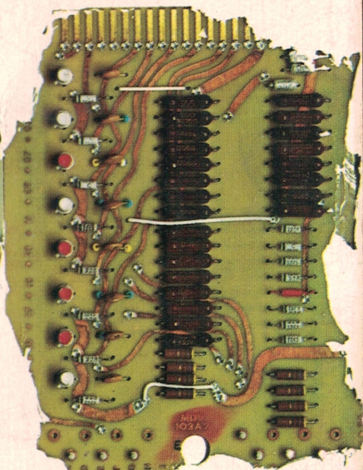
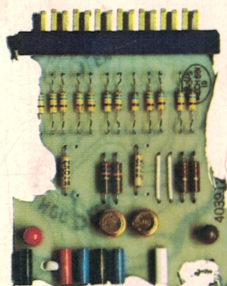


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MASK OF CHAOS

25

JOHN JAKES



On the masked world,
the law is the deepest secret

Mike was apprehensive about being stranded on Tome. But the peaceful city and the exquisite masks everyone wore somehow allayed his fears. The sculptured expressions of tranquility and the ghostly, frail smiles lulled him into serenity.

He soon compared his plight on Tome to a sojourn in Eden—until Mike met a flame-haired woman with an apple. She taught him to see the horror behind the masks, to look beyond what people and things “seem” to be.

But then again, *he* wasn’t what he seemed to be. He didn’t need a mask. He was a mask. . . .

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

**And of their vain contest
appeared no end.**

—John Milton

MASK OF CHAOS

JOHN JAKES

AN ACE BOOK

**Ace Publishing Corporation
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**For Harlan,
who will remember Dayton
and understand why.**

THE STAR VIRUS

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PART I

THE STRANGERS

Shawnee Sachem, on the order of 750,000 metric tons, descended stern first into the underground docks at a little before 1800, Tome universal realtime. An hour later, the liberty gong rang.

Mike was about the last to leave the vessel. He already knew he would be by himself when he went off board, so he took his time changing from duty clothes to liberty grays. All alone in the Q deck lav, he combed his olefin hair and smiled at his reflection in a simple, pleased way. He had long ago stopped trying to separate what was his own, womanborn body and what was artfully disguised steel, plasto, and synthetic.

He had to bend to get through the hatch out of the lav. He stood about two meters tall, weighed 1270 kilos, and often forgot spaceman's posture in the casual routine of ship-board duties. This tended to give him a slouch that somehow emphasized his look of compact power.

He whistled along the empty companionways. Even skipped twice. He had his perfs in his pocket and naturally they were all the very top. That gave him a little extra money at voyage's end. What he'd do with it he didn't know, but earning it satisfied him.

Distantly through the ship he heard the chuff of cargo being tubed down to the lowest levels of the docks. He tried to recall the little briefing packet he'd read about this planet. The planet's name was Tome. It was supposed to be a very interesting, unusual place. Something about masks. He couldn't recall more, though. Or the name of this largest city into whose port they'd descended. But he looked forward to going above ground.

To do that, he first had to go down. At the outer lock he rang for the pod. It rose up the outer hull, opened its hatch, bore him down. He stepped out into a huge vaulted bay whose concrete floor held the bottom third of *Shawnee Sachem* in a deep round hole.

Lights high up in the vaults shone bright blue, casting reflections on the network of interwoven cargo tubes slung from the ceiling. It was dark in certain far corners of the big bay, though. The filtered air smelled of something close to kerosene.

A yellow universal exit arrow gleamed at the bay's far, darkest side. He started for it. His boots went *chack-chack*, with an echo.

"Hey ole Mike," someone called.

He turned, smiling. Even when he recognized the caller he still smiled.

"Hello, Robineyes. I thought you'd gone."

"Just waiting for a friend. Come on over?"

"Sure," said Mike thinking nothing of it, even though he knew very well that Robineyes was no friend. There wasn't anyone who could be classified a friend aboard *Shawnee Sachem*.

Roger Robineyes was a point-chinned 'blood off Helmrich's Rolly II. He worked third trick in the loop room and often shared mess with Mike. Right now he was lounging way back around the curved rail that kept people on the concrete from falling into the docking hole.

Robineyes held the rail with one hand. Behind him, in the dark, Mike thought he heard a noise. Robineyes immediately coughed.

"Ole pal Mike, can you lend me five for a vive?"

"We just got paid, Roger."

Robineyes wiped his sweaty chin, shamefaced. "A little game, see—"

"And you lost it all. Okay, here." Mike handed him one of the tokens in his pocket. "I'm not much for those joints. I don't remember reading about vive divans in the packet, though." Of course he didn't remember reading about it.

"Oh—ah—sure, Mike. These Tome women are supposed—uh—"

"Is something wrong, Roger? You seem jumpy."

"Not a thing, not a thing. I'm just spaced because I lost—oh, shiddings."

With all his nervous gesturing, Robineyes had let go of the five token. It went sailing down into the black space between hull and concrete, hitting the hull twice with loud clicks, then dropping on in silence.

Mike turned, gripped the rail, peered down into the black space.

"Gone. Guess I can spare one more, though. Another of the ones specially reserved for not being spent on a vive—" With the sentence half uttered, the grin half formed, he heard the air whistling behind him. He understood that Robineyes had deliberately dropped the token to make him turn away from the bay. He went to all circuits on by jamming his elbows against the plates where ribs once were.

His hands reached for Robineyes so fast they could hardly be seen. Not to maim. To shake, chastise. He heard what was coming: many fast, slithering feet. Many men who'd been hiding in the shadows around back of the ship.

They grabbed him at knees and elbows. He threw two off. They sailed high in the air, like light toys; then they fell, striking hard, shrieking in pain. Harder landings than Mike'd planned.

A lugger was crashed against the back of his skull, which sang like a bell. He counted ten, twenty, thirty faces, all familiar, all ugly. If he fought he'd hurt them. So he lowered his head, preparing to race his way outside the ring they'd formed. The crewman with the lugger, Preensteen, hit him again.

"That's no use, Preensteen," Mike exclaimed. "You should know by now I—"

Someone slipped a hand in under his right arm, slapped the plate through his gray uniform. He spun toward the treachery, but half his circuits were out. Confused, he hesitated. Someone else darted at the plate under his left arm while Robineyes screeched: "His arms! Get his gozzing arms up over his head!"

This they did. Eight of them were required to hold him. Four took the legs and trunk, four the arms, holding these straight up in the air so he couldn't possibly apply pressure to the plates that switched on all the relays and acceleration circuits with which he was honeycombed. Robineyes kicked him in the crotch. Although he was mostly plasto there, Mike felt it. For the first time he scowled.

"We all got our perfs just before planetfall," Robineyes said. He was on tiptoes so that he could shove his small face as close to Mike's big one as possible. "We all know what you got on yours, don't we? Guess what we got on ours."

Spittle from that hit Mike in the eyes. A man he recognized as little brown Somaku danced in, though not too closely. Even the eight holding Mike showed a lot of white eye. Somaku was seething.

"One, two, three points less 'cause' of you. Less tokens, less tokens!"

"It's not that I want to do you out of extra wages—" Mike began.

"It's you're a Lightcommander's sternkisser," shouted von Wecht.

That made Mike mad. "I just try to do a job the best way I'm equipped."

Preensteen brandished the lugger in Mike's face. "We're gonna de-equip you, you gozzing freak."

Growls of agreement at this. Mike tried to drag his arms down. Without the aid of the circuits he had no extra strength to employ against them, except for the normal margin of extra strength his height and weight provided. Against eight that wasn't enough.

Robineyes took charge. "Some of you bucks roll up his blouse and screw off those plates. Then dig inside and get yourself a fistful of wires."

"What if we hit some real live guts, Robin? He keeps saying he had some of those, once."

"Tear them out too."

"Not without the gozzing insulated gloves I don't. Who's got them?"

"Me. Here."

"All right, you two," Robineyes instructed. "Start to work on the elbow bolts."

The two so ordered pushed their hands through the web of limbs belonging to the men holding Mike. The two helped the holders jockey Mike's left arm down into reachable position. Mike was worried now. He estimated weights, suddenly jerked his left elbow inward at the right moment. "*The plate!*" someone screamed.

Hands were jammed between Mike's elbow and body in time to prevent pressure contact.

"I don't want to hurt any of you mates—" Mike began, trying to sound as if he meant it, which he did.

"Don't worry, freak, we won't let you," Preensteen panted. He shoved Mike's sleeve above the elbow, then fastened the lugger to the chrome joint nut. Preensteen fingered the lugger stud. Its head began to whine, spinning off the nut. Inside his left arm Mike felt the tickle of a warning circuit.

"Unless you mates let go of me—" he tried again.

"Got it!" Preensteen said as the nut fell into his hand. He used the lugger to knock out the bolt. The outer casing of Mike's lower arm dropped, then jerked up short, separated from the elbow but kept from falling by all the internal wires. Nowhere, on none of the other ships, had it ever gotten this bad, with multiple alarm circuits tickling. He was really scared. He began to throw his body from side to side to break free.

"Hang on, hold on!" Robineyes cried. "Once we get him apart we can sell him for souvenirs to the gozzing Tomes in the marketp—"

"Leave off."

"Come on, you bucks," Robineyes kept on. "The right arm next."

"I said leave off."

"Saint Elmo's mother's halo," gasped von Wecht, who was religious. "Lightcommander—"

Where exactly Lightcommander Leaf had come from, no one could say, least of all Mike. But there the Lightcommander was, at the back of the crowd, in his bright, creased liberty uniform. His skin was deeply tanned, free of wrinkles. His eyes were old, and no wonder. Leaf had told Mike he was over 200.

Leaf waved his swaggerbolt back and forth. It had the desired effect. The savagery of the mob faded away, leaving rather embarrassed men, a few of whom managed to feign a certain amount of anger.

They weren't so angry that they failed to release Mike, though. He thought about putting his circuits on, really thought about it, he was that mad. But the thought got no further.

"Can you put yourself back together, Mike?" asked Leaf.

"Yes, sir."

"Do it. Now who's in charge of this convention of thugs? I got the crew grievance writ in my tube half an hour before planetfall. One hundred and twelve signatures. I counted." Leaf's mouth had a white lividity. He was a man of routine. He was always enraged at having it disrupted.

"Isn't a writ enough for you gozzing apes? I'm taking it under advisement. But I'm late for a dinner engagement with the charge d'affaires and I don't take kindly to missing the first course."

After a silence, Leaf hit his swaggerbolt against his leg. "I said who's in charge?"

No one spoke. All the other crewmen began staring at Robineyes.

Robineyes fumed. Then he blurted, "This freak's the ruination of morale aboard, Lightcommander. When the perfs came out, we compared notes. We all got marked down compared to the performance rating we got before you signed *him* aboard on Delilah's."

"He's strong, he's fast," Leaf countered. "He does his jobs well—"

"He's stronger, he's faster'n ordinary bucks because he's a gozzing mechanical man."

Leaf flicked his burned-out eyes toward Mike. "Only half."

Somehow Robineyes found courage. "Well, Lightcom-

mander, we all meant what we signed to in that writ. Either you toss him off the *Sachem* or the rest of the crew goes, to a man."

Grumbled eyes.

"You don't mean it."

"Yes, sir; we do. We'll all go and take our chances on another ship in a few months."

"You won't be able to get another crew on this gozzing planet," Preensteen put in. "I read about this place in the packet. It's nowhere."

Sadly, Mike remembered that much from a conversation he'd overheard at mess. Tome was way, way off the usual lanes. Only secondary trading companies called there. *Shawnee Sachem* belonged to one such secondary company. Failing to deliver a complete voyage because of crew grievance, Lightcommander Leaf would find himself dissatisfied with his own company-written perfs.

Mike bolted his arm together with a feeling of sadness. He'd seen this scene before. Leaf's eyes seemed to be trying to express regret. But only briefly.

"Come along to my quarters, Mike," he said. And Mike knew that was it.

As was customary, Lightcommander Leaf had quite the most comfortable quarters aboard: seven small rooms, interplaying colored lights, an illuminated tank of minidolphins, and an emerald marmoset that romped all over the furniture.

Most captains kept pets to break the loneliness. In typically salty fashion, Leaf's had been trained to speak by the crew. It hopped up and down around Mike's boots and kept piping, "Howzabout it, starbuck? A little grog, a little sog? Howzaboutit, starbuck?"

This kept Mike mildly interested for a few minutes. During that time Leaf busied himself at the bubble that had emerged from the wall at his touch. He completed his work at the keyboard. Tiny pink and magenta lights stopped rippling across the canted deck above the keys. A chime sounded. Leaf took the square perforated card from the slot.

"Mike, what I have here is a D and C."

"Yes, sir. I've seen them."

"I don't care to hand out a Dismissal and Cause lightly."

"No, sir."

"Or hastily."

"No, sir."

Leaf extended the ticket. Mike realized he was supposed

to take it. "Oh." He did. "Begging the Lightcommander's pardon—"

"What is it?" The way Leaf said it, so fast, belied his edginess.

"If you don't want to do it, why are you?"

"Because unless I do, I not only will not have a crew tomorrow, I won't have a crew one hour from now." He touched the bubble. It withdrew, whining. He gestured. Mike followed to the next room, lit amber.

Leaf poured himself a small round glass of something in an old brown bottled labeled Grand Marnier. When he indicated the second, empty glass on the floating bar, Mike nodded back. Leaf poured. The liquor tasted of oranges. Leaf stretched the ritual of watching Mike's pleasure as long as he could, then:

"You understand how it is. You said you did when I interviewed you on Delilah's for the open berth. You said you'd been kicked out of your last two berths."

"Yes, sir," Mike answered, kneeling. He tickled the emerald marmoset behind the ears. It leaped onto his shoulder, hugging his head.

"Come on, starbuck, a nick for a nog all night?"

Mike laughed, scratching the animal's belly. It burbled with delight. Leaf tossed off another glass of liquor, seeming to find the affection distasteful. Mike glanced up at his superior officer.

"I hope you don't think my work was no good, sir."

"Goz no. With six of your speed and temperament I could run this ship like a sweetheart cruise. You understand . . ." It was left hanging.

"Sure, I said so. I make the others look bad."

"I guess I made a mistake being honest in the perms. Where I really made my error was hiring you on. If you have to blame anybody, Mike, blame me."

"Why, there's no question about blame."

"Why the goz damn isn't there?"

Mike stared. For the first time, the Lightcommander's skin sheened with a very light sweat.

"I just don't understand what those brain pickers and wire planters did to you, Mike. I know they made you faster and stronger in the course of all those experiments they hired you for." He seized the back of Mike's head. "But what did they do to you in here? You smile all the time. Yes, sir. No, sir. Shiddings, man! That makes people nervous."

"I don't mean for it to, Lightcommander. I feel cheerful

inside most always. Except like when they unbolted me outside."

"You didn't want to hurt them even then," Leaf sighed. "Don't tell me you couldn't have got to your switches if you'd wanted."

Caught, chagrined, Mike walked to the bar. "Okay to have another?"

"Sure. A gift from the bighearted skipper." Leaf slurred his words slightly. Mike realized the man had already consumed his third or fourth drink.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you funds over and above the liberty tokens," Leaf said. "Because of the standard contract, I have to let you go with D and C. D and C doesn't allow for separation pay. I'd pay you out of my pocket, but my wages are locked up in the computer just like everybody else's till the voyage is over."

"I'll make out, sir. My tokens will last a while. It sounds like an interesting planet, this—this—"

"Tome," said Leaf, fiercely. "Didn't you read the packet?"

"I did. I—forgot."

"You remember the place where you got all those wires and circuits inside you, don't you? You remember who did that to you, don't you?"

"The Trelawny Institute. On Castin. In the Jerez stars."

"Gozzing right," Leaf agreed, pouring his fifth or sixth.

"A man ought to remember who ruined him for life."

"I signed the paper of my own free will, Lightcommander."

Leaf sneered. "How old were you?"

"Twenty." Mike rubbed the small glass on his chin.

"Twenty-one."

"You think. You can't remember. And how you're forty realtime at least. They had you for fifteen years."

"I enjoyed—"

"You enjoyed it because the bulbs they planted in your brain box say you enjoyed it," Leaf slurred. He waved his empty glass under Mike's nose. His burned-out eyes looked less harsh, misted as they were from rapid blinking. "You don't have the vaguest idea what they did to you, because you don't relate to the real world any longer, Mike my friend. They fixed you so you can't relate. All you do is float along, float along"—waving his glass, Leaf staggered to the bar for a refill—"wondering why those shidding apes on my crew hate you when you're so happy, when you love everybody who kicks you in the ass." He drank, gulp.

"Begging the Lightcommander's pardon—"

"Ah, why don't you tell me to shove it up or something?"

In the reverberations after the shout, Mike said, "As a matter of fact, sir, I am kind of sore now."

"Bully. That's just gozzing bully." Leaf whizzed his swaggerbolt at the bar laterally, struck his empty glass sitting there, shattered it. The emerald marmoset yelped and ran off into the other rooms.

"I know exactly what the gentlemen at the Trelawny Institute did, Lightcommander. They used my body for experiments. Science experiments. Worthwhile experiments. It's a very fine place, the Trelawny—"

"Oh, puke. They made and remade you fifty dozen times, with new organs every time. When they found they'd crammed as much electrocrap and circuits into you as was humanly possible, hyped your skills curves as far as they could, and published their findings, they kissed you off. I suppose they told you to try the service, eh? Suggested you'd be very welcome there because of your superior strength and speed?"

Unhappy at how this was going, Mike frowned. "Truth is, I decided on the service myself. The Trelawny Institute made no suggestions whatsoever—"

"Smart of them! They knew you'd be miserable, wherever."

"Begging the Lightcommander's pardon again, I am not mis—"

"I can't stand much more of this," said Leaf with a direct and peculiar stare. "I've missed the first course, by the way. Did you know that?" His glass gone, he helped himself to Grand Marnier directly from the bottle. "You poor"—gulp—"simpleton"—gulp—"if they made you so perfect at that place, why can't you remember where you came from?"

"I don't know."

"Who your parents were?"

"I don't know."

"What your real legal name is?"

"My name is Mike, sir."

"Mikel Micropig. Micro pig. You said somebody at the Institute gave you that, didn't you? They were making a joke. A joke!" Now Leaf had hold of Mike by the shoulders, blowing orange-flavored breath and misty spit in his face.

"Why do you take it, Mike? That's the crime—you do. They rigged you with wires and relays and performance boosters but the rest of you"—he seized Mike's head again, giving it a shake—"they ruined! I wish you'd flange me. Wipe the plates with me and the crew. Instead, you schlep from dock to dock, booted out on your ass every time but still with that smile—"

Mike drew away from Leaf's hand suddenly. The Lightcommander rocked down hard on his heels. He blinked, almost looked gratified. That in turn began a sadness in Mike, oddly mixed with irritation.

"Begging the Lightcommander's pardon for the last time, who are you mad at? Me? Or you?"

Leaf stood shivering a moment. His eyes looked as fierce and burned out as ever. He raised his swaggerbolt. Mike edged his left elbow in toward his side, just in case.

Leaf lowered the swaggerbolt. He thrust it in his belt. He turned away, ostensibly to adjust his collar tabs in a glass.

"Your ticket's on the floor. You dropped it."

"Oh." Mike bent, with immense grace. "Thank you."

Lightcommander Leaf's face had regained its smoothness. It now looked as perfect as dark brown wax. "This isn't an entirely unvisited port," he said. "I've been here before. You shouldn't have any trouble picking up a berth in a few weeks if you can make your tokens last. The natives were Earth stock way back. They're odd but friendly."

"Thank you, sir. I really am looking forward to checking on what's above ground."

"You were looking for—? Christ Ancient be merciful." Leaf went out.

Leaving a moment later, Mike tore up his ticket and threw it to the emerald marmoset, who began to hop and play with the bits like confetti. Mike was pleased that the animal liked the gift, because he had nothing else to give.

Ten minutes later he was riding the tube up to the surface of Tome.

Two things impressed Mike immediately about Tome: the silence, and no trash.

Of course the masks were unusual too. He noticed them the moment he stepped outside the vast customs complex at ground level. But the impact was somewhat less because, observing the first pair of local citizens passing by, their faces concealed, he remembered a statement in the briefing packet about masks. Nothing had been said about the silence, or no trash.

The city's avenues were unusually wide. The buildings, built closely together, were of basically uniform design. All were extremely tall. They thrust up row on row into the distance in every direction like so many clean, polished sabers. Here and there one building was a level or two shorter than the rest. But the whole effect was one of up-

wardness and order. The building exteriors were smooth. There were few visible openings. Those Mike spotted resembled portholes rather than ordinary square, oval or elliptical windows.

There was an atmospheric dome over the entire city, Mike guessed, although he couldn't see it up there. The packet did say that Tome's air was not human breathable. Since the city air had a crisp, vaguely citrus tang when he breathed in, he presumed it had to be artificial.

He wandered along one boulevard, then another, and another. The sky far up was a field of milky stones of many colors. Every so often he passed citizens of Tome in pairs or trios. He could tell the sexes because the women's bodies were apparent under their clothing. Men wore loose-fitting tunic suits in bright colors, two-piece. Women wore single-piece garments in bright, elaborate patterns. These were loose-fitting, too, but not so much that the shapes of breasts were invisible. Since both sexes wore those beautiful masks, clothing was the chief key to sex differentiation.

