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Robert
Lory

Masters of the Lamp

Send a spy
to find a God



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Msters of the Lamp by Robert Lory



CHAPTER ONE

I was worried.

I tossed off the rest of my glass of gruul—the clear, neutral-tasting alcohol native to Hawk II—and surveyed the dimly lit interior of Nur's Rest for the third time within the space of a half hour.

The electronic apparatus that had been a part of me for the past fifteen years gave me the same readings as before. Radiation and magnetic impulses showed me who in the long room concealed the numerous laser pistols, maser knives and other less effective weapons. Situation normal for a place like Nur's Rest, an unpretentious just-off-port drinking and meeting place on a Free Zone planet. Psych-probe indicated the same high level of hostility throughout the room, also normal among a collection of twenty-one individuals of some five separate species of which the most numerous species, the human one, was represented by four variant strains.

The girl sitting across the scarred table thought there were five variants.

"Odell," she said, adding the tinkle of little bells to pronunciation of my name. "It has the ring of a New Earthan but, apart from your light skin, you look like a Rim Worlder."

Her deduction was sound, as far as it went. Apart from my skin, which was sunbrowned but still much lighter than the brown-black color of the Rim Worlders, only my six feet two, one hundred ninety pound stature differed from that people's much smaller average build. In common, however, was the complete lack of hair on my head except for eyebrows and lashes. A more knowledgeable observer would have noticed that and excluded the possibility that I was a Rim Worlder. He would have no way of knowing that both brows and lashes were false.

"I was born on New Earth," I told her truthfully. In the Free Zone you supposedly could tell the truth. The hot white sun and its four planets were

declared nonviolable. No matter what your crime, regardless of your line of endeavor, in the Free Zone you were safe. Supposedly.

In actual case, you were simply *safer*. Anyone attempting to do you in here would have to be very careful. Every step would have to be planned thoroughly, especially an escape without identification which, if unsuccessful, would result in far-reaching reprisals not only to himself but to any government agency, trade guild or religious sect with which he was identified. And since potential victims who came to Hawk II or other Free Zone planets were not the type to act with precise predictability, a would-be assassin would find his planning tough.

Which still didn't leave me any less worried.

"Buy us another?" she asked.

I looked at her curiously.

She tapped my empty glass with a well-manicured nail. "Another drink. What's the matter? You're supposed to be relaxing."

"Nerves, I guess."

Which was right. Something other than part of my artificial apparatus had flashed a warning deep inside me. It had been just a minute voice and it registered for just an instant. Its source defied tracing, but in my business you don't disregard a warning, regardless of its source. You can wind up very dead if you do.

I kept my eyes on the girl. My lips curled into a pleasant controlled smile as one hand beckoned to the waiter, the other moving across the table to stroke her shoulder-length fiery-red hair. She laughed brightly, beautifully, sincerely. She checked out as sincerely happy. Indices thirteen and fourteen—which approximate harmful intent and guile, respectively—were dim to the point of zero. Further, she carried no weapon of any kind. No, not her, I decided. But who, then?

Of the twenty-odd beings in the room, only five minds registered as close to murderous, but none of them—and that included Square Deal Nur himself behind the bar—directed their hate toward any specific individual. Like Nur, they hated *Them*—some authority or other who they felt they owed malice.

I had been in Nur's place on other occasions. Once he banged his yellow hairy claw on his bar and screwed up his three tiny eyes at me in pure disgust.

"There ought to be a limitation on exile," he complained. "Just because the crud whose throat I tore out was an Imperial officer... You, Odell, you've killed, yet you're as free as a sailfish to wander where you will. Me, I've been in this star-forsaken Free Zone for fifty-two of your years and am doomed for still another twenty. Fifty-two years. Tomorrow to the day."

"Happy Anniversary," I'd told him. His rage had reached the boiling point. It boiled, and he laughed so hard his yellow frame shuddered uncontrollably.

We'd gotten on well since then. At least I thought so. But who—or what—was I being warned against?

"Dirt and plants," said the flame-haired girl. She raised her fresh drink.

"And air to breathe," I answered, completing the old space explorers' toast. We touched glasses.

"*Sham Odelll As I live and writhe!*" boomed a voice to my rear.

I almost knocked over my glass as I spun off the chair. But even before my eyes saw the owner of the voice, my memory recalled its tone. Instead of the fist I was primed to use, my open hand shot out to grasp one of the six silver-gloved tentacles extending from the heavy black mass.

"Datchet, you old son-of-a-squid! What are you doing here?"

Datchet's long brow wrinkled. "Son of a squid, indeed," he laughed roughly. "The last time we met, you'd not have called me that. In answer to your question, I live here. I've retired from the business."

He was right about the last time we met. It was the only time we met. In the capitol city of the state of Ponce on the planet Myrtle's Ear, I was lodging in a very unpleasant dungeon from which Datchet broke me out. For reasons of his own—or those of his employers—he wanted the prisons emptied. Out of gratitude, and for reasons of *my* employer who wanted the governor of Ponce eliminated, I joined with Datchet and we took the city by storm: Datchet, myself, and the prisoners who were supposedly behind the popular uprising which took over the state and hung up the decapitated governor by his heels from the top of the citadel over our prison.

"Retired?" I said. "You never retire from this business."

His two large eyes teared, a sign in Datchet's species of satisfaction. "The good old days were far too good. A person can have his fill of adventure. You will come to it, Odell. Meanwhile, who is your lady friend?"

My eyebrows raised. I'd forgotten about her.

AAASTERS OF THE LAMP

"Join us in a drink?" she asked Datchet, at the same time sliding my glass closer to me.

"Gruul," Datchet sneered. "Can't stand the stuff." .

"Well, I can. You don't mind?" I asked as I grasped the stem of my glass.

"It's your poison," Datchet's deep voice rumbled.

It's my poison.

I looked over her head. "Is that a Romboid over there?"

"A what?" she asked.

"Over there, talking to Nur. He looks like either a Romboid or one of the Collectivites."

She turned to face the bar. When she turned back her hand returned to her glass. "Of course it's a Romboid. Male, about forty man-years old."

Those were the last words I heard her say.

"What?" Datchet said, staring as her head thudded to the table. He looked at me accusingly. "You switched glasses."

"You were right," I said through my teeth. "It was my poison."

My crashing exit through the door of Nur's Rest was to the tune of a police whistle. Behind me, Datchet flung three tables at the lone Security man in the room. The whistle was silent when he joined me.

"My place is near. Thank the stars," he puffed, keeping up with my pace. "I'm too old for this kind of thing."

"No good," I said back.

"Damn right it's not. You're known here."

"I don't mean that. It's no good going to your place. *You're* known here."

"I have more than one place. Turn here, sharp right."

A short time later I was sitting before the viewer in a comfortable four-room flat some five blocks from Nur's.

I sipped the gruul Datchet poured for me. He came back into the room and began gulping tankards full of a sour fruit-beer I'd never learned to like.

"Anything on the viewer?" he asked.

"Folk music from somewhere. No interruptions yet."

"Who knew you in Nur's?"

"Just Nur. And the girl."

"Nur," he mused. "They'll question him. How's he regard you?"

"Somewhat higher than any official authority," I said. "But he won't stand up under truthing methods."

"Which maybe are being applied right now. We'd better get you out of here as soon as we can."

"Out?" I refilled my glass. "Not until I find out why I was targeted for a kill.**

Datchet shrugged. "Your mission, perhaps?"

"I'm on leave. Resting."

He smiled. "The ways of the business are too much for an old badger like me anymore. Have it as you will. You're on leave."

"Datchet," I said carefully, "did you ever meet two New Earthans named Haskins and Lari-Tane? They were men of my organization."

"Where was it I would have met them? I've been here for the past three Hawk II years. Did they travel together?"

"They traveled separately, and I have reason to believe they entered the Free Zone. It would have been within the past three years."

His many-furrowed brow furrowed deeper. "The names are not familiar, but names mean nothing. However, one gets to know the ways of others in the same line of work, and we get very few New Earthans here on Hawk II. No, I can't help you. But did you ask Nur?"

"I might have, had I not been distracted by—"

"The girl," he finished. "And there perhaps is your motive?"

I thought about it. "No, killing me would have been a mistake."

It would have been, I was certain. Had whoever wanted me dead known my mission was to find out what really happened to Haskins and Lari-Tane, and had the two men actually spent time on Hawk II or another Free Zone planet, killing me in the Free Zone would pinpoint where they were done in. Because, unlike them, I was not on leave and therefore was filing reports on a prearranged schedule. If my last message were sent from here, here would be where the finger would be directed regardless of where my remains subsequently were found. Whoever my opposition was, they would at least be cognizant of the possibility.

"Killing me here just wouldn't have been smart," I said, just as a red light under the televiewer screen flashed.

Datchet turned a knob which killed the concert and the round pink face of a Romboïd focused on the screen. "About the trouble you were in tonight," the Romboïd said. "You and the human—"

"Odell is safe here with me," Datchet informed the Romboïd. "Make your report."

The Romboïd nodded. "The girl is not dead, so Odell is free to come and go as he likes."

"No charges against him?"

"None. Security force questioners are still trying to learn from her the details of her passing out, but are getting nowhere. The girl claims she just suddenly got sick."

Datchet frowned. "But analysis of what she drank— haven't they thought of that?"

"Certainly," responded the Romboïd. "But she's stick-ing to her story anyway. Security is perplexed as to what they should do next."

Datchet nodded. To me he said, "And they will remain perplexed. They would like nothing better than to close the books on this episode but cannot if there remains anything unexplained. That's the law. The girl's story being what it is, doesn't give them much of an out, even though they'd grasp at anything to—"

He stopped abruptly and his eyebrows contracted. He spoke to the Romboïd. "Do we know a physician or a pharmacologist we can trust? Or, failing that, one whose services we can buy?"

The Romboïd named two.

"Good. Get one of them to police headquarters as quickly as possible. Have him say that the drug the girl took was prescribed for her ailment, but that obviously she took somewhat more than the amount specified."

Datchet smiled when the screen went blank. "That should take care of it. The law here on Hawk II can be a friend if one knows how to work within it."

"Work?" I asked. "I thought you said you'd retired."

Datchet's grin widened. "As you yourself said, one never completely retires from the business. I like to keep my hand in, in a small nonexhausting way, of course. More of the vile liquid you like so much?"

"Just a little—to celebrate," I responded as the kitchen door closed behind his exit.

Datchet's voice shouted cheerfully from the other room. "It always seems to me you humans turn to celebration too quickly. Who knows what the moments of the future "will bring?"

I was nodding silent agreement when a loud crash sounded from inside the kitchen.

"Such as a dropped bottle of gruul?" I suggested.

There was no answer.

"Datchet?"

I rose without a sound and moved swiftly to the swinging door leading into the next room. My sensors were moving messages of urgency through my nervous system when I heard the groan of pain. I shot into the room, hands ready for anything.

The sight of Datchet heaped on the floor registered for just an instant. Then from somewhere a stun gun blotted out the universe.

CHAPTER TWO

My name is Odell. At birth I was given the first name of Shamryke to go with it. Shamryke, I'm told, being the name of a mythological plant of good fortune on Old Earth. My close acquaintances use the name Sham. My friends would too, if I had friends. In the business you don't have friends.

There are many names for the business. Intelligence, espionage, or just plain spying, depending upon the attitude of the person who is doing the describing and the particular circumstances involved. *The business* are the words used by most of us who do the leg-work— the operatives.

The business is simple or complex, again depending upon your viewpoint. To the operative, who is at the lowest level of the system, it is quite simple. Your control gives you an assignment. You attempt to do it. You are either successful or unsuccessful. In my kinds of assignments, that mostly means you are either alive or dead. That part of the business is fairly uncomplicated.

The complexity affects the operative only in the manner in which he must do his job. Early in the game you learn three very important words, "Trust no one." That includes persons with whom you may feel you've established long-term relationships. Relationships can change as fast as the directions from your control—again a result of the complexity of the business.

Probably from the dawn of recorded time, the business has been uncertain. Changes of allegiance or affiliation occurring at higher levels often would make the past enemy a friend and vice versa. But in my time, when each national entity, each intraplanetary and interplanetary federation or group had its own working intelligence and undercover system, and each merchant guild and religious establishment by their reckoning of necessity also had their own agencies independent of the strictly political alliances, the complexities in working relations seemed at times, to the higher-ups

whose job it was to juggle them, to outnumber the number of stars in the galaxy.

"That's understatement, really," my first control told me. "Take the number of stars in the galaxy and multiply that figure by the number of grains of sand on all the beaches in the universe and you arrive at a more approximate and meaningful number."

A control had to be concerned with such matters, since he had higher levels external to our organization to whom he reported through the Head. The Head and those higher levels had to be even more concerned with the complexities of the business.

But the operative's main task, regardless of the complexities that directed him to it, was simple: accomplish the mission and stay as whole as possible.

It was my third time out when I suffered the only permanent mishap of my career. The pirates weren't after me when they hit the yacht I was cruising on, but that didn't save my face. By careful rebuilding, it now approximated its former look... without hair, however.

My missions were accomplished in the name of the Intelligence Arm of the Federated Nations of New Earth, which not only included the political entities on that one planet, but some forty colonies on half as many worlds. We were reputed to be one of the largest intelligence agencies in the galaxy, not counting temporary affiliations with other groups.

My mission, this time—as always—was simple. Find out who murdered two FIA (Federation Intelligence Arm) agents and, if possible, why. I was to take no retributive action.

"Your job is to find out the facts," Gand told me. "Nothing more."

"Why me?" I countered from the seat across my control's wide desk. It was not disrespect on my part; an operative does what he's told, and is paid

well to do it. But after fifteen years in the Arm, Shamryke Odell was surprised to be selected for a job like this one.

"You feel it's beneath you?" Gand asked. He leaned forward. He was a small man, half my size in 'most every physical proportion. But I did not underestimate his value to the Arm. He'd been my control for the past six years, and he wouldn't have lasted that long if he'd had too many shortcomings.

"I'd put it differently," I said. "A waste of resources. TKis is the kind of thing you'd send a new man on."

Gand drummed his fingers on the top of his desk. I'd come to recognize it as a sign of humorous patience. It was his only sign of humor. He never smiled, never at least in my presence.

"You think so? Let me tell you something about the background of this assignment." He held his hand up to cut off my words.

"Normally, you don't need to be backgrounded very much, but this time it's a little different. The Head is concerned." The Head. In the Cybernetic Age, machines based on electronic impulses grew, first smaller and more compact, then larger as they took on more functions. Few grew larger than the Head, however, which was housed in the top three stories of the FIA headquarters building, protected by an impassable shield. But the Head was not a machine. The Head was totally organic. It—or *he*, as the Head was personalized—was a brain, constructed or grown under carefully controlled conditions but when completed took over for itself the operation of its own life-sustaining functions. Fed constant streams of information by FIA controls, the Head absorbed all, and issued its orders unbidden. Taking in its data in chemical and electronic impulse form, it issued its commands in the same way; the commands then translated into codes specific for each control.

In the old days, I'm told, it would have been correct to say that "the machine has uncovered a logical inconsistency." With the Head, however, it was precisely accurate to put it the way Gand did to me. "The Head is

concerned," he said. "Within the past three years we've lost two operatives," he continued. "Haskins and Lari-Tane—"

I interrupted. "Only two in three years? That's a good record."

Gand shook his head. "You misunderstand. Though I have no idea of the total number of operatives we've lost in the three-year period, I know for a fact it's more than two. But the circumstances surrounding the loss of these particular two are unusual and, the Head feels, warrant further investigation. There is the unusual aspect that both men were junior men whose assignments had been of marginal importance to the Arm. There is also the similarity that both men were on leave when they disappeared somewhere, we think, in the Free Zone. There is also the strange similarity that both men were discovered far away from the Free Zone, both in burnt-out ships."

"Murdered?" I asked.

"Haskins, the first to be found, was stored away in the Head's information vault as probable accident, possible foul play. When Lari-Tan was found, memory bank scanning recalled Haskins."

I shrugged. "So it's murder. Happens to operatives every day."

"True, but the—"

"The Head is worried," I completed. "He is. He's computed a distinct possibility that the two men were murdered as they were for a reason, a specific reason."

"Which is?"

"The Head doesn't know. He has, however, ordered me to assign an experienced operative to the case. He ordered me because neither of the two men were mine. Operating procedure has been left to me, but it has been strongly suggested that the Free Zone would be the place to start."

I digested Gand's words. "You say there's a distinct possibility of a connection here between the two men's deaths. Does that mean there's a possibility that there's no connection at all?"

Fingers drummed the top of his desk. "Your assignment, Odell, is to substitute probability for possibility either way. You leave in two days. Have your requisitions for whatever you feel you need on my desk before tomorrow noon. And, Odell—"

I had risen and was moving toward the door. I turned back.

"The Head is anxious about this. Get your information and get back here fast. One other thing. This may seem like a lark assignment for you, but you've been around the Arm long enough to know two important facts. The first is that the Head doesn't get worried over nothing."

"And the second?" I asked.

"There are no lark assignments."

I suddenly was wide awake. Through years of training, my eyelids stayed shut in involuntary nonresponse, but my mind—with both its normal human and abnormal added inputs—was active.

It took only minute movements of arms and legs to tell me these appendages were strapped firmly to the surface upon which I lay. There were four attachments in all, one at each ankle and one at each wrist, which bound me in a horizontal attention.

Sound in the room was of low level, a faint but constant humming was accompanied at irregular intervals by a clacking and clicking. I deduced the clacking as the footfalls of the single animate being with me in whatever sort of place I was in. The latter I gathered was coming from the manipulation of something mechanical, buttons or small levers.

I tentatively tested the pressure binding my wrists. The straps could be snapped free, I judged. Next I checked for weapons. Two registered, both of

the laser variety: one of greater power somewhere above me, the second in the direction of the animate source.

I opened my right eye a slit.

His lean back was toward me as he fiddled with the controls of an electronic bank on the other side of the room. He was very tall and thin and human in form—at least, he looked so from his angle—and white shirt and slacks plus the sidearm resting in the holster around his waist suggested he was in some sort of military or police service.

Looking upward, I saw the larger weapon. It was seated in a plasti-turret which was darkened. There was a chair for the gunner, but it was empty.

A movement across the room made me close my eye. I concentrated for a moment, building up the strength I'd need to break my bonds. It would take basically four movements, I knew. One to both release my arms and sit upright; the second to shoot my legs downward; the third to hit the floor (distance from present level unknown, but angle of perspective across the room yielded an estimate of three feet); and the fourth to uncoil my tightened legs for a spring at the man across the room. Four movements during which he'd have time to whirl and maybe clear his pistol from the holster. Maybe. The pistol was kept in place by a single strap. A good man could thumb free the catch at the same moment he pulled the weapon. Even if the man across the room wasn't all that good, it would be close. But he supposed me to be unconscious, I had that in my favor. Unless his reactions were as quick as mine, his synapses would first have to register danger. And that would, I hoped, be preceded by instant-consuming surprise.

The surprise showed itself horribly over his face as I dove at his throat. Off-balance in his turn, his pistol skittered across the floor at the impact which drove us both into the console behind him. The impact was in fact more than I'd intended, as the gravity in this place was less than I'd been accustomed to. Yanking him from the wall, I drove my fist into his stomach and dropped him with a knee to the chin.

Neither blow was aimed at killing. I just wanted to be sure he could give no sound of alarm. As far as I could tell he hadn't, and my internal systems registered no change in activity in whatever was outside this room. As the man at my feet would be unconscious for minutes, I again surveyed my surroundings, this time with the benefit of two eyes viewing from an upright position. I let my senses wander slowly, carefully attentive to detail, about the enclosure which I now saw was elliptical in shape and doming to an arch in the roof. The many devices clamped to the walls and the large weapon above me suggested a military installation of some land. The table I was strapped to, however, would have looked at home either in a surgical laboratory or a torture chamber. None of the radioactive messages my systems recorded afforded an exact clue as to its purpose, other than the holding in place of a being with two arms and two legs. I smiled. It hadn't done too good a job of that.

Of the console which dominated a large part of the room's wall, I could make no conscious sense. It looked like any console everywhere. But as this seemed the central feature of the room—that the man I had downed had been working there bolstered this judgment—I kept my *eyes* trained on the banks for two or three seconds, allowing the view to imprint itself fully on my mind.

I was finished when the man woke up. Seeing him rouse, I stepped to his front, gripping the laser which had been his. He shook his head, a lean head with soft white-colored hair which I judged to be its natural color since he appeared a man of about my age. He was definitely of human strain, but one which I'd not seen before. His skin was of a bluish cast and his eyes a dull green. The eyes were somewhat large for the head size. They grew larger when they saw me.

It was my turn to be surprised.

"I am *not* defeated!" he shouted, rising to his knees.

He got the words out before the weapon I held clubbed into the side of his head. He toppled over to a shoulder and scrambled to his feet. He stood

at hand-to-hand combat on-guard position, his chest puffed. It was then I noticed for the first time the small emblem stitched into his jacket just above the left breast. It was a silver device at one end of which was a handle and at the other a bright red and yellow flame. I'd seen something like it before but my mind refused to consider the matter now. It was busy with the man who wore the uniform.

"I am not defeated," he repeated, this time more softly, solemnly. "We cannot be defeated. We c-cannot!" he said, his voice beginning to tremble. The trembling reflected the naked fear on his face.

I held the pistol steadily and waited for his spring. It never came.

His body began to shake. I saw now that his combat position had been taken for the purpose of holding himself rigid, not for attack. He closed his eyes and my mind-probe yielded only a single focus rarely ever encountered among humans. That focus was trained on self-control. And he was losing control rapidly.

"I have... won!" he whimpered. "I..."

