender man in a gray suit; he struck a false note. Farr reversed his direction, threaded the maze of open-air shops and booths under the arcade, ducked into a palm-shaded cafeteria, and stepped out of sight behind a wall of leaves.

A minute passed. The man in the gray suit came briskly past. Farr stepped out and stared hard into the well-groomed, well-pomaded countenance. "Are you looking for me, mister?"

"Why no," said the man in the gray suit. "I've never seen you before in my life."

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"I hope I don't see you again," said Farr. He left the cafeteria, stalked to the nearest underground station, dropped down the shaft, and jumped into a car. After a minute's thought he dialed Altadena. The car hummed off. No easy relaxation now; Farr sat on the edge of his seat. How had they located him? Through the tube? Incredible.

To make doubly sure, he canceled Altadena and dialed Pomona.

Five minutes later he wandered with apparent casualness along Valley Boulevard. In another five minutes he located the shadow, a young workman with a vacant face. Am I crazy? Farr asked himself, am I developing a persecution complex? He put the shadow to a rigorous test, strolling around blocks as if looking for a particular house. The young workman ambled along behind him.

Farr went into a restaurant and called the Special Squad on the stereo-screen. He asked for and was connected with Detective-Inspector Kirdy.

Kirdy greeted him politely, and positively denied that he had assigned men to follow Farr. He appeared keenly interested. "Wait just a shake," he said. "I'll check the other departments."

Three or four minutes passed. Farr saw the blank young man enter the restaurant take an unobtrusive seat, and order coffee.

Kirdy returned. "We're innocent around here. Perhaps it's a private agency."

Farr looked annoyed. "Isn't there anything I can do about it?"

"Are you being molested in any way?"

"No."

"We really can't do anything. Drop into a tube, shake 'em off."

"I've taken the tube twice—they're still after me."

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Kirdy looked puzzled. "I wish they'd tell me how. We don't try to follow suspects any more; they brush us off too easily."

"I'll try once more," said Farr. "Then there'll be fireworks."

He marched out of the restaurant. The young workman downed his coffee and came quickly after.

Farr dropped down a tube. He waited, but the young workman did not follow. So much for that. He called over a car and looked around. The young workman was nowhere near. No one was near. Farr, jumping in, dialed for Ventura. The car sped off. There was no conceivable way it could be traced or followed through the tubes.

In Ventura his shadow was an attractive young housewife who seemed out for an afternoon's shopping.

Farr jumped into a shaft and took a car for Long Beach. The man who followed him in Long Beach was the slender man in the gray suit who had first attracted his attention at Signal Hill. He seemed unperturbed when Farr recognized him, shrugging rather insolently, as if to say, "What do you expect?"

Signal Hill. Back again, only a mile or two away. Maybe it might be a good idea after all to drop in on Penche.

No!

Farr sat down at an arcade cafe in full view of the shadow and ordered a sandwich. The man in the natty gray suit took a table nearby and provided himself with iced tea. Farr wished he could beat the truth out of the well-groomed face. Inadvisable; he would end up in jail. Was Penche responsible for this persecution? Farr reluctantly rejected the idea. Penche's man had arrived at the Imperador desk while Farr was leaving. The evasion had been decisive there.

Who then? Omon Bozhd?

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Farr sat stock-still, then laughed—a loud, clear, sharp bark of a laugh. People looked at him in surprise. The gray man gave him a glance of cautious appraisal. Farr continued to chuckle, a nervous release. Once he thought about it, it was so clear, so simple.

He looked up at the ceiling of the arcade, imagining the sky beyond. Somewhere, five or ten miles overhead, hung an air-boat. In the air-boat sat an Iszic, with a sensitive viewer and a radio. Everywhere that Farr went, the radiant in his right shoulder sent up a signal. On the viewer-screen Farr was as surreptitious as a lighthouse.

He went to the stereo-screen and called Kirdy.

Kirdy was vastly interested. "I've heard of that stuff. Apparently it works."

"Yes," said Farr, "it works. How can I shield it?"

"Just a minute." Five minutes passed. Kirdy came back to the screen. "Stay where you are, I'll send a man down with a shield."

The messenger presently arrived. Farr went into the men's room and wrapped a pad of woven metal around his shoulder and chest.

"Now," said Farr grimly. "Now we'll see."

The slim man in the gray suit followed him nonchalantly to the tube shaft. Farr dialed to Santa Monica.

He rose to the surface at the Ocean Avenue station, walked north-east along Wilshire Boulevard, and back toward Beverly Hills. He was alone. He made all the tests he could think of. No one followed him. Farr grinned in satisfaction, picturing the annoyed Iszic at the viewer-screen.