Behind the eyeholes of the masks, they watched as he passed by. There was no other person with a bare face to be seen anywhere. Mike heard whispering whenever he went by a group of citizens. But the people of Tome didn't gesture at him or bother him in any way. He kept a smile on his face and proceeded at a brisk pace, marveling at the silence and no trash.

On many of the worlds he'd visited during his five years on the ships, the noise level was nearly unbearable. Usually, it was accompanied by huge crowds of people everywhere you turned, and flashing signs that obliterated the stars or sun by day as well as night. Mike had come to associate such hurlyburly with wealth, aggressiveness, a planet whose factories and commerce made it rich.

But here on Tome, although there were many people out tonight, he didn't feel the least crowded. Nor was there any unseemly noise.

After a while he realized the silence was due to a complete absence of vehicle traffic. He felt like a dummy for not having grasped that earlier. The guilt didn't linger long; no more than a second or so. He was too busy plodding through the meanings of his discovery.

Certainly a city this size had to have service facilities. That usually meant wheelpods, service trains, rapid conveyance rails, and the like. All at once he associated the silence with a sensation he'd felt in the bottoms of his boots

at intervals. About every long block or so the mosaic pavement vibrated faintly.

All the vehicular traffic was underground.

He laughed inside his head, delighted at his hard-won guess. Smart people, these citizens of Tome. They kept their cities, beautiful, open, and quiet.

Clean, too. Not once did he notice litter. Not a single faxesheet, carrybag, discarded contra kit or anything similar thrown away. The mosaic pavements, done in muted paisley-like patterns, were completely free of the cast-off junk he'd seen in even the finest sections of cities on faster-paced worlds.

Yet the order and cleanliness didn't suggest to Mike that Tome was backward or slow. Just the opposite. He had a feeling, from the buildings, robes, masks, silence, pavements, that he'd landed on a rich planet. Queer, maybe, by common standards. But rich.

And though he was the object of curiosity because of his bare face, he didn't feel uneasy. Nobody stopped him, plucking his arm, hawking this map or that vice. None of the passersby expressed their curiosity with more than those whispers, those quick glitters behind mask eyeholes signifying a long look.

He was well into his second hour of wandering, whistling, with his hands in his pockets, when he laboriously arrived at the reason he felt so relaxed. He should have been worried about his status. He was, after all, without a ship, or even a place to sleep tonight.

The silence contributed to his feeling. So did the lack of trash.

But what really made him comfortable, he decided, were the masks.

He certainly didn't know anything about art. Had never walked inside a conservatorium to look at an exhibit on any of the planets he'd visited. Yet the masks he judged beautiful. Beautiful.

So far as he could tell without actually touching one, they were metal, or metallic derived. The people of Tome wore them as the fronts of rather loose-fitting cloth hoods. Less self-conscious now about returning the glances of the citizens he took more time examining the masks.

Each mask was full, face-formed and contoured, curving down across the forehead, flared at the nose, then curving to conform with the shape of the chin. From the chin the mask dropped straight for a short distance, thereby concealing the wearer's neck. The mask curved back on both

sides of the eyes to a point just in front of the ears, where it was seamed together with the cloth hood-part of the head covering. There were eyeholes of conventional size, but only a mouth slit to permit speech to come through. Lips were sculptured into the mask, as was a nose. By kneeling and pretending to adjust the velc fastenings of his right boot as three women went by, Mike looked up from a sufficiently low angle to discover that the undersides of the sculptured noses had small holes for breathing.

The people of Tome really allowed only their eyes to be seen, and not very much of those, either.

Mike wondered why he didn't feel upset or worried by the sight of so many people wearing masks. He thought about that for the next hour as he strolled along. Finally he realized what should have been obvious. Or at least he told himself, reprovingly, that it should have been obvious.

The masks were beautiful, and formed so that the features suggested peace. He began hunting for masks which suggested anger. Or tension. He didn't see any. Then he narrowed the search even more, trying to find a mask with the corners of the lips turned down. None of those, either. About half the mask mouths were sculptured straight, so to speak, neither happy nor unhappy. The rest had slight upturns at the corners of the lips to suggest, if not big grins, at least a smile of contentment.

Also, he noted that some masks were pure, polished metal. On others, metal-working tools had been used to form intricate scroll designs on the cheek and forehead areas. Still others appeared to be painted with solid pastel colors, while a few had a mosaic effect something like the pavements. These were by far the most beautiful, the face being divided into sections of pleasing size and shape, each section shiny with a different color enamel. Yet the colors all harmonized, and the sections were so carefully balanced that the effect was orderly and pleasing.

Mike knew he couldn't pass an examination that included a question asking for a definition of a work of art. But as far as he was concerned, he could apply those words to each mask he saw and feel comfortable: a work of art.

He began to feel awed. He'd never visited a world like Tome before.

On other planets, he had the feeling that people were nervous, in a hurry, with problems, struggling for every credit. Here he felt just the opposite. Here were people who must be very rich, appreciative of beauty, and peace-

ful too. There was simply no feeling of tension or worry anywhere.

Why didn't more people talk about Tome out on the lanes? he wondered, making his next discovery of the evening. It was almost a crime that this world was so little known. Even fellows like Robineyes hadn't said much about Tome while *Shawnee Sachem* was making planetfall. Didn't they know or understand that here was a planet where a man could see beautiful things, and feel himself surrounded by utter peace? Mike felt wonderful. His earlier anxiety—it had been worse just after his interview with Lightcommander Leaf—was completely gone.

So what if he was stranded on Tome? He needn't worry. Tome was friendly.

In this mood, he realized he'd been walking almost half the night. He walked a few blocks more. He was hungry.

Up ahead, he saw a plaza where several of the boulevards came together. Like all of the city, the plaza was illuminated softly and pleasantly by a uniform glow given off by the buildings. A covered deck overlooked one side of the plaza. On this deck he noticed small floating tables. A cafe. It continued back into the building, the deck separated from the inner rooms by a translucent wall. The tables on the deck had small blue lanterns on them. At various places, masked men stood with folded arms.

Mike walked up the wide stairs to the deck. The cafe wasn't completely deserted. A man and woman in gold masks sat at one table back in the darker section. Inside, their outlines hazed by the translucent wall which looked to be different colors at different angles, a large dinner party was in progress. Dim yellow lanterns shone. Gauzy hangings stirred gently above a huge floating table where a dozen men and women in masks were dining.

Mike chose a table next to the balustrade overlooking the plaza. He liked watching the masked people moving to and fro. Not many left at this hour of the night, but enough to make it interesting.

As soon as he sat down, a small electronic sign repeated on all four sides of the blue lantern lit up:

Your pleasure is fulfilled at Aleph's. Your waiter is Neel.

Neel unfolded his arms and walked over to the table. He, like the other waiters, wore a loose tunic suit of rich, soft gray material. His mask was brushed chrome finished with an intricate loop design worked into each cheek.

"Good evening, sir."

"Hello." Mike laid one liberty token on the table. "Are these good here?"

The waiter hesitated before saying, "Yes, they are. Would you care to see a list? We have all the standard interplanet drinks, plus our own specialties."

"I'll have a beer. Orbiter brand if you've got it."

"We do."

Neel went away, returning with an iced mug. He slipped the token into a pocket of his suit.

"Will that be all?"

Mike sipped the beer, which was cold, mild, bubbly, and refreshed him. He wiped foam off his lips.

"This'll do fine. I was wondering, though—what color's the sky?"

"Pink. Our sun is a Fletcher type."

"How big is this city?"

"Fifty-four millions at the last census, sir. I think that's correct, but it might be fifty-three."

Mike whistled. "Is there a sleeporium anyplace near here?"

"You'll find a very good public facility that way, three blocks." Neel pointed at a boulevard opening off the far side of the plaza. "They accept liberty tokens and the couches are very comfortable, I'm told."

"I'll have another beer," Mike said, gulping the last. He began to feel warmer, and good. How could anything go wrong, or be wrong, on such a rich and polite and peaceful planet? The fax were always so full of articles he never read past the first paragraph, in which this or that politician was worrying about the need to find interplanetary peace and agreement. Why didn't those politicians visit Tome if they wanted to find out what it was all about?

Neel returned with the second beer. He once again asked if that would be all.

"Yes, thanks. I was wondering about one other thing."

"What's that, sir?"

"The masks. Does everybody wear them?"

"Almost everyone, yes. At all times, except in privacy."

"They look very expensive. They're very pretty."

If Neel was offended by Mike's hasty choice of a description, he didn't show it, not even with a whisper of breathing through his mouth slit or a hesitation in his reply.

"Yes, we think so. Originally, Tome was colonized by metalworkers from the Gemini Belt. They began to turn out masks in their spare time. A few were sold for export at very high prices. My great-great-great-grandfather designed one that sold for ten kilocreds at the other end of the

galaxy, I've been told. Before long all the metal parts factories were converted when people realized that exporting masks was much more profitable. I understand they're highly prized for their beauty by citizens of a great many worlds. It must be true, because the masks are about all we manufacture for export on Tome now."

"When did everyone start wearing them?"

"Oh, I think it was a hundred years ago at least. It began as a fad and pretty soon it became the custom. I'm not much of a student of that sort of thing."

"Well, it's obvious the masks have made this a rich and happy place."

Neel said nothing, folding his arms.

Mike grinned. "By the way, I sure appreciate your answering all my questions."

"We're always prepared for questions when a vessel docks."

Though he was definitely feeling the effects of the Orbiter, that remark got to Mike. He wasn't so far gone that he couldn't weigh two statements against each other.

This was a city of fifty-three or -four millions. Yet Neel made reference to the arrival of one ship as though it was a special event. That said something about his chance of getting passage off Tome quickly. Because of the beer, he didn't really worry. But he knew that maybe he should.

"Have any of the boys from the ship been here tonight?" he asked finally.

"We had several groups earlier. They all wanted to know where to find the vice district."

"Well"—Mike laughed, downing the last of his second brew and paying up with his second liberty token—"all I want to know is where to find a sleeporium, and you've already told me that. I'm tired as anything." He stood up. "Thanks again. Just out of curiosity—where is the vice district?"

"We don't have any."

"Oh, well—good night, then."

"Good evening, sir. Come again. Aleph's will always serve your pleasure."

Starting down the stairs, Mike turned back. His big mouth pushed his plasto cheek insets into an embarrassed smile as he fished for another token.

"I forgot—I mean, it's probably the usual thing—"

"No tipping is necessary," Neel said. "Any tips are returned."

"I'll be gozzed. We just came through lightspace from Hopkinsyard. On our ship, I mean. Do you know that on

Hopkinsyard they write thirty per right on top of even the smallest check?

"That is interesting. On Tome, we're very well taken care of."

"That's clear for sure. So long," Mike said, waving.

He crossed the plaza, which was empty now. His boots went *chack* as he followed Neel's directions to the sleeporium.

A masked woman accepted his token and led him to a comfortable cubicle. Mike checked his token supply. He discovered he'd used about a fourth of them. He was too tired to worry. He'd worry in the morning.

He sprayed off in the nutrient shower adjoining his cubicle. About forty percent of his skin was still his, and responded to the shower. The percent felt cleaner afterward.

In the cubicle he latched the time latch, relaxed on the couch and closed his eyes instantly after powering down all his circuits.

Tome was perfect. Almost too good to be true. All night he dreamed of masks.

When Mike started out to hunt up breakfast next morning, he found two men waiting for him.

Pale pink sunlight flooded the glass-walled lobby of the sleeporium. No one attended the desk. Mike didn't think the men wanted him until they rose from the floating pillows on which they'd been sitting and stepped between him and the door to the street. Outside, many masked people were moving in both directions. The sun occasionally flashed highlights from their masks.

"Good morning," said the taller of the two men.

Mike's mouth was furred from the beer. He felt edgy. He held his elbows close to his sides. "Something you wanted?"

"My name is Iveness. This is my assistant, Hector. We're from the local government."

Mike might have guessed. Both men wore undistinguished brown tunic suits, by far the dullest garments he'd seen on Tome. Their masks appeared to be a metal like unbuffed copper, plainly executed with a minimum of sculpturing and no decoration. He glanced around. The desk was still empty. Whoever was in charge of the sleeporium on the morning shift was out of sight in an inner cubicle, making as little noise as possible.

"Maybe you've got the wrong man—" he began.

"I don't believe so," Iveness replied. "Our central computer tabulates all new arrivals. You're registered here under

the name of Micro. Mike Micro, isn't that what you signed when you came in last evening?"

"Yes." His eyes were wary. "What difference does it make?"

"We understand that you've been dismissed from your vessel," Hector said.

"I don't understand this." Mike's mouth lost its automatic smile now. "What you've said is true. But nobody told me getting tossed off the roster was a crime around here."

"Be assured, it isn't," Iveness said. "The fact that you're stranded brought you to the attention of my superior, Executive Fochet. He'd like to see you in his office. It'll only take a few minutes. It isn't far. Just four blocks over at the government complex by the Aquarian Stairs. Because you are stranded, the visit will be to your benefit."

This had a smell Mike didn't like. For the first time he saw no beauty in the masks. Instead, he saw a barrier that frustrated him. Iveness's voice was even and polite. Because the light was at his back, his eyeholes lacked highlights.

"How did you find out I got shoved off the ship?" Mike wanted to know.

"The central computer also filed that information with Executive Fochet."

"Who told the central computer?"

"Your superior officer. It's a customs requirement."

"I can't figure out whether I'm under arrest or not."

Hector raised his hands, which up to now had been concealed in the flowing folds of his long, loose cuffs. Hector sounded young, but his hands were quite gnarled. The blood vessels stood out large and ugly.

"Don't get us wrong, please. We can't force you to go with us. You've done nothing wrong. On the other hand, you probably will be here on Tome some time. Ships aren't all that frequent. Your stay will be much more agreeable if you cooperate. Executive Fochet just wants to outline a proposal for making your stay agreeable."

Unaccountably, Mike thought it might be smart to hit the plates where his ribs had been, speed up, knock them down and escape. But the premonition of danger passed quickly.

He tried to review the impression he'd gotten from Hector's speech. He couldn't remember any of the exact words. He wasn't in any trouble. But the men left the definite impression that he ought to cooperate.

Well, why not? He would run out of tokens soon. Maybe

first impressions were wrong. Maybe this Fochet sincerely had his interests in mind.

"Okay," he said. "You lead the way."

"Thank you for your cooperation," Iveness said. "You won't be sorry." Hector held the door, letting Mike bend and step through into the pink sunlight first.

On the walk over, Mike examined his surroundings again and concluded that he'd be a fool to think any harm could befall him on Tome. He'd never seen a city, a planet, so composed. Even the few citizens hurrying slightly faster than the rest this morning gave the impression that they weren't really concerned about getting anyplace. Their masks said so.

Mike and his escorts climbed a stairs at the end of a short street. The stairs were as wide as the widest boulevard in the city. Mike counted as he climbed. Exactly one hundred and forty-four stairs. Twelve pieces of statuary decorated the heavy balustrades, six on either side. Each statue was set twenty-four steps above the next. They represented the old mythological zodiac signs. The Aquarian Stairs were crowded with people sitting, chatting, and taking in the pink sunlight. Even so, there was plenty of room for all. Mike got his quota of curious stares as they climbed.

Three tall buildings faced the small plaza at the top of the stairs. Mike's guides led him into the one directly opposite the head of the stairs. They took a tube upward.

As they rose past various levels, Mike saw very few men and women in colorful robes or elaborate masks. He decided those few must be there on business, because the rest of the people in the building were men, dressed like his guides in dull brown and dull copper facepieces. Mike had had a couple of encounters with government bureaucrats before. The trappings were always different, but he could always detect the dullness, the faint tiredness, the sense of routine. He didn't like it.

They stepped out of the tube high up in the building. They turned right, then left into another corridor. Iveness and Hector showed him into a plainly furnished waiting room with a closed door in the far wall.

"If you'll just have a seat, Executive Fochet will be with you shortly." Before Mike could protest, they left.

He paced around the room six or seven times. He sat down. He crossed his right leg over his left. Then his left over his right. There was no reading matter in the room, no decorations on the walls. He began to get a little angry.

Fortunately the inner door opened, recessing automatically into the wall. A voice called out, "Come this way, please."

Mike did. The door shut behind him. The office was not large. It was carpeted in dull brown fiber. Furnishings were at a minimum: a plain floating desk, one pillow suspended in air for the visitor, one for the owner of the office. The room did have a porthole-shaped window overlooking the long marches of saberlike buildings. And one wall was completely filled with view screens, like an orderly painting. There were five screens in each row across, and five rows from top to bottom.

"Please be seated, won't you?" The occupant of the office sounded neither friendly nor unfriendly. "My name is Executive Fochet."

"I guess you know mine."

"I do," Fochet said. "Your Lightcommander filed a complete report. It says you're an unusual man. You can alter your strength and speed of performing normal human functions at will, just by touching a switch. Remarkable. I'm sorry that you were dismissed from your berth because of the spite of the other men. The report says it's happened to you before."

"It doesn't bother me," Mike said, with considerable truth.

"The unusual man is often penalized, though."

Still standing, Mike didn't answer. He couldn't tell how tall or short Executive Fochet might be, though the man seemed wide through the shoulders. His tunic suit was loose-fitting and brown, no different than those of the men who worked for him except for a single ribbon not unlike a military decoration fastened on his right breast. Fochet's mask was of that dull copper finish with which Mike had become tiresomely familiar in just a short time. It did have two distinguishing features, though: a single cleanly sculptured cleft at the curve of the chin, and a faintly smiling mouth.

Fochet's hands rested on top of his floating desk. The backs of both hands were heavily scarred, and showed a few white hairs. Not so young, Mike decided.

"I really wish you would sit down," Fochet said.

"Well, okay. But I still have the feeling I'm in some kind of trouble."

"Just the opposite," Fochet answered when Mike was comfortable. "When your report came to my attention, I immediately realized that the government might be of assistance. I'm sympathetic with your situation, believe me. I know you'll want to leave Tome as quickly as possible. Not

many commercial vessels call here, though. Seldom more than one or two a month. That's because we have just one basic export."

"Those masks. A waiter told me."

"Quite right. As for tourist business—that's light to non-existent."

Forgetting his suspicions, Mike said, "I can't see why more people wouldn't like to visit Tome. It seems almost perfect to me."

"Why, thank you."

"Peaceful, polite—looks rich, too. You people really act like you've figured out how to live with yourselves."

"Kind of you to say that. We are fairly self-sufficient. That's why a man in your position won't find too many opportunities to earn money. You're going to run out of tokens fairly soon, aren't you?"

Unhappy to be back to reality, Mike said, "I guess so."

"And if the next vessel through here doesn't have an open berth—few do; I keep track of such things—your only choice will be to continue to pay and wait. Pay for food, pay for lodging, and wait till the next ship comes. Alternatively, you could pay for passage on that first ship. Either plan will be costly. And unfortunately we don't have industries that hire outsiders. There's next to no unemployment on Tome. All new jobs are carefully allocated to our own citizens entering the work force. What I'm trying to emphasize," Fochet concluded, folding his hands together, "is that your chances of finding a means of paying for immediate passage, or for the necessities while you wait for a ship with a berth, are poor."

Under the stare of the black eyeholes in the coppery mask, Mike began to feel a little nervous. He even managed sarcasm. "That's pretty encouraging."

"I only bring it up before presenting an alternative."

"What's that?"

"First let me say that because of your unusual physical skills, you'd be ideal for what I have in mind. And what I have in mind is about the only way a man like you can earn money on Tome."

With a stolid expression that hid his nervousness, Mike repeated, "What's that?"

"We call it the Game."

A silence. Pink sunlight bored through the porthole window, lighting a circle on the dark carpet. Mike shifted on the floating pillow. It was quite unlike him, but he felt terrified of Fochet for a second. He wondered why. By

turning on his circuits he could pitch Fochet against the wall and reduce him to jelly with no effort. Then he wondered why he even thought about doing that.

"Actually," Fochet resumed, "the Game is our national pastime or entertainment. The equivalent of contests such as asteroid jumping and bezbel, which I'm told are popular on other planets."

"Anyplace you find Earth people, you'll find them going nuts for bezbel, that's for sure."

"Yes, and we have the Game. Basically it's a contest of physical and mental skill. Players are usually selected from our own population. But we like to have other contestants when they're available. A man of your obvious strength and quickness couldn't help but succeed. The government pays contestants handsomely."

"How much?"

"If you win, fifty kilocreds. If you lose, half."

Mike whistled. "That'd take me halfway to Centaurus."

"It certainly would. That's why I wanted to call the proposition to your attention."

"You said it was physical and mental. I'm not much for the mental stuff."

"Ideally, you'd be teamed with another contestant who would balance your physical abilities with a very sharp mind."

Mike digested this while trying to fathom the kind of man he was talking to. That was impossible. Executive Fochet had a stiff, formal posture. With the pink light flowing in at his back, reading any glint from the eyes behind the eyeholes was out of the question. What bothered Mike most were the man's hands. He kept them laced tightly together, gripped together, so that the heavy veins stood out and the scars on the backs whitened. That threw everything else, even Fochet's reasonable tone, out of kilter.

"Tell me some more about this Game, will you?"

"The Game," Fochet corrected. He turned slightly toward the wall with the view screens. Rather than pointing with a free hand, he untangled one thumb from the tight lace-work of his fingers and pointed to the screens with that. "The Game is held once a month. It's transmitted all over the planet by our communications network. I'd venture that the only people who don't watch are the infirm and those whose jobs keep them on duty. Even they miss only certain sections. The Game continues over a number of days, you see. You'd be seen by some eight billion during its course."