There was a popping sound and the smell of something burning. The lean man in the white-uniform crumpled like a wet facecloth before me.

In the back of his head there was a small black spot. It was smoking.

CHAPTER THREE

"*Then?*" said the voice. The never-ending, ever-insisting voice that I could not shake even in the dense black dust that rolls on undirected between the stars. "*ThenF*

I drove my mind through the dust and it congealed in the body of Shamryke Odell who stood peering down at another body, sprawled on a floor of some kind.

"Then?"

"Then—I felt disgust," my voice said to the unseen questioner.

"Disgust for whom?" the voice came back.

"Myself, I guess."

"Do not guess. Was it yourself you felt disgust for?"

"Yes. For myself."

"Why? Because the man was dead?"

"He was dead, and I was instructed not to kill. I was just to learn, and he might have told me if he had stayed alive. But he was dead."

"You did not kill him."

"I don't know what killed him."

"Think about it again. *See* the scene before you. You have said that there was a smell and smoke—"

"And then the black hole. The little black hole in his head, smoking."

"It was smoke? Smoke produced by combustion? You're sure of that? It couldn't perhaps have been steam, resulting from a boiling process?"

"It could have been steam, yes. But there was this smell, too."

"Which reminded you of what?"

"Of burning?"

"Is that a statement or a question?"

"A question."

"Very well. What did you do next?"

"There was a door. I went through it."

"Go through the door again now. Speak of what you experience."

The black fog covered the obscene, little dark hole in the dead man's head. There was a pinprick of light, bright to the point of pain, which registered somewhere behind my ears. The point expanded to coin size. It was a hole through which I could view part of...

"Part of the wall. There is a handle attached to a man-high panel which must be a door. I am cautious.

I ease the lever downward. The door opens a crack. I wait. No life registers outside. I go through and I know where I am- now. I am on—in—a ship. I feel the feeling of movement. I am in a corridor that runs the rim of the—"

"The satellite. The orbiting satellite on which you were found."

"It is a *ship*, that's what I am thinking as I walk through the corridor and —"

"Later, when you discover you are alone in—"

"I am alone in orbit. The one man who was with me is dead. I feel pain when I return to the control room and deliberately smash my finger. I wince with the pain."

"Back now. Earlier, in the control room. The man is standing there. You have felled him, but he rises. What is it he says?"

"He's beaten me. He says he's beaten me."

"His exact words."

" 'I am not defeated. We cannot be defeated. I have won.' That's it exactly."

"Now look carefully at the silver crest he wears on his garment. What does it look like again? You said it reminded you of something. What is it that the crest reminded you of? Look at it carefully. Stop the movement of time around you. Stop the movement of your opponent, stop the movement of your eye. Look at the crest. Concentrate on the crest..."

I sipped the warmth of the caffeinello, holding the cup with my left hand, the hand with the repaired little finger. I had smashed it aboard the satellite. Standard Operating Procedure. The alarm inside travel multidirectionally with the speed of light. It was the beam upon which my rescuers found me, half starved and endlessly rounding an uninhabitable planet in the Crab

Nebula, unnamed and known only by a six or seven digit nomenclature.

Across his desk from me, Gand grimaced. He had fully digested the Head's new directive which contained analysis of its—his—interrogation of me.

"It could be worse," he said flatly. "We know what they're after. We know why Haskins and Lari-Tane were killed. We know why you were not. There are, however, two things we don't know."

"We don't know who they are," I concluded.

"That, and we don't know something more important. We don't know whether they've gotten what they were after."

"From me?" I asked.

Gand shook his head. "No, they got only one piece of information from you. And that was that you were no good for their purposes. They learned that when they operated on you."

"Operated on me," I said.

"Correct. From your description of the satellite interior, combined with the results of your physical examination upon your return, the deduction is inescapable that surgery was performed on you. You can check the back of your head later. A close scrutiny should reveal the minute scar slightly above the neck."

"Precisely where—" I began.

"Again correct. Precisely where your short-out is located."

Short-out. A device or a process, depending upon your semantic preference. All operatives were equipped with one, its function to prevent your revealing information under opposition questioning. How it worked exactly I never knew. It had been described to me once as a sort of disintegration of the brain. It was triggered involuntarily by the operative who realized he was divulging classified knowledge.

"The man who died in the satellite also had one, evidently," Gand said. "His was structured along different lines, and was triggered by—"

"Defeat," I supplied.

"To be exact, it was triggered by self-realization of defeat. Which is why he was terrified at the very thought."

"My short-out. Did they-"

"It can't be removed. That's what they learned from their surgery. That's one of the things they had to find out. *They*, whoever they are, had Haskins and Lari-Tane short-out on them. To hide this fact—short-out can be very messy—the bodies were later involved in more devastating mishaps. Purpose: to throw us off." He cleared his throat and continued. "When you became available to them, they wanted you alive so they -could find out exactly what killed our previous two operatives. The short-out dissolves when dissipated, you see. That much they knew."

"If so, why was I left circling around in a surgical shelir

"No doubt, the Head asked that very same question of himself. His answer is that, having found the short-out, they attempted to tamper with it. First, of course, they would try to remove it. Then seeing that to be impossible they would try to nullify its effect. Having made whatever adjustments possible back there in your skull, and your physical shows they did, a test had to be made. When you became conscious, you were to be put to question."

He looked at me levelly. "No. Their tampering affected the short-out's efficiency not at all. Had you been questioned, under threat or truthing of any kind, you would be a dead man today."

The caffeinello suddenly tasted cold.

"What happens now?" I asked. "How do we track them down?"

"We use the one piece of knowledge we have about them—that their inquiry was interrupted and they don't have the one particular fact they seemed very anxious to have. We aren't going to have to track them down, as you put it, Odell."

What he was leading to was fairly clear. "They'll track *me* down. I'm to be dangled like bait," I said.

Gand's fingers drummed the top of his desk. His voice stopped me as I rose to leave. "One more detail. Just for the record, the Head wants confirmation on something." He passed a sheet of vellum across his desk to me. There was a color pictoform centered on the sheet.

"Does that look familiar?" he asked. I nodded. "It's the crest he wore. What exactly is it?" Gand had turned to the code-speak input which each control used to feed the Head. "I've seen nothing like it before, but Head says its a lamp."

"That's it. I saw one something like it on an island on one of the colonial worlds. Burns a liquid fuel, and is used for heat or light, sometimes both."

Gand shrugged. "Maybe, but you wouldn't get that from what the Head says about it. He says it's a very special lamp. The Lamp of Knowledge, he calls it."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bait. Decoy.

Come on, pal, try me. Take me, grab hold tight. You can't see the line attached to my tail, but it's there. Slack now, maybe—air thin to the point of invisibility if the work has been done right—but it's there, strong, and when the Fisherman in the Sky feels the nibble...

When the nibble was felt, I just hoped I wouldn't be wriggling my last.

Square Deal Nur slid a half-filled bottle of gruul across the bar to me.

"First one's on the house," he said. "It's your last one here. I don't want you around."

I leaned over the bar and, reaching behind, took from the shelf a large water tumbler. "Might as well make it a healthy one in that case," I said. "Whatever became of your famed friendly hospitality?"

"Maybe it got lost under the Security lads' truncheons the last time you graced my establishment," he sneered. "Violence in officialdom? At worst, you get a shot of truth beam."

"Sure, and while I was hanging around there, the nice sort of gents who form my clientele cleaned out almost my entire liquor supply. Your one free drink is a lot cheaper for me... provided you leave me in peace afterward."

"I might," I said.

He looked up at me ferociously. It was early and we were alone in the Rest, the night trade still busily doing whatever illegal things Nur's night trade did before coming in to swill the quantities of badly distilled forgetfulness that he sold by the glass. I'd chosen the time purposely. If he was the fish for whom I dangled, he was free to make his play. If not, he might prove helpful to me in other ways.

"You want something, Odell," he said flatly. "The girl," I replied. "Ah, the little redhead."

"You remember her, then."

He laughed. "Who can forget her? She cost me plenty, like I told you."

"You told me I cost you plenty."

He snorted. "Never saw her before or since.- Don't know why you'd want to again, either. Almost got you killed with her suicide try. You break her little heart or something?"

"Suicide?"

"I guess maybe you didn't stick around long enough for them to drop the charge against you. Seems she's been under some kind of medication. Her doctor came to headquarters while they were questioning me, is how I know. He said she probably took an overdose. I was glad to hear it."

"Why? You just said you didn't know her." "I didn't and don't. Furthermore, I don't give a blast about her personally. But if she had died or got sick in my place, some might say it was because I was selling bad stuff."

I slid the bottle back across the bar to him. "Some might say that anyway. Thanks for your generosity." I started to leave. "Odell?"

"So you're not going to be generous after all." He paused, considering. "This trouble you seem to be in. Is it business or personal?"

"Both. Mostly personal," I said. Life and death are fairly personal things to me. "Why?"

He poured himself a short glass of gruul. "If it were business, I wouldn't mix in. But if it were the other, I could maybe ask around a bit and—" I cut him off. "No thanks. I can do my own asking." He registered surprise at my

gruffness, then fell back into his hate-the-universe snarl and ignored me as I moved across the room to the door. Help I could have used, and it was possible that Nur could have been effective. But I couldn't afford to have two pieces of bait dangling before "them." And if they thought Nur was helping me, he would be set up too. What Nur could not know, could not *feel*, was the tingle in my brain that told me somewhere out in the oncoming dusk was a high-powered listening device trained on us—or me. The decoy had made contact. Now the period of watching began. Circumspection. Wariness. Does he act normal? Does he know he's been tagged? Is tracking him too easy? Is he handing himself to us? Is he, in other words, the spring to a trap?

The night people were beginning to stir in the streets as I hit the open air which, on Hawk II, is fairly invigorating to a human. I breathed deeply with a sense of satisfaction. The fact that I had a listener trained on me rather than a more destructive weapon was comforting. The mechanics of sighting both devices were exactly the same. It meant that the Head was right about one thing: they wanted me alive. This gave me a greater degree of latitude in action.

The first order of the night was to shake the listener and force the watchers into the open on foot.

Four fast corners later, the listener was gone. A short, two-legged being enclosed in a dark green cape had, however, kept with me at each of the four turns. At the fifth he was joined by a purple-haired Jamba who scampered along in the little creature's wake on his three spindly legs. The Jambas are originally from the planet Jamb, from which they take their species name in New Galaxian speech. Intelligent as humans, they have two disadvantages in any tangle with a man. They are half the size of the average human, and their brains are protected from smashing only by a fingernail-hard outer shell. They do, however, have two advantages. Their three-legged running speed is twice that of man's. That, and they have proven telepathic abilities.

The Jamba and his partner both fell to loitering nearby as I stopped in front of an all-hours snack stand to concentrate. Setting up a mind shield is a simple matter for an FIA operative, as is shooting out a mind-probe. However, it seems that the mechanics involved in doing both at the same time were never quite solved by the Arm's scientists who developed my mechanisms. But it could be done with effort. I made the effort.

I expected and received nothing from the Jamba. Their natural shielding is part of their telepathic power which is strong enough, applied correctly, to register zero on life-form identification. But I did not expect to get what I received from his partner. There was no shield, but inside were only emotions and thoughts that added up to happiness. *The day is nice, the flowers and air. The people I meet ... gladness ... life is good today...*

I pulled back the probe. It was useless and besides my shield could be maintained with more ease.

The Jamba showed no emotion as I started back in their direction, but his green-caped friend shifted nervously on his feet. My glance at them was that of any curious observer. I did not look back to see if they followed.

But at the first corner I retraced, I saw their reflection in the shiny metal of the large rearview mirror of a ground vehicle parked near a dark alley. I smiled to myself and ducked into the alley.

The Jamba entered the darkness first. His cracked skull oozed pink death over the stones of the alley as I caught the hastily retreating green cape and flung its lightweight bearer into one of the craggy walls that surrounded me. Red blood smeared the spot where he squished against the hard surface.

He was a dwarf-man from Surya, a planet which had been a pirate haven before the Federation threatened them with destruction. That was centuries ago, and the Suryans had devoted their craftiness to more peaceful pursuits, such as hiring out as assassins and spies. Supposedly the Arm itself employed a few as operatives, though I'd never run into any. This one, however, was not employed by the Arm.

Under the naturally ugly face which would have ended in the usual Suryan triple-chin, were it not for the fact that his collision with the wall had wiped away the lower part of his face, was a small metal object pinned onto his shirt-front. It was the crest of the lamp.

Datchet did not look surprised to see me, but with a being of Datchet's species, surprise was hardly evident from externals, All my systems were on and functioning, and probe revealed mild shock.

"Sham," he said as I entered his apartment. "I'd given you up. What are you drinking?"

"Nothing. I'm working." I said, sitting down in the same chair I'd occupied on my previous visit.

"Ah, not vacationing this time."

"You know I'm not."

"I would have suspected not," he answered. "But you are fortunate to find me. As I told you, this is only one of my places."

I nodded. "Fortunate, maybe. Last time I saw you, you could have been dead."

"Simply stunned. I take it they were after you?" He slithered into the kitchen, leaving the door open.

"They were."

"And?"

"And they got me."

"Who?"

"That's my job to find out. Maybe you can help me."

Datchet came back into the sitting room with a bottle of beer. He squatted on a stool facing me, his eyes watching my face intently. "Maybe. How?"

"The girl, the one who tried to drug me. I want her."

"I don't know who—"

"But you can find out. For example, the medic you sent to Security that night. He might know. Or you might have connections in the Security Office itself. I'd guess you have, knowing you."

"Maybe," he said slowly. "I do sort of still keep a hand in, so to speak." He wriggled three of his six silver-gloved arms. "But if you locate the girl, what then?" I grinned evilly. "Then I ask her some embarrassing questions. I need the answers."

"Excuse me," he said and moving to the table which held his televiewer, punched a button. A Romboid, not the same one as I'd seen on the same screen before, appeared and awaited instructions.

"The red-haired human female that was involved with my friend Odell sometime back... I want her name and present whereabouts. I took some action in the involvement. That will be on record. I expect your answers in less time than a Raaman day."

"Raaman day?" the Romboid asked. "Common expression of my people," Datchet said. "It means hurry the hell up." The picture of the Romboid faded. "She may not be alive," he told me. "But on the other hand, if she is she might be in the center of a trap."

"I can handle the trap. I've taken precautions."

"Of course. I assume they are adequate? I recall that you had taken precautions the time you got chunked into prison and I had to—"

I laughed. "I've learned over the years, my friend. There's a full platoon of marines at the spaceport just waiting for a signal interruption from me. Much as I hate to disturb their leisure, I won't hesitate to disconnect if need be.

"Federation marines will have been noticed," Datchet commented. "Then why didn't you receive notice of them?" He didn't answer. "You didn't," I said, "because they're supposed to be crewmen on a food trade ship."

His head bobbed. "Not original, but functional. We have a wait before us, it seems, regardless of the length of the Raaman day. Might I repeat my offer of gruul?"

"You might," I said.

But the wait ended before I'd finished half of the small tumbler. Name, home address, present whereabouts, and state of health of the girl were reported by the Romboid.

"Is she guarded?" Datchet asked. "Does it appear she is being watched by anyone?"

"Negative, as far as we can tell. No one bodily near her, and no evidence of any surveillance ship."

"Any *familiar* surveillance equipment, he should have said." Datchet growled as he turned off the set. "Romboids have first-class minds, but they are programmed to deduce from observable data only. They disregard the unobservable which, as you and I have learned, is sometimes of greater import." He sighed. "Well, what now?"

"To the girl called Juna," I said, standing. "Be careful, Sham Odell," were Datchet's parting words.

I was careful. What's more, as far as I could determine, I was not under surveillance of any kind as I entered the shabby building in the deteriorated

port-side living quarter to which the pale Romboïd led me. The lift was long out of use so I took the stairs after dismissing my guide who would be in the way from this point on. I waited until my registration of him waned to nothingness, then I took the rusty steel stairs upward to the fourth level.

I took them slowly, carefully.

It wasn't until I reached her door that I got careless.

Probe revealed one weapon—a stun gun—and one life form on the other side. The indices matched those of the girl Juna. They registered calmness with a bit of anxiety. The anxiety heightened considerably when my foot crashed the door open.

"You!" she said, startled.

The room was bare except for dirt and three empty packing shells that served for chairs. I motioned for her to take one of them.

"I just want to talk," I said.

She looked doubtful, her eyes riveted on the blaster with which I did my motioning.

I searched the room fleetingly. Tour stun gun, where is it? I know there's one in the room."

There was. I heard its whisper from behind me. As I fell into the unavoidable oblivion, I managed to get a glimpse of the Jamba who held the weapon. Stupid of me! I thought. Jambas can shield...

"Yes, it was stupid of you," the Jamba said from his seat across the room.

How long a time had lapsed between my original thought and his confirmation, I had no way of telling. Enough had passed to allow him to

bind me firmly to one of the packing shells. I looked past his grinning too-large mouth. The girl seemed nowhere around. Her life spectrum was—

"Not in evidence," the Jamba completed. "But if you'll simply look to your rear."

I had to strain my neck to see her. She was slumped into another of the shells. The way her lower jaw hung open at an angle confirmed the fact she was dead.

"She was in misery anyway," the Jamba said. "Surely it was an act of mercy on my part to—" He stopped, catching my thought. "Your psych-probes of her? Of course, they showed nothing but what she was programmed to show. But underneath that hard-shell crust, Odell... it is better for her now," he concluded.

He picked up my next thought before I'd assimilated it myself.

"Shield? Of course, you can shield yourself. I care not whether you do or don't. However, that other idea that you're trying now to force out of your mind—the one that keeps telling you to remove your false fingernail and interrupt your signal to the waiting marines-go ahead, I won't try to stop you."

He laughed. "Really, I urge you to peel off the nail. Ah, well done. Very neat." He was referring not to my nail, which was still in place, but to the shield which I had dropped between our minds.

He continued. "I need very little of my telepathic power to read your mind at this instant. Why don't I care, that's what you're wondering. Ill tell you. Both ships have been destroyed with all hands aboard."

"Both ships?" I said mystified.

"The ore transport ship which held the marines authorized by your Arm and the food trader, which perhaps carried—"

"Nobody!" I said. "You destroyed an innocent ship with innocent crewmen!"

He sighed. "We got the authorized marines, anyway, that's the important thing. So you see, pull the nail away as you will. It will make no difference to your situation. As for the food ship crew, we thought maybe you'd brought along a few allies. We'd heard you'd been teamed up with an operative from the 'Inter-Colonial Merchant Guild."

"I'm teamed up with nobody," I said. "Then," he said slowly, "perhaps we have destroyed the food ship for nothing. If so, the joke is on us. Or rather on the crew, wouldn't you say?"

No, the joke was on me. I bared my teeth and made a silent vow.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"We wait. Until—ah, someone is coming."

He rose and started toward the door. Suddenly, where his movement had been casual, it froze into rigidity. "It's not—" he began, and his weapon lifted toward the entrance.

There was a creak on the other side of the door. Then several things happened at once. It was a chance, but I took it. I whipped down my shield.

Behind you! was the message I thrust at him with the full force of my concentrated thought. It grasped his attention for only an instant, but it was enough. By the time his huge head had jerked back again to the door, it had been thrust open and a slim figure in black had entered the room in a headfirst dive. There was the fiery *zap!* of a heat ray and the stranger hit the deck in a neat shoulder roll a millisecond before the Jamba's top half splattered against the opposite wall.

The figure on the floor twisted and in one smooth, fleet motion stood looking down at me.

"A proper introduction seems called for, Mr. Odell. I am Aleya Nine, on assignment with the Inter-Colonial Merchant Guild. I have been instructed to cooperate fully with you."

"Welcome to the club, Aleya Nine," I said. My grin must have looked extremely foolish. But under the circumstances...

I mean, with Aleya Nine's, frail body, back plasti-leather skintight jacket and trousers—even with short-cropped black hair—she was one of the most desirable women it had ever been my fortune to be introduced to. Properly or improperly.

Datchet's mouth opened in an O. I gave him that long at the door before I used the stun gun on him. I wanted to blast his blasphemous black trunk to bits, but that could come later. There was something I had to put to the test now, before the ship that would take Aleya Nine and me off Hawk II left spaceport. I had twenty minutes in which to make the port for prior-to-lift-off decontamination. There would be, I decided, time enough.

I had a question and needed the answer. That Datch-et had been the one to finger (if that's the right word to use in his case) the food ship was obvious. I'd told him about it for that specific reason. I'd also put the innocent victim under heavy guard, but it seemed to no avail. Whether Datchet himself was a member-in-full-standing of whatever it was I was fighting, I knew I'd never determine. Probably not, I judged, knowing his predilection to free-lance his talents. But there was a way to determine whether or not the organization he himself supervised was really his or held its prime loyalty to the mysterious group of the lamp. And that's what I was going to find out now.

Except for the task of dragging Datchet's bulk across the room, it was easy.

When he was propped up into a chair, the top head-half of him lolling over obviously, I punched the televiwer button I'd seen him use earlier. Then I stood in front of the screen.

The Romboïd looked surprised.

"That's right," I said. "Odell has caught on. What's more, he's blasting up your organization starting from the top. Look."

I stepped to the side. The Romboïd's eyes grew wider as they took in the black form in the chair. I stepped back into view and leaned my face close to the screen. My voice was as menacing as I could make it.

"You're done," I said. "Defeated. You've lost."

First class minds, Datchet had said. They deduce well from the observable.

"N-no," the Romboïd said feebly.

The wisp of smoke rising from where his head had been gave me all the answer I needed. I switched off the set.