He came to the Capricorn Club—a large, rather disreputable-looking saloon, with a pleasant old-fashioned odor of sawdust, wax and beer. He turned in, went directly to the stereo-screen, and called the Hotel Imperador. Yes, there

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was a message for him. The clerk played back the tape, and for the second time Farr looked into Penche's massive sardonic face. The harsh deep voice was conciliatory; the words had been carefully chosen and rehearsed. "I'd like to see you at your earliest convenience, Mr. Farr. We both realize the need for discretion. I'm sure your visit will result in profit for both of us. I will be waiting for your call."

The stereo faded; the clerk appeared. "Shall I cancel or file, Mr. Farr?"

"Cancel," said Farr. He left the booth and went to the far end of the bar. The bartender made the traditional inquiry, "What's yours, brother?"

Farr ordered. "Vienna Stadtbrau."

The bartender turned, spun a tall oak wheel twined with hop vines, gay with labels. A hundred and twenty positions controlled a hundred and twenty storage-tubes. He pushed the bumper and a dark flask slipped out of the dispenser. The bartender squeezed the flask into a stein and set it before Farr. Farr took a deep swallow, relaxed, and rubbed his forehead.

He was puzzled. Something very odd was going on no question about it. Penche seemed reasonable enough. Perhaps, after all, it might be a good idea—wearily Farr put the thought away. Amazing how many guises the compulsion found to clothe itself. It was difficult to guard against all of them. Unless he vetoed out of hand any course of action that included a visit to Penche. A measure of uncompromising rigor, a counter-compulsion that set shackles on his freedom of action. It was a mess. How could a man think clearly when he could not distinguish between an idiotic subconscious urge and common sense?

Farr ordered more beer. The bartender, a sturdy apple-cheeked little man with pop-eyes and a fine mustache, obliged. Farr returned to his thinking. It was an interesting

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psychological problem, one that Farr might have relished in different circumstances. Right now it was too close to home. He tried to reason with the compulsion. What do I gain by seeing Penche? Penche had hinted of profit. He clearly thought that Farr had something he wanted.

It could only be a female house.

Farr had no female house, therefore—it was as simple as that—he would gain nothing by going to Penche.

But Farr was dissatisfied. The syllogism was too pat; he suspected that he had oversimplified. The Iszic were also involved. They must also believe that he had a female house. Since they had attempted to follow him, they were ignorant of where he would deliver this hypothetical house,

Penche naturally would not want them to know. If the Iszic learned of Penche's involvement, breaking his franchise was the least they would do. They might well kill him.

K. Penche was playing for high stakes. On the one hand he could grow his own houses. They would cost him twenty or thirty dollars apiece. He could sell as many as he liked at two thousand. He would become the richest man in the universe, the richest man in the history of Earth. The moguls of ancient India, the Victorian tycoons, the oil-barons, the Pan-Eurasian syndics: they would dwindle to paupers in comparison.

That was on the one hand. On the other—Penche at the very least would lose his monopoly. Recalling Penche's face, the cartilaginous bar of his mouth, the prow of his nose, the eyes like smoked glass in front of a furnace, Farr instinctively knew Penche's position.

It would be an interesting struggle. Penche probably discounted the subtle Iszic brain, the fanatic zeal with which they defended their property. The Iszic possibly underestimated Penche's massive wealth and Earth's technical genius. It was the situation of the ancient paradox: the

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irresistible force and the immovable object. And I, thought Farr, am in the middle. Unless I extricate myself, I will very likely be crushed. . . . He took a thoughtful pull at his beer. If I knew more accurately what was happening, how I happened to become involved, why they picked on me, I'd know which way to jump. Yet—what power I wield! Or so it seems.

Farr ordered another beer. On sudden thought he looked up sharply and glanced around the bar. No one appeared to be watching him. Farr took the container and went to a table in a dark corner.

The affair—at least his personal participation in it—had stemmed from the Thord raid on Tjere. Farr had aroused Iszic suspicion; they had imprisoned him. He had been alone with a surviving Thord. The Iszic had released hypnotic gas through a root-tubule. The Thord and Farr had been stupefied.

The Iszic had certainly searched him unit by unit, inside and out, mind and body. If he were guilty of complicity, they would know it. If he had seed or seedling on his person, they would know it.

What had they actually done?

They had released him; they had facilitated, in fact they had prompted, his return to Earth. He was a decoy, a bait.

Aboard the *Andrei Simic*—what of all that? Suppose the Anderviews were Penche's agents. Suppose they had apprehended the danger that Farr represented and sought to kill him? What about Paul Bengston? His function might have been to spy on the first two. He had killed the Anderviews either to protect Penche's interests, or cut himself a larger slice of the profits. He had failed. He was now in custody of the Special Squad.

The whole thing added up to a tentative, speculative, but

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apparently logical conclusion: K. Penche had organized the raid on Tjiere. It was Penche's metal mole that the wasp-ship had destroyed eleven hundred feet underground. The raid had nearly been successful. The Iszic must have writhed in terror. They would trace the source, the organization of the raid, without qualm or restraint. A few deaths meant nothing. Money meant nothing. Aile Farr meant nothing.