Fochet faced front again. "Another playing is scheduled in a few days. I'd very much like you to be a contestant."

Mike ruminated on this. Then, as though he'd been slapped, he sat up. "Hey. I forgot to ask. Is it dangerous?"

"I won't deny there's an element of physical risk. That's what makes the Game so challenging and popular. And the rewards so good."

"In other words, I could get killed?"

"I think that considering your physical abilities, only in the most unlikely circumstances would the Game result in injury or death. We'd team you with an especially sharp, intelligent partner to further minimize the risk."

Mike felt increasingly uncomfortable. He decided that the best way to break the tension was to be pleasant. He rose, smiling. "All right—"

Fochet jumped right in with "You agree?"

"What? Oh, no. I mean, all right, I'll think about it. I'll be in touch."

"I was hopeful for a decision this morning."

"Well, I don't want to do that. I want to think about it."

And why not? He had only the word of Executive Fochet that the Game was exactly what it was said to be.

"I strongly urge you to give me a tentative yes today," Fochet said. "We can handle details at a later time. I assure you, unless you accept my offer, you'll very shortly be starving. You'll find yourself—"

"You tell me that," Mike interrupted.

"What?" Fochet's coppery mask flashed in the sunlight as he turned just a bit sideways with a jerky movement.

"I appreciate your offering to help me, Executive"—Mike stumbled over the word—"but I'd still like to be sure I can't pick up money some other way. Basically I'm a pretty easygoing type. I don't much care for big, serious games."

"You're questioning what I've said about your prospects on Tome, then?"

Mike noticed that Fochet's laced hands were whiter, tighter than ever. But he couldn't help that:

"I guess I am."

"Let me explain my function in this government. I hold a very high position. You can take my word—"

"Thanks all the same, but I want to think about it."

Fochet acted irritated as he rose behind his desk, leaned forward, pressed his palms hard on the desk surface. "You're making a mistake."

"I'm not trying to cause trouble. I just want—"

"Any man of sense would realize—" Fochet began, angrily.

"Well, nobody ever has given me awards for brains," Mike retorted. "Lightcommander Leaf said the name they tagged me with at the Trelawny Institute, Micropig, was a joke I was too dense to understand. But at least I can make up my own mind about things. I'll get along okay, don't worry. If I decide I'm interested, you'll hear from me."

"It's definitely to your advantage to consider—"

"So long," Mike said, facing away from the desk quickly because he was losing his temper. He felt hot, uncomfortable at this unusual reaction. The door confronted him. He half turned, looked back at Fochet over his shoulder. "Would you open this door for me?"

Executive Fochet didn't move for some time. Then he lifted his hands off the desk. The door opened.

Mike was halfway across the waiting room before he noticed the other person, and did a take. He grinned, stammered out a "Hi, girl." She answered with a hello but without a smile. He hurried on into the corridor.

He hadn't felt so blindly anxious to be away from a place in a long time. He blundered the wrong way in the corridor. He had to ask directions of a masked civil servant. Only when he was outside in the small square which the government buildings fronted did he begin to relax.

He breathed deeply of the crisp, fruit-scented air. His big fingers shook faintly. How had that man in the mask gotten him so upset? All of a sudden he realized part of the reason, and it made him feel like a fool. He'd forgotten to ask Executive Fochet even basic questions about the nature of the Game. Forgotten. Maybe he deserved the name Micropig.

The city's cleanliness and order no longer registered on him. Withdrawn and upset, he walked to the Aquarian Stairs. He ignored whispers about his bare face. He found an open place on the third stair from the top and sat down, putting his chin in his palm and staring into the march of clean buildings against the sky and the unseen dome.

Maybe Fochet had been trying to be helpful. Mike had vague guilt feelings about misjudging him, blaming him for what had happened in connection with *Shawnee Sachem*. He had trouble sorting out these different ideas and possibilities, with the result that his misery and confusion grew keener.

He didn't like Fochet, that was definite. He didn't know why, though. It troubled him. Generally he could simply walk away from those he felt were the wrong sort and

smile and feel nothing. If they grew threatening, he could always activate his circuits and defend himself. This made him a relatively carefree individual. He didn't feel that way now.

Sure, he'd soon be without liberty tokens, without any way to pay for his day to day needs. But was that so tragic? Certainly on a planet as big as Tome there ought to be a way for a strong man to earn wages. He had the definite impression that Fochet, pushing for a decision on playing the Game, might have been handing him the old flimflam. Maybe that was the big reason he didn't like the man whose face he couldn't see.

True or not, this conclusion settled his mind. He began to enjoy the pink sunlight once again, and the repose of the masks on the people passing. His shame over having failed to ask basic questions faded.

He wondered suddenly about the girl in the waiting room. Why was she there? For the same reason he was? This perked up his interest in her. He struggled to remember all the impressions his eyes had received in that moment when he said his clumsy hello.

He recalled her as fairly tall and good-looking, with long, lacy red hair. Her clothing was a mixture of black tones and a smear of red. Red boots. He brought those to mind. Knee-high red boots.

Then, in another of those embarrassed self-realizations, he focused on the most obvious detail of all: he'd seen her face. She wore no mask. She was a stranger on Tome just like he was.

Grinning, he hurried back up the small plaza to wait.

In less than half an hour the girl emerged from the building. She walked with her head back, her eyes on the sky. He watched her approach. She walked fast, paying no attention to anyone. Mike noticed details he'd missed earlier. Her red boots were cracked and shabby. The rest of her costume was shabby too. She wore a waist-length cape, tights, and a hugger blouse that emphasized her good figure. Everything except the boots was black.

Her clothes didn't look dirty, simply worn out. As if she couldn't be bothered maintaining them. A leather kit hung from her waist, bounding against the right side of her stomach as she walked. Colorful beads sewn to the kit spelled out a word: Eros. The word meant nothing to him. Was that her name?

"Hello," he said, stepping in front of her.

Her head snapped down as they collided. She jumped back. Her eyes were gray and tense.

"Space off, I'm not selling right now."

"No, that isn't why—wait!"

She was halfway down the Aquarian Stairs before he could catch up to her. Without switching on, that is. He grabbed her elbow from behind. She spun.

"I thought I made it clear—"

"I just want to talk. My name's Mike. I got thrown off my ship. That Fochet wanted me to play his—uh—the Game. I thought maybe because you were there he wanted you to play too."

"He did."

"Did you say yes?"

"Come off it. Of course not."

"Well, I didn't either. That made him sore. Look, can't we talk? I've looked at nothing but masks till I saw you." He smiled his biggest, most hopeful smile. "I'll buy you a beer at the cafe. That's all. Honest."

For the first time, she really saw him with her gray eyes.

"All right, why not?"

On the deck at Aleph's, he wanted to sit near the balustrade, in the open. The girl preferred a table further back, where it was less light. Mike didn't argue. He ordered his usual Orbiter from a waiter other than Neel. The girl ordered a little goblet of iridescent green Dom Lachrymae. Before the drinks arrived, she took a tortoise comb from her waist kit and combed the tangles out of her lacy red hair. Mike was content to sit with his hands folded on his flat stomach, watching and smiling. He felt fine.

All at once the girl noticed his stare. She stopped combing. "Am I violating some local custom, friend?"

He blinked. "I'm sorry? I don't underst—"

"You're watching me like a specimen." And she disliked it.

"Specimen? Uh—uh. Not unless it's a specimen of something pretty. I was just watching your skin. I haven't seen an ordinary face, or any face . . ." Tangling in his own thought, he flushed and glanced away.

"Watching my skin," she repeated. "That's not bad. I should use it."

"For what?"

"For a poem. I write poetry sometimes. I've had three editions published by a distinguished but unprofitable little fax house over on Mim's Prime." She gestured up. "Whichever direction that might be just at the moment. The publisher says he loses money on me. I sleep with him a month

out of every year to make up for it. Besides, I like him. His name's Josephsohn. He's a chess player. Very bright and kind. I'm boring you, I'll bet. I suppose I'd bore you even more if I asked whether you've read any of my things." She shook her head in a way that made Mike feel unhappy. "I ask wherever I go. No one ever has."

"I was a spacer," he said. "Not much time to read."

Quick gray eyes found him as the waiter delivered their drinks. "Was?"

"Oh, I guess I still am. Slip of the tongue. Temporarily I'm not because I was given a D and C and put off my ship. *Shawnee Sachem*. She's in dock right now."

"I see." The girl's murmur blended into a pleasurable sigh as she tossed off half of her Dom Lachrymae. "And that officious wart calling himself Executive Fochet—Executive!—had you picked up?"

"Yeh."

"He tried to persuade you to take part in his nice little contest?"

Mike nodded. "Same thing happen to you?"

"It did. His subwarts put their thumbs on me right after breakfast."

"Did he want us to team up together?"

"Maybe so. He described an ideal Game playing team as one player with brawn, one player with brains. How original. He also tried to flatter me all over the carpet by suggesting I was right for the latter role. No roll on that one for him."

Mike missed that last. She sipped and studied him over the goblet's rim, then: "You're the one he mentioned, then. A likely candidate who'd been some kind of research subject at an institute on another planet and wasn't half-human. You look pretty human to me."

"I'm only about forty percent." He held up a strand of his hair. "Synthetic. Under here"—he plucked at his grays—"there are two plates, either one of which'll let me operate at about three times normal strength and speed."

"Goz me. The compleat mechanical man. Executive Fochet was angry with you, did you know that?"

"I had that sort of feeling."

The girl turned her gaze out across the busy plaza. "I hate to say it, but he believed you'd come around at once. Agree to play his Game, whatever it is, no questions asked. When you didn't he had some unkind things to say about your brain power, the wart."

Digesting this, Mike rolled a little Orbiter on his tongue,

which if he remembered was flexible plasto. But he tasted things superbly.

"Why do you call him a wart?" Mike asked.

"Because I loathed him. He made me feel unwashed."

With the beer floating in him, Mike could say, "Wasn't he just doing his job?"

"Come off that!" She smacked the goblet on the table. "I appreciate that you don't have time to read on a ship, big one. But you really ought to run through a history sometime. That doing his job routine has been whitening over the nastiest kind of muck for twenty-six Ancient Christian centuries now, and some pre-A.C. ones before that."

The little speech ended with a challenging stare. Mike fidgeted. He drained his beer, called for another in an effort to stop being bothered by her. She was so pretty. But too smart for him. He liked the curve of her body but was scared off by the gentle despair in her gray eyes. To hopefully shift the direction of things, he said, "I don't know what your name is. Mine's Mike. Short for Micropig. I'm told by my Lightcommander—former—that that's a joke."

"Don't you know?"

"Honestly I don't."

"What do you think, then?"

He tried to smile. "I like to think it isn't."

"Poor—" she began, aborting the final word with a quick compression of her lips.

She rummaged in her kit, brought out a slim binding of small fax pages. She opened to the first spread where screened type said, *CANTOS AND PLAINTS on the Occasion of a Galactic Crossing. By The Beloved Abattoir.*

He pointed to the *Beloved Abattoir*. "That's you?"

"A pseudonym. A writer's name because my real one is even uglier. When someone pronounces it, it sounds like plumbing."

"What is your real name?"

"Never mind. You can call me Ab."

He saluted her with his glass. "Pleased to meet you, Ab."

"Mike the superstrong," she saluted in return. "Where's your paranoid compulsion to dominate the stars, lover."

Again he blinked. "What?"

"Forget it. Ignore me."

"If you don't mind my saying so, you seem pretty unhappy. Pretty—well—sour."

"My most gracious apologies," she answered. "Of course I have no reason to be that way. Of course everything is simply fine in this fine universe. So what if you and I are

tossed up on this weird world like a couple of fish on a shingle? Let's also disregard anyone on Tome—that wart—except not caring a goz what becomes of us. Pardon me for my stinking aura of pessimism, which is certainly exaggerated even though I know what the wart said is quite true—there is no way, no legitimate way, for someone like me or someone like you, very nearly broke, to turn a couple of creds. I'm so sorry I brought it all up. I really should be grinning ear to ear like you. Yes, definitely. Forgive! Forgive!" In bitterness she drank.

He reeled away from the tangly thoughts her words started in his head. He picked his way back to one he could understand. "That remark you made about earning creds—"

"Yes?"

"Fochet said pretty much the same to me. I thought he was fooling. Trying to persuade me to play the Game by pretending I'd stay broke otherwise."

"He wasn't pretending, dear. I've been here two of their pretty, pink days. I've checked around. As I said, there's no way"—she lifted her long red lashes a moment, then lowered them—"legitimately. That's why I was half intrigued when Fochet began to describe his capital G game. But the more he talked, the less I liked."

"I guess this Game is sort of dangerous."

"That I don't mind so long as I know what kind of danger it is. Did he behave the same way with you? Refuse to answer every last question about this little sport of the natives?"

Shamefaced, Mike admitted, "I forgot to ask any like that."

Ab's expression showed amazement, then sad belief. "Well, I asked—about the rules. About how the Game's played. Would he say? He would not. All details politely held back. Well, big Mike, ball him, then. I for one am not going to surrender my still reasonably attractive body to a public entertainment with rules no one will spell out in advance. Good goz, they might turn us both upside down in a tank of foolfish, for instance, then inform us it's illegal to swim with more than one arm and one leg. I don't know much about you yet. But I guarantee I can't swim that way. I made Executive wart Fochet very angry."

They drank a while in silence. Ab began acting uncomfortable as Aleph's deck filled with masked men and women ordering beverages and food. A waiter went by balancing

plates of something that smelled like steamed crab. More and more, Mike was conscious of being the center of attention.

Hunching forward and lowering his voice, he chuckled out, "I made Fochet sore too. You know, it surprised me. I thought this looked like such a nice planet. Rich. Quiet. Full of peace."

"It looks that way," she answered. "It smells another."

"What do you mean?"

"Just something . . ." Irritated, she shrugged. "Ask me in a week and a half. Let's do the Dutchman with the drinks, all right? I'd like to walk. We're being examined under the tenth power."

In truth, Mike wasn't unhappy to leave. He was extremely conscious of all the eyeholes turned their way. He and Ab paid up separately, then strolled down the stairs and took a boulevard away from the plaza at random. Ab rummaged in her kit. She came up with a meager handful of tokens similar to the ones issued for ship's liberty, but of a different color.

"Feel like squandering one of yours, Mike? I could use a vive."

He blushed. "Ab, there aren't any women—or, in your case, men—that is, I get the idea that vives around here don't feature—"

"Nincompoop, I know that. I had one yesterday. A scenic's fine. There's a spot right next to the sleeporium where I'm staying. Afterward, well, I might tell you a little idea I've hatched out just since we met. Fochet, the wart, was responsible for making me think of it. He'd die if he knew. But that wonderful old combination, Mike, brains and brawn—it does work. Are you averse to making enough money to buy passage off Tome by means other than those strictly legitimate?"

"Wait a second," he laughed. "You lost me back there."

Two women in white enamel masks were passing. Ab waited until they were out of range. Then, with a teasing glance, she said, "Would you mind doing something crooked?"

He thought about it. "To get money?"

"Mike," She sighed. "I like you but you're slow. Yes. It's that or their fishy Game, and I'm not playing."

He thought more. "I wouldn't mind as long as nobody else got hurt."

"Mike, I like your style. It's all wrong, of course, given the state of affairs of the universe. But it's different. Come on, the vive divan's just ahead."

As they walked, he tried to figure out what to make of this bewildering, pretty young woman. In the first place, calculating her age was out of the question because of all the tricks cosmetics could play these days.

The Dom Lachrymae seemed to have revived her. She walked with a jaunty step. In fact she was almost cheerful. The way she carried herself made her shabby black things, her cracked red boots, seem brave, not merely poor.

He was positive he should accept her advice about the Game. She too sensed something awry. She too felt Fochet was untrustworthy, that Tome wasn't all it seemed at first glance.

To discover this last was both disappointing and heartening. Heartening in that he didn't have to feel dumb about having a vague intuition in that direction. She shared it. Disappointing because, in truth, the pink day of Tome, the sparkling garments and lovely masks, still made it seem to him that all should be right with this world.

Anyway, whatever the next hours would be, they wouldn't be dull.

"I never met a poet before," he said as they walked along briskly.

"Poetess," she corrected. "That's not my real line. That's only what I write on customs forms. My real occupation is woman."

"Yeah, I can certainly see that."

The heavy attempt didn't go over. "You think I'm playing word games. Wipe it. I'm not. There's little enough love out in the stars the way it is. If anybody should know that, from what Fochet explained about you, it should be you. I write poetry as a hobby. Otherwise I'm a full-time, professional woman. I've been a mother, a wife, a mistress, a sweetheart. Sometimes paid, sometimes not, depending on my need, the man's need, and the atmospheres of the situation. Do you realize, Mike, how many women on the inhabited planets work at all kinds of professions except the one profession for which they were specifically engineered? Ninety-nine point nine percent of the women everywhere are like that. Women, and everything but. But I'm a professional. Needless to say, it's not a recognized occupation. The authorities on most planets disapprove of seeing it on forms. I've learned to write *poetess* pretty fast."

"I'll bet you're good at it, Ab."

"At being a woman?"

"Yeh."

She smiled, really smiled, then. Dazzling.

"I am. Be good and you might find out. Just a square more."

He asked how she'd happened to land on Tome.

"Well, I was in the mistress part. I was with Diego Dieppe, the fixfax producer, on his yacht. It was lovely for about three weeks. Then I realized Diego had his mind on just one thing. His next production. That, and not a certain bodily hangup, was making him a candidate for the psycho-couch. I tried to point it out to him. We quarreled. In every profession there are jobs at which you succeed and jobs you botch. You learn to accept it. I suggested he drop me off at the nearest planet. He was glad to. I wouldn't take any money. That was my second mistake. My first was not checking on the nearest planet. It happened to be Tome." She shrugged.

Any lingering regret was gone in that one quick, beautiful gesture.

Mike wanted to question her more about her last lover. But they'd arrived in front of a keyhole doorway edged in pastel tubing. The tubing flashed vividly even in the daylight. Ab went inside. Mike ducked to go after her, sniffing with pleasure the smell her skin left behind.

An instrument something like a flageolet wailed. Mike realized one of the differences about Tome that he'd failed to notice before. Groomed and masked in repose, the people of Tome gave off absolutely no smell. Ab smelled like a girl.

The smell was washed away in the scent of the vive divan. Ab gripped his hand, plunging on through darkness. A masked proprietor on a stool underneath a soft vermilion light awaited them far ahead. His filigree face seemed to float in black, bodiless. Of all the masks Mike had seen thus far on Tome, this one smiled the widest.

He lay on ocher grass staring up at a lime sky where mauve clouds streamed in warm wind. A river splashed nearby. Leaves rustled. The earth seethed up a rich smell under his large body. He hummed, breathed deep.

Abruptly the sky shut off. Everything else disappeared. He was no longer lying on ground, but on a contoured divan inflated to gooey softness. He saw nothing but a small red glow high above. The microtrodes that had pressed against the active areas of his flesh retracted into the couch. The vision was no more than a memory, and he was alone in the dark, disliking it.

"Ab?"

She should be coming out now. They'd both paid for a

half hour. He blundered through a curtain, unable to remember the maze way they'd been led to the separate divan rooms. His throat tightened. Small red lights high above receded in both directions.

"Ab?"

He sounded strident. He went the left hand way, crashed into a dead end. Terrified, he spun around.

"Ab?"

No answer.

He breathed loudly. He started to draw his elbows in to his sides as he yelled her name again. It rang in all directions among the red bulbs, *AbAbAbAb*—

"Right here, you big goose. Don't be so jumpy."

"Can't find my way in this place. It's like a gozzing funfair."

She laughed, but gently. Cool, her fingers twined through his. She led him. He followed without protest. It struck him that he'd come to depend on her in a very short time.

The proprietor maintained a drinking room off one side of the foyer of the vive divan. There was a scattering of tables, a single waiter, lights a bit less dim than elsewhere in the establishment. Mike and Ab took a table along one wall. They thought they were the only patrons until Ab noticed a man at a table next to the wall opposite. Mike had thought the shape there was a dumped sack.

Ab stared at the solitary individual for some minutes. The person—sex and features indecipherable in the dull redness—never moved. The waiter fetched their drinks and went away again. As Mike gulped, deciding that he'd been given something cheaper at the price of Orbiter, Ab ran her hands up and down over the table pedestal, then along its undersides.

"What are you doing, Ab?"

"Checking, sweet. Okay, I don't think we're being snooped."

"Did you think we would be?"

"I don't know enough about Tome to answer one way or another. But I assume they have some kind of police force. Even if it consists of more of those neuters in brown." Her glass caught a highlight from the redness as she saluted him. "Shall we get down to a little crime?"

He grinned back. "Anything you say."

"What's valuable on Tome, Mike?"

He didn't have to think long. "The masks, I'm told."

"Here, and on plenty of other planets. Where do you think we might be able to sell one or two if we had them?"

He chuckled, because it was so obvious and neat. "On the docks when the next ship comes in."

"You're curving up to genius fast," she laughed, patting his hand. That took away any hurt he might have felt from the teasing.

He hadn't felt any, though. He liked her. Trusted her brains. Believed they had a very optimistic partnership going. To try to suggest this, he leaned forward across the table as she continued:

"Since this is the largest city on Tome, I presume some of the masks must be manufactured here. We need to learn where. Then we need to find out the best time to break in. We needn't be greedy. One for each of us should do it. Let's sleep in the streets if we must, but let's make sure we have a couple of masks to sell to the crew of the very next lightship that nests her stern down at the port. You know crew types better than I. Do you think we can make a safe deal?"