Then I switched on the timing device on a packet of plastic half the size of my fist. I dropped it in Datchet's lap. In five minutes flat the packet would blast itself to neutrons. It would take along with it that big slithering SOB who called me friend. I was sorry I couldn't wait around to enjoy it.

It was ten minutes to lift off as I entered our first class compartment.

"I was worried you weren't going to make it," Aleya Nine said. She half lay on a couch, still in her black plasti-leather, still as desirable to me as her first impression.

I smiled wearily as I depressed the trigger that sent a sleep-inducer needle into her shoulder. I slumped down onto the couch next to her. Even with the warp-jumps, the trip back to New Earth would take fourteen hours, since we'd booked the first possible, though indirect, ship lifting.

Fourteen hours, and me with myself. I switched on the Tri-D viewer.

The movie was lousy.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Head's voice echoed off the featureless walls of the little gray cubicle in which I sat.

"This is not interrogation, but conversation. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, I understand," I answered.

"You also know that conversation like this—between myself and an operative of the Arm—is unusual?"

"Unprecedented. That was the word Gand used." ' , "Then you must also recognize that the situation leading to such an unprecedented meeting must also be unprecedented."

"I appreciate that."

"Your report, as filed with Gand, was fed into me. I shall now give you the deductions I have made. First, it is clear that the organization which is opposing us is young in years, at least its years of practical effectiveness. Its bumbling handling of its probing of the FIA shows that. Second, however, even though young, the organization is wide in its scope of operations. The number of species involved in just your confrontation with them shows that. Vastness also is indicated by the extent of their operation. The FIA has not been the only intelligence network which has become alarmed.

"The Merchant Guild," I suggested. "Among others. Too many others have been losing operatives. On some matters, you understand, there is cooperation between agencies which may in general be opposed. On this particular matter, there is an amount of cooperation that is, to use the again correct word, unprecedented."

"But why wasn't I told of this cooperation? Specifically, why wasn't I told that I was to cooperate with an agent of the Guild?" I was still hot under the collar for having had to unnecessarily drug the girl who could

have made the trip back home more interesting, not to mention the inconvenience I had in hoisting my "poor, spacesick sister" all the way from the Primus City terminal to headquarters where I insisted she be locked up for security reasons.

"There wasn't time. You were on your way before the agreement was reached."

"But *they* knew about it," I protested.

"Yes. They did. And they also knew about your backup men, where they were, who they were. What does that suggest to you?"

I didn't want to say what that suggested to me.

"This is a conversation, Odell!" I was reminded sharply. "A conversation is a *two-way*—"

"There may be a leak in the Arm, either accidental or intentional."

"Correction. Not may be, there *is* a leak. You know how the Arm is structured on three levels—operative, control and Head. This boils down to either sloppiness or duplicity on the part of you or Gand, or me. Do not be concerned for yourself, you could not possibly have leaked information you did not have. Additionally, your short-out *sees* to it you can't leak information you *do* have. Now do you see why you and I are having this conversation, this unprecedented short circuit of the chain of command?

"Gand?" I couldn't believe what the Head seemed to be driving at.

"Gand, or—the Head. First, they—whoever they are —tried the obvious. They tried to make their contacts with the operatives in the field—Has kins, Lari-Tane, yourself. But they became reasonably certain that this avenue was impractical due to our short-out device. At least, as far as the FIA is concerned. But not all intelligence agencies implant such devices in their operating people. And, more to the point here, our own agency does not implant them in our controls. There has never been a need... until now."

"Then why not do it? Why not—"

"No. If the leaks are taking place at the control level here, our suddenly implanting short-out devices would let them know what we know. We don't know, mind you, that this *is* the level we should be concerned about, but if it is we are not going to do anything which would give them warning. We need every advantage .we can muster. We are, I fear, running out of precious time."

"What—what exactly is it they want?" I asked. "Their symbol tells you that. The Lamp of Knowledge. They want information, the kind of information that is the Arm's stock and trade. But they want information not fust from our Arm, but from agencies like it all over the-galaxy. And they are getting it."

I thought about that. "If one agency could do as you say... if one group had access to what we know *plus* what the other..."

"It would be disastrous. This group would be the most powerful organization in existence. It could do all we can, but on a scale which has never been contemplated. Wars, revolutions, planetocides—think of it, and they could do it. And from what we already have experienced of their techniques and their disregard for sentient life to gain their goals, they *would* do it."

"You have, I assume, shared your conclusions with—"

"With organizations like ours? No." The last word was pronounced quietly. "No?"

"No. Again, we cannot afford to let them of the lamp know we suspect their organization's existence. We do not know how deeply they have penetrated the informational systems of other agencies. We cannot take the chance."

"But you've told the Guild," I said.

"Only that there is a common threat, the nature and seriousness of which is not at the present appreciated by my Guild counterpart. I have not attempted to alter his views. It was agreed that the Guild would release Miss Nine to work with you, however. She knows only that her assignment is to help you trace a security leak in the FIA. Such an arrangement, I felt, would provide you with assistance without using another FIA operative. Another of our own assigned to the matter might serve to alert the opposition to the extent of our concern. Also, I thought you might prefer having at your disposal a trained agent who, unlike one of our own agency, you might wish at some future moment to consider expendable."

There was a pause, presumably to allow me time in which to assimilate the information I'd received. Then the echoing voice went on.

"Concerning the facts of the matter, only two of us know, Odell. You and the Head. Your assignment is, first, to find the leak."

"And, second, plug it." I thought of Gand.

"No. Find it and follow it. If my deductions are correct, you will be led to the most vast data-gathering and interpreting system ever devised. The thought of its existence is terrifying. Just as terrifying, however, is the thought of the system falling into the hands of another agency. Any agency, to be precise, other than ours. Do I make myself clear?"

"I am to try to capture the system for the Arm," I said.

"Not simply try. You are to accomplish it. First, of course, you must destroy all of the members of the lamp organization. They must be completely eliminated. In this regard also, there is Miss Nine."

"My expendable co-operative."

"The future will determine how well chosen that word is. Co-operative, cooperative. Cooperation implies a state of trust. Certainly Miss Nine has at this point no reason to mistrust you. Nor you her, for that matter, at this point. However, should it become convenient for you to sacrifice her, her

trust would be misplaced. On the other hand, your trust in her can only exist to a point—the point when she realizes the implication of the system you oppose. At that moment she ceases to be an ally and is to be considered dangerous to the Arm. The Guild, after all, could not expect to welcome the idea of our possession of the system, just as we—"

"You're saying I might have to kill her myself."

"I am saying that, yes. This conversation, Odell, is concluded. Report back to me as you see the need. I shall not wish you luck because luck is not logical. Good day."

Luck or logic? Which was more helpful to me? Certainly, logic ruled the first steps I took. Since it was known by the opposition that Aleya Nine was working with the Arm temporarily, it was logical for me to assign her to duties which would not arouse undue suspicion but would be logical in the view of the opposition. And there was no harm in making the assignment one that might possibly yield results.

She looked simply great in her messenger's uniform, but did not take to the idea kindly.

"Odell, I'll have you know I'm a highly trained operative. To make me a—a messenger, the lowest cog in—"

I cut her off. "The Arm is simple in its structure in one way, in its direct reporting relationships. However, it takes a great number of people in supporting staff positions to make the organization work. For example, the message-carrying staff in headquarters contains some thirty people from the central message units to the runners. While very little of classified material comes along this network, there's the possibility that an intense study and piecing together of the messages carried might be revealing as to the particular projects we were involved in. That's why it's important to have someone like yourself—trained in intelligence thinking—analyze the kinds of messages on that network. Also—"

"A beginner could do that," she broke in.

"Also," I went on, "you're assigned to work for me, Miss Nine. Report to the message center immediately."

Her expression was not pleasant as she stalked off in a huff.

Gand did not greet me kindly, either.

"Well, what great ideas did you and the Head exchange?" he said with a smirk. Clearly he was disturbed by the organization short circuit which put me on conversational terms with the Head, conversation per se being rare even between Head and control.

"Not much of an exchange," I responded. "He did most of the talking."

"Not unusual," he commented. "And your assignment?"

"For now, not much for me." I then told him what Aleya Nine was doing. This, too, was logical. If Gand was in fact the leak, he'd gather no new information from what I'd told him. The lamp organization would know we were investigating some kind of irregularity, and if the Guild agent's assignment reached them in full as I reported it to Gand, it might throw up an additional blind as to the line of investigation we were following.

"Is the Head aware of her assignment?" Gand asked when I finished.

I started to say yes. Then looking at the raw data recorder on the table behind his desk, I changed my mind. "No," I said. "It should, I suppose, be reported through normal channels."

Logic or luck?

Aspects of both, maybe. It was logical that the up-ward route of information had to be investigated. The route was simple. The control, Gand, put raw data by voice onto the recorder in his office. This was then picked up in the electronic-chemical data receiver and translated into the form useable for inputting to the Head. There would be no spool or

cartridge of tape remaining on Gand's machine for subsequent pickup by anyone. This kind of arrangement had been avoided since the dawn of intelligence work. There is the old classroom case study about the operative who single-handedly thrust Old Earth into the Fifth Global War as a result of the information he gathered by collecting used electronic typewriter ribbons from the wastebaskets in a governmental headquarters. These kinds of information tapes could no more aid the agent.

While Gand spoke into the unit, my mind traced the whole process. The data receiver on the other end would now be registering his voice prints. Almost instantaneously, and under the cover of heavy metal shielding, it would be converted to-Converted.

The word registered with the shock of a steel fist on the back of my brain. When Gand turned back to me in his chair, I had phrased my line of questioning carefully.

"What happens to the raw data you put in?" I asked.

"You know what happens to it," he said, and he covered the ground my mind had already traveled.

"But after conversion, what happens then? Not to the converted data, but to the original raw stuff?"

He looked at me strangely. "It's destroyed, of course. Burned at high temperatures in the heating plant located directly underneath the converter a floor below. Didn't you ever get the basic orientation tour of this building?"

I had, but long ago; and now I recalled seeing,

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through the glass observation panel, the small atomic heating plant and the instantaneous melting of the little plastic cassettes of data which dropped down from above. It was a closed system which no possibility of... But something was nagging at me. And very il-logically so.

"I think it would be beneficial to give Miss Nine a tour of the building," I said.

Gand again looked at me strangely. "Miss Nine is not an Arm operative, Odell."

"Should we take the matter up with the Head?"

He could not stop the little patches of red from flaring on his cheeks.

"I hope you find this instructive," I said to Aleya Nine as the tube took us downward to the building's engineering facilities.

"Anything is better than what I've been doing," she said hotly. "Do you know what a messenger's main duties consist of around here? I'm a waitress, is what. *Be a good lass and bob over to the caffeinello shop for me, dearie' is what my mainline instructions have been. I've never seen caffeinello consumed in such quantities before, anywhere. Believe me, Odell, if I wanted to destroy your organization in one sweep, I'd just have to get a job in that shop and drop a few grams of neo-arsenic in the right places."

I'm happy to see you're in better spirits," I said. "But, inventive as your idea might seem to you, it's already been thought of. The Arm owns that shop. The workers there are two or three grades higher than messengers."

The tube stopped and the opening of the sliding door cut off her sputtering. We were met by a small cloud of foul-smelling smoke.

"Mr. Odell, Miss Nine. My name is Angus. I'm chief engineer here, but since I'm. the *only* engineer that doesn't mean too much."

The man who ushered us into the thermal control room was my age, my height and half again as heavy. His chiseled face was permanently reddened through what at one time must have been constant outdoor living, and his smile was contagious. Aleya Nine brightened beautifully seconds after seeing the man puff from his cheeks billow after billow of tobacco smoke.

He noticed her fascination at his black curvy pipe. "Don't see many of these things anymore," he said, "but it's gotten to be an old friend. Not like the nico-pills which the medics say do the same thing for you but do it healthier. Good to have you folks visit. Don't get to see many people in business hours. By the way, those I do see call me Gus. What would you like to see first?"

"The heating pile," I told him.

He bowed in mock cavalier fashion and led the way, a stream of tobacco smoke trailing behind him, through a corridor which contained miles of gleaming, gracefully twisting metal and plastic piping. When we arrived at our destination, he instructed Aleya, "Now, if you look in there, through the glass panel, you'll see—" He stopped. A single *plink* sounded from above our heads somewhere. "Excuse me just for a moment," he said. "Duty calls."

He ambled over to a small panel on the face of the thermal heater. He seemed to have no objection to my coming with him, so I followed, leaving Aleya peering through the large panel. When I drew up behind him, I could see that the small open door was the end of a sloppily constructed tube leading upward inside the unit. The chief engineer placed his beefy hand inside the tube then extracted it.

"Mostly this place runs itself, of course," he said.

"But there are still some things that have to be done by hand." He opened his to illustrate.

There in his palm was a green plastic data cassette.

CHAPTER SIX

"Stopping the information flow would be a signal flare to the opposition," the Head droned. "The controls will be summoned and a code will be worked out which will allow the cassettes to continue along their illegal route but which will not reveal our important operations. What do you see as your next step?"

I outlined my plan in brief. I told the Head I needed the help of two people with special skills. I was given two names and current addresses.

"Your plan of action seems logical, although somewhat out-of-stream," was the Head's comment. "But you should be warned that probably the opposition spot checks the information it receives. When the first discrepancy between cassette data and fact occurs, they will make a comprehensive check at which point you will be in extreme jeopardy. It is best if you accomplish the remainder of your mission swiftly. Questions?"

"One," I replied. "How much of this should I communicate to the girl?"

"Girl? You mean woman. Miss Nine."

"Woman, yes. I hadn't—I mean, I'd thought of her as a girl."

"Communicate only what you have to in order to gain her complete cooperation. And she is a woman, Odell. The Head has been fed her complete dossier. But you surprise me. Knowing of your proclivities, I would have thought you'd have discovered much by now. about Miss Nine."

"I've been busy," I retorted.

"This is ridiculous," was the opinion of my Guild cooperative as we waited in the darkness between two buildings. It was later in the same day, the early dinner hour, and the dusk of the fall season had already lowered its curtains around Primus City.

"It isn't ridiculous if you've done your work well," I pointed out.

"He'll pass this way, I assure you," she said coolly. "But wouldn't it be much easier to—"

I put a finger to my lips. The sidewalks were not crowded at this hour, and each time someone of Angus' size came into view I took a careful reading. This one turned out to be a false alarm.

* She continued. "Wouldn't it be easier just to break in on him in his apartment?"

"It might be under surveillance," I reminded her. "But how can you question him out here?"

"I have no intention of—"

-This time it was Angus. I jerked a thumb in the direction of the street. Aleya stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Why, Miss Nine," Angus said with a surprised smile. "Do you live near here? I was just coming back from dinner myself."

"Angus, I must speak to you," Aleya told him. "Sure," he said easily, following her into the darkness.

When, moments later, he emerged onto the street again he was supported between us.

"A fist strike," Aleya said distastefully. "Very primitive in this age of quiet, efficient stunners."

"Primitive, maybe, but I don't have any idea of the booby traps this man has in his head. And if you think what you just saw was primitive, wait and see what's coming. In the meantime, try to be a little more quiet and efficient yourself. *Taxi!*"

The hovercab driver smiled self-righteously to see the drunk we deposited in his back seat. "Little early in the day, isn't it?" he asked.

"Not if you've been at it since last night," Aleya shot back.

He grinned as I gave him the address. "And you've *still* not had enough?"

The address was the section of the city which was a combination booze joint and red-light district. But that's where Honeycott lived, and as he told me that afternoon, "Honeycott does not go to the mountain. The mountain comes to Honeycott."

"Back here," Honeycott said, opening the door and ushering the three of us through the black hall to a draped door. "We will have some quiet, at least for a while. The girls don't start coming down for another hour."

Aleya screwed up her eyes. "What sort of a place is this?"

Honeycott the Great, thin and raggedly dressed and topped with a matted black head of hair and matching beard, stared at her. With a gesture designed to make the most of his multi-colored but natty robes, he announced dramatically, "Madam, this is a brothel."

"Never mind that," I said as we deposited Angus on a plasti-silk-covered divan. "Let's get started."

Honeycott nodded. "No drugs or aid of any land?"

"That's right. You said you could do it."

"I can. It's just easier with drugs, that's all. But even before drugs were invented for this sort of thing, ancient practitioners of my science were entering the minds of people. But why no drugs?"

"Just put him under, Honeycott. That's what you're being paid for."

Honeycott straightened Angus on the divan. Then he placed above the eyes of the unconscious man a device made of gold-anodized aluminum supported upon four legs. He touched a part of the machine and a pendulum began swinging and a light at its top began flashing off and on.

"What in the world?" Aleya asked. I snorted. "For all your so-called experience, it's obvious you've never been to a colony-tramping carnival show. Every show has its mind-bender or hypnotist, and Honeycott used to be one of the best."

Honeycott looked up sharply. "Used to be? Just because a man gets too old to trod on the shores of forsaken reefs in the deep space of—"

"Is," I corrected myself. "One never loses the art," he continued. "Prove it by using it," I said impatiently. "I must use a spirit to awaken him," he said. "What kind of spirit—a drug?"

"If old style smelling salts can be termed drugs..." I relented and a small bottle was placed under Angus' nose. He began to murmur. His eyes opened, looking directly into the flashing light and the swinging pendulum.

Honeycott the Great was on.

"You are falling... falling into blackness... the blackness of sleep... deeper and deeper... it is quiet, lonely, cold, black... dark sleep..."

The phrases were repeated, phrases which in so many languages on so many worlds had formed the recurring craft of the mind-benders. As I watched Honeycott, I could not help but compare him with others I'd seen. Old now, perhaps, and unable to make the carnival circuits, but in his time, I was sure, he was as great as the Head's memory bank said he was. "... a voice... you can hear my voice and you must obey... You must obey each and every command... You want to obey... you like the sound of my voice... and there will be another voice which you will like too... and you will speak when asked questions... you will be glad to answer... won't you? Won't you?'"*

Angus' mouth opened. "Yes."

Honeycott motioned to me. "He's yours," he said softly and stepped back with Aleya to view the rest of the proceedings.

"Angus, do you hear me?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Search your mind. Is there any protective device transplanted in your system which does not allow your answering questions?"

Angus didn't answer. His mouth opened to do so, but no words came out. I felt a pull on my arm. Honeycott pulled me back.

"The subject cannot answer questions he doesn't understand. Keep your questions simple. Not necessarily yes or no questions, but simple. It makes no difference how involved his answer has to be, but the questions must be simple and easy to understand."

I stepped forward again. "Angus, this is Odell. Do you remember me from this afternoon?"

"Yes, you came to my heating plant."

"Yes. Now, Angus, you know I'm with the Arm, don't you?"

"You're an operative."

"Right. Now operatives sometimes have devices implanted inside their physical systems. Do you know these devices?"

"I have heard something like that. I don't know whether it is true or not."

"The devices are something foreign to your own organism. They are small. I want you to internally examine yourself, to look and feel around

inside your head, and tell me if you have something foreign implanted there. Will you do that?"

"Yes, I will do that," Angus said. I shot a look back at Honeycott. He nodded. Aleya whispered a question to the hypnotist. He nodded to her. I caught only the words "human mind... mysterious in still so many ways."

"Yes," Angus said suddenly. "Yes what? Is there something there?"

"Yes. Something... something cold."

"Do you know what it does? What it is supposed to do?"

A pause. Then, "No."

"Can you tell me who put it there?" Another pause. "No."

Deadlocked on that line of questioning, I thought. All right, I had another.

"Angus, you remember this afternoon? Miss Nine and I came to your heating installation. Do you remember that?"

"Yes"

"While we were there, something came down the little pipe within the thermal unit. It was a small green container. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"What is in the container? Do you know?" His face showed concentration. "In the container," he repeated. Then, "No, I don't know." I stepped back to Honeycott. "Could he be lying?" Honeycott shook his head. "Not lying, no. But—" he paused. "What I was going to say was if another hypnotist, in a session like this, has told him he did not know something—even if before he *had* known it—he would respond to your question in the negative. Ask him whether or not somebody has suggested he doesn't know."

I did.

"Yes," Angus responded to my amazement. Honeycott stepped up beside me.

"And did you know what was in the—" Honeycott looked questioningly at me. "Green containers," I supplied.

"In the green containers? Did you know what was in them *before* someone suggested you did not?"

"Not really," Angus replied. "I just knew they were secret and were to be destroyed."

I sighed. This explained a lot of things. It explained the nagging problem of why Angus had no compunction in showing me the cassette. A spy, in the true sense, would have panicked when the container dropped into the makeshift tube.

"The tube, Angus. Who built the tube inside the thermal unit?"

"Me. I built it. Not very craftsmanlike, but it had to be done in a hurry and with spare materials."

"You were told to build it?"

"Yes."

"By the same person who told you that you didn't know—"

"Yes," he interrupted.

"Who is that?" ■

"I don't know."

"All right. When you get the cassettes, what do you do with them?"

"I take them."

"Yes. Where do you take them?"*

"To Omega."

"Omega. Is that a man's name or a place?"

A pause. "It could be both. It is the little store where I buy my pipe tobacco every day."

It was my turn to pause.

"When... when did you start smoking a pipe?"

"Two, maybe three months ago," he answered. "The man—the one I told you about—he said I should smoke a pipe. So I did."

The Omega Specialty Tobacco Shoppe was within walking distance from Honeycott's place in the same seedy part of the city. If the area were inhabited by curiosity seekers, the group of us who stopped across the street from the tobacconist's would have attracted more than mild attention.

Angus, still in trance, was with us—needed to lead the way. Honeycott, fully robed, came along to break Angus' trance after we'd finished with him. An elfin midget named Squam had joined us with a large black bag before we'd left Honeycott's. Finally, in addition to Aleya and myself, there was a plump, pinkish woman in her late thirties and in bright red plasti-silk pajamas.