And small cold chills played up Farr's back.

A pretty blonde girl in gray sheen-skin paused beside his table. "Hi, Cholly." She tossed her hair roguishly over her shoulder. "You look lonesome." And she dropped into a seat beside him.

Farr's thoughts had taken him into nervous territory; the girl startled him. He stared at her without moving a muscle, five seconds—ten seconds.

She forced an uneasy laugh and moved in her chair. "You look like you got the cares of the world on your head."

Farr put his beer gently to the table. "I'm trying to pick a horse."

"Out of the air?" Pushing a cigarette in her mouth, she archly moved her lips toward him. "Give me a light."

Farr lit the cigarette, studying her from behind his eyelids, weighing her, probing for the false note, the non-typical reaction. He had not noticed her come in; he had seen her promoting drinks nowhere else around the bar.

"I could be talked into taking a drink," she said carelessly.

"After I buy you a drink—then what?"

She looked away, refusing to meet his eyes. "I guess—I guess that's up to you."

Farr asked her how much, in rather blunt terms. She blushed, still looking across the bar, suddenly flustered. "I guess you made a mistake. . . . I guess I made a mistake. . . . I thought you'd be good for a drink."

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Farr asked in an easy voice, "You work for the bar, on commission?"

"Sure," she said, half-defiantly. "What about it? It's a nice way to pass the evening. Sometimes you meet a nice guy. Whatcha do to your head?" She leaned forward, looked. "Somebody hit you?"

"If I told you how I got that scab," said Farr, "you'd call me a liar."

"Go ahead, try me."

"Some people were mad at me. They took me to a tree, pushed me inside. I fell down into a root, two or three hundred feet. On the way down I hit my head."

The girl looked at him sidelong. Her mouth twisted into a wry grimace. "And at the bottom you saw little pink men carrying green lanterns. And a big white fluffy rabbit."

"I told you," said Farr.

She reached up toward his temple. "You've got a funny long gray hair."

Farr moved his head back. "I'm going to keep it."

"Suit yourself." She eyed him coldly. "Are you gonna spring, or do I gotta tell you the story of my life?"

"Just a minute," said Farr. He rose to his feet and crossed the room to the bar. He motioned to the bartender. "That blonde at my table, see her?"

The bartender looked. "What about her?"

"She usually hang out here?"

"Never saw her before in my life."

"She doesn't work for you on commission?"

"Brother, I just told you. I never seen her before in my life."

"Thanks."

Farr returned to the table. The girl was sullenly rapping her fingers on the table. Farr looked at her a long moment.

"Well?" she growled.

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"Who are you working for?"

"I told you."

"Who sent you in here after me?"

"Don't be silly." She started to rise. Farr caught her wrist.

"Let go! I'll yell."

"That's what I'm hoping," said Farr. "I'd like to see some police. Sit down—or I'll call them myself."

She sank slowly back into the chair, then turned and flung herself against him, putting her face up and her arms around his neck. "I'm so lonesome. Really, I mean it. I got in from Seattle yesterday. I don't know a soul—now don't be so hard to get along with. We can be nice to each other . . . can't we?"

Farr grinned. "First we talk, then we can be nice."

Something was hurting him, something at the back of his neck, where her hand touched. He blinked and grabbed her arm. She jumped up, tore herself loose, her eyes shining with glee. "Now what, now what'll you do?"

Farr made a lurch for her; she danced back, her face mischievous. Farr's eyes were watering, his joints felt weak. He tottered to his feet, the table fell over. The bartender roared and vaulted the bar. Farr took two staggering steps for the girl, who was composedly walking away. The bartender confronted her.

"Just a minute."

Farr's ears were roaring. He heard the girl say primly, "You get out of my way. He's a drunk. He insulted me . . . said all kinds of nasty things."

The bartender glared indecisively. "There's something fishy going on here."

"Well—don't mix me up in it."

Farr's knees unhinged; a dreadful lump came up his throat, into his mouth. He sank to the floor. He could sense

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motion, he felt rough hands, and heard the bartender's voice very loud, "What's the trouble, Jack? Cantcha hold it?"

Farr's mind was off somewhere, tangled in a hedge of glass branches. A voice gurgled up his throat. "Call Penche . . . Call K. Penche!"

"K. Penche," someone voiced softly. "The guy's nuts."

"K. Penche," Farr mumbled. "He'll pay you. . . . Call him, tell him—Farr . . ."

XI

AILE FARR was dying. He was sinking into a red and yellow chaos of shapes that reeled and pounded. When the movement stilled, when the shapes straightened and drew back, when the scarlets and golds blurred and deepened to black—Aile Farr would be dead.

He saw death coming, drifting like twilight across the sundown of his dying. . . . He felt a sudden sharpness, a discord. A bright green blot exploded across the sad reds and roses and golds. . . .