Mike tried to recall some commodity that Rober Robin-eyes hadn't smuggled. In the short time Mike had known him, the man had earned eight to ten times his annual wages. Or so he bragged.

"I think we can," he nodded.

Ab patted his hand again. "Let's go sightseeing till we've walked every road in town. That's the only way we're going to locate places they manufacture the masks. Without asking a lot of obvious questions, I mean."

"I'm for it," Mike said, starting to stand. "Let's get out—"

Ab's breath warned him. He turned back left, to discover a man standing there with glass in hand. He didn't know who it was until he saw the table along the opposite wall was empty.

The man wore a scruffy, loose-fitting tunic suit. His face was deformed, as though it had been melted and then pulled toward the right side. In the dull red light all the blotches on his skin became black.

"Bare-cheeked babies," the man said, saluting them with his glass. "Welcome to Tome."

The last thing they needed, Mike decided, was a stranger on their team. And one who looked slightly disreputable at that. But he couldn't be impolite. He said, "Are you stranded here too?"

"No," said the man without a mask. He took a sip. "I live here."

"Do you mind?" the man asked. He was already seated. Mike flashed a look at Ab. Her entire body was still. Her

hands folded beneath her chin might have been carved. She said, "I did a minute ago. Now you've got me curious. A native sans mask?"

Mike tried to decide whether the man represented danger. Impossible to tell. The man, on close inspection, wasn't old. His disreputable clothes and general air of weariness only made him seem that way. He glanced at Ab for another signal. Got none, because her gray eyes over the back of her hands still rested on the stranger. So Mike looked at the stranger again and got a shock.

The pupil of the man's right eye, dull brown, had changed position. It had moved out to the right corner of his eyeball, creating half of a case of wall eye.

Excess moisture formed in the eye. The man blinked, knuckled his eyeball. When he removed his hand the pupil was back in position. Mike remembered seeing a similar wild muscle condition. But it was still disturbing.

The man swizzled the dregs of his drink with his finger, then licked it. He smiled without warmth. "I'd be happy to bring you up on the local mores if you care to buy a round."

"You're the one offering Tome's hospitality," Ab countered. "We aren't that curious." Yet Mike had a feeling she was. She added, "My name's Ab. His name is Mike. We're both stranded on this pretty little world."

The man sneered. "Surface pretty. I know your names. Also know you visited the government complex."

"How do you know all that?" Mike asked.

"The Downbelow keeps track."

Ab's eyes never wavered from his face. "What's the Downbelow?"

"You certainly asked the right question," the man replied. He had a heavy, superior manner that Mike didn't like, as though he alone possessed the secrets of the meaning of everything. "Strangers usually ask where the Downbelow is. That can be answered. However, the answer's irrelevant."

"Go ahead," Ab prodded. "Be irrelevant."

"After we get your name," Mike put in. "I personally don't like drinking with total strangers."

"We're only partial strangers," said the man. "At least we can see one another's faces."

Mike wasn't so sure that was desirable. The man's right eye developed another spasm. The pupil rolled while his lid was down in a blink. In the red dullness, the effect was unnerving, even sinister.

"My name's Swann." The man waved at the waiter, signaling a refill for himself but not for them. "Where was I? Ah,

yes. About to be irrelevant. The Downbelow is down below." He giggled. "On the service levels underneath." A thumb toward the bowels of the city. "It isn't a single community in a single spot. Its many communities are just two or three or four. Others are quite large. So geography is irrelevant."

He paid the waiter, consumed part of his new drink. Ab's mouth had relaxed slightly. Mike wished he could be at ease again. Oddly, he couldn't.

"That's why," Swann explained, "the question *what* is the Downbelow is relevant. The Downbelow is not only a state of mind but a living rebellion."

"Against what?" asked Mike.

"Everything up here, of course." Swann giggled again. Mike caught a whiff of his breath. Not clean, but there was another odor mingled in. The man had been drinking heavily.

"I thought the city—Tome itself if the city is representative—" Ab began.

Swann made a limp gesture. "It is. My yes."

"—presented an attractive face."

Swann hit the table. "A face. An image. All you see are the masks."

"They look pretty peaceful to me," Mike said.

With a shrug but no direct glance at Mike, Swann cut him down. "I'm sure they do."

Ab scowled. Swann saw it. His hand shook, spilling a bit of his drink. Ab had gotten the reaction she wanted, so she switched on a perfectly charming smile. Mike did relax a little when he saw it. Then he wondered whether it was an honest smile. He questioned whether it could be. That tensed him again.

He really had an urge to hit this Swann. That wasn't like him at all. It made him fidget all the more. Ab, however, relaxed her hands and leaned forward.

"Your style of life in the Downbelow is meant to be a protest, you say?"

"Definitely," Swann agreed. "We refuse to disguise truth by wearing the masks. Even though the truth isn't so attractive." He plucked at his facial blotches, as if he enjoyed reminding himself that he had them. A queer sick one, Mike decided, with unbidden pity.

"I'm fooled, I must say," Ab told the man. "Honestly, I wouldn't have believed conditions here were less than ideal." Remembering her remarks about things smelling off-color, Mike marveled at how sweetly she lied.

With a furtive glance Swann whispered, "Our protest won't be purely passive forever, I assure you."

Ab perked up. "There's going to be a revolution?"

Mike chimed in with, "Fighting, maybe?"

"It's the only way." Swann hit the table again, nearly falling off his seat. His right pupil was now back in position. "We won't have a healthy world till all the masks are off and we all face the truth. I've been through it, you know. I was born here. Oh, not in the city. Out in the country. But I had a proper education. They thought they laundered my brains thoroughly."

"But they didn't?"

"Never."

"Why?"

Swann answered Ab with the word, "Griselde."

"Is that a thing or somebody?" Mike asked.

Swann looked morose as he drank. "Never mind."

"Tell me a little more about the Downbelow," Ab asked.

Behind his hand, Swann released a small belch. "Rather you see it for yourself. Just want you to know you'll be welcome." He obviously begrudged adding, "Both of you. In the event you find you can't cooperate with Executive Fochet, join us."

Evidently Ab was annoyed at his sarcasm, because she replied in kind. "And you can personally guarantee us a warm hello?"

Swann bit his lip. "Listen, when they want a leader in the Downbelow, it's me they come to."

"Then why don't you stage your revolution and get it over?"

He retreated from her direct stare. "The time's not right."

Swann pondered his drink again. Ab glanced at Mike. Her gray eyes said in a half-wink that she dismissed this man completely. Mike, though, was still curious. He asked, "How come you know we've had business with Fochet?"

"Any stranger to Tome is invited to participate in the Game."

"Invited," Ab repeated. "You mean something by that."

Swann made a snuffling noise supposed to be a snicker. "I expect you'll find out."

Angered, Mike jabbed his left elbow against his side. That activated him so that he hit Swann's drinking hand with almost invisible speed. The force of his fist hurled the glass against the wall, bursting it into microscopic parts that tinkled down. The waiter appeared out of a haze of red light. Ab sat up, tense.

Mike dug out a liberty token. He flung it at the waiter. The token hit the waiter's mask so hard that it left a dent. The waiter advanced another step. It was impossible to tell his reaction because of the mask.

"I paid for your lousy glass," Mike shouted. "You want something else?"

Ab slid her hand over his forearm. Mike cooled, instantly ashamed. What was getting into him on this rotten planet? Before, he never would have done such a thing.

The waiter remained motionless. Another masked man pushed up behind the waiter. Mike stayed ready for trouble.

The two men conferred. Then the second man vanished in the red. The waiter picked up the token but didn't leave the room again. He folded his arms and observed the three.

Swann was still gulping. "I never saw your hand move. I swear I didn't."

"That's because Mike has mechanical boosters in his body," Ab said. He was pleased by her tone; she was bragging on a friend. "Show him, Mike, can you? Without breaking up everything?"

He'd switched the circuits down so he put them on again, taking his time, letting the pressure of each elbow result in a definite *cl-ick*, so that Swann got the idea. Then he began to weave his right hand in the air in a figure eight. Soon his forearm and hand vanished, replaced by a continuous flesh-colored blur trail, eight-shaped.

He stopped this, stood up. He walked behind Swann's chair. When Swann shifted jumpily, Mike said, "I won't hurt you." He extended the index and middle fingers of his right hand, palm side up. He slid the two fingers under Swann's right elbow.

"Stiffen up."

Swann did, his right eye going wall again. Mike lifted. Rigid, Swann was raised high above the table with ease.

Grinning, Mike lowered him again. Swann's heels caught his chair, knocking it over. Mike put Swann's feet on the floor. The man began to scramble after his chair, goggling.

"That's the most shidding fantastic thing I've ever seen! No wonder Fochet wants you for the Game."

Ab smiled sweetly. "That's something else you keep track of in the Downbelow?"

"Naturally. What did you say to him?"

"We said no," Mike said.

Swann was wiggling all over his chair with almost obscene delight. "That's absolutely shidding marvelous. You'd

be a sensation." A finger aimed at Ab's red hair. "Fochet wants you for the brains half, and Mike for the other half, right? Oh, I'll bet he's frothing because you refused." This got Swann to chuckling so hard that he ordered another drink for them as well as one for himself.

"I don't care for another, thanks," Ab said, "unless you can make it worth my while to stay around."

Swann said, "How could I do that?"

"Explain to us just exactly what goes on in this Game."

"Fochet didn't tell you. Of course. He never does, I'm informed."

"But I suppose you know all about it," Mike said.

"My good friend, it's beamed planet wide once a month year round. I watch fourteen times out of fourteen, year after year. Though I suppose I watch for different reasons than most of the people up here. They consider it entertaining and thrilling." His right eye rolled out of position. He leaned forward, seething words between his teeth with a lot of extra saliva. "I consider it perverse and degrading. I especially enjoy watching when Fochet recruits strangers. I enjoy seeing how successful policies of intimidation can be. I enjoy discovering anew how stupid people can be."

"Which people?" Ab countered. "Those in the Game or those watching?"

With a sullen smile he replied, "Both."

Ab unfastened her kit and took out her tortoise comb. She began to comb her hair. "You're being obtuse and cryptic on purpose, aren't you? Well, Mike and I have better things afoot than being butts for private jokes. Thanks for nothing."

Immovable, Swann grinned at them blearily. "More fun if you find out first hand. Though in a way I hope you don't, too. We'd be glad to have you with us in the Downbelow."

"So we can get a welcome from your friends like we got from you, huh?" growled Mike, sadly thinking that anger was getting to be a bad habit fast.

Ab tilted her head as she completed the combing. That said in a casual way that it was time to go. Mike wasn't unwilling. He followed her into a dazzle of red lights. Behind them, Swann raised his voice, which sounded more blurry the louder it got.

"If Fochet keeps maneuvering to lure you into the Game, you'll be thankful for a place in the Downbelow, mark my words. Just remember: the masks are beautiful, but what's behind them? That's the question. Look at my face and ask yourself what's behind them, eh? What's behind them?"

Out on the street, Ab shook her head in a puzzled way. Mike blinked away the afterimages of red.

"Drunken sot," he said, hoping to draw her out.

"Yes, and something else. A leader full of fire and bluster. But did you notice—he hasn't done anything about it? Keep that in mind."

Startled, Mike turned her way. "Why?"

"In case we really do need to hide out in the Downbelow, goose. After all," she said with a sidelong grin of joy, "we are planning a crime."

"Oh sure." He grinned back. "I forgot."

They decided to remain at their separate sleeporiums rather than move in together at one. Ab presented the case, which had nothing to do with sex or the lack of it. Her mind obviously wasn't on that part of her profession now. She reasoned aloud as they walked, saying that until they discovered what kind of civil police maintained order on Tome, and what kind of problems they would have getting into a mask factory, they might as well avert extra suspicion and sleep in separate locations rather than just in separate cubicles.

A review of the token situation showed they could last about four more days comfortably, five or six more by skipping some meals. Ab wanted to look into the matter of factory locations. Mike was assigned the job of finding out what he could about police. They parted in mid-afternoon. If Executive Fochet had anyone watching, they were simply stranded strangers taking a break from each other's company.

On the deck at Aleph's that night, Mike had no difficulty drawing answers out of Neel. Starting with a statement that he was growing horny on the beach, he moved to a discussion of vice districts, and the absence thereof. He learned in the exchange that *Shawnee Sachem* had blasted on schedule. He felt low hearing it.

Oh, well. Out there in the soft glow of the saberlike buildings he at least had one friend left. That eased his mind, enabled him to slip from questions about vice to questions about police with a minimum of clumsiness.

He met Ab at a prearranged corner next morning. They began to walk. This was one of the mornings they meant to skip meals.

"There are police," he informed her. "You can't tell them from those other types we saw in Fochet's office building."

Neel, the waiter, said the police wear brown robes and copper masks too."

"Where are they on duty?"

"Places that need watching. Tome does have a few banks. I get the idea that you won't find many personal crimes around here. Murder, I mean. But theft is another thing. Since it doesn't hurt anybody directly, I guess it happens sometimes."

Mike considered that a tremendous compliment to Tome. What was a little robbery if murder and physical assault were completely avoided? Ever since talking to Neel, his original impressions of Tome had been reinforced. He'd practically forgotten everything said by the weird Swann.

Ab watched the masked crowds moving past. In a low voice she said, "So if there are police, they'll probably be watching the mask factory."

"You found one?"

"No, not yet. I walked all night, too. Covered about a third of this city. It's huge. I worked up nerve to ask a few questions. But I asked the wrong people. They thought they knew where there was a mask factory, so I'd go there and discover there wasn't any. I'll try again today. You go back to the sleeporium, or do whatever you want. We'll check in again at the same corner tomorrow."

A heavy frown wrinkled his face. "I ought to help you."

"Not necessarily."

"No, honestly, Ab, it's not fair for you to—"

"Let me do it my way," Ab snapped. Then she looked at Mike with those luminous gray eyes and smiled in a tired way. She touched his arm. "Remember how Executive Fochet classified us? It may seem as though I've got the hard part but really I haven't. You rest now, Mike. I'll need you when the time comes. I'll need every single circuit in the great big spaghetti body of yours. Your turn's coming."

A ripple of red hair among chrome and pale enamel reflections, she was gone.

The boulevard was located in a remote part of the city. It was as broad as the ones near the government complex, and as uniformly lit. But it was completely deserted.

Ab and Mike sat behind a balustrade on the small deck in front of a very tall building whose porthole windows were all blacked out. From this position they could look out across the street at a low, solid stone railing that ran completely around a large building in a parklike setting. The building, without portholes, occupied the space equiva-

lent to three long blocks. It was an unusual structure because it was no more than two stories high, with a graceful egg-shaped roof line.

It was the middle of the night, five nights after they started their search. Ab was bundled up in an ankle-length cloak, all black and heavy with folds. She'd spent some of her last tokens to buy the cloth, sewing it in the privacy of her sleeporium room with needles from her kit. Even though the air was as temperate and citrusy as ever, Mike's teeth chattered.

"That rail over there is deceptive," Ab whispered, pointing between balusters.

"Looks like I can hop right over it," Mike whispered back.

"And frizzle to a black ash. I've seen that stone pattern before. At least one similar. Circuits are fused into it after the molten rock's poured."

"Where in the stars did you learn that?"

"I spent eighteen months with a security engineer on Petallume. He thought he needed a mother."

Footsteps rapped along the boulevard. Shortly two men in dull brown robes appeared, walking beside the low stone rail. Their copper masks cast back the light shed by nearby buildings. Their sculptured mouths did not smile.

Each man wore a small square device on a chain at his waist. The devices had lenses, like lanterns. At ease, the men moved by Mike and Ab's vantage point. They turned a corner and disappeared behind the factory.

Ab exposed the inside of her left wrist. A metal wafer with several dials gleamed. She had spent her last two tokens on it. The wafer went *tock* softly at intervals. She kept glancing out between the balusters as she showed it:

"I watched the place all last night. They make a circuit of the mask factory every twelve minutes."

"So we have to get inside in eleven."

"Make it ten. The doors won't be hard. It's that rail. I understand the circuitry, I think. I've chalked the two places where you might try to take it out. See?"

He saw, faint marks on the outer vertical faces of the stone.

"You'll have to break the stone," she said. "They may see it next time they come around. We'll have to risk it. Try not to make a big hole."

He clucked low in his throat, unfolding from his kneeling position. Despite her nearness, he felt nervous. Crime was foreign to him. Only repeated looks at her face reminded him of the why, and soothed his conscience.

Ab looked more gray and drawn than ever. Plainly she

hadn't slept much during the past few days. As he started for the boulevard, she stopped him.

"Mike?"

"Yeh?"

"Are you sure you—"

"I told you; when the deviation box on the *Princess Ridolph* malfunctioned, I had all circuits on, and both hands on the box while I tore it loose from its cable connections. I held it for maybe ten seconds. I only felt a little dazed afterward."

She kept darting glances to the stone rail over there. "I can't be sure about the load. I think it's light enough for you. Lethal for the ordinary person. But if I've calculated the lineage right—"

"Where'd you learn to compute lineage?"

"Lightcommander Scoyk of the Croesus line." Weary smile. "Some other time." She leaned up to give him a light kiss on the cheek. "You be careful."

Loping across the boulevard, he was aware of the risks. He might burn up and die. He wasn't too worried, personally speaking. He'd sort of pledged his talents to her, as she'd pledged hers to him. That was that. What continued to bother him was the fact that this was a crime. Maybe justified, given their situation. Well, somewhat justified. But the nagging uneasiness wouldn't go away.

His shadow loomed long ahead, then fell across the walk and rail, broken in two places. He chose the left hand chalk mark. It was lower down than the other. Damage there might be less easily detected. He dropped to his knees, glancing both ways along the boulevard.

Empty. The saberlike buildings marched in glowing silence.

He elbowed the plate in his left side. He felt his circuits tickle and liven. He switched on with his right arm. His head filled with a faint throbbing.

He stiffened the metal cores of the fingers of his right hand. Fingertips forward and tight together, he drew his arm back. He rammed his hand at the rail.

His hand blurred out of sight halfway to the stone. He heard a crunching. Dust drifted past his eyes. By then he was through, his hand driven ramlike into the unresisting stone. He felt searing heat beginning to melt through his right arm.

He fisted his hand inside the rail at blinding speed, hammered it right, hammered left again. Out of the hole

driven by his fist, spitting green sparks rocketed at his eyes. They sizzled harmlessly off his hard, synthetic corneas.

He whipped his hand back out of the hole, breaking contact. The heat drained off. A moment longer and all his internal wires would have melted.

His temples buzzed. He leaned his head on the rail and powered down both body switches. His right leg twitched four times. Ab came running, her boots loud.

"Beautiful, darling." She kissed his cheek. "Beautiful. Can you walk?"

"Sure." But he had trouble even standing.

Ab shoved as much of the rubble as she could back into the large, ragged hole in the stone. Mike switched on and impacted it, solidified it, with quick blows of his knuckles. The semipasty substance created by hitting the rubble with terrific force and speed partly concealed the black stains around the edge of the hole left by the circuits burning out. If the strolling police were careless, they might not notice.

Strange, how bleary he felt. Ab touched his hand as he switched off. The pride in her eyes helped him make it. She climbed over the rail. He followed, sprawling on his face.

She helped him up. The turf underfoot looked black. He stumbled again. She darted in against his side, braced his elbow from beneath. He regained his footing.

"You're pretty strong for a girl."

"In more ways than several, love."

He followed her toward the building. He matched her speed without putting the circuits on, because he wanted to.

The outer doors of the factory were diamond-shaped. Mike switched on half his circuits, thrust stiffened fingers at the seal line where one door met the building wall. The wall was thick. He drove his hand through up to the wrist before he felt his fingers wiggle free inside.

When he pulled his hand out he left a large oval opening, half of it in the door, half in the wall. He took hold of the door, yanked.

"Not so hard—!" Ab began.

He wasn't quick enough to abort the strength of the pull. He wrenched the door off four of its eight hinges, bending it severely. He looked embarrassed. Ab hid her annoyance.

She slid around his right side and through the opening he'd created. He followed. Inside, it was dark. Air filtration systems operated in the silence.

"Pull the door shut as far as you can, Mike."

He stayed at half power to do it. Being careful, he found he couldn't shut the door more than halfway. He'd wrenched it out of shape too badly. Anyone passing might notice that it hung crookedly.

"I could try straightening it from the outside, Ab."

"There isn't time. We have to get back here before the policemen come around on their next trip. I don't want them passing this side of the building and maybe discovering the damage while we're working inside. If they did they could sneak up on us. If they're going to spot something, I want to know the minute they do." Her voice faded through the dark. "Hurry up."

Was there a little bit of anger under her words? He wouldn't blame her. The opening between the wall and the twisted door admitted a considerable amount of outside light. How could the policemen help but notice the way the door stood out from the wall, bent? He felt like swearing.

"Will you turn off all your switches?" Ab said from the dark ahead.

Mike understood she didn't want him blundering into anything and smashing it noisily. He felt warm. He did as she asked, then followed the sound of her voice.

He stepped with care, one short step at a time. He felt awkward, clumsy. Things were going badly. It was his fault.

They had some better luck in the next stage of the theft.

Operating in complete darkness by feel, they quickly reached an inner wall, located a gasketed door, went through. Ab risked taking a small light amplifier from her kit. The ruddy light showed they were inside a huge room with many machine benches in orderly rows. Complicated machines were attached to the backs or ends of about half the benches. In padded trays on many of the benches they saw masks in various stages of finish.