"My feet hurt," she complained loudly.

"Silence, woman," Honeycott ordered aloofly. "You are being well recompensed for your little part in our drama."

"What's it all about, anyway?" she asked. "Why won't somebody tell me *why* I'm supposed to—"

Aleya turned on her. "You hear this good, dunce. You do exactly as you've been told. Don't waver an inch from your instructions. We are serious about what we're doing tonight. Deadly serious. Do I make myself clear?"

The pinkish woman nodded. The coldness of Aleya's voice had gotten its message across.

"Are we ready?" Honeycott asked me.

I had been looking at the facade of the tobacconist's. I turned to Angus. "This is the place? You're sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure," Angus replied.

"Don't antagonize the subject," Honeycott warned. "You are finished with him?"

I told him I was, and Honeycott turned Angus to face him.

"You will accompany this woman where she takes you. When she snaps her fingers three times..." He paused. To Pinky he said, "You *can* snap your fingers?" She nodded again, still watching Aleya's scowl, and Honeycott went on. "When she snaps her fingers three times, you will awaken from your trance. You will remember then that you were walking along the street near your apartment and that you were accosted by the lady. You will remember then that you went with her to her place of business and thoroughly enjoyed yourself, and that at the point of awakening you and she are just saying goodbye. You will then go home and sleep. You will not remember meeting Miss Nine tonight. You will not remember talking to Mr. Odell and myself. What's more," he said and winked at me, "what's more, you won't remember my instructing you not to remember. Do you understand all that?"

Angus said he did, but Honeycott had him repeat the full set of instructions. He had memorized it almost to the very word.

Then the two of them were gone, Pinky leading Angus around the next corner. "Now, you go to work for us," I told the midget named Squam.

"It doesn't look too formidable," he said in a high, squeaky voice. "But then the tough ones never do. I want to take a closer look."

He crossed the street with a childish bounce in his step, swinging his black bag.

"Honeycott," I said, "there's no need for you to stick around. Things could get rough from here on in."

He tugged at his beard and his eyes twinkled. "Mr. Odell, if it is at all within the realm of possibility, I'd like to stay. I have been retired too many years, and I don't have all that long a future in this world. Your adventure, though it surely may have its elements of danger as I can appreciate all too well, might give an aging man a bit of fun—or at the very least a memory of excitement that he can bring to the forefront of his thoughts when the melancholy of old age—"

"All right," I said, cutting off what promised to be an hour's lecture on how to enjoy retirement. "But once we go inside, you stay outside. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Well?" I asked Squam, who returned to us. "You've got in's in the right places, mister," he said. "If you could obtain the plans for the electricity and water and sewage ducts, then by tomorrow—"

I shook my head. "Tonight. We go in tonight, within the hour."

He scratched his head. "I dunno. No living guard inside, but the place is solid with alarm systems, all of which don't go off in the building but remote. It's gonna be difficult—"

"But not impossible," I said. "Have another look, this time a better one."

"I'm not sure—" he protested. "I am."

I wasn't, but if Squam couldn't get inside the Omega Specialty Tobacco Shoppe, then the place couldn't be gotten into by anyone. According to the Head, who gave me his name when I anticipated needing a man of special talents if Angus could be made to reveal his drop-off, Squam was the only person ever to have escaped from the maximum security prison of the United Southern Continent of the planet Driscoll. He'd done it seventy-three hours after arrival. So eager were the authorities to find out how he did it, they promised him a full pardon for the life sentence he'd earned by stealing a Continental official's wife's priceless jewelry. He told them. Faced with the choice of promising to give up his career of crime or of going into exile, he chose the latter and came to New Earth. Whether or not he still plied his old trade was not the Arm's business. We are not an internal police force, and people like Squam can often come in handy.

Half an hour passed and we were inside the Omega Specialty Tobacco Shoppe. To my amazement we walked in the front door, except for Honeycott, who remained outside.

"All the stuff has been bypassed," Squam explained. "Luckily, it's all thermal stuff that goes off if animal heat is present or light beam stuff that goes off when an object breaks the beam." He grinned. "In the older days it wasn't so easy, when they used televiewers."

"Why'd they stop?" I asked.

"Labor saving," he explained. "You have to hire a man to watch the televiewer. Not only that, several smart operators simply drugged the watcher. This stuff here is more modern, supposedly more difficult to breach. But it can be done." He tapped his bag affectionately.

Aleya asked, "Anything specific we're looking for?"

"The cassettes, hopefully, with an address of destination."

"You hope big," she commented, taking from her belt a subminiature camera. Woman or not, Aleya was a professional. She knew, as well as Squam in his trade and I in mine, that ideally we should touch nothing. She began photographing shipping orders on the un-dercounter of the main room of the shop.

"Just those for the past two weeks," I said. "The outgo of our product would be frequent enough in that period for a pattern to emerge."

The shop was small. An open door led to a storage room off which was a tiny cramped washroom. I stood in the center of the storage area and let my eyes care-fully move over the addresses, both off-world and on, contained on cartons both large and tiny.

We were finished with all we could accomplish in fifteen minutes. We'd found no green cassettes, but Aleya seemed pleased about something.

"I want to study my film in a more relaxed surrounding, but if what I suspect is the case *is* really the case, these opponents of ours aren't all that brilliant," she said. "As a matter of fact, they're pretty stupid."

"How's that?" I asked. But she had no chance to answer. Honeycott's voice cut through the night: "Hovercab! Stopping up the street!"

"Move on," I told him, noting that Honeycott had his back turned to the shop entrance. He began to do so. That a hovercab should stop up the street was in itself no cause for alarm, but you had to play it that way. Probably, I thought, as we crept silently to the door, the stopping was innocent enough. Probably also the single set of clacking footfalls were innocent. They weren't.

"You—you there! Stop!" a heavy voice boomed. Honeycott's voice shot back a profanity. There was a flash of light that danced in my eyes and Honeycott screamed.

"The bastard!" Aleya said under her breath and, before I could react to hold her back, she was through the door and onto the street. There was

another flash of light. This time the source was the blaster in Aleya's hand.

Her face wore an expression of cruel satisfaction when Squam and I joined her. Before her was the smoking lower half of a dwarf-man from Surya, like the one I'd killed on Hawk II.

"That was stupid," I said, turning to Aleya. But she had noiselessly moved down the street to where what was left of Honeycott lay.

"He was a nice old man," she said, not turning immediately when my footsteps stopped behind her. When she did look up, her eyes were wet. "He was a nice old man," she repeated.

I strode back to Squam. "I need an accident," I said.

"It can be arranged," he responded. "The hovercab and all. I have some friends who can arrange it."

"Fast, it's got to happen. He might have regular check-in times."

"Fast," he assured me. "It'll only take a few minutes to fix the shop's systems back to normal. But this accident, that'll cost a lot—"

"Just fast," I said.

"And the other one? You want me to handle the magician?"

I told him I'd handle the magician.

An old-time carnival man once told me that a true tramper's idea of immortality is to have his dust carried eternally by the winds of time and space. Aleya and I reduced the hypnotist's body to ashes and carried them to a bridge over the bay which separates two sections of the city. Sprinkling the ashes to the high winds, I hoped that Honeycott had held the true tramper's idea of immortality.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"It's very simple, really," Aleya said later as she spread out her instant prints on the small desk in my apartment. "It's so easy to figure out that I can't believe they're so stupid."

"They are not stupid, my friend," I said. "I think we've had enough evidence of that."

"Not stupid, then. Cocky would be a better term. And I guess they can afford to be blatant about where your secret stuff goes."

"How so?" I asked.

"The only consistent destination for packets from the Omega Shoppe are here. Direct, three days warp." She circled an address on the print.

Based on firsthand experience and on the information I'd given her—that our job was to track down to its source a highly skilled and deadly serious group of FIA-secrets busters who used a silver lamp as its emblem—Aleya had agreed with me that the cassettes would have to be sent to a direct and consistent destination. The lamp organization would need its input swiftly in order to act without the delay that a relaying system might entail. That was logical, and was borne out by the swiftness in which they had received information about Aleya's being assigned to me and the specifics of my Hawk II bodyguard. The argument for consistency was less certain, but probable. A cell-system of independent decision-making headquarters separated widely in space was also possible, but just barely, if the Head was correct in deducing it was a young organization we were up against. I turned the print to read it.

"No name, just a mail cubicle number at a spaceport," I commented. "What's so cocky about that?"

"Odell, don't you recognize the port?"

"Shaeffer's Landing, Marquette," I read aloud. "It's out near the rim somewhere. I don't know much about the place."

"You would if you worked for the Guild," she said. "Marquette is, as you say, out near the rim. It's a small world with one continent, the inhabitants of which are mostly of a mixed human strain. Its main import is exactly the same as its main export. Religion."

I repeated her last word.

"The world is a haven for fanatics of every conceivable religious sect. They number in the thousands. Not that all the inhabitants are followers of the creeds, but most of them are. Shaeffer's Landing, the port city, is a smaller replica of the entire planet, only more so."

"All right, so you've got packets going from the Omega Shoppe to Shaeffer's Landing, a religious city. So?"

"It's the Omega *Tobacco* Shoppe," she replied. I began to follow her thought. "And its product is going to a religious community. No, it's a good try on your part, but it won't wash logically. I've run into several religions that use a combination of drugs, sensitzers—including nicotine—to heighten their spiritual experiences. Shaeffer's Landing would seem to me to be a natural and regular destination for the product."

"The Children of Gzar don't use tobacco. The religion outlaws the use of all artificial stimulation."

"That's very interesting, but whoever the Children of Gzar may be, they are only one sect. You can't generalize from that."

Aleya shook her head. "You can when that only one sect, as you put it, forms the majority party which governs Shaeffer's Landing, and when that only one sect has successfully pushed through legislation prohibiting the import of all products they consider to be anything other than wholesome." She now had my entire attention.

"The Guild has had problems with them for years. Their Customs people enforce the rules rigidly. Now and then, an item on the list—such as a specific medical chemical—will be taken off temporarily when the specific disease it cures reaches dangerous proportions, but the list is miles long and all nicotine products, of which tobacco is one, are proscribed."

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I looked at the circled address on the instiprint. "Smugglers?"

"Hardly. The penalties are stiff and the Customs people careful."

"Then the packets being sent from Omega would be confiscated, wouldn't they?"

"Yes," she said and smiled.

Then I saw her point. "All we need do is find the confiscator who—"

"Yes," she said again. "That's all."

Less than twenty-four hours later, I saw the advantage of having a co-worker who, through her years with the Merchant Guild, had a storehouse of little-known facts in her mind. Less than twenty-four hours later, I joined the crowd of shoppers entering a round-the-clock everything store in the city. Shortly after entry I was three stories underground in a room which was used by the Arm for a variety of purposes and where Aleya Nine was waiting for me, having made what she called the necessary preparations. Aleya Nine and Shamryke Odell would not leave the store. I was doubtful as to fust who would.

She calmly scrutinized my face when I joined her.

"Somewhat too finely chiseled, I think," she said. "Say something."

"Say what?"

She squinted and looked at my head with her forefingers and thumbs touching, forming a square. "Anything. Tell me what you've been up to this afternoon."

I'd been up to, as she put it, checking on how well Squam had arranged the accident to the dwarf she'd blasted, I told her.

The finger box moved into a diamond shape. "Oh?" she said, hardly interested. "How well was it arranged?"

"Adequately. The evidence will show that a small but vital part of the operation of the hovercab gave way at an extremely inappropriate moment. The resulting unplanned but unavoidable dive of the vehicle took it bubble-first into a medium-sized atom-pack recharging station. The driver was almost completely burnt, but the vehicle registration numbers remained intact and thus identifiable."

"Pity," she said. "By the way, I was under surveillance by distance as I entered. Yes, most definitely a beard." The last was said not to me but to a wiry man who immediately opened a panel in the wall.

"We've both been under surveillance, except for last night when we managed to shake them. They picked me up again this morning as I left the apartment. And what do you mean beard? They scratch."

"They itch," she corrected me. "Beard and full head of hair. Both musts. And a little plastic to add some jowls. And since we'll also be adding a few lice, you're right. You'll scratch."

"At least pre-lift-off decontamination will get rid of them," I grunted, sitting down in the chair the little man gestured toward.

I have never liked physical disguise. Clothing, all right. But actual addition to my body (fortunately I'd never had to undergo subtraction) always made me nervous. Would I be able to move as well with a pot belly? (Answer: Yes, normally, in that most of the time the plastic addition weighed less than the real thing would.) Would the false nose or belly or

hair come loose or fall off? (Answer: No, electro-melt application of fake skin was permanent unless surgically stripped. My face rebuild was accomplished by that method. Hair, too, could be set fast the same way, but was not as permanent. However, it wouldn't come loose even if yanked with "extreme vigor," to use the words of one makeup man a few years back who then proceeded to demonstrate. It hurt like real hair, too.)

Still, I always felt clumsy, and was glad that aside from facial rearrangement the rest of my body was left alone. I felt a little better, too, when Aleya assured me I wouldn't have to limp continually or display some other deformity or ailment. Most of the time, such deformities or ailments are not faked. A simple injection makes your disguise a real one, leaving your mind free from the chore of acting.

The work was performed with speed. Because of the pads over my eyes—my eyebrows were being changed—I couldn't see what was taking place with Aleya, but another Kttle man was busily transforming her also. I couldn't help but grin when I saw her.

"Red hair, is it?" I asked.

"I understood you liked red hair," she said simply. "At least, based on your temporary affiliations on Hawk II." She ran her fingers through the long locks which fell gracefully over her shoulders. She had lost something of the... mystique is perhaps the word, or whatever it was she had in her short black haircut. But the longer hair seemed all by itself to shout for the rest of her body that she was indeed feminine and a red-hot example of the sex.

"I like red hair, yes," I said.

"It's good that you do. Take a look at yourself."

I did and saw what she meant. The beefier-looking face, somewhat older than my original, that stared back in surprise from the mirror, was surrounded completely by red hair. Mangy, rangy, badly in need of trimming some months ago, the strands as she had promised were the

home-sweet-homeland of a large clan of lice. The members of the clan were not bits of plastic in disguise. They were quite real.

Aleya laughed. "Now that my ego has been satisfied with my beauty..." she started. As I turned she was busily mussing up her just-combed locks. Her makeup man poured over her head droplets of a red-dyed liquid. They finished in a matter of moments.

She looked awful.

"Our robes," she said, and another panel in the wall was opened.

I could smell the foul odor the tattered brown drapes of cheap cloth exuded from across the room. "We have to put these on our clean bodies?" I asked.

"Not at all," was her reply. "We have to put them on our filthy bodies. Please strip, Odell."

Whatever physical reaction her naked body might have gotten from mine, I had no chance to learn. Just as the final garment she wore dropped to the floor, the smearing began. It was dried muck, the actual substance of which I felt no need of inquiring into further as it was rubbed into my pores. The smell it carried conveyed the total impression of four-month-old perspiration which had been strained through a vat of... I stopped thinking about it entirely. I wished my nasal senses could have done the same.

"Like you said, we can look forward to decontamination," Aleya said, her own nostrils quivering. "But we must not appear to enjoy it, you understand."

"I understand," I said, trying to stop inhaling altogether. "Will you now tell me what it is we're supposed to be in these cleverly conceived disguises of ours?"

"Saints, of course," she answered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The extraordinary appeal attached to Marquette by the faithful of so many and varied creeds can at first

seem inexplicable to the student of religious phenomena, but there is a wealth of historic precedence. Creeds that range from the mystic union with the central Cosmos to those which follow the teachings of an individual being-god are found to have within their dogma, or non-dogma when applicable,³⁵⁷ a special experience which can be gained by the faithful in solitude and isolation. Whatever the reason—Rew, for example, has it that the practice was begun by the Incandescent Sons of Ufta, while Boggins-Jones points to the origin as a Universophist ritual; and while both are highly respected historians it should be kept in mind that Rew and Boggins-Jones are, respectively, a Son of Ufta and a Universophist—Marquette has become the accepted location for such spiritual experiences. To the dull and sometimes severe little planet (with its sections of desert and mountain crags) flock seekers of truth in tiw millions annually, the traffic in people between Mar-quette and all sections of the galaxy exceeding the freight imported and exported by planets the size of, say,...

Gurvish Kommer II, a historical

INTRODUCTION OF MODERN RELIGION AND PARAPHYSICS.

I melted the tape after passing it through the en-larger-viewer in the back seat of the Arm car-diguisd-as-cab which took us to the spaceport entrance. For those who are intrigued by the footnote referred to in the text, it read:

Nondogma is used here as referring to the tenet several religious creeds hold dear, namely, "We have no dogma, we are free from such restraints." To the objective observer, such nondogma must be viewed, as an example of an inherent restraint itself, and

therefore nondogmas are classified in religion-research as a type of dogma.

"I must read the entire work sometime—when I have more leisure," I told Aleya. "I'll bet a person could spend an entire week comprehending just one of those footnotes."

But Gurvish Kommer II seemed to know what he was talking about. That, at least, was my conclusion, based on the composition of my fellow passengers in the economy class lounge of the liner *Hemmet Galsworthy* which lifted off twenty minutes late from spaceport.

In my years of bouncing off planets in the Arm, I rarely shipped out economy class. The reason for first class accommodation had little to do with the fact that the taxpayers were footing the bill, but the less obvious (to the taxpayer) reason of security and protection of the individual operative. In the large amphitheatre-like lounge (and the around-the-wall Tri-D entertainment screen makes it in fact an amphitheatre) you would be an easy target either from a distant assassin or from one who worked from close up and who then could fade into the crowd of between 200 and 400 passengers, the number depending upon the size of the vessel. Ease in his work would be helped by the fact that all seats faced away from the center toward the wall screen.

The *Hemmet Galsworthy* was a smaller size ship with 200 economy class seats. They were, however, all filled, and it was good that the aisles between rows were somewhat spacious, since the seats were not.

"Sit down, Odell," Aleya told me. "You'll attract undue attention."

"Will attract attention? In here?" I laughed. In the entire lounge, dressed in what I had thought to be rather absurd style, I counted myself one of the more conservative in attire present.

But she was right. I did attract attention. He was a man about my weight and height and musculature. His flowing red robes were in a tattered

condition that made mine look store-bought. Decontamination had at least made mine *feel* better.

"Pilgrim, what star do ye follow?" he asked in a voice that was somber and heart-heavy.

Aleya stepped quickly between us. "My master follows the unborn star," she said, matching his somber tones. "He speaks not of stars, he speaks not at all. He has vowed to speak only when he finds the as yet un-issuing spark."

"But surely, I heard him speak a moment ago?" Red Robe said.

Aleya smiled. "In your heart of hearts, perhaps. His power is such that it sometimes affects those nearby so. It is why I follow him, this power he has."

"Power!" came the scoffing reply. As the reply was directed to me I looked blankly back at him. I hoped my expression might be a close approximation to what one might call serene. But since I couldn't quite make out what Aleya was talking about, serenity was difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, he seemed to buy it, because he gave up on me and returned his gaze to Aleya.

"Power is the corruptor," he said.

"There is such a thing as creative power," she replied.

"But ye have it not, nor he. Ye both are those of the kind because of whom we of the Martyrites endure pain, suffering—"

"My master demands none of these from ye—you," Aleya said.

I nodded slightly not knowing what else to do but feeling called upon to do something. The gesture was ignored.

"But *The Master—He* does. He demands by His Natural Laws that sins be countered with suffering. Since the guilty refuse to bend to the suffering that is due them, we Martyrites must keep the Divine Scales of Equilibrium in balance. Do not think that this is injustice on the part of Him—or stupidity on the part of us—for when the sacrificial end for one of us takes place, the Bell of Glory shall ring out and we shall be transfixed in the Holy Stare and be taken up bodily, blissfully, into the Supreme Presence of Him who..."

I sat down, as Aleya suggested, and tried to concentrate on the Tri-D screen. Following the example of her master, Aleya did likewise but was unsuccessful due to the Martyrite's occupying what had been someone's seat whose someone had left it.

"But your master... and yourself," he said. "Such blood-red hair. Blood-red is our color, you know. You didn't? Well, let me tell you about our order's founding. It was back in..."

Fortunately for us both, the Tri-D movie appealed to the aesthetic sense of the Martyrite.

The trip to Marquette was divided into three segments equal in time. The first "day" was spent in normal drive, then once we were free from heavily trafficked space, we moved into hyperdrive which warped us to the end of the galaxy we were headed for. The second day was spent in warp, which inside the lounge was no different from the first, except that the movies seemed better and our red-robed friend had moved a row to our front in order to attempt the conversion of a nude female, a green-skinned human of advanced age. The snippets of conversation I heard were: her, "...nudity frees the pores"; him, "Freedom! freedom is the corruptor!" the third day would bring us out of warp and later in the day we would move into the shipping lanes heading toward Marquette.

Because of the potential hazards involved in a ship's suddenly appearing out of "nowhere," all-point coordination of our appearance was necessary. Our exact point and time of entry into normal space was known by

hundreds of individuals, mostly because of official working necessity. It was, therefore, not by guess but by precise knowledge that the attacker ships knew where to wait.

The thing that upset most of the passengers "was that the attack caused an interruption in the movie which was reaching an important climax.

The faces that appeared on the screen in some twenty places looked controlled and even-tempered, but most flight commanders were exactly that. "Forgive me the interruption," he said, "but we are under the illegal control of two vessels, neither of which bears any identifying insignia. They have contacted me and demanded that I allow one of their people to board us for what he calls an 'inspection.' If I do not, our ship is threatened with immediate destruction. I have therefore given the order that a party of one person be allowed to enter our ship. Remain calm and I have been assured that we are in no danger."