Aile Farr was alive once more.

The doctor leaned back and put aside his hypodermic. "Pretty close shave," he told the patrolman.

Farr's convulsions quieted, mercifully he lost consciousness.

"Who is the guy?" asked the patrolman.

The bartender looked skeptically down at Farr. "He said to call Penche."

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"Penche! K. Penche?"

"That's what he said."

"Well—call him. All he can do is swear at you."

The bartender went to the screen. The patrolman looked down at the doctor, still kneeling beside Farr.

"What went wrong with the guy?"

The doctor shrugged. "Hard to say. Some kind of female trouble. So many things you can slip into a man nowadays."

"That raw place on his head . . ."

The doctor glanced at Farr's scalp. "No. That's an old wound. He got it in the neck. This mark here."

"Looks like she hit him with a slap-sack."

The bartender returned. "Penche says he's on his way out."

They all looked down at Farr with new respect.

Two orderlies came into the bar. The doctor rose to his feet. "Here's the ambulance."

The orderlies placed stretcher poles one on each side of Farr; metal ribbons were thrust beneath him, clamping over the opposing pole. They lifted him and carried him across the floor. The bartender trotted alongside. "Where you guys taking him? I got to tell Penche something."

"He'll be at the Long Beach Emergency Hospital."

Penche arrived three minutes after the ambulance had gone. He strode in and looked right and left. "Where is he?"

"Are you Mr. Penche?" the bartender asked respectfully.

"Sure he's Penche," said the patrolman.

"Well, your friend was taken to the Long Beach Emergency Hospital."

Penche turned to one of the men who had marched in behind him. "Find out what happened here," he said and left the bar.

The orderlies arranged Farr on a table and cut off his shoes. In puzzlement they examined the band of metal wrapped around his right shoulder.

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"What's this thing?"

"Whatever it is—it's got to come off."

They unwound the woven metal, washed Farr with anti-septic gas, gave him several different injections, and moved him into a quiet room.

Penche called the main office. "When can Mr. Farr be moved?"

"Just a minute, Mr. Penche."

Penche waited; the clerk made inquiries. "Well, he's out of danger now."

"Can he be moved?"

"He's still unconscious, but the doctor says he's okay."

"Have the ambulance bring him to my house, please."

"Very well, Mr. Penche. Er—are you assuming responsibility for Mr. Farr's care?"

"Yes," said Penche. "Bill me."

Penche's house on Signal Hill was a Class AA Type 4 luxury model, a dwelling equivalent to an average custom-built Earth house of 30,000 dollars value. Penche sold Class AA houses in four varieties for 10,000 dollars—as many as he could obtain—as well as Class A, Class BB and Class B houses. The Iszic, of course, grew houses infinitely more elaborate for their own use—rich ancient growths with complex banks of interconnecting pods, walls shining with fluorescent colors, tubules emitting nectar and oil and brine, atmospheres charged with oxygen and complex beneficiants, phototropic and photophobic pods, pods holding carefully filtered and circulated bathing pools, pods exuding nuts and sugar crystals and succulent wafers. The Iszic exported none of these, and none of the three- and four-pod laborer's houses. They required as much handling and shipping space, but brought only a small fraction of the return.

A billion Earthers still lived in sub-standard conditions.

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North Chinese still cut caves into the loess, Dravidians built mud huts, Americans and Europeans occupied decaying apartment-tenements. Penche thought the situation deplorable; a massive market lay untapped. Penche wanted to tap it.

A practical difficulty intervened. These people could pay no thousands of dollars for Class AA, A, BB and B houses, even if Penche had them to sell. He needed three-, four-, and five-pod laborer's houses—which the Iszic refused to export.

The problem had a classical solution: a raid on Iszm for a female tree. Properly fertilized, the female tree would yield a million seeds a year. About half these seeds would grow into female trees. In a few years Penche's income would expand from ten million a year to a hundred million, a thousand million, five thousand million.

To most people the difference between ten million a year and a thousand million seems inconsequential. Penche, however, thought in units of a million. Money represented not that which could be bought, but energy, dynamic thrust, the stuff of persuasion and efficacy. He spent little money on himself, his personal life was rather austere. He lived in his Class AA demonstrator on Signal Hill when he might have owned a sky-island, drifting in orbit around Earth. He might have loaded his table with rare meats and fowl, precious conserves, the valued wines, curious liquors and fruits from the outer worlds. He could have staffed a harem with the houris of a Sultan's dream. But Penche ate steak and drank coffee and beer. He remained a bachelor, indulging himself socially only when the press of business allowed. Like certain gifted men who have no ear for music, Penche had only small taste for the accouterments of civilization.