"I think the light will be safe in here," she said.

"We want the storage area for finished masks, right?"

"Yes. I don't know where it is. Let's look."

Again their luck seemed to have improved. They found the area in a relatively short time. Ab shone the amplifier through a grille that served as the outer wall of the storage facility. On the other side of the grille, tiers of bins held bundles wrapped in a coarse synthetic cloth.

Breathing a little more noisily, Ab signed Mike's attention to the lock on the grille. He switched half on and broke the lock easily.

Inside the storage area, Mike held the amplifier while Ab took down a bundle and unwrapped it. A golden mask with a delicate filigree on forehead and cheeks shone like a red-gold mirror. Ab's teeth looked intensely red as she smiled.

"They're all valuable," she said. "There's no point in being picky."

She passed him the mask. Then she opened the fasteners on the front of her heavy cloak. She'd sewn extra large pockets on the inner lining in several places. She slid the mask into one of the pockets. She pulled down two more masks from the bins and tossed the wrapping aside. One mask was severely sculptured in dull blue metal. The other was a beautiful mosaic with sections in black, white, and various tones of gray. She hid them both in pockets inside her cloak.

"How do I look?" She asked when she'd refastened the cloak.

He grinned. "Fat in the hips."

"Nasty." She grinned back. She glanced at the wafer on her wrist. The smile vanished. "We're running late."

They dashed back through the factory room to the door into the outer room. Ab shut off the amplifier and put it in her kit. They crept through the door, Ab first. She blocked his view through the opening between the outside wall and the bent door, so his first warning of trouble was her exclamation.

"The two policemen are there!"

Mike stole up beside her. Just as he did, she turned. Outside light fell across her eyes, making them shine. She squeezed Mike's hand.

"If anybody could ever convince me there's a benign intelligence in the universe, it would be now."

For a moment he didn't get it. Then he saw that there were five people, not two, on the walk on the other side of the low rail out there. Two were the men in drab brown. The other three, two of them women with pastel masks, were asking directions.

The policemen had their backs to the damaged wall. One pointed in the direction of the central city. Conversation continued. The group was stopped just slightly to the left of where Mike had broken the wall circuits. As he and Ab watched from inside the factory, the group moved on down the walk past the damaged place.

"If they just keep doing their civic duty," Ab breathed, "we'll make it."

At the corner the pedestrians parted from the policemen and went on. The two men in dull brown turned right to continue their patrol. When they were out of sight Ab nodded. Mike touched the bent door, pushed it outward slightly to give her more room. Somehow she stumbled on the sill.

She fell to the right, hitting the door with her shoulder. The stressed metal went *pong*, loudly.

"Goz it all to—" she started to say. Before she finished, one of the policemen appeared down on their right, having come back to check on the noise.

Mike didn't wait for instructions. He bolted past her, hitting the plates under his arm. "I'll draw them off," he yelled as the power surged.

He hoped it would work. Ab might be able to escape if the policemen chased him. He turned into a blur as she shot over the black turf. He was halfway to the low rail when one of the policemen shouted an order to stop.

It was working! Their attention was completely on him. He shoved upward with his leg circuits when he was still a good distance from the rail. He went floating up and over in a blur, fast yet graceful.

As he started down a white light hit his legs. Nothing happened, except for a faint tickle in his alarm circuits. His boots crashed on the boulevard.

He glanced back as he ran. The other man in brown had switched on his lantern device. White beams poured from both lenses. Mike laughed because the beams, whatever their purpose, did nothing to nullify his tremendous speed. He kept running.

He reached the far side of the boulevard in a microfraction of time. The men in brown kept shouting. Mike accelerated. His surroundings melted, became horizontal streaks and blurs, alternating bars of light and darkness in which spectrums flashed. Suddenly Ab cried out.

Struck by one of the white beams, Ab was down. She lay on the grass halfway between the factory and the rail.

He shoved his heels hard against the pavement. The braking caused smoke, then sparks, then bursts of flame where his boots created friction. He jumped away from the twin fires consuming the mosaic pavement. He spun back toward the factory.

Both men in brown were racing toward her across the lawn. One kept her in the beam of his lantern.

Ab thrashed and rolled as though in the grip of a neurological seizure. She arched her back, flopped over on

her side, then her stomach, jerking. Mike's face wrenched.

His strategy had failed. The air stank of raw chemicals. Where the pavement fires had gone out, pools bubbled. He didn't even think consciously about what to do next. He ran back toward the factory.

While the one policeman kept his beam on Ab, the other flashed his in Mike's face as Mike hurdled the stone rail in a parabolic streak. He was angry because of the obvious pain Ab was suffering. He ran just fast enough so that the surroundings didn't blur out of focus. Ab looked like a puppet in a spotlight, heaving around on the grass. Her lips were skinned back from her clenched teeth. Her fists shook in the air.

"Don't come any farther!" one of the policemen shouted.

Mike paid no attention, charging on. The two men yelled confused orders to one another. Mike dove between them, swung to the left. The man he faced shone the lantern directly in his eyes. Mike felt heat in the cores at the back of his eyesockets. He grabbed the lantern device from the man's hand, flung it against the factory wall where it pulverized into dust and left a crater.

Mike was vaguely aware of the policeman shrieking. He powered down slightly. Without the light in his face, he could make out his opponent in better detail. The hand from which Mike had torn the lantern was red and mangled. All the fingers flopped as if they were boneless. Mike didn't remember touching the hand with more than the lightest touch.

"Put the power up," the injured man yelled to his companion. "Up!"

Mike realized he'd have murder to account for if he wasn't careful. He switched off completely as he lunged at the man he'd injured. He gashed the back of his hand on the pointed chin of the man's mask. He got hold of the man's throat a second later, wrestling the man backwards. The policeman wasn't strong. Mike's height and weight bore him over.

As the policeman fell, Mike let go. The man's headpiece tore. The mask slipped sideways on the right side of his head. Mike bent his right knee, ready to drop down on the man's belly and knock the breath out of him. The man thrust up his mangled hand.

"You'd better stop. You'd better not. If Comus puts the power up, she'll go into an instant coma and never wake up."

"Get away from him or I'll do it," panted the other man, behind Mike.

Mike hesitated. He couldn't see what was happening with Ab. But his shadow was long in front of him in the black grass. The other policeman's lantern was still lit. What if it were true? What if a turn of the controls burned Ab to death? He couldn't risk it. So he hesitated.

That gave the first policeman time to leap up and back out of danger. As he did so his headpiece slipped again. His mask fell off. He caught it.

In the white light falling from behind, Mike saw the policeman's head clearly. In place of hair, the man's skull was covered with widely spaced, stringy-looking scabs that lay like sliced brown worms across his freckled skin. Then Mike realized that the freckles were actually pustulant sores. The man's face was generally human-configured, but that was all. It was more blotchy, more grotesque than Swann's.

A drop of foam fell from the policeman's misshapen lower lip. He shoved his mask in front of his face, then fumbled with the headpiece until the mask stayed in position. It hung slightly crooked.

Mike stared at the mask. He thought, with horror, it's a lie. Swann told the truth. It's all a lie. Everything looks so peaceful and pretty but it's a lie.

"Turn around," ordered the policeman behind Mike.

He obeyed. The man with the lantern acted nervous. The beam jiggled as he moved it away from Ab on the ground, flashed it in Mike's eyes. Again Mike experienced heat in the cores linking the polished cups of his eyesockets with the circuits in his mind. The policeman with the light shook his head.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Are you sure it's working?" his companion asked.

"You saw that it worked on the woman properly."

On the ground, Ab writhed, though less violently. The back spasms had loosened the fastening of her cloak. One side of the cloak fell back. A section of a mask in one of the deep pockets flashed.

"If you've hurt her—" Mike growled.

"Not yet we haven't," said the man with the light. "She's only been under a quarter stun."

"You start anything with either of us and Comus'll power all the way up," the other man warned, still sounding out of breath.

"Correct," said Comus. "Take this." He unfastened the clip of the chain that held the lantern to the belt of his

tunic suit. He tossed the light to his companion. The sailing light cast wild, shifting shadows on the factory wall.

Comus went down on both knees. Ab was moaning, coming around. Comus ripped the rest of the fastenings of her cloak. He spread both halves out like huge wings, the linings exposed. He searched the pockets quickly.

"They took three," he reported.

From the way the other man let out a breath, Mike knew the crime was very serious. Comus shoved an arm underneath Ab's shoulders, dragged her to a standing position. Mike was relieved to see her eyelids flutter. Some of his rage receded. In its wake came a sense of personal humiliation.

A strand of Ab's red hair blew across the mouth slit of the mask of Comus, the policeman holding her. Comus turned his head quickly. There was a spitting noise from behind the metal. The strand fluttered free of contact with the mask.

"Where are you two from?" Comus barked. "The Down-below?"

Mike didn't answer. The other policeman advanced a step.

"I don't think they are, Comus. Do you notice how big he is? He's some kind of freak. I've never seen anyone run so fast. He completely disappeared when he was going at top speed."

Comus demanded, "Speak up."

Still Mike said nothing. The injured policeman rasped, "You'll talk to our superiors if you won't talk to us. We're all going to walk to the local headquarters. If you try anything," he continued for Mike's benefit, "I'll turn the zeta line up to maximum power and there won't be anything human left of your ladyfriend."

"You mean she'll wind up with a face like yours."

The police masks glittered. The silence had a stunned quality.

Thinking he should attack them but knowing he didn't dare, Mike trudged after the policeman with the light. Comus breathed noisily, supporting Ab. The man leading the way reached the low rail. He touched it carefully, as if expecting a shock. He was still careful climbing over.

He wigwagged the lantern device to indicate that Mike should hurry. Mike jumped across to the pavement on the other side. Comus had trouble getting over with his burden.

Mike extended his hands. "I'll carry her."

They didn't seem inclined to argue. Mike put Ab across

his shoulder like a sack and followed the two policemen down the boulevard.

They were taken to a detention room on a lower floor of one of the saberlike buildings in the neighborhood. The room was brightly lit, unfurnished except for two floating pillows. A new civil servant in the same dull brown and copper questioned Mike, asking the same things over and over. Where were they from? What were they up to? Mike stood with his head down, saying nothing. Presently the questioner went away.

After a while Ab woke up. She didn't seem in bad shape, except for a look of extreme tiredness. Another policeman brought two goblets of a clear liquid he said was a nutrient. Mike wouldn't touch it. Ab drank hers. Then she began to comb her hair. The police had confiscated her cloak and the masks, and searched her kit, but had left her personal articles.

"I'm sorry I messed it up," Mike said at last.

"Not your fault. As a team we've got a lot to learn."

"I could have squashed those two."

"Mike, you don't have to prove you're strong to me."

"I didn't do it because they said they'd hurt you."

She studied him. "That's admirable compassion. I'm not surprised. You've been made miserable for years."

With a little frown he answered, "Haven't I told you I'm not miser—?"

"Innocence is so horrible because it always has to die so soon. In exceptional cases like yours it takes longer. I want you to know I'm thankful you're an exceptional case. Otherwise you probably would have killed those two and abandoned me. Mike?"

He refused to glance at her directly. "What?"

"Thanks."

"S okay." He thought he felt somewhat better. He wasn't entirely sure.

More time passed. The door recessed into the wall. A man entered. They both recognized the smiling upturn and the chin cleft in the copper instantly.

"I was just informed," Executive Fochet said.

Ab smoothed a palm down the left flank of her black tights. She moved her head as though tossing stray hair back out of her eyes, though actually her hair had been combed into near perfect order. To Mike, the motion gave her the air of a queen. He felt lucky being with her rather than alone to face Fochet.

Executive Fochet's scarred hands hung at his sides in repose. When he spoke he sounded friendly:

"I really was quite sincere when I said there was no way you could earn funds on Tome except by taking part in the Game."

"We thought we'd try anyway," Ab retorted.

"I suppose that was inevitable." Fochet didn't act annoyed by her sarcasm. Mike wondered whether it was because Fochet thought he had them. The man continued, "I've just discussed your case with the authorities in charge of this sector. Normally, they would process you, take the testimony of the two men who discovered you committing the crime, and you would be given a swift but fair trial."

"What happens to people you put on trial?" Mike wanted to know. "If they get all worried so their faces break out, do you give them one of those pretty masks to cover things up?"

Fochet's reaction, though brief, showed how startled he was. His shoulders jerked. He turned his mask at Mike and faced him quite a long time. Mike wished he could see details within the eyeholes. That blackness gave him the shivers.

"I'm sorry to say I don't understand your remark," Fochet said.

Ab put her boot up on one of the floating pillows. "Private joke," she said, knocking a speck off the cracked red plasto.

Fochet interlaced his fingers at his waist, pressing them tightly together. His voice was a trifle rougher as he continued, "To answer your question, if you were found guilty—as you certainly would be, since the evidence—"

"No denying I had it on me," Ab broke in. She sounded almost gay. "I wouldn't try lying to you, Executive. My face always gives away my feelings."

For some reason that made Fochet's shoulders jerk again. He said quickly, "For the crime you committed, you could expect the maximum sentence. One year's therapeutic detention."

"He probably means," Ab explained to Mike, "physicians would work on us. When they got finished, I wouldn't recognize you and you wouldn't recognize me. It might be fun, though. I'd love to see their faces when they opened you and confronted all those wires." Coolly she regarded Fochet. "On the other hand, I think I'll pass. I'd never see the faces of the physicians, would I? And I have a nasty objection to restraint. To having someone tinker with my head and glands and—"

"For your information," Fochet cut in, piqued, "our methods are humane. Social deviancy is simply eradicated from the personality. Those few who are sentenced to undergo the treatment find it rather pleasant."

"You don't bother treating some of your own people, though," she shot back. "Those silly cods who live—what did he call it, Mike?"

"Downbelow."

Fochet gestured. "Harmless malcontents."

"I'm sure their strategy is to keep you convinced of that."

"Young woman!" Fochet was loud all at once. "I did not come here to discuss the mores of Tome. You and your friend are in serious trouble. I have already interceded on your behalf. I have arranged for you to be spared trial and the certain punishment that would follow."

"Shidding kind of you." She bowed.

"Your attitude—"

"I think I get the drift of what's coming next," Mike growled.

Fochet spread his hands. "I was able to negotiate your freedom by accepting you as contestants in the Game. Isn't that a sensible, acceptable alternative?"

Ab pursed her mouth. "Not sure. Tell us the rules."

Smoothly, Fochet glided past the question: "The same rewards apply. That is, you'll each be awarded fifty kilocreds if you win. More than ample to cover your passage on the next ship that docks. Should you lose, the reward drops to half of the winning amount. Not enough for full fare even to the farther star clusters, I'll grant. But a beginning. Frankly, I resent the way both of you keep glaring at me. What I'm offering is a sensible, humane alternative."

"Nuts," Ab snorted. "We've been maneuvered."

"Had," Mike agreed.

"Do we have a choice left?" she wanted to know.

Fochet's fingers looked wholly colorless. "Choice?"

"What if we decide we prefer to stand trial?"

"I'm sorry," he shrugged. "That is no longer one of your alternatives. Neither is optional participation in the Game."

Ab chewed her underlip. Mike didn't like the deal one bit. She didn't either. No words were necessary to communicate that, either way. She said, "Mike? What do you think?"

"I think I don't care for this planet as much as I did the first night I wandered around town. I think I'd like to get off, but quick."

"I have the same reaction, even though I wouldn't normal-

ly let myself be pushed around like a gerb in a testing maze." She smiled in a sweet, murderous way. "You have us, dear Fochet. I dislike you so much I really should kick up and yell and show you. But Mike's right, of course. There's something ripe and rank about this world of yours. I'd just as soon be shed of it all, even if that means swallowing the nasty words you deserve."

All pretense at politeness gone, Fochet turned away. "You are at liberty in the city until you're summoned to play the Game." As the door recessed he paused, showing them his smiling copper mouth across his shoulder. "Don't try to hide or leave. You'll be watched."

He went out.

PART II

THE GAME

Four days later, civil servants in brown called for Mike and Ab at their respective sleeporiums and escorted them to the Game.

Since the last interview with Fochet the two of them had been together constantly, except at night. They walked the street. Or they sat in Aleph's, drinking. They discussed their decision endlessly. At one point Mike guessed that they must have expended a million or maybe even a billion words of conversation on what the Game might be, and how Fochet had maneuvered them into saying yes and playing.

Actually, Ab expended most of the words, Mike few. But they were pretty much in agreement. They had made a basic gamble in deciding to steal the masks. They had lost. They were getting off lightly by permitting Fochet to maneuver them to his own ends.

At one point, Mike formed another thought with effort. Were they repeating this same point of view—*we're getting off lightly*—because the Game might really be very dangerous, and they had to convince themselves it wasn't?

He didn't mention this thought to Ab. Not that he believed she would laugh at him. By now he was confident she wouldn't. He just didn't want her agreeing that his fear was true.

One worry was taken care of by their forced consent. On the morning after the interview with Fochet, the proprietors of their respective sleeporiums informed them that their bills would be forwarded to the government after they checked out. They also discovered that they enjoyed unlimited credit at Aleph's or any other eating or drinking spot in the city. They were required to present no cards, no vouchers. They merely ordered what they wanted and got it. They were never handed a bill.

"The faces of the sacrificial lambs are by now familiar," Ab observed.

"Yeh. Did you notice how many more whispers we get when we walk along?"

"I'm trying not to, Mike dear. Please order me another drink."

A sort of euphoria settled over them toward the end of the waiting period. It was shattered when Mike came out

of his cubicle one morning and found the two masked men in brown.

The Game building was located in another remote part of the city. It took almost half a day to reach the district on foot. The building was of the same general design as the mask factory, except that its roof was squared off. Also it was much larger. Roughly about six stories tall. And where the mask factory had occupied about three square blocks, the Game building took up at least ten times that many. Its exterior showed no porthole windows whatsoever.

"A crowd," Ab said to Mike as they neared the low stone rail that surrounded the building and its lawn.

Mike had already noticed that several hundred masked citizens were gathered near a gate in the rail. Masks dazzled in the pink sun.

"You're celebrities, actually," one of their escorts remarked.

"How odd," Ab said. "I feel more like a goat."

Mike put on a grin he didn't feel. "I thought it was lambs."

"Same difference."

The crowd grew more excited as the six approached the gate. "One moment until we're recognized . . ." cautioned one of the masked men, reaching for Ab's arm. She jerked away with a flash of teeth, but she didn't try to go through the gate.

"All right, it's safe," the escort said a moment later. "Take that path straight ahead to the central door. You'll be met inside."

The pink sun cast their shadows ahead of them. The two civil servants who had called for Mike and the two who had fetched Ab from her sleeporium didn't accompany them onto the grounds.

"*Déjà vu*," Ab said.

"What's that?"

They walked to the middle of three diamond-shaped doors. The door sprang open. Mike glanced back at the crowd, which had settled into watchful stillness. He took a deep breath of the citrus-scented air. It didn't please or satisfy him nearly as much as it had the first night he walked the town. Maybe the longer you stayed anywhere, the more you learned of the dismal things you couldn't see at a glance. He'd never been anywhere long in his life except the Trelawny Institute, and that was mostly a smudged memory. Never before had he been captivated by a place, only to discover it wasn't as pretty as it seemed. The sweetness and freshness of the air were ruined.

"Well," Ab was already across the sill, "I'm not surprised."

"Good morning." Executive Fochet rose from one of several floating pillows scattered around the large, spartan reception hall. "Are you feeling fit?"

"I'd feel better on the docks with my ticket in my hand," Mike told him.

"Oh, come, I'm sure you'll both do splendidly. Just on the other side of that door you'll find the Game. However, play doesn't actually commence until sunset. But you'll be admitted before that."

Fochet walked to the long inner wall that ran parallel to the outside of the building. Three oversized view screens were recessed into the wall at wide intervals.

"I want to explain one or two details about what you'll find inside," Fochet said. The hairs on the back of his right hand looked stark white in the room's uniform illumination. He reached toward the center screen, passed his hand in front of it. Without a sound, a sharp color image appeared.

"That's the city," Mike exclaimed.

"It certainly looks—" Ab began. She shook her head. "No. It's not."

"Quite perceptive," Fochet agreed. "You are looking at the Game on the other side of the wall. It is a replica, virtually exact, of a typical Tomistic metropolis. The replica occupies almost all of the floor space in this building. There are many boulevards, squares, buildings, and pedestrian walks."

He glided to the left screen where he repeated the gesture. The second image showed a view upward across a flight of steps resembling the Aquarian Stairs. At the top were three typical buildings. No, something was wrong with them. Distorted. Ab announced the difference:

"The scale's wrong. That is, not the same as—"

"Yes," Fochet nodded. "Although the entrances to all the buildings are scaled to normal height, the buildings themselves are done on quarter scale. Those three buildings surrounding the plaza are reductions of twenty-flight structures."

Mike approached the screen. The closer he got, the more apparent the luminous dots became, so that what at a distance looked distinct became a colored smear at close range. But colored nevertheless. He pointed.

"What's that thing?"

"A color-keyed panel set in the wall of the building, right beside the door."

"What's it for?"

"In a moment, if you please."

Fochet walked to the remaining dark screen, activated it with a sweep of his hand. The lens providing the image was trained down one of the odd-scaled boulevards. The angle emphasized the pedestrian walks. They narrowed sharply from the bottom of the screen to the top.