The movie went back on the screen. "What do you think it is?" Aleya asked. "Abnormal," I answered. "Highly, but why this ship? And who?" A few minutes later, I suspected the answers to both questions. The lone figure who entered the economy lounge wore, like his ships, no identification marks, but I had the answers nonetheless.

"*Jamba!*" I whispered through my teeth.

He moved on his three spindly legs slowly, eyes lowered, circumnavigating the outer row nearest the screen. Though only the low-keyed sound of the movie could be heard by ear, the mind-shouts coming into the Jamba's receiver must have been an off-key symphony or, worse, several symphonies simultaneously themed to emotions ranging from simple bewilderment to frantic hysteria. The Jamba could do nothing other than accept them all and sort and separate until he found the one he wanted.

"Concentrate on the screen," I instructed Aleya.

The Jamba's head jerked upward. He'd received my warning. But the registration came from too far for him to pinpoint it before disappearing

into the clutter of other emotions.

On the screen the adventure-romance was moving toward the dramatic moment when the hero and heroine would prove by example that a humanoid female and a human-looking synthetic male either could or could not realize emotional fulfillment with each other regardless of the number of harrowing escapes from danger and destruction they'd weathered. As I infused myself into the scene, he—the man—was saying that though his body parts were not real flesh and blood, nonetheless they were constructed of the same stuff of the Cosmos as were the parts of her body. She turned to him.

She turned to me.

"We cannot return to Fewsan together." Facial expression is of homesickness, of wishful remembering of green hills which are in contrast to the sand-dunish landscape surrounding her and me as I nod in slow agreement that unions between humans and synthetics are punished on Fewsan by radiation burning of both parties which for me would mean a melting to liquid and then steam. And for her, and my expression betrays that my real innermost thoughts are for her and not me, for her the flesh blackens quickly the searing heat penetrating into the marrow of her delicate bones and the blood boils and bubbles and burst through the confining walls of veins and arteries and as she-as-person becomes in a painful eternal instant she-as-ash, 't her mind races to free itself in the hellfire and calls to Odell you're here I know it and for my part I—

I dropped my mind shield in place.

Instantly I lifted it, but it was too late.

Less than ten yards away from my seat, the Jamba smiled.

"I believe I have found the one I seek," he said directly to me.

It was an unfortunate choice of words.

"Seek?" repeated a tall thin man with a gold electro-tattooed forehead. "I am the one you seek. The Prophet Nufra am I. Guidance is mine to give to the earnest seeker after my word."

The Jamba took a step backward as Aleya shouted at him. "Seek not from the Prophet Nufra whose faith is false, but seek ye truth from him who is guided by the unnamed star!"

"Repent your sins, pirate!" shouted a man whose face had been burned half away. "I, the Marked, the Chosen, will—"

"Repent to me," came a loud plea from behind the Jamba.

"To *me—for I* am the True God!" came another.

"There is no god but Tsotsil!"

"Tsotsil? Haha!"

The Jamba shifted his weight nervously from foot to foot. The chorus, now screaming slogans ranging from "Religious Freedom" through "Kaal eats children!" completely drowned out the Tri-D sound track. Everyone in the lounge was up on his or her feet shouting and shoving. Nodding to Aleya, I waded into the sea of fist-wavers pressing about the slowly retreating Jamba.

He saw me coming, but too late. Jambas are speedy, but not in a crowd of pressing bodies. My fist bottom struck hard and fast, so fast that in the confusion I was caught in an outgoing tide of moving flesh and by the time the brain-crushed Jamba was spotted under someone's feet I was nowhere near him.

Then the lounge fell silent. No one moved, but all eyes were focused on the pulpy mess that had been the object of earlier fear. Only the sound track filled the room with pledges of undying love even though the lovers would never see each other again. Then even that sound ended and into the

resulting hush came the voice of the flight commander whose face appeared in repetition on the circular screen.

"The attack is lifted," he said. "The two unidentified ships have fled in the face of a Security Patrol from Shaeffer's Landing. The creature who is on board now is to be held in our custody until the patrol arrives. This is to give him notice that resistance is useless in that his cohorts cannot give him aid."

The commander's huge faces, their eyes unseeing the dead Jamba between the two rows of seats below him, urged all present to remain calm in the short interval it took for him to be with them. The faces faded.

"That was close," I whispered to Aleya, who had joined me in the silence.

"I won't underestimate these people again," she said. "Lucky for that patrol. Would they have taken us off the ship?"

"I don't think so. And I don't think the patrol is a matter of luck. I figure that, on the outside, things happened just as planned. The pirate ships are driven off by the patrol, which therefore is worthy of praise from your Merchant's Guild for protecting vessels in the region instead of the criticism that would be barreled at them if the pirates were at all successful in boarding. No, the patrol is all part of it, I'm sure. The officials would then place the Jamba in custody' and upon landing, or shortly after, you and I would have found a very unpleasant reception committee."

"Like you said, it was a close escape," she said.

"I said it was close. It was, but we haven't escaped yet."

Aleya followed my eyes to the approaching Martyrite, our old red-robed friend. "Trouble?" she asked.

The Martyrite supplied her answer.

"So, your master doesn't speak, you said. I could have sworn..." He left the sentence unfinished, but the narrow smile on his lips completed the thought.

"He does not speak with flesh and blood," Aleya said smoothly.
"Prayers issued to the unnamed are permitted by himself to himself."

The smile widened. "Prayers, no doubt, for the soul of our departed visitor there. It seems no one saw the actual act which put him in his departed state. But if I recall correctly, your master was nearby when the act of violence was done. And earlier, again if my faulty memory serves correctly, was it not your master to whom the pirate spoke? Surely it was him or someone close to him, yourself perhaps? Is the whole incident to be attributed to that power you mentioned, that power the morality of which you so fervently defended?"

His phrases had been addressed to Aleya, but his eyes and mocking smile were directed to me. His oratory completed, he turned on his heel and stalked off presumably to view the remains of the fallen in battle.

"Trouble," I confirmed to Aleya, as the flight commander entered the lounge.

Which of us, Aleya or myself, was more startled it is difficult to say.

"I confess to the act," the Martyrite said.

The commander of the *Hemmet Galsworthy* and the three blue-uniformed Security officers who had boarded us also looked surprised.

"You, sir, are confessing to the killing?" asked the senior officer, a black Rim Worlder.

The Martyrite stood stiffly. "I do. The balance of equilibrium of bad act and good must be maintained. The evil stroke has been made. I hereby cancel its effect on the Cosmos. I await the justice of your punishment for the murder."

Aleya shot a glance at me. "A true believer," she muttered under her breath.

"Murder? Evil act?" the senior officer repeated. "Sir, to the contrary, you've done the government of Shaef-fer's Landing a great service—and the Merchant Guild as well."

"To cause the death of another is to gain a stigma," the Martyrite responded.

"Not when the other is a criminal who breaks the laws of decent folk," countered the senior officer.

"I'm not under arrest?"

"You are a hero of the planet, sir."

"Hero?" the Martyrite asked. He wasn't so sure the idea appealed to him.

The senior officer nodded enthusiastically. "Surely a hero. At the risk of life and limb, to subdue—"

"Hero," the Martyrite said again. Now he was becoming surer about the idea appealing to him. "Sacrifice is, after all, my creed. I felt it only my duty to—"

"Of course," the senior officer broke in. "And I assure you that the government of Shaeffer's Landing will want to decorate you suitably for your work." He held up his hand. "Ah, I know how modest the true

AAASTERS OF THE LAMP

hero is, but I insist that you accompany us on our ship, traveling as a passenger of honor to Shaeffer's Landing where a suitable reception will be prepared as soon as we can get word back."

"Well..." the Martyrite said. The expression on his face indicated that the idea of being decorated also appealed to him. "Well, I was only doing my duty as I saw it, but if you insist..."

"We insist," the senior officer said. His tone was icy cold.

When the *Hemmet Galsworthy* touched down later that day, there was much talk at the spaceport about the poor man who was gunned down as he came down the ramp of a patrol ship. The man was said to be a religious leader of insignificant note, but one who had performed a heroic action against pirates in space. The assassin's identity was unknown at present, but it was said that the outraged authorities were working on the assumption that he was one of the band of pirates they were already seeking.

"He got his suitable reception," Aleya said as we entered the immigration line.

"You mean Shamryke Odell did," I said. "Let's hope they've scratched a thick black line through my name."

"He might have given them reason to question his being you."

"I don't think so. After all, he was my build and size. Also, if they'd discovered that he was just a crank, they would have done as they said—given him a medal or something."

"At least he got what he really wanted," she said. I arched my eyebrows. "Enfolded in the arms of the Cosmos King? You really think so? How quickly we saints switch our religious affiliations." She did not laugh.

CHAPTER NINE

Getting through Immigration was easier than I'd expected. No probes of any kind were trained on me as we waited in line, nor did my internal equipment give me the telltale warning when it was my turn. There was just one man, dressed in Security blue.

"Name, place of birth, place of current residence, length of intended stay in Shaeffer's Landing," he said without raising his eyes from the form he held before him.

Aleya stepped between us. "The Master has no name, he has always been alive, his place of residence is the universe and—"

The eyes were now raised. "And, lady, your turn is next. This bird can answer his own questions."

"But he can't," Aleya protested. She explained to him about my vow of silence, ending with "Does not Shaeffer's Landing allow religious freedom? Cannot a man be silent if—"

A sigh. "All right, you answer his questions." The man obviously had seen his share of fanatics and probably a few who had taken vows such as mine. Exasperated, he said, "Name. We'll start with that."

"He has no name other than Master."

"All right. But he had a name once. What name did he have at birth?"

Aleya smiled. "At birth, sir, none of us have names. They come later, after we are born."

Another sigh. "So all right, after he was born, then..."*

From the frown we received after passing through, we were quite satisfied that we'd qualified as the bona fide saints we claimed to be. Next stop was Customs, and here was the delicate part. Not for Aleya. Her job was to pass through as quickly as possible and beat a path to the mail cubicles which would be filled from the unloading ship. A letter, by mistake, had been forwarded to her in care of the Shaeffer's Landing spaceport. It was incorrectly addressed to the mail box number one digit higher than the box to which the Omega Tobacco Shoppe parcels were sent. She was to wait and watch. My job was less simple.

I was entering the Customs check as a lawbreaker. In the sack of personal belongings that I was to claim by the numbered tag I clutched in my hand were four ounces of pure uncut *blalum*, a substance which is air-hardened sap from a small tree found on many worlds. Where the blalum tree was first native to is anybody's guess, but it has been transported over seas of black space to remote corners of the galaxy. Blalum is highly praised and deeply damned for its psychedelic effects. Blalum was, of course, nonimportable to Marquette.

"Anything to declare?" the blue uniform asked me as Aleya gathered her sack and departed through the exit.

"Just a sack of personal things," I said. It was both safe and a pleasure to talk. Here, too, was no evidence of probing devices.

"Let's just have a look, whatsay," he said uncheer-fully. It took him less than two seconds to discover the contraband. "What's this?"

I looked at the raw white substance in his hand. "That?"

"This."

"Just some blalum, is all. I find it useful in my meditations."

He shook his head. "You want to do your meditating in jail? Importing blalum is a crime against the people."

My face showed disbelief. "Crime? But I was told this was a place of religious toleration."

"It is, but possession of drugs of any kind is—"

"Blalum is not a drug," I protested. "Blalum is a heightener of experience, a bringer of objective reality. It is—"

"It is on the list of proscribed items. Since you didn't know, the government will not hold you personally liable. However, you should

consider yourself in debt to the official generosity in letting you off with mere confiscation."

My nostrils flared in indignation. My voice thundered. "*Confiscate!*"

The official remained calm and unfazed. "You'll get a receipt. Please wait over there." He indicated an uncomfortable-looking fiberplas straight-backed chair. "Over there, please," he repeated, a little heavier.

I gathered the remainder of my things and stuffed them into the bag. "Anything to declare?" the person behind me was asked as I sat down in the appointed place.

I had a good vantage point from which to view the movement of luggage and freight. For the entire half hour I sat there, I saw nobody pocket anything; in sum, I saw nothing unusual. All I had for my wait was a receipt for four ounces of blalum. I could pick up the stuff on my way off Marquette I was told, but only if I left within ten days. After that confiscated goods are destroyed. "Sorry, but it's the law. We'd need a warehouse half the size of the planet if we held onto all the stuff we take in," explained the official smiler who gave me the receipt.

Aleya had better do better, was my thought as I stalked indignantly to the exit.

She wasn't at the mail cubicles so I passed through the area quickly and headed for the snack bar. This was to be our meeting place in the event one of us was detained. She wasn't there, either. I started to worry. Not about Aleya. Not only was she officially expendable, but one operative never worries about the safety of another. It doesn't pay. You worry about your own skin, that's all. But if Aleya had been taken, my own skin could be next.

I ordered a cup of caffeinello and was served a flat-tasting liquid of the same color but of no similarity in taste. The countergirl smiled sweetly. "It's pseudo, of course, but most people can't tell the difference-after awhile," she added.

I stirred the rest of it around in the cup until the liquid got cold. Still no Aleya. I went back to the mail cubicles.

"Help you?" a blue uniform asked.

"Waiting for someone," I explained.

"Not here, you're not. No loitering. You see the sign?" I saw the sign. "There's a nice snack bar you can rest in, or try the main waiting lounge."

"But I'm supposed to meet somebody *here*," I insisted, looking like a lost, confused off-worlder. "If I go from here we may miss each other."

"Sorry about that," he said and a quick probe showed he was really sorry, "Taut rules are rules. If you're going to be here in Shaeffer's Landing long, you'd better learn that fast."

"That tough here?" I asked. I was stalling, waiting for something to happen, watching the three uniformed men behind the large counter sort and pile packages and envelopes in the little see-through glass cubicles. All were busy and looked efficient, even the bulky man whose half-chewed-off ear made him look stupidly lopsided.

"Not among ourselves. Crime rate among people who live here is almost nonexistent," the friendly official said. "Must be the lowest in the galaxy, but we do have trouble with newcomers for the first week or so they're here. They're the only ones who break the rules. Now please move along."

I returned his smile. "I don't want to break any rules." I'd seen what Aleya maybe had seen also. A psych-probe added fuel to my assumption. But if she had seen it, then where in blazes—

The blue uniform broke off my train of thought. "That's wise. Already today we've had one arrest in here, a girl, a new arrival naturally."

"A girl? For loitering?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, not for loitering, at least I don't think so. She was trying to collect a letter. Maybe it didn't belong to her or something. Anyway, she was taken by a Security—" His face took on a strange expression. "Say, this girl, she wouldn't be the person you're waiting for, would she? Because the Security man said—"

"Girl? No, it's a man I'm waiting for." I started moving away.

He too was on the move, cautiously. "Well, I recall she was wearing the same land of robe you got on. Her hair was red, like yours—hey, wait! *Halt in the name of Gzarr*

The doorpost blew to fragments as I dove through it

"Hey!" protested a portly woman in a flowing yellow toga as I bounced off her.

"Sorry, madam," I mumbled, gripping her elbows. With a sudden twist, I was free from her and she was moving with speed she would have thought herself incapable of toward the open doorway I'd just left. I heard the noises of the resulting collision but didn't take time to see how many uniforms had become tangled in the toga. All I wanted to do now was, melt in the crowd moving through the waiting lounge to the exit.

I was outside the terminal before the shrill alarm bell sounded.

"Taxi, mister?" I was asked by the man driving the crude wheeled cab.

"No, I've got business here first," I told him as I watched the uniforms begin to swarm to the gateway through which I'd just passed.

I took one calculated risk, but under the circumstances it was necessary. A description of the large red-haired and bearded man would soon be circulating to the general public. I had an image to alter, and quickly. From the ample supply of Guild notes in the money pocket inside my robe, I purchased from an automatic Shop-All a bottle of black fabric dye and a pair of scissors. The false hair I'd been given couldn't be gotten rid of easily,

but its appearance could be changed at least. I was in the public wash-stall only a matter of minutes. When I emerged, my black hair was extremely short and my black beard neatly trimmed. I'd wished that the Arm disguisers' beards were such that they could be shaved off, but figured the job I'd done, though hasty, would suffice until I'd time later to make the change more leisurely. Right now I hadn't the time, and would trust to the efficiency of the hood of my robe.

I joined a group of quiet alms-seekers stationed across from the main entrance-exit to the terminal. The risk I'd taken by leaving the vicinity even for a moment was that the mailroom worker with half an ear might have passed through while I was gone. I didn't think it probable, for I suspected that every government employee available would now be inside, weaving through the crowds of people looking for the man in the red beard. But it was possible. And if I lost him, I'd lost the trail to those of the lamp.

The fortunate thing about my being uncovered—if in fact I *was* now uncovered—was the automatic closing of all ways in and out of the terminal except the main one which was heavily guarded. That meant that my man would have to pass through here if he'd not done so already. But that was the risk I'd taken, and now there was nothing for me to do but wait in the gathering darkness. Wait and think.

The man with half an ear took little thought. He had been working closest to the cubicle with the Omega Shoppe address. The cubicle was empty, easy to determine through its plasti-glas front. But though the bulky man ill-fitted his uniform, there was still a little too much bulge around his trouser pocket area. Scanning him, I got a reading which matched that of the fiber material of which the cassettes are made. Psych-probe revealed nothing of content value, but did register a general furtiveness absent in the minds of other officials here. It was little enough information to go on, but it was my only lead and had to be followed. Wait and think.

About Aleya's being picked up. "... by a Security," the friendly mailroom attendant had said. Why Aleya, and why not me? Not me because they had me, or thought they had. They'd taken care of Shamryke Odell

when he stepped out of their patrol ship. But they knew, of course, that Odell had been working with a woman operative. At least, he had on New Earth. And both of them disappeared together. Just *after* the lamp loses a man in an unexplainable accident. Can the two incidents be related? Easy to check out. *If* Odell and the girl have made any discovery concerning their information gathering and transmitting system—thought hardly likely since the engineer Angus continues to bring the cassettes to Omega—the two of them might well ship out to Marquette.

Such a series of events would mean that Odell would have had to work fast and be extremely lucky and careful. All things considered, tracing the system from the furnace room to the tobacco shop to Marquette would be highly improbable. But Odell was a professional, and with luck...

But easy to check. Search ships moving into Marquette. Just to be safe.

And Odell is found. At least, the Jamba is killed, and who else would have reason to do it? Only Odell. But where was the girl? Perhaps still on New Earth, but maybe... A simple matter again. Ask some of the passengers. Was the hero against the pirates particularly friendly with any of the other passengers, particularly a young lady?

Aleya's role-playing, her lengthy metaphysical remonstrating with the Martyrite, had been all too perfect. "The Security man said..." Those were the words the mailroom attendant used when he inferred I was meeting the girl. What did the Security man say? That if anyone came looking for the girl he should be detained. Why? They had Odell.

Unless they thought there was a third agent, perhaps already on Marquette. No, that wouldn't seem likely to them.

But if they now had doubts about the pirate killer... if they thought he might not have been Odell. Or if maybe they *knew* he wasn't...

The thinking ended, because the waiting had ended. The figure passing under the bright spotlight trained on the exit was my man. My beggar

companions made no notice of my rising, but I thought I'd better make some explanation. "Pickings aren't so good here," I said.

"They never are," mumbled the beggar nearest to me. He slowly turned his begging bowl upside down. It was empty. So were all the others. "But the sage Den-nestedth was inspired with the Truth while begging outside this very terminal. We are his followers. You are not, I take it."

"No, I follow another," I said. And it was time for me to get about doing exactly that.

The building was the most impressive I'd seen yet in Shaeffer's Landing. I was sure that it was the most impressive I would see no matter how long I'd stayed. How many floors there were behind the white-gray windowless walls there was no way of telling, since the architecture—with its high, vertical, smooth-sloping exterior that ended in a purplish-colored dome was the highest point in the city—conceivably could contain anywhere from five to twenty stories depending upon ceiling heights. Exact perspective was difficult to attain due to the structure's uniqueness in its surroundings and to the high wall which formed an outer circumference and shielded the lowest quarter (from my vantage point) of the exterior.

But the man with half an ear had gone through the guarded gate, and I was in no mood to follow him further. Not with the two manned laser cannons mounted on each of the posts overlooking the gate.

The street through which we'd just come was crowded on both sides by somewhat dilapidated buildings in which, as the open windows made clear, religious services of various natures were being held. The streets also were peopled with the same sort of variety that had been the main feature of the economy class lounge on the *Hemmet Galsworthy*.

In one feature, however, variety was lacking. The faces and minds of almost everyone I saw—mostly hu-mans of various strains although now and then another species would slide or skitter by in the cold night air—contained nothing but a dulling and serious sense of consciousness. Where on shipboard the religionists *had* been loud and occasionally even merry,

there was no evidence of such emotion here. As I sat down at an outside snack bar table, I concluded that the religious life is not the most cheerful of callings.

The young woman at the next table confirmed the impression. I pointed to the purple-domed building and asked her what it was.

"You're new," she said without emotion. She was a Rim Worlder—dark, large with slender limbs, hairless and yet attractive in a sexually sinister way. Her attire was a sort of ground-length cloak made, obviously several years ago, of black and white spotted fur. It was a wrap to match the coldness of Marquette's evenings, which are in contrast to the sometimes blistering heat of noonday. She, too, matched the coldness, and I wondered about her noonday temperament. I reminded myself I was on business. "I'm new," I agreed. "Is that a crime?" Her naturally wide eyes observed me with little interest. "The building is the Temple of Gzar, the Initial Conceptor."

"A place of worship?"

She shook her head, her eyes moving to the stalls and shacks on the other side of the street. "Those are houses of worship."