He recognized his own lack, and sometimes he felt a fleeting melancholy, like the brush of a dark feather; sometimes he sat slumped, savage as a boar, the furnaces

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glaring behind the smoked glass of his eyes. But for the most part K. Penche was sour and sardonic. Other men could be softened, distracted, controlled by easy words, pretty things, pleasure; Penche knew this well and used the knowledge as a carpenter uses a hammer, incurious about the intrinsic nature of the tool. Without illusion or prejudice he watched and acted; here perhaps was Penche's greatest strength, the inner brooding eye that gauged himself and the world in the same frame of callous objectivity.

He was waiting in his study when the ambulance sank to the lawn. He went out on the balcony and watched as the orderlies floated out the stretcher. He spoke in the heavy harsh voice that penetrated like another man's shout. "Is he conscious?"

"He's coming around, sir."

"Bring him up here."

XII

AILE FARR awoke in a pod with dust-yellow walls, a dark brown ceiling vaulted with slender ribs. He raised his head and blinked around the pod. He saw square, dark, heavy furniture: chairs, a settee, a table scattered with papers, a model house or two, and an antique Spanish buffet.

A wispy man with a large head and earnest eyes bent over him. He wore a white cloth jacket, he smelled of anti-septic: a doctor.

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Behind the doctor stood Penche. He was a large man but not as large as Farr had pictured him. He crossed the room slowly and looked down at Farr.

Something stirred in Farr's brain. Air rose in his throat, his vocal chords vibrated; his mouth, tongue, teeth, palate shaped words. Farr heard them in amazement.

"I have the tree."

Penche nodded. "Where?"

Farr looked at him stupidly.

Penche asked, "How did you get the tree off Iszm?"

"I don't know," said Farr. He rose up on his elbow, rubbed his chin, blinked. "I don't know what I'm saying. I don't have any tree."

Penche frowned. "Either you have it or you don't."

"I don't have any tree." Farr struggled to sit up. The doctor put an arm under his shoulders and helped him up. Farr felt very weak. "What am I doing here? Somebody poisoned me. A girl. A blonde girl in the tavern." He looked at Penche with growing anger. "She was working for you."

Penche nodded. "That's true."

Farr rubbed his face. "How did you find me?"

"You called the Imperador on the stereo. I had a man in the exchange waiting for the call."

"Well," said Farr wearily. "It's all a mistake. How or why or what—I don't know. Except that I'm taking a beating. And I don't like it."

Penche looked at the doctor. "How is he?"

"He's all right now. He'll get his strength back pretty soon."

"Good. You can go."

The doctor left the pod. Penche signaled a chair up behind him and sat down. "Anna worked too hard," said Penche. "She never should have used her sticker." He hitched his chair closer. "Tell me about yourself."

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"First," said Farr, "where am I?"

"You're in my house. I've been looking for you."

"Why?"

Penche rocked his head back and forth, a sign of inward amusement. "You were asked to deliver a tree to me. Or a seed. Or a seedling. Whatever it is, I want it."

Farr spoke in a level voice. "I don't have it. I don't know anything about it. I was on Tjiere atoll during the raid—that's the closest I came to your tree."

Penche asked in a quiet voice that seemed to hold no suspicion, "You called me when you arrived in town. Why?"

Farr shook his head. "I don't know. It was something I had to do. I did it. I told you just now I had a tree. I don't know why . . ."

Penche nodded. "I believe you. We've got to find out where this tree is. It may take a while, but—"

"I don't have your tree. I'm not interested." He rose to his feet. He looked around and started for the door. "Now—I'm going home."

Penche looked after him in quiet amusement. "The doors are cinched, Farr."

Farr paused, looking at the hard rosette of the door. Cinched—twisted shut. The relax-nerve would be somewhere in the wall. He pressed at the dusty yellow surface, almost like parchment.

"Not that way," said Penche. "Come back here, Farr. . . ."

The door unwrapped itself. Omon Bozhd stood in the gap. He wore a skin-tight garment striped blue and white, a white cloche flaring rakishly back on itself, up over his ears. His face was austere, placid, full of the strength that was human but not Earth-human.

He came into the room. Behind came two more Iszic, these in yellow and green stripes: Szecr. Farr backed away to let them enter.

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"Hello," said Penche. "I thought I had the door cinched. You fellows probably know all the tricks."

Omon Bozhd nodded politely to Farr. "We lost you for a certain period today; I am glad to see you." He looked at Penche, then back at Farr. "Your destination seems to have been K. Penche's house."

"That's the way it looks," said Farr.

Omon Bozhd explained politely. "When you were in the cell on Tjere, we anesthetized you with a hypnotic gas. The Thord heard it. His race holds their breath for six minutes. When you became dazed he leaped on you, to effect a mind transfer and fixed his will on yours. A suggestion, a compulsion." He looked at Penche. "To the last moment he served his master well."

Penche said nothing; Omon Bozhd returned to Farr. "He buried the instructions deep in your brain; then he gave you the trees he had stolen. Six minutes had elapsed. He took a breath and became unconscious. Later we took you to him, hoping this would dislodge the injunction. We met failure; the Thord astounded us with his psychic capabilities."