"You'll notice that the Game complex is empty of people. Only the two players are admitted to the area for the duration of the Game. There will be no one to assist you—or give you bad counsel. You'll also notice the streets are marked off into large colored squares."

"I miss the mosaics," Ab told him.

"Looks like a big game board or something," was Mike's comment.

"In a way, in a way," Fochet agreed. "Your play of the Game, you see, is meant to approximate a collapsed version of the full lifetime of a human being. Various doorways—indeed some of the streets themselves—lead to certain—permit me to employ a vulgar but accurate word—payoffs. Food. Shelter. Power. Money. Success, as it were. Other doorways and streets lead to failure. To warn you fairly—to potential physical harm."

"How do we find which ones are which?" Mike asked.

"You learn as you play the Game, of course. After a reasonable time—a day or two—you should be able to determine the rules of the Game and begin to make only the right moves. You'll learn to differentiate between squares on the pavement. Which to step on, which to avoid. Likewise, you'll learn which color panels beside which doors bring rewards when you press them and are admitted to that particular building. You must also learn which panels deliver a negative outcome when pressed. At the end of the Game, your correct and wrong moves will be totaled. The score will determine whether you have succeeded or failed." He folded his hands. "Any questions?"

Mike shipped his eyes from one screen to the next. "Gozzing right. We press panels beside the doors, and we hop around from square to square?"

"No hopping required. Simply walk normally."

"What if we hit the wrong square? The wrong door? Can we get killed?"

"You must discover that yourself."

Ab's mouth turned white around the corners. "He told me the first time there was physical risk involved."

Dully, Mike remembered. "Oh, yeh. Me, too."

Ab continued to fix Fochet with a direct, even hostile, stare. The man said finally, "Is there something else?"

"Rules!" Ab's lifted hand expressed the unsaid word. *Simpleton.*

"I have outlined the rules."

"You haven't at all. How long do we play? A week? A year?"

"You will be informed when you have won or lost."

"Look here, Fochet, we want more definite information. How many deadfalls are waiting in there? What should we do to avoid them? Isn't there any best strategy? It seems to me you could at least—"

"My dear young woman," the Executive broke in, sounding sententious, "a baby out of a mammalian womb isn't advised first thing about best strategy. It learns. You must do the same."

"She wants to know whether the stinking thing's fair!" Mike exclaimed.

Executive Fochet started at the view screen on their left. He passed along the wall, blacking the images one by one with the passage of his palm in front of them. He reached the last screen. The multicolored squares of pavement collapsed upon themselves in a welter of yellow and cyan and magenta dots. He faced the contestants.

"I have outlined the rules. I wish you the very best of luck. Remember, eight billion will be watching."

Then, as if it were timed to his voice or his turn of body, a large door in the inner wall recessed. Brilliant light shone forth. Mike hunched to get a look inside.

He saw a sharper duplicate of the images on the screens: streets receding, divided into squares of color; buildings with color panels alongside their doorways. The colors chosen for the panels and squares had a vividness absent in the greater city outside. The place resembled a toy town in many respects.

"The door will only be open another moment," Fochet advised. "I suggest you go in. The terrace inside will release you when the Game begins."

With a might-as-well shrug, Ab led the way.

They found themselves on the terrace Fochet had mentioned. Long and narrow, it jutted from the wall one flight up from the odd-scale city. In front, on the ends, and overhead, bars of a soft silver color formed a perfect cage around the terrace.

Mike whirled as the door started to close. The compulsion to rush back outside was wild, uncontrollable. In the ante-

room Fochet regarded him with folded hands. Mike took two steps. The door shut.

"The light's pink, Mike. But the sky is black. Notice?"

Following her finger, he did. The Game city stretching into the distance in near-perfect perspective was overarched by a concave black roof. The roof, hard, shiny-looking, shimmered at intervals with pink reflections. Mike couldn't detect the source. He glanced out through the silvery bars.

"It's eerie. The quiet, I mean."

"Better get used to it, sweet. We may be here an eternity. Or at least a few days, which is apparently the same thing. The more I see of Tome and that fishy Fochet, the more I despise them both. He might have given us a little more information. What if one of those sidewalk squares is a trapdoor with a pride of great big liongumphers underneath? Have you ever seen a liongumpher?"

"In the zoo on Athen's, I think."

"Masculine as sin. But brutes. What if something like that's waiting?"

Mike tried to smile. "I can always switch on."

She didn't seem to hear, she was that nervous. She walked to an ornamental bench and pedestal table in the center of the terrace.

"Here's something." She held up a soft maroon bag. She unfastened the drawstring. She took out several medium-sized, melonlike objects with pale blue skins, then a couple of bubbles. "A meal on the house while we wait for the sport to commence. At least the bubbles are stenciled Orbiter."

Seated on the bench, they munched and drank for what seemed an hour. The Game city was absolutely still. Mike jumped up, started pacing. More time went by. Whenever he tried to spark a conversation, Ab growled at him. The final time, she blazed.

"Why don't you sit down, you lummoX? You're wasting your strength on—"

A bell rang twice. Beneath Mike's feet, the terrace rumbled.

High overhead, the concave roof became transparent in places where large lights above it had been switched on suddenly. The lights reflected on nearby clusters of immense lenses, also suspended above the black ceiling. The silver bars at the front and the ends of the terrace sank vertically, rumbling. The bar overhead retracted horizontally, rumbling. Mike swallowed, trying not to stare too obviously at the lens clusters above the ceiling.

Eight billion watching, he thought. He reached for Ab's hand.

"I think it's time to play," she said in a strangely hushed voice.

"And," he swallowed again, "at night. Realistic, huh?"

She said nothing. They were gripped by the sight of the Game city dropping rapidly into darkness. Though no source for the fading pink light was visible, the effect was precisely that of evening coming to Tome.

As the surroundings darkened, the buildings began to glow. The colored squares in the pavements and the panels beside various doorways also glowed, though with a primary intensity unlike anything the two had seen on the outside.

Hand in hand and close together, Mike and Ab walked down the stairs from the terrace to the Game.

At the end of the first block they discovered a cafe, a miniaturized version of Aleph's. Ab suggested they try here for food. As they climbed the steps to the small deck she glanced backwards.

"We stepped on every one of the squares on that whole first block. Nothing happened, Mike."

He shrugged. "A good sign, huh?"

"No. Even Fochet's nonrules don't seem to hold true."

One table out of five on the small deck displayed a color panel, yellow, in its center. Mike peered up at the underside of the awning. "Wonder how they keep track of us in —oh, I see. Look, Ab. There are little lenses mounted in the bottom of the awning. Suppose every building's covered that way?"

"I wouldn't doubt it. We're a spectacle." She pressed the yellow panel.

Immediately one of the other tables sank into the floor. A moment later it rose up again, laden with elliptical loaves of something like dark bread, plus four bubbles. Mike rushed to pick up a bubble. Ab grabbed his arm.

"Don't drink it before you test it."

She suggested pouring some on the balustrade. Mike was all smiles, wanting to show off for her. He had a better idea. He rolled up his sleeve, pushed Ab back, popped the bubble and poured the amber liquid over his exposed left arm.

As the liquid hit his arm, smoke twisted into the air. The liquid spilled off both sides of his arm, splashed the floor, fuming, eating holes. Scowling, Mike tossed the bubble off across the deck.

Ab picked up one of the loaves with care. She held it at arm's length, poised to break it.

"You might turn on half power just in case, love."

He did. She broke the loaf, dropped it instantly, screaming as oversized wet worms shot their heads out of holes in both dark brown halves. Their darting tongue searching something solid to sting as they fell. Mike jumped, landed one boot on each half of the loaf and squashed them.

Ab shivered and made a vile face. They lost no time leaving the cafe.

They spent the next couple of hours exploring the Game from end to end. As they moved away from the perimeter, the boulevards bent into graceful curves. At the heart of the miniaturized city, they could not see far down any street from any given point.

Many thoroughfares that branched off these main ones continued only a short distance, ending in cul-de-sacs. Ab was particularly interested in one such block-long dead end.

"It's the only one so far with walls completely covered by panels," she observed as they stood at the cul-de-sac's mouth.

Mike studied the panels. One row ran along the left wall. Another row ran along the right. The panels, of uniform size, butted one another. The panels continued across the end of the little street, forming a U.

"But they're all blacked out," he said.

"This could either be a very good payoff, to use Fochet's vulgar word"—she was nasty—"or dangerous. Let's keep it in mind."

He yawned behind his hand.

"Excuse yourself," Ab said with a wry glance at the lights and lenses glaring on the other side of the ceiling.

"I keep forgetting. I'm sleepy."

"No rule says we can't rest." She linked arms with him. "Come on, there was a place resembling a sleeporium two blocks back."

They crossed the boulevard, pacing down the lit squares of the walk. Mike began to feel a little more confident. Except for the lethal food at the cafe, they'd encountered nothing threatening. They strode across a bright green square, a deep orange one, a cerulean blue, a scarlet, stepped to the next, a white.

The moment their feet came down, Mike's first, a tiny trap in the white square sprang open. A gust of air shot a

small leathery bag up through the pavement. The trap shut. The bag hit the walk with a clump.

Ab glanced at Mike. He turned on both plates under his arm. "Let me," he said.

He picked up the bag. Squeezed it. Something crinkled inside. He unfastened the drawstring, took out a rolled slip, unrolled it.

"Holy goz. Take a look here." And, smoothing the slip from both ends, he held it around where she could see by the light of the glowing buildings.

"Credited fifty thousand kilocreds," she read.

Mike whooped. He tossed the slip away, then jiggled and hummed. "We're rich! We made a strike! We're rich, we've already started winning, se—what's wrong?"

"Mike, I distinctly remember we walked this same way, across this same white square, earlier. Nothing happened."

He scratched his jaw. "We were going the other way. Suppose that's it?"

So they tried approaching the luminous white square from the opposite direction. Nothing happened. They turned around. They recrossed the square from the direction that had produced the payoff. Nothing happened.

"I don't like it," Ab said. "It's inconsistent."

"Maybe it's jammed up. Want me to turn on and stomp it?"

Her gray eyes grew moody. "No. I want to think about this a while." She linked arms again, dragging him off in the direction of the sleeporium.

"Why are you upset?" he wanted to know.

With a backward glance at the white square she answered, "If I could tell you that, we could beat the Game tonight."

The sleeporium had a rose-colored panel next to its closed door. By now Mike had mentally assumed responsibility for testing all such panels, his switches always to the on mode when he did. As he palmed the panel it sank into the wall slightly. The door opened. Lights flashed in the scaled-down sleeporium. It consisted of two cubicles adjacent to a tiny lobby.

As she vanished into her cubicle Ab said, "You can do what you want, Mike, but I intend to sleep in my clothes. We're enough of a free show as it is."

Surprisingly, once he dialed down the light level, he had no trouble dozing off, even aware of the small lenses overhead. His last thought was a vague wonder about the

audience of eight billion. Was it now being considerably reduced? He certainly wouldn't watch someone sleep the night away. Feeling waggish, he lifted his right hand. He wobbled the fingers by way of greeting. He presumed the lenses could see him, even in the dark. He fell asleep with a sloppy grin on his face.

Next morning they experimented with a different cafe. It produced no traps, but it also produced no nourishment. "I'm not that hungry anyway," Mike lied.

Ab looked refreshed, eager. "All right, let's forget our bellies a while. Shall we try some of the buildings?"

They did, entering every other one on this particular street. Some were tricked out as shops, with simulated displays of unfamiliar merchandise. One, entered by touching an amber panel, contained an obelisk under a pin spotlight in otherwise total darkness. The obelisk lit up suddenly with a message:

You have been elected.

"To what?" Mike grumbled.

"Who knows? But it sounds good."

They entered other buildings. One dropped a whirling mica-bright sphere from the ceiling. The sphere opened with a clockwork hum and unfurled a banner announcing, *Full education completed.*

Ab raked her hair with her long fingers. "So now we have a sum of money, we're educated, and someone put their trust in us for public office. I'd say we're on the way, wouldn't you?" She raised her head, deliberately speaking to the ceiling. "I might quarrel with the effects, though. They're cheap. Obelisks and glittery planets. I suppose they think some showmanship values are necessary—" Her shrug completed the thought; she disagreed. Her brows puckered. "Why do you keep hopping up and down that way?"

His synthetic skin, actuated by internal chemical changes within him, simulated a flush. He swallowed. He blinked at the ceiling, furiously.

"What in the world's wrong with you?"

He cupped his hands to hide his mouth, barely whispering, "Bathroom."

"Well, why don't you use that lav we passed? Six doors back. Or was it eight? Anyway, the building with the hot pink panel."

"They're watching," he mouthed, his color building.

"I stood it. You can too."

So he did. He emerged with his head hunched onto his

shoulders and a creep of simulated heat burning his face. He felt better for one reason, worse for another. Ab was waiting impatiently to lead him on.

Mike noticed that the shadows they cast on the glowing pavement had changed direction. The simulated day was passing. "Up ahead's the little avenue I want," she told him, hurrying.

It turned out to be the cul-de-sac where continuous panels formed a U down the walls and across the end. All the panels now glowed in different colors, save one. Dead ahead, centermost of five panels running across the end of the passage, that one remained blank, blacked, somehow forlorn in the brilliant jumble of primary reds and yellows and blues.

"This looked like an important place to me," Ab whispered. "With our kilocreds, our election, and our education, we've lit all the panels except that lone holdout. I have a feeling that if we can turn it on too, we'll be way ahead."

"How are you going to do that?" he asked.

"That, my dear brute, is question *numero uno* of the moment. Maybe we try the same payoffs but in different sequence? Education first, then election? Or—I'm getting so gozzing hungry, I can't keep my mind on it. You?"

Ravenous, he shrugged it off. "Oh, I could eat a little."

They scoured the curving ways at the Game's center until they located a third cafe. This one, more hospitable, yielded up two glasses of nutrient similar to what they'd been offered when arrested. This time Mike drank his gratefully. Then they retraced their steps.

First they visited the building with the obelisk, to claim election. The obelisk repeated its reward in the same way. Next they stepped on the white square that popped up another bag containing financial payoff. Lastly, they watched the clockwork sphere halve and spew its tawdry banner. They raced back to the cul-de-sac.

Ab's face fell. "Wrong sequence."

Merely saying, "Um," wasn't much of a contribution. But Mike was disappointed. He couldn't think of another thing. Half the panels were lit, the other half were dark again.

On the third try, the sequence became education first, then financial success, and election last. By now the light had begun to fall off sharply. The glowing buildings illuminated Ab's disappointment at the mouth of the cul-de-sac. Only a fourth of the panels shone.

Ab straightened up. The way she flung a look at the ceiling was far from friendly. "Want to try again?" Mike asked.

"Later. I want another glass of that stuff from the friendly eating place. My behind is fanning the ground."

In sympathy, he agreed that he was equally tired. He began to itch with a new nervousness. Probably the eight billion out across Tome were having a merry time laughing at them. He didn't know how to beat that. He had trouble enough just thrashing through all the various possible combinations of three payoffs, those they'd tried and those they hadn't. As he dragged along behind the girl, his body actually began to feel heavier.

On the deck of the cafe, they sat and drank a glass apiece, pushed the plate for more. They got them, luckily. Mike had grown accustomed to the faint anise taste of the nutrient. Even slightly fond of it, probably because nothing else was available.

Ab looked tired. "Do you want to try again?"

"Whatever you think, Ab."

"I'm exhausted. I don't know why. I vote for the couches."

"We'll hit the right combination in the morning," he nodded.

"Sure we will."

She tossed off the remainder of the drink. Then, after studying the glass, she sailed it across the balustrade. It struck the boulevard and rolled. Ab's mouth twitched.

"Same stuff as the bubbles. Tricky, these Game designers."

"You sure never know what to expect next."

"Truer words were never etcetera. Come on, I'm sick of these shidding pretty lights. And my bladder's bursting besides." She jumped up on the table, waving at the minilenses in the ceiling. "Go on, turn in! There's nothing coming up the rest of the night but the lav and sleep. Good night and bad luck!"

With that she jumped down again. She looked chagrined all at once. "I'm sorry, Mike. Bad sportsmanship, what?"

"It's getting me down a little too. I thought—"

"We made such a dandy start? I expect they want us to think that."

Moving slowly, they wandered toward the sleeporium, two black figures holding hands among pretty, shining grids of colors. Mike lay awake half the night pondering what to do next. It was effort wasted. He couldn't come up with one new, constructive thought. That made him not only edgy but miserable. Sleep, finally, was a drug, not a pleasure.

Next day they began the sequence by activating the educational sphere. They hit the financial payoff second, the election last. When they ran to the cul-de-sac, Ab exploded.

"What in gozhell's happening? Those lights are crazy!"

He of course had no explanation, and could only tug his nose with metal-cored thumb and index finger while he shook his head at the curious display on the U of panels.

All the panels had lit, alternating white squares with black. There was no doubt about the blacks being illuminated, either. They shone with an intensity not present when the panels were merely blacked out.

All day Ab and Mike repeated various combinations of the three payoffs. All day the payoff mechanism functioned with repetitious predictability: bag with rolled slip puffed into the air from the white square; heart of the obelisk illuminated; clockwork sphere swinging open to spit its banner.

The U of panels remained lit black, white, black, white, black, white, unchanging.

As if to confuse them further, all the cafes turned friendly, disgorging vessels of liquor, edible wafers, bubbles of clear, hot broth.

Ab suggested they test how far a voice carried in the miniature city. It carried pretty far, as it turned out. Mike stationed himself at the entrance to the cul-de-sac. Ab ran from payoff station to payoff station, triggering them.

She'd shout, "Okay," from far in the distance.

He'd shout, "No," when nothing happened to the black and white and black and white squares. By the time the artificial pink light waned, he didn't even bother to look hard in the cul-de-sac. He could register no change from the corner of his eye.

When they visited a new cafe for their evening meal, they got no response. No food. No drink. At the sleeporium they found that pressing the entrance panel had no effect. The door refused to open.

Ab turned to him. Shadows were congealing around her eyes.

Mike shoved on another unfelt grin. "I've slept on worse than this street, Ab. Lots worse."

They settled down on a tangerine-colored square, backs against the building, boots pointed to the center of the boulevard. Mike shifted his left arm up slightly. Ab took the invitation. She snuggled against the build of his body in the curve of his arm. The smell of her hair was warm and pleasing. Very shortly she'd drifted off. But she whimpered now and then.

All the pavement lights burned through the night. Somehow he was wide awake. He forced himself to remain still

so as not to disturb her. By artificial morning, all the real parts of his body ached.

"Where do we start?" he asked, after two cafes had refused them anything.

"At the cul-de-sac." She was moving briskly again. She even thumbed her nose at the cafe deck as they departed. Her idea was sound: to check the status of the lights before they commenced replaying the pattern.

All the panels in the U had returned to their original, dark state.

"Maybe we're missing the last, right building," Mike offered, yawning.

"Possible."

"Or we're trying to light the wrong set of lights."

"Mike, we've been down every boulevard at least once. There is no other set of lights just like this, looking so obviously like a display. This is the right one."

"I'll take your word."

"Don't sound so bitchy, love."

"Men can't sound bitchy. Grumpy, but not bitchy."

"What you just said isn't grumpiness. It's bitchiness."

"Oh for the—" He stifled the rest. It wasn't her fault.

"Come on," she said.

At her suggestion, they headed to the building which contained the election obelisk. Once more the umber panel admitted them into the dark where the pinspot bathed the black needle. In the gloom they waited.

"Why doesn't it turn on the way . . . ?" he began, and something warned him: a faint *clack* in the obelisk's interior.

He hadn't bothered turning up the circuits all day yesterday. He didn't have them on this morning, either. Lights flashed on over head. The obelisk began to rotate with a grinding noise. It had turned ninety degrees by the time Mike whammed the switch plates with his elbows.

He blurred in front of Ab as the obelisk completed reversing its front. The back flew open—two panels springing out—and Mike had only microseconds to drag Ab up against his chest, whip his body around so that his spine was toward the obelisk as it fired a blizzard of little darts.

The darts penetrated his liberty grays, stuck in the fibers. But the dart tips couldn't penetrate the carapaces of his synthetic back or buttocks. He picked Ab up in his arms and started for the door that was closing.

Blurring, Mike spun again and hit the door with his back.

The door caved outward. He tumbled. His weight crazed, then cracked, then shattered the lime-colored square right outside the building. Ab spilled off. Another blizzard of darts shot from the obelisk. A few whizzed through the open doorway, passing harmlessly overhead.

Mike rolled on his belly. The translucent square changed from lime to gray. Smoke seemed to be whirling underneath it.

The square heated. All the lights in the obelisk building went off. Mike rolled off the square as it turned flaccid, melting. He watched the translucent material soften, drip downward, contour itself over machinery shapes below ground level. Down in the bowels of the street some kind of alarm went *wheep-o, wheep-o*.

At last this sound faded. The melted square solidified around the juts of machinery. The air reeked in an oily way.

"You make it?" Mike panted. He staggered to where Ab was picking herself up.

"Barely, with you to thank. What"—her eyes were large—"happened there?"

Mike looked at the shut building. The umber panel beside the door no longer glowed. He picked up a dart, silver and thin. It whined as he bent it, then snapped in his fingers. He remembered to power down both switches.

"The Game doesn't like us anymore," he said. "Maybe we were getting too close to winning, do you suppose?"

The pretty, twinkling town revealed its deadfalls the rest of the day.