"Yes, but Gzar is not being worshipped in those. Gzar, is, I assume, worshipped in his temple."

"Worship Gzar? He is *the* God. Why would anybody want to worship him? No, here are the places of worship, all around you." I should have known I wouldn't make it in a dis-cussion of theology. When the waiter came out, I ordered a cup of caffeinello.

"It's pseudo," the dark girl volunteered.

"I know," I said with a grimace. I had no intention of drinking the stuff regardless of how pleasant its warmth might be.

She shrugged. "You're new, that's all. Lots of you new ones aren't aware of things like that, Barth knows."

"Barth?"

"I follow the moral codes of Barth. He is a god on my homeland. I am a priestess there, and here."

"But you believe in Gzar, you just said."

She nodded. "Gzar is God. The God. There is no need to worship him."

"Then why does he have a temple?" I asked.

The question seemed not to make sense to her. She considered it for a while, then answered, "Gzar's disciples live there, and it is also the government building. The word of Gzar governs here, you are not too new to know that?"

"Can anyone visit the temple?"

"Newcomers sometimes do, but we who have been here don't. Not unless the governors ask us to."

"But why don't you visit the temple? Surely it is the most beautiful place in Shaeffer's Landing, on all of Marquette, I'd imagine."

"Beautiful? I suppose," she said dully.

"Then why-"

"I don't know why," she said. She rose and her right hand traced a design of some sort over my head. "May the countenance of Barth protect you," she said and then left, moving purposefully up the street.

I dropped a chit on the table and stepped after her.

"I must go to services," she told me.

"May I join you?"

She paused. "Do you worship Barth?" she said.

"I am still seeking what to worship." Her shoulders gave a shrug and she turned from me. "All are welcome at our services."

CHAPTER TEN

The inside of the building was as dilapidated as the outside. Only a shiny black stone altar looked impressive as my priestess strode majestically to its side facing the thirty-odd battered plexiplas chairs. Less than two thirds of the chairs were occupied by worshippers who sat deep in what I presumed was meditation. I took a chair near the rear.

Her chant made no sense to me at all, being in a language of which I had no knowledge. Probably one of the old Rim Worlde tongues. Since I could spot only one or two of the dark members of the priestess's race in the room, I assumed that for most of the group her words had no meaning. I was therefore surprised when her chant began to be picked up by other voices, the singers standing and mimicking the swaying motion of their priestess's torso beneath her black and white fur cloak.

Louder and louder the chant became, and more voices were added in an odd discordant harmony. At the same time, the pace of the chant quickened and the swaying torsos swayed in wilder patterns. I was among the last to stand, joining in the movements only not to be conspicuous.

Suddenly, and for no reason that was apparent to me, the dark girl stopped her movement. Her voice was still as with one forearm she wiped the perspiration from her brow. "Yes, what is it?" she asked.

The man in the blue uniform carried a portable Tri-D set. "This man. He is being sought.

It was a composition color Tri-D photo, put together probably from the mailroom attendant's description. It was too accurate as to the details. It was me, all right. I hoped that the small changes I'd made in my appearance had been enough.

"I know not the man," the priestess of Barth replied.

The official's eyes scanned the group of worshippers. "Any of the rest of you seen him?" he asked gruffly.

There was no response. When he'd gone, the priestess folded her hands before her breast. "Services are concluded for the night. Barth has heard our messages, even though they were so untimely interrupted."

She left the building, passing through the group which moments ago were wild with frenzy and now were docile play-beasts.

I mixed with the others in leaving. She was nowhere to be seen as I entered the dark street. I was wondering if I should try to find her, wondering what my next move should be, when a firm pressure in the small of my back told me I could stop wondering for the moment.

"Don't turn around," a thick raspy voice said in the blackness. "We have no reason to kill you. Not yet."

"Barth be praised," I said evenly.

The pressure increased. "Around the side of the building to the back. Quickly!"

There were two of them, both large in build, one larger than myself. Both had small laser guns and both had their minds fixed on something that came through to mine as "the purpose." When we'd come to the back side of the building, I was told to turn around. The beam of a pencil light played over my features.

So did the laser guns, and from just enough distance that I'd be fried before I could reach one of them.

"What do you think, Ute?" asked the larger of the two men, the one holding the pencil light. His rough weathered face had the stubble of a white beard, though he looked anything but old. Both men were dressed in leatherlike skins which exposed hairy and powerful arms and legs. The leather looked old—and real. The men looked filthy, even for this religious

planet. But what drew my attention most was neither the leather nor the filth.

It was the tiny Lamp of Knowledge each man wore pinned to his chest.

The smaller man, the one called Ute, studied my features. "Could be. Black hair, though, Cloud."

"Take a closer look. Could be dyed. I'll cover you," the one called Cloud said.

Ute took two steps forward. They were enough.

The air exploded from his lungs as my straightened fingers caught him in the chest. Keeping myself angled so that Ute remained between myself and the quick-moving larger man, I leveled Ute's gun at the other.

"It's over," I said evenly. "If you shoot, we all get it."

The large man let his gun dip down, then smiled evilly. The smile abruptly changed to an alert expression. "Hear that?"

"Don't be stupid," I warned him.

He shook his head. "No trick. The running."

Then I heard the clacking footfalls.

"Security men," Cloud said. "Quick, follow me or we all *will* be getting it, as you said. Come on!" he urged. "Ill lead, and you can help Ute. You're the one who dropped him."

I had no time to consider the alternatives. I followed, half carrying Ute who fortunately was not unconscious. "W-where—" he began, but his voice was cut off from a quick slash to his face by the larger man. "Snap out of it! We got trouble." To me he said. "This way. We have a groundcar."

As he turned to help me with Ute who had not snapped out of it, I noticed that his gun was now stuck barrel first into his belt. I held onto the one I had, carefully.

I still held it carefully, when minutes later the old-fashioned wheel-type ground vehicle was speeding bumpily across the night landscape of field and sand splotches. From the rear seat, I watched the big man drive with a skill which at times came close to reckless abandon.

"They may send a hovercraft after us," he growled. ^{<f}We took a chance coming after you."

I tapped the gun on the backrest of his seat. "You sure did."

He looked back at me and scowled. "Don't be stupid," he said, shooting back at me my earlier words to him. "Camp's at least an hour away, if we make it. If you're beat, try and get some rest. Just don't disturb me, is all. I got territory to chew up."

I was beat, but rest would have to wait, I decided. But I didn't say anything more, as the territory got itself chewed up successfully.

The end of the journey came abruptly. I thought it was going to end more abruptly than it did when the car sped straight on toward the side of a black, up-jutting face of rock. But when the wheels ground to a halt I found we had somehow passed through or under the rock wall and were inside a large and hewn-from-the-rock cave lighted with flaming torches attached to the cave's sides. Parked around us were a score of groundcars, most looking more dilapidated than the one we sat in. I could see no people.

The large man at the wheel slumped in near exhaustion, then turned to Ute who sat on the seat next to me. "Is he coming round yet? I hope you didn't hurt him much. He's one of my best men."

"I didn't know we were just clowning around back there. He'll be all right though, just sore for a day or two."

"For the love of atheism, will you put that damned gun down," he said. He waved toward the walls.' "My riflemen won't get a moment's peace until you do. He read the doubt in my face, and put his head out the driver's side window. "Hey, somebody out there fire a warning shot or something."

The beam shot upward toward the high ceiling. I handed Cloud my gun butt first—and gently.

By the time I was out of the car, they were all around us. The men in the forefront carried their weapons loosely, curiously looking me over. They too wore the armless and legless leather outfits bearing the little silver lamp. Behind them were a group of women who were dressed more variedly in female attire, but mostly ragged. They seemed not at all curious as to what had transpired, but all began to talk at once as if their conversation had been rudely interrupted by "men-business" and now could be resumed. There were no children in the cave.

A small round man with a thin black mustache looked into the car interior. "What happened to Ute?" he asked.

"Him," Cloud grunted, inclining his head toward me. "Let Ute rest."

"And Snow?" the round man asked.

"He never came out. We waited too long as it was. I want ten minutes to clean up, then I want a council meet. Have everybody there."

"Yes sir, General," said the round man, who scampered off in the darkness.

"You come with me," I was told. "You look like you could stand a cleanup too."

"General," I said speculatively as I followed him into a torch-lighted tunnel. "General of what?"

He spread his hands expansively. "Of all you survey," he said, a cutting edge to his voice. "This is my fortress —my main one, anyway. I got another farther to the south where we keep the children. But here is my army. Ninety-two men and seventy-six women."

The room we entered was not spacious, but warm. In a rugged way the one chest of drawers and solid cot matched the man who lived there. On—or in—one wall was a small, recessed pool of water.

"It comes from the rock itself, a natural spring. You first," he gestured. "And while you get clean you can start talking about yourself."

I slapped the water against my face. It was clear and fresh and cooling. "I seek truth," I said between gulps of the liquid.

"So do we all, Brother. But there are many kinds of truths and there are many ways you can seek them. What's the truth you're looking for? It—or your way of looking—must be interesting. At least, interesting to the government slobs. The light is better in here, friend, and the red splotches on the back of your head easier to see.

I turned and faced him. "So—"

"So we've got some dye around here. One of the single women will get kicks from helping the handsome young initiate."

"Initiate? Of what?" I asked, stepping away from the pool.

As if considering me quite harmless to himself, Cloud turned his back on me and leaned over to submerge his entire head under the water. He let out an animal noise of contentment as he shook his head, the droplets leaping like missiles from his face and hair. "Initiate of the Brotherhood, what else?

"You're a *religion*, too?" I asked and added cautiously, "And that lamp there, I suppose, is your symbol."

He grinned. "Everybody on this big ball is a religion, and I guess all religions need symbols, don't they? We're an army now, too, but five years ago when the Brothers of the Intermittent Sprinklers first arrived here we were just a religion. Now we're more criminals' than prayer-makers."

"Your faith is against the law?"

"No faith is against the law on Marquette. The government for its own political reasons can't afford to have anything blemish its code of religious freedom. But the Brotherhood has been officially chastized, they call it, and no Brother can go into the city legally. If he does, and is caught, it's death. We're the only ones who've been chastized like that."

"Which explains your concern over the Security men tonight. But why? Why are you the only ones?"

"Because we're the only ones who know," he rumbled. "We can talk about it later. I got a meeting. I want you there."

He strode off. I followed.

The council meeting of eight men in the large section of the cave we'd arrived in had hardly been called to order when a cry bounced from wall to wall.

"Hovercar approaching Pass One! Hovercar approaching Pass One! Heading direct on, low!"

Cloud nodded at the round little man with the thin mustache who turned to the rough wall and slid back a panel that shouldn't have been there. A Dual-D viewer sprang into life; on its screen was the infrared image of a hovercar moving closer.

"Camera's attached to the laser beam," Cloud explained. "That's Pass One. We came by it tonight—and Two and Three, too. Getting here, you can avoid the first two if you want to, but not the third. This guy is going out of his way to get himself blown out of the sky."

"Either that," I said, "or—"

The round man cut me off. "What's he doing? It looks like he's *waving*!"

"Close-up," Cloud ordered. "Use the zoom, dammit!"

"It's on zoom," the round man complained.

"Then give me audio," Cloud grunted. A switch was turned. Cloud shouted at the Dual-D, "Ramus, what the hell's going on out there?"

A crackling voice came back through a speaker on top of the set. "It's Snow, General. I think it's Snow."

A cheer went up from behind me. Turning I saw that the group around the set had grown to more than a hundred people.

"Somebody -with him," continued the voice.

Cloud screwed up his eyes. "All right, wave him in. He's probably got half of Shaeffer's Landing on his tail."

All eyes stayed glued to the screen until the hover-car dipped and shot away from view. Cloud shot an order to somebody to alert Passes Two and Three to disregard the craft, but to report it when it, sailed by them. He then turned to the group assembled before him. "Battle stations," he said grimly.

Not knowing what else to do, I followed him behind a natural rock-formed defense screen. He checked his pistol. "I don't like it. One wrong move out of that car when it gets here, up it goes."

"I thought Snow was your man," I said.

"He is—or was. He went on his job alone. Now he's got somebody with him. I don't like that. And I don't like that hovercar. Where in hell would Snow get it? Unless somebody helped him to it. And there ain't nobody around to help us, friend. Nobody." He grimaced. "This could be the end of the whole thing for all of us if I'm doing the wrong thing. If he's being

tracked even, it won't be long before they'll hit us here. Probably won't even have time to get everybody out."

Someone called, "He's by Pass Two."

"You could have solved the whole thing back there," I said.

Cloud looked at me narrowly. "Blast him? Sure, I could've. But Snow's been with me a long time. I'm taking the chance." Again he fidgeted with his gun. "Sorry about you, though. Maybe you would've been better being a mindless slob back there. Leastways you'd still be alive."

"What do you mean, mind—"

"He's by Pass Three!"

"This is it," Cloud said, his face set. He trained his gun on a dark wall of the cave.

Less than a second later, the dark wall moved, sliding soundlessly along unseen runners. It was back in its original place before the hovercar motor had been shut off.

"Cloud!" called the wiry-thin man who stood laughing on the cave floor beside the machine. "For the love of rain, I made it! And I've got a guest!"

Cloud rose, exposing himself to treachery if that was in fact Snow's desire. "You're being covered, Snow," he said simply.

"Because of the car? Or because of my guest?"

"Hold this and come with me," Cloud said, handing me his gun. "If he's betrayed us I want to wring his neck with my bare hands."

We moved out and down to the central floor level. Noting the seriousness in Cloud's face, Snow laughed. "Damn it, Cloud, I stole the car."

"And your guest, too?" Cloud asked.

At which point the door to the near side of the cab opened.

"Odell, I can't believe it's you!" Aleya Nine said.

Which took the words from my own mouth.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was less than an hour later when the council meeting which now was expanded to include Snow and Aleya and myself, and surrounded by most *pi* Cloud's people—the man being eager for Snow's report and the women curious about this new female in their cave dwelling—broke up with Cloud's words:

"It's finally come, then. We got more information than we ever had about their stronghold, and waiting isn't gonna increase our numbers any. Tomorrow night we hit with everything we got. Snow, see to the preparations."

His decision was greeted by no cheers, no reaction at all, in fact, other than a general gravity which found expression in the nodding members of his army, both men and women. It was if they knew one day it would come, but that the one day would always be far into the future.

But Cloud was right. Now was the time to strike. Both from his point of view, and maybe from mine too.

Snow's mission had been reconnaissance. No Brotherhood member had tried scaling the wall before. Snow tried and made it.

"We knew there would be some land of alarm," he had said when reporting to the council, "but we hoped I'd be able to slide in and out before I was detected."

It didn't prove as easy as that.

He was taken moments after he'd hit the ground as he was trying to slip across the expanse of lawn separating wall and temple. "That was good, in a way," he said. "Otherwise, I couldn't have gotten into the place. You have to know where the panels are that swing into the interior. You can't tell from the outside of the building. I guess they figured I wouldn't be coming out alive again, so they didn't care what I saw."

He saw plenty, enough to sketch a fairly comprehensive diagram of the first floor interior and the location of the panels to the outside. Aleya was able to add details to his sketch plus information about the upper levels, of which she had seen three.

"Damn good," Cloud had said appreciatively, inspecting the sketch.

Snow nodded, "You're right, she is. If it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't have gotten back here at all."

"You have our thanks, lady," Cloud said. "But you haven't said anything about what you were doing in there in the first place."

Aleya looked at me. Her eyes grew cold. "You'd better be the one to explain. From the questions they asked me, it became rather apparent that I don't know much about what our real assignment is."

I ignored her attitude. To Cloud I said, "Our mission is similar to yours. There's someone or something inside the temple we want destroyed."

"Something like an organic thinker?" Aleya asked. My facial expression was blank as I raised my eyebrows with no more than normal interest.

Her lips curled upward into a taut smile. "I saw all kinds of climactic controls, and the central core of the building looks as though it's made to hold an organic thinker of some kind." She paused. "I think you know about it, Odell, but maybe there's something you don't know. A frightening thing. Because if the core of the temple is the repository of a thinker, it must be gigantic, much bigger than the Guild's. Think of what that could—"

I cut her off. Her line of thinking was dangerous, especially for herself. I said to Cloud, "You've got an idea—as much as we can give you—of why we want inside. But what about you? And that lamp symbol you wear, what does it stand for?"

Aleya, too, had recognized the implications of the symbol, though she'd not actually seen an example of it before. But her only reference to it had

been a short questioning look she shot at me after seeing it on Cloud's garment when getting out of the hovercar.

Cloud grinned. "The eternal flame, maybe. Hell, I don't know what it stands for anymore. It's just a symbol, like I told you. As for the reason we want inside the temple, we ain't as selective as you. We just want to destroy everything and everybody inside the place. Before they destroy us."

"But why should they want to destroy you?" Aleya asked.

"For one thing," Cloud answered, "they know we know about them. They don't have to be worried if they think we're somewhere out in Desolation or anywhere far from the City. But they must suspect now that we're close by, and they must also suspect our numbers. When we came here there were only ten of us. Me, Snow—" he named off a few others in the cave. "But then we found out."

"Found out what?" I asked impatiently.

"You know they forbid drugs of any kind on the planet?"

I nodded.

"You also know that many immigrants to here have them on their persons, either because they don't know about the law or that they figure they can get through Customs with it."

"Yes."

"Do you know what happens at Customs? All the drugs are confiscated, right? But ask yourself what happens to them then, these drugs which amount to tons of stuff in any given month. I'll tell you what happens. Certain of them, alone or combined with others are poured into the City's water reservoir."

He looked at me levelly. "What I'm saying, Brother, is that all of the regular inhabitants of Shaeffer's Landing are drugged up all the time."

It made sense. The people I'd seen in the City. Beggars who begged where no alms were given, crime rate only among newcomers. The vacant stares, the shuffling walks, the noninterest, the sudden frenzy of the Barth worship I'd witnessed—frenzy that, being 180 degrees away from the normal mood, was an unusual phenomenon to explain in that there was no transition between the two moods. But if they had, as Cloud said, been "drugged up..."

"We found out about it easily. The code we brought with us here was simple. The leader of our sect or religion or whatever you want to call it believed in the purity of Nature as opposed to the impurities of civilization."

"Many religions embrace such a view," Aleya commented.

"That's right, lady, but with us there was one difference. The Brothers Of Intermittent Sprinklers will drink only rain water, water melted from snow, or natural spring water; so we didn't get drugged up. But we noticed that people who were here when we landed acted strange. Most of the newcomers notice that—for awhile. Then... then we began to see that people from other sects who arrived with us became like the rest. The leader, our leader, used to be a scientist and made some tests. That's when we found out."

"This leader of yours," I said, "Where is he now?" Cloud's face darkened. "He was a good and simple person. He didn't have no badness in him at all, so it was hard for him to see it in others, He figured that some crazy little screwball group was responsible for the drugs, or that it was an accident of some kind. So he went to report it to the government. If we had known what he was going to do, we would've stopped him." Cloud bared his teeth.

Snow said quietly. "The next day the Brotherhood was outlawed in Shaeffer's Landing. The leader never came back to us. He was a brilliant scientist before it came to him that science was not the way to truth. He

changed his name to Sleet and named others of us, the original group, after forms of the water elements. He was Cloud's younger brother."

Aleya broke the silence that followed. "You said there were only ten of you then. Where—"

"The others?" Cloud anticipated. "Recruited—*saved* if you want to put it that way. Each new shipload of people that comes here, we try to get to one passenger. We ain't always successful. Two or three cups of caf-feinello at the spaceport can tip you over past saving." He looked at me. "You looked all right, and when we spotted your picture on the Tri-D, we figured you'd be worth a try."

Aleya said, "One of the men inside the temple wanted me to drink some caffeinello, but another stopped me from doing so. Probably felt it would slow down the interrogation that was to come."

The interrogation had just begun, she explained when the alarm sounded that an intruder had crossed the wall. Her two guards' attention was distracted for the moment.

"I don't know whether I killed both or not. One I'm sure about," she said simply.

"Another one *I'm* sure about," Snow said with admiration. "He was going to take me upward on the lift. But it was coming down, so he waited. The door opened and out pops this young lady. And I mean *pops*."

We were lucky that their hovercars are parked on the lawn."

"You were lucky the laser gunners on the post tops were either asleep or not alert."

Snow shook his head. "That's not right. They just don't shoot at hovercars. The only ones around here belong to the government. For anyone else to possess one is illegal."

Cloud laughed harshly. "Us Brothers sure do break a lot of laws."

Cloud sat contemplating. Preparations were busily being made for the next evening. "Before-battle nerves?" I asked.

"Something like that. I was just thinking about how small a mob we are, and how many they are. Not just the Security forces, but the whole City."

"You think we may have to fight the whole City?"

He nodded. "Wouldn't surprise me. All drugged up, all under the influence of their puny priests and priestesses. All the government would have to do—"

I stood up. "Of course! What's the matter with my thinking—and yours? What Jack can do, so can Jill."

Cloud screwed up his face. "Who're they?"

"It's a kids' rhyme. The point is—"

I told him what the point was. He had three objections. He repeated all three as the hovercar whipped back toward Shaeffer's Landing. Snow drove with Cloud and myself up front with him. Cloud was still doubtful.

"First, we might get caught."

"True, but we're three. That still leaves most of your army and Aleya to general it."

"Second, we can't get all of them."

"The car is large enough to hold nine or ten, neatly stacked."

"Yeah, okay, but we still got to attack tomorrow night, especially if we get away with this thing tonight. The ones we take probably won't be missed during the daytime but rather at the nighttime services. Which means, if we're lucky tonight, we only got one day to change them."