Farr looked at Penche, who was leaning negligently against the table. There was tension here, like a trick jack-in-the-box ready to explode at the slightest shock.

Omon Bozhd dismissed Farr from his attention. Farr had served his purpose. "I came to Earth," he told Penche, "on two missions. I must inform you that your consignment of Class AA houses cannot be delivered, because of the raid on Tjere atoll."

"Well, well," said Penche mildly. "Not so good."

"My second mission is to find the man Aile Farr brings his message to."

Penche spoke in an interested voice. "You probed Farr's mind? Why weren't you able to find out then?"

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Iszic courtesy was automatic, a reflex. Omon Bozhd bowed his head. "The Thord ordered Farr to forget, to remember only when his foot touched the soil of Earth. He had enormous power; Farr Sainh has a brain of considerable tenacity. We could only follow him. His destination is here, the house of K. Penche. I am able therefore to fulfill my second mission."

Penche said, "Well? Spit it out!"

Omon Bozhd bowed. His own voice was calm and formal. "My original message to you is voided, Penche Sainh. You are receiving no more Class AA houses. You are receiving none at all. If ever you set foot on Iszm or in Iszic suzerainty, you will be punished for your crime against us."

Penche nodded his head, his sign of inner sardonic mirth. "You discharge me, then. I'm no longer your agent."

"Correct."

Penche turned to Farr and spoke in a startling sharp voice. "The trees—where are they?"

Involuntarily Farr put his hand to the sore spot on his scalp.

Penche said, "Come over here, Farr, sit down. Let me take a look."

Farr growled, "Keep away from me; I'm not cat's-paw for anybody."

Omon Bozhd said, "The Thord anchored six seeds under the skin of Farr Sainh's scalp. It was an ingenious hiding place. The seeds are small. We searched for thirty minutes before we found them."

Farr pressed his scalp with distaste.

Penche said in his hoarse harsh voice, "Sit down, Farr. Let's find out where we stand."

Farr backed against the wall. "I know where I stand. It's not with you."

Penche laughed. "You're not throwing in with the Iszic?"

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"I'm throwing in with nobody. If I've got seeds in my head, it's nobody's business but my own!"

Penche took a step forward, his face a little ugly.

Omon Bozhd said, "The seeds were removed, Penche Sainh. The bumps which Farr Sainh perhaps can feel are pellets of tantalum."

Farr fingered his scalp. Indeed—there they were: hard lumps he had thought part of the scab. One, two, three, four, five, six. . . . His hand wandered through his hair and stopped. Involuntarily he looked at Penche, at the Iszic. They did not seem to be watching him. He pressed the small object he found in his hair. It felt like a small bladder, a sac, the size of a grain of wheat; and it was connected to his scalp by a fiber. Anna, the blonde girl, had seen a long gray hair. . . .

Farr said in a shaky voice, "I've had enough of this. . . . I'm going."

"No you're not," said Penche, without heat or passion. "You'll stay here."

Omon Bozhd said politely, "I believe that Earth law prohibits holding a man against his will. If we acquiesced, we become equally guilty. Is this not correct?"

Penche smiled. "In a certain restricted sense."

"To protect ourselves, we insist that you perform no illegalities."

Penche leaned forward truculently. "You've delivered your message. Now get the hell out!"

Farr pushed past Penche. Penche, raising his arm, put his palm flat on Farr's chest. "You'd better stay, Farr. You're safer."

Farr stared deep into Penche's smoldering eyes. With so much anger and frustration and contempt to express, he found it hard to speak. "I'll go where I please," he said finally. "I'm sick of playing sucker."

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"Better a live sucker than a dead chump."

Farr pushed aside Penche's arm. "I'll take my chances."

Omon Bozhd muttered to the two Iszic behind him. They separated and went to each side of the sphincter.

"You may leave," Omon Bozhd told Farr. "K. Penche cannot stop you."

Farr stopped short. "I'm not kicking in with you either." He looked around the pod, then went to the stereo-screen.

Penche approved; he grinned at the Iszic.

Omon Bozhd said sharply, "Farr Sainh!"

"It's legal," Penche crowed. "Leave him alone."

Farr touched the buttons. The screen glowed and focused into shape. "Get me Kirdy," said Farr.

Omon Bozhd made a small signal. The Iszic on the right sliced at the wall, cutting the communication tubule. The screen went dead.

Penche's eyebrows rose. "Talk about crime," he roared. "You cut up my house!"

Omon Bozhd's lips drew back to show his pale gums, his teeth. "Before I am through—"

Penche raised his left hand; the forefinger spat a thread of orange fire. Omon Bozhd reeled aside; the fire-needle clipped his ear. The other two Iszic moved like moths; each jabbed the pod wall with meticulous speed and precision.