The white financial payoff square squirted no soft bag up at them, but a noxious gas that made them both weep for an hour, even though Mike—operating constantly at half power now; forewarned—sensed the warning hiss, tossed Ab across his shoulder, and ran them two blocks away before the gas gushed out.

The educational sphere harbored a bomb. Mike's cycle-response apparatus picked it up, a tickle, when they were still half a block from the building's entrance. He went back several blocks, broke off a chunk from a cafe baluster. Standing near the building, he threw half the chunk at the door panel to activate it, the other half through the door after it opened. He absorbed the blast without harm at mid-street: fire squirted, smoke billowed, and the building's street wall burst outward. Hiding a block away, Ab's forehead was struck with a fragment.

The building itself did not collapse. Didn't even lean.

Obviously, it had been engineered to withstand a programmed blast.

The moment after Mike stepped one step inside the cul-de-sac, slots below the U of panels discharged a flash of knives. Fully activated, he ran through them—*whing, whang*, they glanced off—and jammed his fingers hard into the nearest slot.

Within the wall, machinery glonked and overrode itself, shutting off. Mike made the mistake of picking up one of the knives, which was deadly keen, and handing it to Ab. She cut herself. She went hysterical, wept. She apologized for half an hour afterward.

A cafe where they ventured opened its deck beneath them. Ab screamed, dropping into darkness full of bubbling and a cesspool stench. Mike kicked both legs behind, slung one hand ahead. Being so tall, he didn't fall through the hole. He hit and braced, a human bridge across the opening. Far down where he couldn't see, his fingers moving at incredible speed caught Ab's hand as she plummeted.

It was some trick to raise her one-handed without breaking her bones. But he did it. He maneuvered her up onto his back. She kneeled on it and, like a child, crawled her way off the log over the gorge.

With a flip, Mike turned over and straightened. He kicked out. He landed on his back on the part of the cafe deck that hadn't dropped.

"It's all a trap," Ab whispered. "Mike, the whole city is a trap."

"Come on," he rumbled, eyeing the awning lenses balefully.

They crept back to the sleeporium which, unaccountably, opened.

Ab sat in his cubicle. He had dialed to lowest light. "Mike, I want to talk."

"Sure, okay."

"I know they can hear us. I don't care."

"Go ahead."

"We were winning. I know we were."

"I had that feeling."

"But then we weren't. It's as if I wrote one equation yesterday and someone sneaked in during the night with a wipe and more chalk, and when I came back again today, there was still an equation but all the terms were different."

"I'm not much for understanding—"

"If there were any rules to begin with, they've changed

them. First when the panels went from colors to black and white—just as we had the idea we'd win the next time through the payoffs. Then everything changed again this morning. The payoffs blew up on us. One minute the cafes feed us, the next they try to murder us. One night we sleep, the next the door's shut fast." She sounded frail as she concluded, "I honestly don't know whether we can win or not."

He stumbled after a thought. "Why would they put all these new things into the Game, I wonder?"

"To make us miserable? To humiliate us? Christ Ancient knows."

He cupped her hand. It was rough trying to keep the discouragement out of his voice. "Well, at least they haven't killed us yet."

She lifted her face. "I was ready to give up at the cul-de-sac. Then I thought the very same thing. We are both alive."

"So I guess we can make another go at it, huh?"

"I guess we can."

She slept all that night on his couch, in his arms, drugged asleep. He was oddly conscious of her body but again, aching, made every effort to lie utterly still.

"Wasn't it white?" Mike yelled.

"White, between the gold and scarlet. Right where you're standing."

Ab called that from the other side of the boulevard. She'd gone there to be certain they hadn't become disoriented, hadn't approached the familiar section of walk from the wrong direction.

She checked reference points, buildings. Then she crossed to where Mike had planted himself with legs wide and fists jammed on his hips. Ab joined him on the scarlet square.

The square adjacent shone with a beige radiance.

Ab squatted. She slid her hand across the seam between squares. "During the night it changed color."

Mike chewed at his lower lip. "How could it do that?"

"Dye injection from the machinery underneath. Little workmen tiptoeing in while we slept our simulated life away. AA, as the space insurers say. How am I supposed to know? It's changed, that's all."

Her palm slid further over the smooth beige surface.

"Not a sign of a gas port, either."

Distracted, Mike eyed the curving street both ways. "What's that AA?"

"Act of the Almighty. It's a clause in contracts in systems where organized religion hasn't collapsed."

"I've never been in one of those."

Her weariness of the night before had been shed in sleep somehow. She seemed more alert, taut. "Shall we see what else they've switched on us?" Without waiting, she tramped off.

The election obelisk was unreachable. The building that contained it now presented a solid exterior at ground level. No door, no colored entrance panel. The lime square that had melted in front of the building was now peacock blue and flush with those surrounding it. The building that housed the mica sphere that awarded learning also had a blank front.

"It's absolutely crazy," was Mike's opinion. "No reason, no rhyme."

"I wouldn't guarantee that," Ab said with a mysterious dark look, rushing off again.

At the cul-de-sac, both stood staring. The long side walls and shorter dead end wall had no panels.

Mike went up from half power to full. He advanced into the short street. He turned, darted left at top speed, skidded up short, rapped his palm on the wall.

"Solid," he called back to her.

"That's about where you shoved your hand into the knife slot."

"I know it is. There's nothing. Not even signs of a repair."

Dispirited, they began to walk aimlessly. Ab kept her head down.

"It sure is smelling all rotten," Mike observed after a while.

"You may accept the trophy for understatement," she returned, caustically.

He wasn't hurt by the remark. He was too busy following his own slow thoughts onward. "They're tricking us by changing things around, just like you said. Maybe it isn't an honest Game. Maybe there's no chance of winning."

With a glance at the lights and lenses above the glimmery black roof, Ab returned, "Maybe you've just discovered why eight billion watch with fascination. But it takes someone sick to enjoy watching a couple of gerbs run around in a mazecage where all the routes to food are blocked. And you know something else? Fochet said this layout was a duplicate of a man's life. In a surreal way, maybe. Only in a surreal way. I just realized something big's missing."

He asked what. She said, "Happiness."

This brought a laugh, which in turn angered her.

"Oh, dungbobs, Mike! I don't mean that kind of happiness. Are you happy?"

"Not right now," he admitted.

"Have you been happy, ever?"

Again he pondered. He replied with honesty, "I don't know."

"Nobody knows. So I'm not talking about happy happiness. That doesn't exist to my knowledge except under drugs or following some of Fochet's social correction therapy. But peace—being satisfied to stop a while, to simply exist—to say, this is acceptable and I'll not get too boxed up trying to change it—do you get that?"

"You mean like when I'm drinking an Orbiter with my feet up?"

"And you don't feel compelled to go anyplace, do anything; yes. Being reasonably content. Reasonably's the operative term. For an hour with your beer. For a megamonth or two with Diego Dieppe on his yacht. For a whole life once you've accepted the way things are and the way you've made them. . . ." Her gray eyes grew sly. She pulled him up short on a magenta square a block from the bottom of the stairs they'd seen on one of the anteroom monitors. "I wonder what would happen if we simply sat down, Mike? Kicked up our shoes and just decided we didn't want any more payoffs. Didn't need them? Wouldn't hunt them?"

"I have a hunch we'd lose," he answered right away.

Laughing, she clouted his shoulder. "So now you know what they've left out of this layout. Why I'm suspecting their honesty more than a little."

Before he could comment, his eye hit something new. "Hey, Ab, look there."

She followed his nod. "That wasn't there before."

"I didn't think so."

"Think so? Know so. We've been up those stairs at least four times."

Dashing, she crossed to the opening of the short street to which he'd pointed. It ran at a right angle from the main boulevard, but was approximately half the length of the other cul-de-sac. It resembled the first one in that panels ran around the sides and across the end. But these panels, all dark, were circles.

"What was here before?" Mike asked.

"A couple of buildings. One was an apparel shop, I think. But that's not the real difference, don't you see? Those panels are round. Everything else—the streets, the door

openers, the cul that vanished overnight—neat squares. They've introduced another new factor."

He eased into the short blind alley, ready. But there were no sudden lethal consequences. When he eased out again, Ab was concentrating on the lenses and lights overhead. Her elation of a few minutes ago was gone.

"What now, Ab?"

"We've only been up a couple of hours. Shouldn't we—?"

"I'm worn out."

"I'm still worn out. I'll continue to call the strategy for this team if you don't mind."

"Sorry."

"Oh, me too." By way of apology she leaned up on the tips of her red boots and smacked him on the lips. Then she tucked his huge fingers inside her smaller ones and led him toward the short flight of stairs. "I saw some benches up there. Let's sit down and collect ourselves."

The small plaza at the top of the stairs was surrounded on three sides by replicas of saberlike buildings. It reminded Mike uncomfortably of his first encounter with Fochet. He didn't complain, though. He sank to the floating bench next to her. For a while they simply stared out across the Game. Even the patterns of colorful lights on the curving streets no longer had any attraction. He was tired, and dully angry.

"You want anything to eat?" Ab asked at last.

He stood up. "Why don't you let me check that cafe a block back? If it's working, I'll sing out."

Her nod said she was grateful. He started down the stairs, did a take, swung back. "Ab?"

"Yes?"

"All the stairs are lighted."

She came to see, but her expression didn't indicate much pleasure. Mike could understand it. This was simply one more incomprehensible introduction of something new. He started down the steps: lavender, lemon, black—

A slot in the black step clicked open, hissed, clicked shut. Mike was already powered up for trouble. He switched down to half again when he saw that all the slot had disgorged was another of those rolled slips.

He unfolded it, read slowly.

"Ab! A hundred thousand kilocreds this time. Twice as many as before."

"It's our lucky day all over again." Her face was expressionless.

Mike trotted down three more steps. The sixth, also a

black, popped out another rolled message. It credited them with another hundred thousand. He approached the final, ninth, bottom step with glee. The moment his right boot hit, the slot operated. He danced around at the base of the stairs:

"Three hundred thousand! Maybe we're onto it this time."

"Have a look at those round panels, why don't you?"

He ran on half power, was back quickly. "Half the circles are turned on. Every one that's lit is golden. Do you suppose—?"

"I suppose we're back in the Game whether we want to be or not," she said as she came down the stairs slowly.

"But Ab, don't you want to earn your passage off Tome?"

"Naturally." Her look was oblique, and strange. "If it's possible."

They began another methodical circuit of the entire Game town. Up one boulevard, down the next. Mike was prepared for danger but there wasn't any. They pressed each and every door panel, pausing only at a cafe to try for food. They got it.

This surprised him. The cafe was the very same one which had opened its deck under them the day before. Now the deck had healed. The bubbles of Orbiter were crystal cold, the melons tangy.

As the pink light began to wane again, they finally encountered another payoff. This one came inside a snack shop, where all the packages inside the scaled-down display banks were dummies. They were about to leave the shop when one of the banks darkened inside.

The dummy containers vanished. The interior of the bank suddenly resembled a fuzzy black hole in space; a place where no light existed in the otherwise brightly lit shop.

Letters in chromatic gold zoomed up from far back in the black, twinkling.

Congratulations to you. The sum now totals plus one million kilocreds.

"Look at the way those letters are twinkling!" Mike whooped. "I bet we've won!"

"Back to the cul-de-sac and we'll see."

They raced, stumbling against each other in their haste. Mike sang a snatch of a bawdy song because he felt, really felt, that this time they'd cracked it.

Several blocks away from the stairs, he couldn't resist hitting both switches with his elbows. He flashed ahead of Ab, then powered off when a quarter of the distance to the

cul-de-sac remained. That way he avoided burning up the pavement with his heels when he braked.

"Ab, they're all lit! Every blessed one!" he yelled, waving his arms and jumping up and down. "Come on, hurry, you'll see!"

"His cheeks shone in the gold glow pouring from all the circular panels. "How do you like that?" he yelled at the ceiling. "How does that hit you, fans? We've lit the whole board—"

The gold circles all went off at once.

Ab reached him a second later. Mike's hands shook. "What happened?" he shouted it more at the ceiling than at her. "What happened?"

She regarded the dark circles with a bitter smile. "We did something wrong. Put it another way. We didn't do something right."

"But we had the whole thing lit! It looked so good, I could have sworn it meant we'd won the—"

"That's the trouble with you, Mike. You expect this Game to be logical."

"Goz right I do. Fochet said we could win, didn't he?"

"He said we could." She emphasized the second word.

"If we can't, somebody's head stands to be cracked." He felt surprised that he'd said that; a little more surprised because he meant it.

Ab acted tired again. The buildings glowed. The pink light level had decreased noticeably. Another whole day gone? Mike couldn't believe it.

"Come on, love," she said. "Buy me supper and then we'll start over again."

"We'll win next time," he vowed. "I know we will."

She didn't reply.

The cafe they selected proved generous. It offered up cheeses, loaves and an unusually large number of bubbles of beer, plus glasses of the anise-flavored nutrient too. Mike jammed half a cheese and half a loaf down between guzzles of beer. Then he tossed off a glass of nutrient. The combination made him drunk.

Ab opened her kit. She looked as drunk as he felt. She took out a small stylus and a tablet, began making marks which he presumed to be poetry. In between lines, she drank bubbles of Orbiter in three swallows.

Mike sank deeper and deeper into lethargy. The Game became a pretty, smeary span of colors. He reminded himself that they should start playing again. But the beer and

nutrient had all gone to the human part of his head, creating a tremendous indifference.

"Ab?" he muttered after a while.

She was concentrating on the tablet. "Yum?"

"How long we been here?"

"Three days. Or does this make four? Anyway, I think tomorrow makes five." She added a syllable Mike didn't get. Obviously it signified disgust. She tore the tablet into confetti and rained it between her legs. She scuffed her boots back and forth across the bits before putting her stylus back into her kit and closing the flap with the word Eros on it.

"Mike?"

"Yeh, sweetheart?" He didn't feel a whit embarrassed over the unexpected word.

Tears weeped at the corners of her eyes. "We'll win this. I promise we will."

"I had the feeling all along you thought we couldn't."

She weaved back and forth, crying and repeating, "We will." Suddenly she gripped her belly. "Mikel! Take me someplace. I'm sick."

He helped her up. She groaned. He smelled the ripe stench of beer on her mouth. But even as he helped her, he had to know something.

"You say we will because you think we will or because you hope we will?"

"Because we've got to."

"Here I thought you believed nobody could win anything, anytime." She slid against him as they left the deck. Her hair hung in her eyes. "What's this place doing to us anyway? Now me, I used to think I could win everything. I always knew I'd come out right side first no matter wh— watch the step, Ab."

Her boot slid off the riser. He didn't catch her fast enough. She tumbled the rest of the way to the bottom. All Mike could think of as he ran down and picked her up gently were staring eyes. Staring lenses.

The sleeporium refused to admit them. They slept on the sidewalk, drunk.

Mike positioned himself at the entrance to the cul-de-sac or circle panels. From there he watched Ab ready herself on the second step from the top of the plaza stairs. She wobbled. Neither had wanted to try a cafe this morning. Neither thought their bellies would take an ounce of anything.

Ab pressed her fingers to her right eye as if thrusting back a pain.

"The black one," her voice drifted.

"All three of the black ones." He kept his eye on the dark circles.

She slid her right boot over the edge, stepped down on the third step.

Instantly the horizontals and verticals of the staircase flattened to a plane inclined at forty-five degrees toward the pavement at the bottom. The row of squares at the base of the stair all flipped upward vertically, hinged on the side nearest Mike. Ab slid down the incline on her bottom, yelling.

A slathering sound of metal fans beat into Mike's circuits as he went up from half the circuits to all. She focused on the sound source. In the street, in the opening created by the panels flipping up. He couldn't see the source because the panels stood up between him and the stairs. He turned on speed.

Ab's hair became a spot of fire in the center of the blur of everything else. Screaming, she was half way down the incline. Sliding fast; unable to stop.

The slathering was louder as he kicked two of the panels, snapped their hinges, sent them sailing away. They lost definition as they revolved, dissolved into the soft welter of lighted shapes surrounding him. He no longer saw Ab clearly. She was only a spot of fire that streaked and glittered in a rush to the bottom of the flattened stairs—

He jumped through the opening where he'd kicked the panels out. Somewhere the panels struck and exploded with long, soft noises. His metal-sheathed legs plunged down into the hole at the bottom of the incline. The slathering noise changed to a tinny racket.

He smacked his fists against the incline. The tinny racket gave way to snapping and fuming smoke. His fists bashed holes in the incline. He tucked his fingers over into them, kicking off the right underarm switch so his strength wouldn't tear the holes into bigger ones.

The whirling fans below street level cracked themselves against his calves, knees, thighs. The blades went *snap* and *spang*. Ab came sliding down the incline like a rocket. Her momentum carried her up and over his gripping hands.

He shoved his head forward. Her breastbone struck his olefin hair. His head absorbed the impact, arrested her slide. The edges of the holes he'd created for gripping

crumbled. With Ab pushing against him, he began to slide waist deep into the breaking machinery.

At half power he could see more clearly. On his right, other fans hidden below the street at the base of the stairs continued to revolve at blur speed. The hand holes kept crumbling, enlarging. He dropped further into the pit under the fans his legs had broken. His boots hit a housing that generated heat. He could brace on it.

He worked his right hand out of the crumbly hole in the incline. He gathered a bunch of Ab's black hugger blouse, picked her up and flung her.

She flew back into the street, hit with a crunch that terrified him. He shoved off, jumped high. He twisted in mid-air, landing on one leg on the pavement behind the vertical panels. The panels began to close, but laboriously. Their hinges squealed as Mike spun over on his side and crashed.

The impact crazed several squares. The stairs accordioned back into their normal state. The panels finally shut, cutting down the amount of smoke pouring from underneath the street. He powered off completely.

He shoved up on his palms. The snapping and spanging of metal faded out. The smoke dwindled to trickles. From beneath the street two new panels slid in to replace the ones Mike had kicked away. Except for smoke and a scatter of rubble, all was normal again.

Except Ab. How about Ab? He ran on all fours, like an animal.

He smelled her mouth. Warm breath there. He poked and prodded. Nothing broken, so far as he could tell.

But she was still. So still. Her skin was ivory yellow. Her eyelids were traced through with thin blue veins.

Slowly Mike stood up. The trousers of his liberty grays hung in long ribbons. He examined the skinlike sheathing of his legs. Unbroken. But the rags of his pants told him how sharp the whirling fan blades had been. Ab would have been chopped small and red.

He hauled her up in his arms. He cradled her and talked to her till she woke.

When she did, she was winded and frightened, then furious.

She thrust Mike away, stalked off, her head going back. She yelled at the black ceiling in a coarse voice.

"You hear me up there? I know you do. So you listen. You

know what I think about you people of Tome? I think you're all liars. Liars' and maybe worse—crazy! You know what I think about this Game of yours? It's a lie too. Nobody can win because something different happens every other minute. I don't think you change the rules. I don't think there *are* any rules, that's the only rule there is. I've smelled you out, haven't I? Your dirty Game's a dirty lie, do you hear me? There aren't any rules, do you hear me?"

Doyouhearme? Doyouhearme? went the echo, around and around.

Up above the black ceiling the lights shone and the lenses glimmered in silence.

It seemed to Mike that they waited an unreasonable time for an answer. Unreasonable because he soon decided that they weren't going to get one.

Apparently Ab had different ideas. Or different hopes. She stayed in that chin-up-and-mad pose quite a while, daring the black roof to respond. Her breast moved fast as she breathed. She held her lips slightly open, showing her teeth. It did nothing for her looks.

Should he tell her to give up? He thought she should be bright enough to know it. She was. What held her, probably, was anger. She was still leaning up off the heels of her boots. The whole line of her body seemed to point upward. Demanding. Defying.

Still, he was getting edgy, just waiting. He cleared his throat. So if he did make her madder. He coughed, loudly.

The rattle broke her trance. She turned to him as if in a slo-mo fax. Her gray eyes leaped out large. He started back a step. He'd never seen her so wild with anger.

Had she guessed his impatience? "Ab, I didn't mean—"

She barked out her disgust, a monosyllable. Ran at him. He dodged aside in surprise. She plunged past. Slow, he didn't understand what she meant to do till she was doing it.

"Don't take a chance—!" he yelled.

Crash! her boots came down solid on the lowest black stair. She bounded up to the next and stomped it. Then to the top one, kicking that solidly too. Her hair was loose, wild, giving her a hysterical look.

She jumped on the top black stair a second time. Then down to the middle one. He started to warn her again but didn't, since the staircase hadn't flattened and the panels hadn't popped up to start the bladed fans slathering.

A question was working its way to his throat. He held

back because she was stabbing her hand in the air, finger extended.

He got the idea that she wanted him to turn. He did. Although he couldn't see directly into the nearby cul-de-sac from his position, he saw the gold light pouring out, bathing the boulevard.

On and off, on and off, the circles were operating again.

Ab tore down the staircase, clawed his arms, danced around. He didn't like her this wild, saying to him, "All right, love, let's beat it. Fast as we can. *Fast*, hear? Every payoff, no special order, I'll go one way, you go another. Find the payoffs and hit them!"

"Too dangerous," he shook his head. "What if something else happens like the fan blades and I'm not there?"

She slapped his shoulder. "Dunce, don't think that way."

"Which way?"

"Any way that makes sense. There are no rules, remember? There mustn't be rules for the way we play, either. I'm going. I'll see you. Wave if you see me down a cross street. Light anything and everything you can. Think like a lunatic. We'll win!"