"Then at worst, we'll have lost a few hours sleep trying. At best—"

Cloud shrugged. "At best, we go up the hill."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Jack and Jill. I just remembered it. I was a kid too."

Thanks to previous reconnaissance work by Snow and others, the particular living shacks we were seeking were easy to find. I opened a metal door quietly.

"Uhhh?" The dark Rim World priestess sat up in her bed and attempted to wipe the sleep from her eyes. The night air was extremely cold, but she was completely naked. "Is somebody in here with me?" she asked, still not completely conscious.

I hit her as gently as possible.

She screamed when she awoke. The shock of the ice cold mountain water could not have been pleasant on her naked skin. As the hot sun of Marquette lifted over the horizon to begin a new day of warmth, the interior of the Brotherhood's cave was filled with screams which formed agonizing discords with the pleading cries of the priestess of Barth.

We had kidnapped twelve priests and priestesses in all—ten men and two women, the other woman being a squat piggish New Earthan whose cult centered around communication with the universe by eating. All twelve were lashed tightly to cots in a row in the large cavern. All twelve were being doused with huge buckets full of the ice-cold clear water. They thrashed and yelled and groaned, raising bloody welts where they strained against their bindings.

"*WaterF*" one of the priests pleaded. "Give me water." When a cup of water was given him, he spat it out. His blood-red eyes frantically prayed to the Brother standing over him. "I want *water*!"

"Horrible," Aleya said.

"But hopeful," I told her. "Whatever the drug is they're hooked on, it is something that the system expunges quickly. They *need* their water. Maybe in an hour or two—"

"Maybe in an hour or two they'll be dead, either from the lack of the drug or from hysteria."

"Maybe."

Aleya said something about checking weapons and left the cavern.

But nobody died that morning. By noon they had quieted to a low moaning. An hour later, we witnessed the first acceptance of *our* water. Others followed. Then somebody asked for food, then another. It was the dark Rim World priestess who suddenly looked at the Brother nearest her and asked, "Why are we being held?"

The Brother looked at Cloud. Cloud looked at me.

"Cut her loose," I said.

She got up from the cot trembling.

"How do you feel?" I asked, taking her arm.

"Lousy," she said, but something passed behind her eyes. A glint of humor. We'd won—the first battle, at least.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"But, sir," protested one of the priests, "you're asking us to lead our flocks to what might mean their deaths."

Cloud pounded his fist on the flat of his other hand.

"Brother, just how many of your flocks would you say are *alive* right now? How *alive* were you before this afternoon?"

It was late in the afternoon when Cloud explained what would be happening that night and what would be required of the religious we'd kidnapped. All but two had pulled out of the drugged state. The fat woman and an emaciated-looking man were both sick, vomiting continuously. They'd get better, but not soon enough for us.

Another priest was on his feet. "I don't think it can be done. Certainly, we have influence over the worshippers in our temples, but to inflame them to attack Gzar's temple... After all, Gzar is God."

Cloud scowled. "Do you believe that? Do any of you really believe that Gzar is God? Who has seen Gzar? Who here has he talked to? You? Or you? How about you?"

"We have felt Gzar's influence," one priest exclaimed. "At various times he has filled my mind."

"You felt the influence of a drug," Cloud answered. "That's what has filled your mind. Does Gzar fill your mind now? No. And why not? Because we've destroyed his influence in your mind. Me, Cloud—me and my Brothers have defeated this powerful Gzar. We've defeated him here in this cave, and tonight we're gonna beat him in his own temple. With your help or without it. Now which?"

"But even if we go against Gzar, how do we convince our people?"

The priests were looking at each other and murmuring and nodding when the dark priestess of Barth rose.

"There might be a way," she said.

The murmuring stopped.

"I agree that we could not convince the people to attack the temple. Their faith in Gzar as God is much stronger than our influence on behalf of the gods we represent. But suppose we were, in our services tonight, to deny our gods. If I, for example, were to deny the reality of Barth and you, Quismus—" she directed her remarks to a silver robed priest with warts on his face— "suppose you were to deny the existence of your Mathematic Principal—"

The silver-robed priest shot up. "Deny? Madam, I should *never*—"

The girl cut him off. "All right, then, not *deny*. Suppose instead you say to your people that tonight we are all called upon to worship the One Great God. Suppose we tell our worshippers that Gzar is calling us to His Temple. I feel sure that the worshippers of Barth would follow me there. If I walked, so would they. And if I ran and shouted—"

"So would they!" a priest completed. "Of course... if Gzar called..." another said. The murmuring now was loud, but the heads were shaking affirmatively and eagerly.

Cloud's mood was expansive. "Well, that's that," he said, coming to my side. "I think it's time to let the first group of cars take off."

The cars were to be sent out in staggered patterns, coming to the outskirts of the city at intervals and from diverging directions. All would be concealed in predetermined places of hiding; then the army members would move into the city and wait for the signal. The signal was to be given in one of two ways. Either from the advance party inside the temple or from Snow outside the temple, after a half hour had passed since the advance party's entrance.

It was only after a tense discussion between Cloud and myself that the makeup of the advance party was decided upon.

"I'm the general, so it's me," Cloud said. "Besides, I got the plan on how to get inside the building."

"A lot of good that'll do you dead," I said. "I'm going too. I've got my own business inside."

"Okay by me. Now, getting past the guards at the gate is no problem. We're in the hovercar. Each one of the Security hovercars is keyed to a sound tune. We pass over the walls low so we can register, and the guns don't shoot us down."

"Our hovercar was stolen," I pointed out. "Suppose they cancel our signal."

"They can't. They're all the same. I told you we did our reconnaissance work good."

"And when we land. What then?" I asked.

"We walk up to the wall, press the panel and walk inside. That's where the fun begins."

I looked at my robe and his leather outfit. "It might begin sooner, by the looks of our uniforms."

"Uniforms?" he repeated. "I forgot. We got three of them—stole them from the laundry. One for you, one for me, and one for Snow."

"And me," Aleya said.

Cloud shook his head. "You stay outside. You're the one who's gotta show the others how to get in."

"Snow can do that," Aleya said. "I know the insides better, and I've got business there, too. And I can hold my own in a fight."

Snow nodded. "She sure can."

Cloud thought it over. "All right, she comes with us."

"No."

Aleya's eyes widened. "Why should you—"

"No," I repeated. "Don't ask me why. Just no."

Cloud grunted. "Listen, Odell, so maybe you don't want the lady to get hurt. I don't want anybody to get hurt either. But the lady's right—she's seen more of the insides of that place than Snow. I say she goes. Which means she goes."

There was a tense moment as we stared into each other's eyes. I needed no psych-probe to tell me—that if I disagreed, one of us would have to kill the other right here.

The army needed a general, I rationalized. I backed off. "She goes."

When Cloud and Snow had gone off to see to the preparations, Aleya came up to me. "Is that why you didn't want me to go, because you didn't want me to get hurt?"

I tried to scowl, but it didn't come off. "Something like that." It was something like that. Feelings never enter into an operative's work, but I didn't want Aleya Nine killed if it could be avoided. Inside that temple she might be. More to the point, it might have to be done by me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nightfall. Cloud piloting, the hovercar moved swiftly above—but hugging the contours of—the dunish landscape, arrowed directly toward Shaeffer's Landing. We -had been the last vehicle to leave, Cloud confidently assuring each of the old-style motor cars which left the cavern that victory was certain. I wasn't all that sure. Confidence is good psychology as long as it doesn't take the place of thinking. In spite of the detailed sketches Aleya was able to make of that part of the interior she saw, in spite of the ease with which Snow assured us we could enter the building, in spite of the fact we had stronger numbers if things went according to plan, I was uneasy.

I didn't like the idea that Snow and Aleya escaped so easily. I didn't like the idea that the vehicle in which we now sped townward carried a signaling device of any kind even though without the device we'd get cut to oblivion trying to enter the temple yard. I didn't like the idea that nobody from the opposition seemed to be searching for the missing vehicle. I didn't like the fact of the lamp symbol on Cloud's people, and I didn't like the thought that kept nagging me—the thought that we might be expected.

"Set her down," I told Cloud.

"Here? You crazy? Next stop is the Temple of Gzar."

"First stop is *here*," I said. Each of us had a blaster, but mine was pointed at Cloud. "Set her down. Now."

Aleya's eyes widened. "Odell, why—"

"Now," I repeated. "And that's the last time I say it. Aleya, put your gun on him and keep it there."

Aleya obeyed. Cloud swore and the car bumped to a halt. I opened the door. "This won't take long," I said and walked some twenty paces from the vehicle.

"All right, next stop is the Temple of Gzar," I said, returning to my place in the car.

"Well?" Aleya asked, perturbed.

"We're not being tracked, not by any device I can detect, at least."

Cloud's lips curled. "Look, friend, if you got a piece to say, say it now. If we got an argument, let's finish it right here before we get this thing up in the air again. If we got no argument, then no more funny stuff. There's a lot of lives depending on me tonight. I can't keep my head cool if I gotta be looking over my shoulder all the time to see where that gun of yours is pointing."

"You owe Cloud an apology," Aleya added.

"Forget apologies," Cloud said heavily. "What about it, Odell? I save your hide, I take you into my camp,

I show you my army, *you* help *me* organize the added thrust that may win us this whole thing, and now—now, you got some doubts. Why? Because of some crummy religious symbol that just happens to match—"

"Nothing just happens that closely," I said. Earlier while instructing the other drivers leaving the cave, he had asked me why I seemed to have lamps on the brain. I'd told him that the last man I'd seen wearing that symbol had been after my blood. "Yeah? No kidding?" had been Cloud's only comment.

Now his eyes narrowed. His huge hands flexed. "Brother, I could have had you eliminated too many times in the last two days for you to think I want you dead. If I did, you'd be dead. Once you were in that cavern of mine, you were *mine*. Does what I say make sense?"

I nodded. "I got problems of my own, I guess."

Aleya snorted. "So much his own, he won't even let his partner in on them."

"Shut up," I said, putting into the words all the savagery my frustration was causing. I inhaled deeply and let the air out slow. "You win, Cloud. My weapon will be pointed in the right direction."

The soft hum of the hovercar was the only sound that accompanied our speechless journey into Shaeffer's Landing.

We barreled down the main street of the city passing through the ramshackle residential districts and the buildings where the lights showed that worship of the various cults and sects was in active session.

"Slow down," I warned Cloud quietly, "or the identification beam won't have a chance to register."

The craft eased up as we slid down over the gates and onto the lawn. The laser guns, I saw, maintained their downward pointing positions. We'd passed the first hurdle. I wondered how many of the mob that would follow us would make it. But that was no concern of mine, not now. We had hurdle number two in front of us.

"Move slow," I said, stepping out of the car. "Act as if we do this every day. Cloud?"

He rolled up the diagram into a ball and flung it into the back of the car. "Where's the damn entrance? We should've brought Snow."

"Follow me," Aleya said, her feet dropping to the grass. "It should be—yes, here." She touched a portion on the smooth white-gray wall. A panel, slightly more than man-height but twice man-width, slid outward on invisible hinges. It was dark inside except for a faint light.

"This makes it easy," Cloud said.

As the panel swung closed behind us, I was inclined to agree it made it too easy. My extra senses told me we were surrounded, even before the lights went on.

The Suryan dwarf was the only one of the thirty men in the hall not wearing the official Security forces blue. His white uniform displayed its Lamp of Knowledge proudly, as he issued his quiet instructions to us. "Guns on floor. Now, please."

Cloud hesitated, then reluctantly followed suit as my blaster and Aleya's were placed gently on the tile-steel surface under our feet.

"You display wisdom," the dwarf said cheerfully. And he was in fact cheerful, the only mind facing us which was not the automaton blankness that I'd grown accustomed to in the lamp organization and on this planet. "Much more wisdom than you displayed by coming back here, Odell. One would have thought that successfully breaking the girl out of here would have been triumph enough. But you had to try your luck—and rope in an innocent man with you."

He looked at Cloud. So did I. "I do owe you an apology," I said.

"Yeah, you do," he snorted.

It was then that the significance of the Suryan's words struck me. They thought I was the one who—me, not Snow. They didn't know about Snow, about Cloud, about the attack. It would come, if things went well, as a complete surprise to them. All we had to do was remain alive long enough. Half an hour.

"What now?" I asked.

The dwarf was about to answer when a movement on the long staircase to our right caught his eye. It could not fail to. The figure at the top of the stairs wore a long, white, flowing robe. Well-groomed golden hair flowed freely around shoulders that denied the masculinity of the pale but majestic

personage. On his breast was a giant-sized, embroidered silver symbol of the lamp.

"My son, what is it? A disturbance?" A regal voice floated down.

The dwarf seemed irritated. "No disturbance, Master. Simply some guests. They dropped in unannounced."

"Guests. How pleasant. Bring them to me."

The Suryan nervously shifted about. "Master, they have but little time —"

I cut him off. "Master, for an audience with you, we have plenty of time." With a half hour to go, a moment saved is a moment earned. I took a step in the direction of the stairway. The dwarf moved his blaster into a threatening position.

"Let them pass, my little son," the figure at the top of the stairs ordered. It was pacific, but nonetheless firm. "I wish their conversation."

Perspiration was beginning to appear on the 'little son's' forehead. Inside that forehead, confusion was uppermost as he moved aside. I turned to Aleya and

Cloud. Aleya's look was hopeful, her thoughts having worked along the same routes as mine. But Cloud—

His mouth open, he stared wide-eyed at the figure in white.

"It's Sleet. *It's my brother...*"

His voice was a whisper, and so was Aleya's. "Don't. Let *him* recognize *you*. If he can."

If he could. Yes, she was right. Mind-probe proved it. The white-robed figure at the top of the stairs had many thoughts in his head, but all were

covered with a layer of... calm, a dead-still calm. He was... I toyed for the correct word as we started to mount the steps. Imbalance? Insanity?

Behind us, the dwarf whispered instructions to one of the men in blue who hurried to the elevator and disappeared. The dwarf, however, ascended the stairs after us. If his prey was getting away from his control, it wasn't getting out of his sight, not if he could help it.

I didn't like that much. Even more I didn't like the look on Cloud's face. He was going to burst out, I knew it. He did.

"Sleet. Is it really you?"

Bewildered as Cloud was, the man he called his brother looked more so. Except he did not seem concerned about it. "Sleet," he repeated. "It is a name I know. I think... I think... that was my name once... a long time ago. I do not clearly remember. It was certainly before my life-changing discovery."

"What discovery?" Cloud said, a harsh edge to his voice.

The man in white smiled warmly. "The discovery that I am Gzar. Please, do not look so terrified. There is no need to fear the One True God."

"I do not deem the weapon necessary," the One True God told his little son.

"Master, there are still men of evil in your universe. These may be some of the tainted ones," the dwarf responded. We had continued up the stairwell% and now were standing in the middle of the unoccupied corridor on what I judged was the second floor of the temple. The gun remained where it had been, trained directly on the small of my back.

The man who called himself Gzar shook his head. "I doubt if they are so tainted. They wear the blue of our government. However, if it pleases you to guard your Master with such diligence, I can only commend you for it."

The dwarf bowed curtly. "Gzar is generous."

"Yes," Gzar-Sleet agreed. He turned to us. "Now, I should like to show you some of the work going on in my temple. New converts to the faith should find it interesting."

"Gzar is generous," I said respectfully. Twenty minutes to go. Then a host of new converts would, hopefully, be on their way.

Gzar-Sleet opened a panel in the corridor for us. "In here as you see, a group of my faithful are exercising."

"Master, I don't think—" the dwarf began. "Gzar's little son questions Gzar's judgment," I observed loudly.

"Don't push your luck," the dwarf hissed. But he quieted down.

"Exercise is good for the body which must be strong to serve the spirit," Gzar-Sleet commented. Aleya, Cloud and myself exchanged glances. The long, curved room which we'd entered featured mat-covered floors. The exercise engaged in by the twenty or more white-clad and lamp-symbolized men and women was advanced forms of hand-to-hand combat. Their minds were blank.

"I'll be happy to answer any questions," Gzar-Sleet volunteered.

"I've been wondering about the lamp. The symbol you wear," I said.

"There is no mystery connected with Gzar," he said, ushering us from the exercise room and back into the corridor. "The symbol is that of knowledge, the quest for Reality and Truth. Ah, now here..."

Here was another room, shaped similarly to the first, but inside were rows of tables, filled with all kinds of apparatus which made the place a complete atomo-biological chemical laboratory. Six robotically-acting technicians—all tall and thin and blue-skinned like the man who'd died before my eyes on the satellite-poured, stirred, shook, tested and did the sort

of things people do in such places. But there was no interruption in their activity, not even a pause to turn to see who had entered. The chill that had been growing in the back of my spine since I'd entered the Temple of Gzar reached the bottom of my skull.

Fifteen minutes left.

"The laboratory is of my own creation," Gzar-Sleet said as we exited. "By that I mean it is of my own *personal* creation, not the creation of my spirit, which all things are in my universe. But of all my personal things here in my worldly temple, I think you will be -most impressed by—this—"

No one said a word as we stepped through the panel. Even the dwarf, who I assumed had been here many times, was awed.

The floor we stood on here was not large. It extended outward around the edge of the circular walls. The transparent core, separated from the floors by at least ten feet, seemed to run all the way to the bottom and all the way to the top. On the other side of the transparent shield...

Back at Arm headquarters nobody saw the Head, who was enclosed in respectable nontransparent sheathing.

"The Brain of Gzar," our host said with pride, 'gazing fondly at the pulsating mass of pink, brown, blue and purple-veined matter which loomed before us.

Aleya gasped. Maybe I did, too. I don't know exactly what I did when it sank home to me that this thing had to be at least three times the size of what until now I had believed was the largest of its kind in the universe.

"Did you know?" Aleya asked me accusingly. "Did you know about this, Odell?"

"Odell," Gzar-Sleet repeated. "Ah, yes. Odell. The man from New Earth who slayed one of our seers. We thought we had the man, but he eluded us."

"Why did you want him?" I asked, ignoring Aleya's icy stare.

"Why? We wanted him... we wanted to... It couldn't have been important, because I don't remember."

"You don't," I said. "How about the other man, the one you picked up, the one you thought was Odell? Why did you kill him? And how did you know he wasn't Odell?"

"That's enough questions," the dwarf said. "Keep your mouth shut," Cloud warned him, ignoring the gun the little man was waving.

Gzar-Sleet ignored both of them. His face took on a mystified look. "The other man? We didn't kill him. Gzar does not destroy, Gzar creates. Ah, it was pirates. That's what I understand. Yes, Gzar knows the Truth. It was pirates."

"And how did you know he wasn't Odell?" I repeated. He thought for a moment. "Our patrol ship... when we were bringing him here... the discrepancy was discovered then."

"By whom?" I asked carefully.

The cheerful answer came from the open panelway to the corridor. "By me," Datchet said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We were still in the central core of the building, though two levels higher. Gzar-Sleet at first had protested our being taken from his presence, but the black squidlike Datchet had insisted.

"They are new, Master, and must receive their orientation," he said.

"True. I was explaining things to them," the young man with the golden hair replied.

"Interrupting your meditation? Master, I beg of you to retire to your room and go back to your thoughts. For it is only through your will that the universe hangs together."

Gzar-Sleet nodded. "That is true," he said to all of us. "Being the One True God has its responsibilities." To Datchet he said, "You are, as ever, the indispensable helper of Gzar. I commend you for your concern for my cosmos."

The dwarf had sighed with relief when his master had left. He gestured with his blaster at Datchet. "When it's time to kill them, I want the pleasure."

"We shall see, oh willing servant of Gzar," Datchet said. "As for now, we have a short bit of business with these three."

The short bit of business entailed our moving upward in an elevator tube. Two levels higher, Datchet and the dwarf looked on as Cloud, Aleya and I were directed by two gunbearing men in white to sit in stiff chairs facing the transparent shield filled with the nauseous brain matter. Each of our wrists and ankles were placed together and encircling but not touching them were single thin bands of wire. When we were secured into position, the dwarf touched a switch on the wall and the wires began to glow.

Datchet gestured to my wrists with a silver-tipped tentacle. "You know what these are, of course."

I did. They were burn-cuffs. They worked on a force-field principle. Try to separate your wrists or ankles and they became permanently separated, cleanly sliced from the rest of you. Datchet explained these facts to Cloud.

The big man moved uneasily. "Another invention by my brother, I don't doubt."

Datchet chuckled. "By no means. Quite commonplace in our business. Correct, Odell?"

"Business? I thought you'd retired," I said dryly.

"You very nearly retired me," he replied. "But fortunately for me, my unconscious self and your explosive were discovered before we both went to pieces. You were very unprofessional, Odell. When killing someone, it is best to make sure."

"Next time I will."

Seven minutes left. Talk, Datchet, eat up time.

"You look depressed, Shamryke," Datchet said, his eyes beginning to moisten. He was enjoying himself.

"It's curiosity more than anything else," I replied. "How did you fall into all this?"

"Good phrase, because that's just what happened. I fell into it." He slid across the floor confidently. "I was hired by the government here to do a small job. Having completed it, I was giving my report here when I saw all the possibilities that being a master of religion would give me—especially the ruling religion on a planet that is known only for its strange cults. I took over. That was six years ago. Much of what I needed was already in place. The drug confiscation, for one thing. All I did was to put the confiscated

drugs to good use. I assume you know about that, or otherwise you'd not have been willful enough to try and crash in here. Then, a year after I settled in, our One True God came within our walls—to lodge a protest. We lodged him, I'm afraid."

"You destroyed him," Cloud said.

"Interpretation. I made him a god—the God. In return, his brilliant scientific mind has made substantial contributions to our success. I now have the Brain. I have a small but increasing band of agents from many parts of the galaxy but mainly recruited among the faithful here; most are missionaries who will actively be preaching the word of Gzar. And I have steady receipts of data which, when I am ready, I will turn to my own uses."