Penche pointed his finger once more. Farr blundered forward, seized Penche's shoulder, and swung him around. Penche's mouth tightened. He brought up his right fist in a short uppercut. It caught Farr in the stomach. Farr, missing with a roundhouse right, staggered back. Penche wheeled to face the three Iszic. They were ducking behind the sphincter, which cinched in after them. Farr and Penche were alone in the pod. Farr came lurching out from the wall and Penche backed away.

"Save it, you fool," said Penche.

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The pod quivered, jerked. Farr, half-crazy in the release of his pent rage, waded forward. The floor of the pod rippled; Farr fell to his knees.

Penche snapped, "Save it, I said! Who are you working for, Earth or Iszm?"

"You're not Earth," gasped Farr. "You're K. Penche! I'm fighting because I'm sick of being used." He struggled to gain his feet; weakness overcame him. He leaned back, breathless.

"Let's see that thing in your head," said Penche.

"Keep away from me. I'll break your face!"

The floor of the pod flipped like a trampoline. Farr and Penche were jolted, jarred. Penche looked worried. "What are they doing?"

"They've done it," said Farr. "They're Iszic, these are Iszic houses! They play these things like violins."

The pod halted—rigid, trembling. "There," said Penche. "It's over . . . Now—that thing in your head."

"Keep away from me . . . Whatever it is, it's mine!"

"It's mine," said Penche softly. "I paid to have it planted there."

"You don't even know what it is."

"Yes I do. I can see it. It's a sprout. The first pod just broke out."

"You're crazy. A seed wouldn't germinate in my head!"

The pod seemed to be stiffening, arching like a cat's back. The roof began to creak.

"We've got to get out of here," muttered Penche. The floor was groaning, trembling. Penche ran to the sphincter and touched the open-nerve.

The sphincter stayed shut.

"They've cut the nerve," said Farr.

The pod reared slowly up, like the bed of a dump-truck. The floor sloped. The vaulted roof creaked. *Twang!* A rib

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snapped, fragments sprang down. A sharp stick missed Farr by a foot.

Penche pointed his finger at the spincter; the cartridge lanced fire into the sphincter iris. The iris retaliated with a cloud of vile steam.

Penche staggered back choking.

Two more roof ribs snapped.

"They'll kill if they hit," cried Penche, surveying the arched ceiling. "Get back, out of the way!"

"Aile Farr, the walking greenhouse . . . You'll rot before you harvest me, Penche. . . ."

"Don't get hysterical," said Penche. "Come over here!"

The pod tilted, the furniture began sliding down into the mouth; Penche fended it away desperately. Farr slipped on the floor. The whole pod buckled. Fragments of ribs sprang, snapped, clattered. The furniture tumbled over and over and piled upon Farr and Penche, bruising, wrenching, scraping.

The pod began to shake, the tables, chairs began to rise, fall. Farr and Penche struggled to win free, before the heavy furniture broke their bones.

"They're working it from the outside," panted Farr. "Pulling on the nerves . . ."

"If we could get out on the balcony—"

"We'd be thrown to the ground."

The shaking grew stronger—a slow rise, a quick drop. The fragments of rib and the furniture began to rise, shake and pound like peas in a box. Penche stood braced, his hands against the table, controlling the motion, holding it away from their two soft bodies. Farr grabbed a splinter and began stabbing the wall.

"What are you doing?"

"The Iszic stabbed in here—hit some nerves. I'm trying to hit some other ones."

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"You'll probably kill us!" Penche looked at Farr's head. "Don't forget that plant—"

"You're more afraid for the plant than you are for yourself." Farr stabbed here, there, up and down.

He hit a nerve. The pod suddenly froze into a tense, rather horrible, rigidity. The wall began to secrete great drops of a sour ichor. The pod gave a violent shake, and the contents rattled.

"That's the wrong nerve!" yelled Penche. He picked up a splinter and began stabbing. A sound like a low moan vibrated through the pod. The floor humped up, writhing in vegetable agony. The ceiling began to collapse.

"We'll be crushed," said Penche. Farr saw a shimmer of metal—the doctor's hypodermic. He picked it up, jabbed it into the chalky green bulge of a vein, and pulled the trigger.

The pod quivered, shook, pulsed. The walls blistered, burst. Ichor welled out and trickled into the entrance channel. The pod convulsed, shivered, fell down limp.

The shattered fragments of ribs, the broken furniture, Farr and Penche tumbled the length of the pod, out upon the balcony, and through the dark.

Farr, grabbing on the tendrils of the balustrade, broke his fall. The tendril parted; Farr dropped. The lawn was only ten feet below. He crashed into the pile of debris. Below him was something rubbery. It seized his legs and pulled with great strength: Penche.

They rolled out on the lawn. Farr's strength was almost spent. Penche squeezed Farr's ribs, reached up, and grasped his throat. Farr saw the sardonic face only inches from his. He drew up his knees—hard. Penche winced, gasped, but held fast. Farr shoved his thumb up Penche's nose and twisted. Penche rolled his head back, his grip relaxed.