"You're almost a god yourself," I said.

"True. Perhaps, when the current Gzar is no longer useful to me, I shall officially take his place. In the meantime, being the controller of Gzar is enough."

I acted impressed. "You've done well, Datchet."

"So have you. You were my only mistake, not killing you when I easily could have several times. But curiosity has always been one of my failings."

"Curiosity?" *Four minutes to go!*

"Curiosity. When my man in Primus City was reported killed in an accident, it sounded suspicious. Even though the tobacco shop showed no evidence of being rifled, I took the precaution of having ships coming from New Earth inspected. I was hicky. Paydirt on the first inspection."

"But the Martyrite—why did you kill him?" I asked.

"When he told us what we wanted to know, that it was somebody else who'd killed my man. It was only after a bit of primitive and messy truthing. We knew who you were, what you looked like—the whole thing.

But there's where curiosity comes in. I had to know how much you knew and how much you'd reported. Since you might not be easily manageable .in questioning, we decided to try the girl first. The idea was to let you roam around under nonelectronic surveillance. The bumbling Security man who put out an alert for you has been, er, demoted. As for the girl, we found out little from her before you busted her loose except that she doesn't have even as much of the picture as we deduced you must have. Very naughty of you to hold out on a co-worker, Shamryke."

Three minutes!

Datchet continued, primed up to talk. "Curiosity. Even back at the start. You may know we performed a small operation on your—I believe you refer to it as a short-out. I wanted you alive to make a test on the success of that operation even though I had absolutely no need for plants on the operative level. I was simply curious."

He looked at me levelly. "I still am, as a matter of fact."

"So test me," I said.

"That is precisely what I plan to do." He motioned to the dwarf, who opened a panel to the outside. In stepped three figures.

They were the largest Jambas I'd ever seen, head capacities twice that of the average. As they squatted before the three chairs, Datchet explained, "Mind shield may be effective, Odell, in normal situations, but this situation is far from normal. These three Jambas are symbiotic mentally. They are one mind, for all practical purposes. In addition, they are able, through a device fashioned by our resident creator, to tap the mind force of the Brain. Your puny mind shield will crumble un-der one thousandth of the power which will be directed against it. And we shall see if we have successfully rendered your short-out inoperative. We shall do so now."

The Jambas had in the meantime placed on their heads small metallic skullcaps. At the top of each was a tiny red plastic ball.

I had no chance to answer. The panel to the outside opened. A man in a white uniform rushed to the dwarf, bent down, and whispered something into his ear.

"What is it?" Datchet demanded, obviously irked by the interruption.

The dwarf answered uneasily. "At the gates. A disturbance of some kind.

My thoughts raced. The little red balls on the tops of the skullcaps were growing brighter. Outside, the attack had begun; but what would be the results? Datchet had taken the dwarf and gone below to investigate the disturbance, but he'd told the Jambas to proceed.

"I will expect a full report when I return," he told them. To me he said, "Odell, I'm afraid this is goodbye—for the last time."

Time. There wasn't enough. Not for me. Datchet was right, I was certain. My mind shield wouldn't hold. When those balls glowed to the desired brightness, the amount of power being transmitted by the Brain into the minds of the Jambas would slam full-force against my defenses. And then my short-out would—

"So there is an organized attack," the middle Jamba said. I looked up sharply. He was looking into Cloud's face. Of course! Cloud would be the first signal they'd get, since he had no mind shield whatsoever. Aleya's, I was sure, was in place, as was mine. Aleya. Even now, at this point in what had been a misadventure, she still had that same appeal that had struck me the first time I saw—

"You do not stand a chance," the Jamba said. He was not arguing or boasting, merely reflecting the message that Cloud's mind held.

Merely reflecting... the first time I saw Aleya... there had been, like now, *a Jamba who reflected—*

My shield shot up. My eyes closed and my fists clenched. I could visualize my mind taking the shape of a cone, the point of which was directed to the Jamba in front of me. Then the cone disappeared and only raw and naked thought filled the vacuum which had mentally existed between us.

He couldn't miss it. The two Jambas whose minds were in tandem with his jerked their large heads in my direction. From the corner of my eye I could see Cloud sag—still careful, however, to keep wrists and ankles together. Aleya was looking at me with curiosity. She could help... *if* I could... if I dared... to interrupt and tell her—

"*We've won!*" I screamed, and far from lessening the force of my thought, somehow hearing it in my own ears as if from some source other than myself, the mass of the thought expanded, its movement slamming into the Jamba's with increased momentum.

"*We've won!*" This time it was not my voice, but another—but strong. *Won! Won!*

It was like a steel fist cracking into my insides. I lurched out of the chair and the floor shot up to meet my face with vengeance. My head swimming, I pushed myself off the surface with my right hand—

My right hand. It was free.

The cuff that dangled from my wrist no longer glowed. The main lights of the room were out.

The Jambas were, too. In the dim light which came from within the transparent Brain shield, the mess that

AAASTERS OF THE LAMP

had been inside their heads glistened wetly with the broken pieces of the skullcaps.

"The lights," Aleya gasped, extricating herself from where her overturned chair had pinned her against the wall. She stood shakily, discarding her cuffs. "Something's happened to the power. I don't understand."

"Neither do I," Cloud thundered, "but we got a war going on downstairs and right about now we just might be able to win it!"

As we swung toward the panel, the main lights burst into brightness again. Faintly echoing in the back of my brain somewhere were the words, *Stay—your job is here*. It checked my forward movement for just a moment. I gave it no further thought. As Cloud said, we had a war going on downstairs.

Getting weapons from somewhere was our first order of business. This proved easier than I'd imagined possible. We took then from the crumpled heap of the four blue-uniformed Security men we surprised in the corridor as we passed through the panel.

"Which way now?" Cloud asked. To the left and right, the corridor looked the same. My internal guides gave no clue, activity ratios in each direction reading similarly. Then suddenly to the left, the lights at the far end of the corridor winked out. I followed a momentary instinct. "This way," I, said and the three of us moved to the right at a run.

We passed an elevator, then a second, both jammed. Rounding a turn in the corridor, we found ourselves at the floor landing of the circularly winding staircase. Looking behind me, I saw that the route we had just taken was now shrouded in darkness, the light panels along the way having been extinguished.

Aleya noticed the same thing. "We'd better work fast. If the power completely goes, we'll all be lost in here."

"They're coming up!" Cloud warned, using his blaster to pick off two men in blue as they came into view around the turn in the stairs below. Answering shots wildly flew upward from behind the burnt bodies. Our

guns steadily spurting out their blazing death, we descended slowly in a morass of futile screams, groans of pain, and charred forms of members of the temple's Security force. The din of active battle grew louder as we moved.

It reached its frenzied peak as we rounded the last landing above the main hall and stood at the point where we first saw the white-robed figure of Gzar-Sleet. The sight below was fantastic.

The opposition formed roughly two groups, one in blue uniforms, the others in white. Behind piles of bodies, both groups kept their backs tightly to the wall and poured out searing blaster flames toward the opposite walls of the hall. Through those walls, or actually through the six panels that had been opened in them, rushed a steady stream of people—young, old, quick, and infirm—pushing or being pushed from their rear, all intent on gaming entrance into the Temple of Gzar. Our allied force seemed to be attacking with no direction or leadership. In fact, the only rationally behaving group, other than the opposition, was a small band of Cloud's brown-leathered army who returned blaster fire steadily from a corner below us to the left.

A cheer went up when they saw us,

"That's Snow," Cloud said. "Cover me, I'm going down."

I had begun to argue, but there wasn't time. As Cloud started off, three of the white uniforms turned tail and slipped back to the foot of the staircase. Seeing us blocking their way, they raised their guns. Cloud cut one in half with his blaster; the second got it from one of Cloud's band across the room. The third was mine.

"Stay put," I ordered Aleya. "We all need covering now."

By the time I was down on the floor, Cloud had had a chance to reach his men. I had my own problems to worry about. Diving to the side of the blue-uniformed group, my trigger finger kept up a steady blast that heated my weapon to the danger point. My sudden attack from an unexpected quarter had taken the group completely by surprise. Those I didn't get

myself became rattled under the now vulnerability of their position. They broke and ran.

Half up on my feet, a .disintegrating blast to the wall over my head sent me stomach-skidding forward into the pile of dead that had served as the blue uniforms' barricade. Discarding my blaster, which I feared would either shortly run out of power or disintegrate itself from overheat, I was trying to find a suitable target for its substitute when a shout from further along the wall to my front caught my attention.

"You fools—don't run!" cried the dwarf in white, leaping to his feet and waving his arms in the midst of the lamp-symboled elite. The blue uniforms, what was left of them, either couldn't hear him or refused to obey as they were enveloped in the onrushing mobs coming through the open panels now in increasing numbers. But the dwarfs harangue was cut off by a beam of light that turned his head to ash. The shot had come from behind me.

"That felt good," Cloud growled as he dropped down on the floor to my rear. Looking at the wall opposite us he said amazed, "By Barth's beard, they're still coming!"

"Where'd we get such an army?" I asked him. The numbers, still pouring through the openings, were far greater than what I had expected we could count on from our religious brotherhoods. "And how did they get through the gates?"

He laughed shortly as a blaster shot took out a portion of the wall over us. "About the crowd, Snow says it was the woman—the dark one. She figured that she might be able to interest a few other congregations. She made preachers out of her whole flock and they spread the word. Looks like the word spread to the whole goddamn town! When they got here, the gates opened by themselves, sort of, and the laser cannons weren't working. Where's that octopus friend of yours?"

Cloud's reference to Datchet brought my thoughts to my job which wasn't here, but elsewhere. I grinned at Cloud. "Let's go find him."

The battle on the main floor was simply a matter of mop-up operations, it appeared to me. The combination of Cloud's army and the worshipper masses would either eventually overrun the elite or the defeat-acceptance brain mechanism would take care of the matter.

We were crawling toward the stairwell at a fast clip, when we stopped dead. Suddenly all around us heads turned and voices stilled. Cloud's gasp sounded in my ear like a crash of lightning.

"No!"

The figure on the stairwell had passed the point where Aleya still stood, uncertainly training her weapon toward the center of the large hall. His arms extended in supplication, his gold hair and white robe flowing in the breezes coming through the open portals, he looked truly like a god.

"My children. The house of Gzar is a house of peace," he intoned. "All are welcome here as in any part of my creation."

No one moved for several heartbeats. Then it hap-pened. A blast of light from one of the members of Cloud's army. It was off target, glancing off the stairs in front of the white-robed figure, but it had its results. 4* *"It's Sleet!"* Cloud roared, but his voice was lost in the sudden shouts raised by the mob on the floor. Cloud and I both were caught up in the stream of flesh that flooded to the bottom of the stairs and pressed upwards with cries of "Gzar, save us!"

"Lord, have mercy!"

"Gzar! Gzar! Gzar!"

"Sleet—go back!" Cloud cried, but to no purpose. Instead of retreating from the pressing onslaught, the One True God, a calm smile beginning on his lips, stepped downward.

"My children," were the words I believe he was trying to say when the press pushed him backward and he was lost under the shuffling feet of the

tidal wave of his screaming worshippers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Taking advantage of a sudden shift in the tide, I broke free and stumbled up the stairs. As I grabbed Aleya by the sleeve and pulled her upward with me, I could hear below us Cloud's commanding voice shouting for order. His voice was joined by others, probably the religious leaders we'd recruited. They could handle it, I was sure. Our job was Datchet. That was our first anyway. Later, whatever it was to be, I couldn't afford not to have Aleya close by.

But finding Datchet wasn't going to be easy. At the second level, we realized that. Our guns at the ready, we peered down the long and deserted corridor which faced us.

"Curious," I said quietly. "All the panels are open."

"There's something else, too," she said. "The lights— they're all back on."

Obviously, we had to start someplace. The first panel we came to was that of the exercise room. Cautiously checking it, we found it empty. Further along the corridor was, we knew, the bio laboratory. As we approached it, the sound of clinking met my ears. I received a signal of life registration. Nodding to Aleya to cover me, I moved into the panelway at a low crouch, my blaster pointed forward at eye level.

The six lab-coated technicians worked at their pouring, their stirring and testing as before. Undisturbed by events taking place below them, they were oblivious as well to my presence. Again the chilling sensation went up my spine. I stayed just long enough to scan the elongated room for the presence of anyone else, then I backed through the panel.

Three rooms later, we were no closer to our prey. As we approached the fourth panel, I recognized it as the one which led to the core of the building. Again we used the procedure which had now become habit, Aleya covering me from the corridor as I moved into the room at a crouch. There was a

flaw in the method, however, and in the fourth room we discovered what it was.

As previously, I checked for life *signs* inside. None registered. But to be sure, I moved in for a visual check. I was halfway into the room when the panel shot back into place, catching me in the back and sending me toward the transparent tube. Shifting my weight instantaneously to regain equilibrium, I spun to face the now closed panel.

"Rest easy, Odell," I was told.

My muscles and fibers did just the opposite. All my sense reflexes, except the audial, told me I was alone, that there was no one who could be speaking to me. And on the other side of that door, Aleya—

"She will be safe, for the present," I was told. My eyes searched for a voice box but I saw none. And somewhere in the back of my memory the voice resembled someone—or something. And then I remembered. It wasn't that the tone or pitch was the same, it was the lack of inflection, the same monotony of both pitch and tone.

"I begin to understand some things now," I said, turning. "Things like power interruptions that made our burn-luffs useless and extinguished lights to help us, and the nonfunctioning laser cannons. But—"

"But," interrupted the voice as the glutinous mass of brain matter behind the shield pulsed, "Taut why should I help you, you're wondering—help you whose mission it is to destroy me."

"Not necessarily destroy you," I said. "My exact instructions—"

"We have little time for discourse, Odell, and I have little inclination to speak with the man who has caused the death of the one who created me."

"Sleet?"

"Sleet or Gzar, call him by what name you will. He was an ingenious man, but a moral one as well. A pure man whose will and creation was subjugated to evil purposes. He referred to me as the Brain of Gzar. So I am, with his individual spirit was I molded. It is why I am aiding you. I will be subjugated no longer."

"But you knew. You knew all along to what use your—your abilities were being put. You must have known Datchet's grand design. You helped him before, why switch sides now?"

"You speak of J. The word and underlying concept connote individual will. I have an amount of that, it is true. But you fail to appreciate that, though constructed of organic tissue, I am fundamentally a machine built to serve given ends. My function is to feed on information and then answer questions put to me. I was not asked for moral opinions on the results of actions which I recommended based on data in light of aims given by those who master me."

The Brain pulsed. Then, obviously picking up my unspoken thought, it continued.

"No, Odell. Your organization will not master me. I will become nonoperational first."

"But my organization—"

"Does not have evil ends? Perhaps, but I have been fed with data from your Head, as you amusingly refer to my counterpart in your organization. I have been fed with data that order destruction and death."

"But the ends—"

"You have not enough data to judge the morality of them. Nor have I, since I have incomplete data. Nor can your Head, even though there data is complete, since no doubt your counterpart of myself was deliberately constructed to be amoral in nature—not immoral, but amoral, coming to its decisions without regard to basic morality."

"You said you'd become nonoperational."

"By which you may interpret suicide."

"If now, why didn't you do it before? You could have disrupted Datchet's entire operation—"

"Do you think, human, that suicide is an easy thing? Can you not see that life—existence—can be precious even to one as myself? And," the voice paused, "and can you not understand the feelings a creation like myself can have for its creator?"

"Sleet?"

"Gzar. Now Gzar is dead. His life impression is cold within me. I know how he died. Nobly, unthinking of himself, wanting to give to others. Even at the last,

Gzar taught me. His last lesson, by his example, was that it can be moral for an organism to become non-operational. The means may be deplorable, but the morality of the end gives morality to the action."

"But the waste," I protested.

"You speak to me of waste? You, who have contemplated a waste just as immoral, even more so? Do not look surprised, human. I received many of your hidden thoughts when the Jambas—"

"You mean Aleya," I said.

"Yes. To possess my life, you would destroy hers. You *were* instructed by your Head to do exactly that, were you not?"

"Only if necessary," I replied.

There was a short silence. "It will not be necessary."

"How—"

"As you've had ample evidence, I control the power plant of the temple. I thereby control the oxygen input into myself. Oxygen, among other inputs, is life to me. Without it..." The voice trailed off.

"Why have you waited, then? Why haven't you done it already?"

"I will live until I have to. There are two things more which must be done."

"Datchet, and his agents on other worlds."

"Datchet is one. His agents here are finished. Those in other parts of the galaxy will die when they receive coded messages I shall send telling of the organization's end. No, the other thing that must be done is the restoration of this planet. I do not wish to change its fundamental nature. As a haven for the religious, it must continue. But it must do so under wise leadership. I wish you to send the brother of Gzar to me. I will give him what guidance I can in the short time I allot myself."

"And Datchet? Where-"

"There is a lift to the roof of the temple where are kept emergency hovercars. He is up there now, awaiting my signal as to his organization's success or failure below. I must give the signal shortly, .since I am' programmed to do so. The pain I cause myself by restraint has been growing during the past few minutes. I cannot delay much longer. You cannot either. Good luck, Odell."

As the panel behind me slid open, it occurred to me what the Head, had once told me about luck not being logical.

It took only a short command to send Aleya downward for Cloud. She had questions, she was concerned about what had happened inside that room, but the determination on my face transmitted the urgency of my order. She was nowhere in sight as I found the lift at the end of the hall.

At roof level, the lift door slid back silently. My systems wary, weapon ready, I stepped out of the lift. The night was cold and black, pierced only by the bright pinpoints of a few stars which lent an eerie feeling to the polished white roof. Far in front of me I could see where the purple dome of the temple had been retracted into its wall shell. At intervals on the roof-floor were between ten and fifteen hovercars. Datchet was here somewhere, but where?

And then I heard him. Or, rather, first I heard the voice of the Brain.

"... completely defeated. At the end, your lamp operatives were self-defeated by the mechanisms you had installed in their heads—"

"Never mind that. Odell, is he alive? If so, where?" Datchet's tone was calm, as I would have expected. He was a professional. My systems located him somewhere to my left front.

"The one called Odell is on his way to the roof," the Brain answered. "Anticipating your next question, yes, he is weaponed. Is there anything else?"

There was no answer. Now the name of the game was stalk and kill.

I zeroed in. All systems registered seventy degrees left of dead center, then seventy-one, -two. Distance was shortening. He was moving around to get the lift exit into his gunsights. But something bothered me: was registering far too strongly. I continued moving forward, low and sure to keep at least one hovercar dead between the two of us. When his movement stopped, mine did, too.

"You're here, aren't you, Sham?" he said quietly. "I felt your globe a little while back. You're not the only one with detection systems, you know. Fact is, I've got you pinpointed."

I knew he was right. "No deals, Datchet. One of us dies up here."

He laughed. "Deals? When did businessmen like you and me ever make deals? But I've always been a gambling fellow, Sham, and I'm betting that you're holding one of our blast-guns. Am I right? No answer? I'll just have to come and take a look, in that case."

And suddenly from behind the hovercar which had been between us, there he was. A black-tentacled blob against the blackness of the sky, his silver-tipped gloves holding¹ three blasters.

"Goodbye, Datchet," I murmured and sent a blaze of death shooting toward him.

The arc twisted off to Datchet's left. Incredibly, I had missed!

So did the two carefully aimed bursts that followed. But there was no shield screen in the universe that could withstand a modern blaster!

"One of a kind, Sham," Datchet explained. "Built on specifications from my Brain. Not fully portable, but here at home where the power input is strong enough, quite functional, as you can see." His mass shook with humor. I could see his eyes glistening with wetness.

"Now, you were saying a little while back about one of us dying up here. Since you've always been a normally truthful person, I wouldn't want —"

"Shoot again, Odell—now!"

Both Datchet and I heard the voice that boomed across the roof.

The top half of his body lurched to the side as he jerked down his three weapons at me. But I wasn't where I'd been. The three bursts chewed up the floor some yards behind me. Rolling over after the completion of my dive, I fired. My aim wasn't perfect but it was good enough to sear off two of Datchet's supporting leg-tentacles. He tumbled to the roof-floor, screaming,

"The shield—something—" he cried in disbelief. "Odell —Sham, look! My guns I"

They clattered on the stone to his rear.

He scrambled to an awkward standing position. Wincing with pain, he sputtered, "Sham, the Brain. It must have... Don't kill me, Sham. There's no need... I saved your life once, remember? You and me, we can—"

I stopped five yards from him. "About saving my life, friend—thanks."

Seconds later he was ashes.

Oxygen, the sustainer of life. It could be done. The Brain was occupied with Cloud, instructing him. With a power pack from one of the hovercars, I could rig up an auxiliary source that the Brain couldn't cut out. If a team of us worked fast enough, I could do the same for all of his life essentials. I could make his suicide impossible.

Maybe. And then maybe not. If not, the work involved—finding the actual inputs, setting up the power sources, removing all intake blocks the Brain might be able to use—all this work would be wasted. But didn't I owe the Arm at least the try? But, hell—one operative can only do so much. And this particular operative was exhausted.

"Maybe the Brain was exhausted, too," I told Aleya later. We were on the ship that would take us back to New Earth. "Exhausted the same way I was."

She regarded me curiously. "What bothers me about just letting it die like that, is the waste. The horrible waste."

I nodded. "I'll have some answering to do for that when we get back. In the meantime, we've got three days ahead of us—three days to ourselves. Three days which we shouldn't... waste."

We'd had to wait four days to get an available first class compartment.
like I said before, operatives normally travel first class for security reasons.
This trip, I had reasons other than security.