Farr croaked, "I'll tear that thing out—I'll crush it—"

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"No!" gasped Penche. "No." He yelled, "Fropel Carlyle!" Figures appeared. Penche rose to his feet. "There's three Iszic in the house. Don't let 'em out. Stand by the trunk—shoot to kill."

A cool voice said, "There won't be any shooting tonight."

Two beams of light converged on Penche. He stood quivering with anger. "Who are you?"

"Special Squad. I'm Detective-Inspector Kirdy."

Penche exhaled his breath. "Get the Iszic. They're in my house."

The Iszic came into the light.

Omon Bozhd said, "We are here to reclaim our property."

Kirdy inspected them without friendliness. "What property?"

"It is in Farr's head. A house-seedling."

"Is it Farr you're accusing?"

"They'd better not," said Farr angrily. "They watched me every minute, they searched me, hypnotized me—"

"Penche is the guilty man," said Omon Bozhd bitterly. "Penche's agent deceived us. It is clear now. He put the six seeds where he knew we'd find them. He also had a root tendril; he anchored it in Farr's scalp, among the hairs. We never noticed it."

"Tough luck," said Penche.

Kirdy looked dubiously at Farr. "The thing actually stayed alive?"

Farr suppressed the urge to laugh. "Stayed alive? It sent out roots—it put out leaves, a pod. It's growing. I've got a house on my head!"

"It's Iszic property," declared Omon Bozhd sharply. "I demand its return."

"It's my property," said Penche. "I bought it—paid for it."

"It's my property," said Farr. "Who's head is it growing in?"

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Kirdy shook his head. "You better all come with me."

"I'll go nowhere unless I'm under arrest," said Penche with great dignity. He pointed. "I told you—arrest the Iszic. They wrecked my house."

"Come along, all of you," said Kirdy. He turned. "Bring down the wagon."

Omon Bozhd made his decision. He rose proudly to his full height, the white bands glowing in the darkness. He looked at Farr, reached under his cloak, and brought out a shatter-gun.

Ducking, Farr fell flat.

The shatter-bolt sighed over his head. Blue fire came from Kirdy's gun. Omon Bozhd glowed in a blue aureole. He was dead, but he fired again and again. Farr rolled over the dark ground. The other Iszic fired at him, ignoring the police guns, flaming blue figures, dead, acting under command-patterns that outlasted their lives. Bolts struck Farr's leg. He groaned, and lay still.

The three Iszic collapsed.

"Now," said Penche, with satisfaction, "I will take care of Farr."

Farr said, "Keep away from me."

"Easy, Penche," said Kirdy.

Penche halted. "I'll give you ten million for what you've got growing in your hair."

"No," said Farr wildly. "I'll grow it myself. I'll give seeds away free. . . ."

"It's a gamble," said Penche. "If it's male, it's worth nothing."

"If it's female," said Farr, "it's worth—" he paused as a police doctor bent over his leg.

"—a great deal," said Penche dryly. "But you'll have opposition."

"From who?" gasped Farr.

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Orderlies brought a stretcher.

"From the Iszic. I offer you ten million. I take the chance."

The fatigue, the pain, the mental exhaustion overcame Farr.

"Okay . . . I'm sick of the whole mess."

"That constitutes a contract," cried Penche in triumph.

"These officers are witnesses."

They lifted Farr onto the stretcher. The doctor looked down at him and noticed a sprig of vegetation in Farr's hair. Reaching down, he plucked it out.

"Ouch!" said Farr.

Penche cried out. "What did he do?"

Farr said weakly, "You'd better take care of your property, Penche."

"Where is it?" yelled Penche in anguish, collaring the doctor.

"What?" asked the doctor.

"Bring lights!" cried Penche.

Farr saw Penche and his men seeking among the debris for the pale shoot which had grown in his head, then he drifted off into unconsciousness.

Penche came to see Farr in the hospital. "Here," he said shortly. "Your money." He tossed a coupon to the table. Farr looked at it. "Ten million dollars."

"That's a lot of money," said Farr.

"Yes," said Penche.

"You must have found the sprout."

Penche nodded. "It was still alive. It's growing now. . . . It's male." He picked up the coupon, looked at it, then put it back down. "A poor bet."

"You had good odds," Farr told him.

"I don't care for the money," said Penche. He looked off through the window, across Los Angeles, and Farr wondered what he was thinking.

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"Easy come, easy go," said Penche. He half-turned, as if to leave.

"Now what?" asked Farr. "You don't have a female house; you don't deal in houses."

K. Penche said, "There's female houses on Iszm. Lots of them. I'm going after a few."

"Another raid?"

"Call it anything you like."

"What do you call it?"

"An expedition."

"I'm glad I won't be involved."

"A man never knows," Penche remarked. "You might change your mind."

"Don't count on it," said Farr.

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