Her red hair trailed off her shoulders as she bolted down the street past the cul-de-sac where the circles kept flashing gold.

He considered heading out on his own, as she'd ordered. He didn't because he still believed it was too dangerous for her to be alone. So he powered up to half and went loping after her.

Ahead, around a street curve, her laughter whooped back. Nearly being hashed by the fan blades had unhinged her, he decided unhappily.

To keep up his end of things he hit panels at each door he passed. He didn't bother to see whether the buildings opened, though. He concentrated on watching out ahead. By applying speed he brought her into sight, a frail figure dancing from one side of the street to the other.

Her red hair flew and so did her short cape. She hit colored panels with one hand, two hands, or by leaping up and kicking them. It was, Mike thought as he loped in pursuit, like watching a dancer crazy with narcotics.

In keeping track of her he lost track of himself. Dodging crosswise through the Game on one street, back the other way on another, he paid little attention to his whereabouts. Countless times he nearly lost her as she whooped and

danced her way among the lights. All at once, conscious of no wall to his right, he wheeled.

There, in the original cul-de-sac, the U of panels was lit, alternating back and white.

"Ab, where are you?" he shouted. "C'mere and see—"

With a funny, short, electronic sound like *choy! choy! choy!* the walls below the panels disgorged tiny missiles. Mike switched on as the missiles from the wall on his right turned left, the missiles from the wall on his left turned right, and both clusters joined a third whooshing straight out from the wall at the dead end.

He kicked hard against the pavement. His body shot forward in a smear, going horizontal. He broke his fall with palms, cracking three street squares simultaneously.

The missiles whined through space where he'd been. They impacted the building on the other side of the street, popping off smoke and raspberry sparks. Under Mike the three cracked panels emitted fizzing sounds as they blacked out.

Far away, black-and-red indicated Ab. He waved. Then he realized his arm would be going so fast she couldn't see. Off went the switches. He substituted his voice for a wave:

"The first panels are back and—what's that? I can't hear you."

Drifting: "—beige square back to white—payoff—"

He blazed down to her at half speed. Sweaty-faced, she dropped a small bag from shaking fingers to his steadier ones.

"The payoff's back, Mike."

He laughed big. "Then let's hit it again, huh? Harder?"

"Harder!" she screamed, charging off.

Sure enough, the white fifty kilocred square had returned. Mike unrolled the slip Ab had given him as they raced up to the square. At half power he bounced up and down on the square. It shot up a bag every time, fourteen bags in all. Ab ran squealing to and fro, catching them. She was like a wild woman but he felt a little wild himself. Suddenly the square shot up just a gust of air. Its lights faded. It turned marbley, streaked.

"We took all it's got!" he crowed.

"Let's see how the panels are doing, come on!"

Her wail trailed after her. He ran at half speed, picking up the half dozen bags she dropped as she bounded to a cafe, screaming that she was thirsty. She beat on the square that activated the cafe, using both hands. The awning over the deck dropped suddenly, lenses and all.

He bawled her name, switching to full. He scooped her out from under just before the awning came down in a

crash of struts and minilenses whose connectors blazed afire as they tore apart.

Dust from the crash sifted through Ab's hair, turned it white. She was shaking violently in his arms. There was a mad look in her eyes, a mad grin on her mouth.

"See, we've got it running, lover. We're being as crazy as it is and it can't keep up!" With a bound she tore away.

"Are you drunk or—?" He choked it off, hurrying to catch her. He closed the distance as she reached the larger cul-de-sac, doubled in wild mirth.

"Pretty as novas! Come on, Mike, hurry!"

All the panels in the U flamed on and off, no two colors alike. Their reflections glistened on her sweaty face.

"I'll bet the other payoffs are all open, Mike. You can't catch me!"

He did have trouble. At half power he barely kept her in view. Of course he wasn't pushing extra hard, being afraid of this wild thing she'd become.

She rushed inside the educational payoff building which had, unaccountably, appeared where there had last been a blank, sealed wall. She rushed out as he arrived. In her hands she held a mica-bright sphere trailing colored cables that spit. She pried the sphere in half, dug her hand inside. The sphere gave a sort of squeal. With a cackling, "Aha!" she unfurled the *Full Education Completed* and draped it around her neck.

She flung the halves of the sphere in different directions. Where they hit pavement squares, explosions went off. The street shook. Craters appeared in the wake of the smoke.

Ab dodged around one, started to fall in another. Mike turned up full, flew across the crater, hit her in mid-air and carried her forward from the pit to the pavement.

They went down tumbling and tangled. As they separated, she kept laughing, louder and louder. Hysterical. She was hysterical. She ran on.

Mike realized the quality of light had changed again. Throughout the Game, all the pavement squares plus all the squares beside the doors were turning on and off. Some slowly. Others rapidly. All changed colors with each flash. Ab disappeared around the curve ahead.

A building on Mike's right split down the front. The facade folded back. Only powering up, hurling on, kept him from being hit by projectiles that chattered down from ten identical, pierced silver tubes mounted on a column in the center of the building. The projectiles hit street and

buildings opposite and blew them up, adding smoke to the colors.

Up ahead, he glimpsed Ab again. She was passing the smaller cul-de-sac. It was rippling with lights of all hues. She zigzagged her way to the top of the stairs leading to the small plaza. Like a drunken long-legged bird she began kicking the top black stair. She didn't see the threat behind her. But Mike did.

As if its solidity were gone, the saberlike building that faced the stairs across the square bent, curved forward, its top falling over like the tip of a melting crescent moon. Under that building, which didn't collapse so much as melt and tilt at the same time, Ab would be caught dancing on the top step—

On full power, he ran as he seldom did. Alarm circuits warned of serious overload. The bolts in his joints grew hot as he streaked out of concrete reality into the neverland of shapeless horizontal lights.

He snagged her into his arms. His right leg, out straight, broke two stairs as he kicked off. Holding her, he jumped high in the air and backwards, out from under the descending building.

They tumbled over and over in the air. He accidentally let go of her. Her face sailed past his eyes, a white and scarlet smear. His buttocks struck the pavement, blasting a hole. He sank down, pulled himself out. She was still up in the air, falling with the back of her head and her neck downward.

Falling that way, she'd crack her spine. He accelerated all the way up. His body began to smell of charring. He blurred underneath her. Instead of the pavement her head burrowed into the softer part of his belly.

He kicked off his switches with his elbows as he struck the street again, this time with Ab on top of him. A small slice of time had gone by, no more. The building, falling fast for all its flaccidity, only now reached the stairs and collapsed them thunderously.

Ab sat up. Her head was cocked. She rubbed her right pelvis.

"I think you broke me up, Mike. In several places."

"Hope not."

His nose tubes fed the smell of drifting smoke into his mind, making his artificial eye ducts water. He sat on his pratt and scratched his olefin hair. She said presently:

"The Game came close to killing us."

"Or the other way around."

"What was I doing?" She said, working her jaw right and left.

"Can't properly describe it. You acted out of your head."

"That's an obscene lie. I've never been out of my head in my life except in the call of duty." She glared. "Passion, you ape. Pass—" Noticing the pleading grin on his face, she laughed too.

In truth he didn't feel amused. Just the opposite. Fear crawled in him because of the sinister, lazy way the street squares and door panels flickered on and off and on in the smoke.

"I think you wanted to win the Game by being crazy too," he said.

"Christ Ancient, did I?" A pause. "I guess I did. Blasphemous."

"Well," he unfolded his legs, rose, began to dust off, "we might as well go see whether anything worthwhile is still lit. We might—"

"Mike."

Her voice sounded so old. Terrified of it, he turned. "Yes?"

"We're not going anywhere."

"What?"

"We're not playing any longer."

He made no sense of it: "What? Ab, if we're going to win—"

"You shut up. Who's the brains of this team?"

"You, but—"

"Then let me be then!"

She was on her feet again, all humor gone, all joy, all softness too. Nothing was left save the same tension he'd seen when she condemned the ceiling lights and lenses earlier. This time, the tension was so strong that he actually felt it in the real sections of his plexus.

Ab ran to the rubble pile where the building had collapsed on the stairs, obliterating them. She scrambled up to the top of the pile, nearer the ceiling.

"You know what you're doing?" he yelled.

She showed him the glare of her teeth. "I didn't five minutes ago. I do now." Then, fishwife-loud and straight up: "We're not playing any more. We'll sit right here on our behinds till you send the gerry wagons, but we're not playing. I was wrong this morning. You do have rules in this Game and I've figured them out this far—no sane person can understand them. They have no relation to a real world, a real life, except on the surface. On the surface it looks like

we could win because this Game looks a little bit like reality. Only a little bit. Underneath, the rules are for madmen. They're rules for a reality we don't know anything about because I'm sane, he's sane—so how can we possibly out-guess your Game and win it? The Game is like your masks. The reality on the outside is a sham. It looks familiar but the purpose is really to hide what's underneath, not mirror what's outside. I've figured out what made Tome smell bad, do you know? I thought the masks reflected the way you live and so did he, the poor dumbbell, but all they really do is hide it. We've seen under the masks. Blotches! Grotesques! Perversions! It's the same with this Game. We've seen. The rules don't apply to me. They don't apply to him. Never can. Never will. We're sane. You're not." She shook her fist at the glimmery black. "We're through playing!"

For a while Mike wondered whether they'd be struck down by sizzling bolts from above. He didn't catch a lot of what she yelled but he couldn't doubt her conviction. He figured she would make the watchers furious.

All the colored pavement squares began to darken. All the door admittance panels did too. Then a silence filled the ruins, and widened. Mike heard sounds receding as mechanisms under the pavement shut down.

The Game grew dimmer and, finally, dark. Ab's shadow was very long as she clambered down from the rubble pile. She was like a phantom, tramping back to him, swirling the smoke. Only the lights beyond the ceiling illuminated her.

Excited, Ab kissed him hard on the mouth. Then she hugged him around the neck.

"We've got them by the scrote now, love. Yes we have." She kissed his ear.

"Yeh, but what happens now we've quit? Something pretty bad, I'll bet."

She drew back to arm's length. She didn't look worried. Not nearly so worried as he felt in the sudden absence of light. She was actually smiling. She began to hum as she opened her kit, took out her tortoise comb and combed dust from her hair.

Her back remained turned to the rubble over the stairs. Thus he saw the figure before she did. He warned her by calling her name.

"Uh?" She blinked in mid-comb.

"He's coming." Mike mouthed it, absolutely unable to

take his eyes from the figure clambering ungracefully across the rubble. He'd recognized Executive Fochet instantly.

As Fochet approached through the smoke his coppery mask floated, as if there was no body below. Then his drab brown tunic suit reappeared as his passing stirred smoke eddies. Head and body united again. Fochet stopped. His mask shook enough to be noticeable.

With a sweet smile Ab faced around to him. Nodded. "Executive Fochet."

"I am here to insist that you continue the Game."

"Insist away. We're not going to."

"But—"

"You heard Ab, didn't you? If she says it's crazy, it's crazy. We quit."

The eyeholes lingered on Mike a moment. Fochet spread his hands in the air. "There is no precedent or provision for—"

"There is now," Ab returned cheerfully.

"You do not underst—"

"I certainly do," she interrupted. "You almost had us. We were running around like crazy people ourselves, trying to outguess this—whatever it is. Not a mirror of reality, that's for certain. Not a mirror of my reality, or his. It's very simple, Executive. There is absolutely no way for a sane person to enter the mind of someone who isn't and comprehend what goes on. But that's what you wanted us to do, for your amusement. Or satisfaction?" Toss of her comb in her hand. "I pity whatever drives you to it. But we just aren't having any, any more."

Fochet trembled. "You dare to denounce the Game?"

"Not only that, we're denouncing you, your fish-eyed eight billion; Tome too." She laughed. "How do you like that. Executive?"

"What you are doing—questioning—" Fochet sounded breathy, confused—"unspeakable—unthinkable—" The words drowned in puffing.

Ab smiled. "You mean you deny those masks are meant to hide the faces of people sick with the torment of their own lives?"

"I deny. Categorically. I deny."

"You deny Tome's an insane society?"

"I deny. Emphatically, I—"

"The hell," Ab laughed, darting in. She seized his mask at the throat and ripped it off.

Mike bellowed like a gored bull gorilla when he saw the anguished, misshapen face with the jaws locked in frenzy,

the eyes glaring, the white hair stringing down on both sides, untrimmed, uneven. Eyes, teeth—those were bright; but the rest was lumpy and awful.

Fochet grappled the mask from Ab's hands. She didn't resist. The sight had stricken her too. Fochet quickly fitted the hoodlike headpiece in place.

Then, as if she had to do something to overcome her shock, she started laughing.

"Stop that, please," Fochet whispered. The copper mask caught flares from the ceiling. The sculptured smiling mouth winked. "Will you please stop that?"

Ab laughed louder. Mike began to feel chilly. Afraid.

"Stop that. I ask you to please stop that."

She laughed louder, in peals. Her red hair shook and shimmered. Her shoulders jerked. The laughter went higher.

Fochet's hands closed in fists at his sides. Up in the rubble of the square Mike glimpsed men in brown robes with copper faces coming to lend Fochet support. That made him all the more afraid.

The scars on Fochet's hands drained of color. "Stop that. I order you to stop that. I order you to stop immediately. Immediately."

They were in for it now, Mike thought, while Ab went on laughing with tears and deafening noise.

PART III

THE EXORCISM

Executive Fochet took them to the scene of the first interviews.

They didn't tumble to this until the Aquarian Stairs loomed into sight. The stairs were deserted. They'd emerged from the Game at night. Extremely late at night to judge from the emptiness of the streets.

Fochet had not spoken to them. He walked ahead, leaving his underlings to surround them. No hands were laid on Ab or Mike at any time.

"Break for it?" Mike whispered as they crossed the small plaza at the top of the stairs. He wanted to, desperately.

Ab smiled a wicked smile. "Let's not. Let's see what he proposes. It might not be so distasteful."

"Huh?" He blinked. "I don't get it." He looked nervously at their escorts, who might or might not have heard. "I thought you'd signal to cut for it before this."

Again that odd glint in her gray eyes. "We owe him some kind of accounting, love. Don't look so rabby. He's defensive, we're not."

"You're not."

"Come on, where's that old hiphooray optimism?"

He admitted, "Gone. Same place that swallowed up the old you. The one so down on everything. I think you're having fun." He shivered.

"You know," she said with another funny glance, "you could be right? Or is it that I think we really can beat-hush. Here we go."

They entered the familiar building, which was lit but empty. Their footfalls rustled away and away in the silence. Fochet's tunic suit vanished ahead of them up the tube.

Mike wondered why he still felt so frantically frightened. At any time he could hit the switches and jelly half their guards, maybe more, in a swipe. He knew the answer, though. That kind of stuff wasn't good enough to win this game, small g.

Their escorts rode up the tube below them. They accompanied Mike and Ab into the waiting room. Miserably, Mike wished he knew what was ahead. He hoped Ab did. Fochet's private door recessed. They went through. The escorts stayed put. The inner door shut.

Familiar, this. The dull brown carpet. Fochet already seated at his undecorated floating desk. Mike let Ab claim the floating pillow. She did it with grace, appearing relaxed. Through the one porthole, the long march of saber-like buildings seemed harsh. From a height and at a distance, their glow didn't soften them appreciably. The view screens on the wall, all shut off, reflected varying degrees of highlight. Had Fochet turned the illumination level up?

With folded hands and mask in place Fochet said, "I believe I should state my position."

Politely, Ab said, "If you wish."

"For the first time in my lifetime, the Game had been canceled before completion. This is due to your refusal to continue."

"You know why we refused," she came right back.

"I heard your incomprehensible rantings from the rubble heap. I did not begin to understand—"

"Oh bother," Ab grumped. "Must we start lying again? Is this place lensed? Are you trying to make an impression on someone who's not here?"

The white hairs on the backs of Fochet's hands vibrated, the only sign he'd tightened his interlaced fingers. How Mike wished he could get a look behind the blackness of those eyeholes and—oh, no. He really didn't wish that one bit. He'd already seen.

"I am in complete charge here," Fochet answered.

She smiled. "Does that mean you're more mad? Or less?"

Fochet reacted with a jerk. "Young woman, do you understand the position of you and your friend?"

"Surely. I even understand your position, Executive. That's really what makes you sweat, eh?"

Mike hoped she wouldn't keep up that badgering. It could only land them in worse difficulty. Fochet's voice quivered like his hands when he said:

"I won't suffer your insults. You're the ones who have offended—"

"Offended?" Ab cried, half on her feet.

"—offended the citizens of Tome. Obscenely offended them! You committed an unthinkable, barbaric act by refusing to continue. When you questioned the rules of the Game, you insulted the entire citizenry. The rules of the Game are based upon the mores—the very civilization—of Tome itself."

To this Ab replied with a word Mike'd never heard a woman use before, and few spacers, either. If Fochet under-

stood, he pretended otherwise. He allowed Ab to wait, to figure she hadn't been heard, to start again.

"Stop the con, sir. Stop the lies. I told you, we recognized them for madmen's rules."

"Nonsense, young woman. This is an ordered, peaceful society."

"Outwardly."

"What do you mean, outward—?"

"Take off the mask."

Again he reacted as if struck. There was a longer interval before he marshaled his next attack.

"Your remark is irrelevant. Do you deny the evidence of your senses?" Gesture to the porthole, the night city. "Is that proof of disorder? On the contrary."

"It's pretty outside, Executive Fochet. Pretty outside and putrid inside. You still don't understand me. Your rules as you call them may work for you. They may make sense to you. But they don't to us. They don't *hibe*, register, mesh, *comprend*? Get it clear. I refuse to accept rules that have no basis in sanity. I refuse to accept a society that lives by such rules. So does he."

"Permit the spaceman to speak for himself!"

"Whatever she says . . ." Mike let it trail lamely away.

The end had to come pretty soon, he decided. Ab couldn't lay it out much more clearly—or heavily—than she already had. He anticipated a death pronouncement. Willingly following her because she understood it all far better than he ever could, he still felt a kind of sadness. It would probably wind up with him turning up full power on both switches, and starting a fight to hurt Fochet and this place as much as possible before the robed civil servants descended to overwhelm them.

The lengthening silence tended to confirm that it would end that way. Sad, having to fight, maybe maim, maybe kill, because there was no other option left. How could there possibly be, though?

Feeling that way, Mike nearly passed out when Fochet said, "I am prepared to come to terms."

Ab squinted sideways at Mike. Her gray eyes were glitery. She didn't hold the glance long, leaping on Fochet with, "What kind of terms?"

"One moment. Bear in mind that my offer in no way countenances any of the accusations you have made."

"Yes, yes, right," Ab exclaimed, "go on."

"It's just that your behavior has been so disgraceful that the government could face a scandal which your continued

presence on Tome might only prolong. I offer you both fully paid passage off Tome, first class ticketing, on the earliest departing vessel."

Big Mike couldn't control his whoop. He had a huge grin on his face before he realized that Ab was staring at him hard. Not smiling.

"Not on your universal welfare number." She said it more to him than to Fochet. "No, sir. No deal."

Suddenly he simmered. "It's what we've wanted, Ab!"

"If we say yes, he wins. Can't you get that?"

"I can't," he growled. "I'm too dumb."

"Mike, Mike," she breathed, softening down because she knew he was wounded and sore. "He's just admitted everything I said is true. This planet's sick and we've found it out. Of course he wants to get rid of us. We can't go. We've got to stay and rub his nose in it. Let the Executive know some can't be bought, some can't be scared, some still see this world for what it is." She faced the eyeholes in the smiling copper mask, and was like a queen. "Clearly."

Fochet pressed his palms on his desk top. "Name your price, then."

"He's running, love." Ab jumped up, circled half around the floating desk so that Fochet reared back and almost toppled off his pillow. Mike had never seen her so glare-eyed. A hunter. All crouching, cruel angles. "See him run?"

Fochet's voice whistled through the mask like wind in reeds. "I—want—you—off—Tome. What will it take? What's the cost?"

She spat on the desk, then laughed. "Nothing."

"Young woman, there's hardly a thing I cannot offer—"

"Damn, Ab," Mike cried, "take him up!"

"No, Mike, please. Let me handle—"

"Then explain to me!"

"Can't you see? We can't play by his rules— The minute we do we accept them."

"That's pretty fine philosophy stuff for a freak to understand. All a freak wants to do is leave."

Her shoulders collapsed. Her face looked hurt. "Oh, Mike. Forgive me."

"You just make me feel stupid."

"But you trust me. You do trust me?"

"Well, sure. We're a team." His frustration was going. And the anger with it. What was this rotten world doing to him? He'd never felt thick in his life before. Nor unhappy about it. The trouble was, he just couldn't stay mad at her for long.

She was watching him, closely. He shrugged. Faced away. Repeated, "Sure."

Now Fochet was frost. "My final offer—"

"Already rejected," Ab smiled.

"Then I can only promise you that consequences of a serious if not fatal nature will result if you choose to stay on Tome. You cannot flaunt your defiance of the law of this society."

"Madman's law, Fochet. We reject it."

He leaped up, straining across the desk with both hands jammed down hard on the palms. "You—you—"

Ab laughed out loud. Fochet somehow folded his fingers beneath his palms and bore down on his knuckles until the skin scars were livid. His cleft-chin mask began to shake a little. A gargly sound came from behind it. Ab laughed again, a tinkly sound. Fochet shook harder.

"All it takes to drive a crazy man crazy is the truth," she said. "Shall we get out of here, love?"

Mike did so, gladly.

On the way down, every step, every level in the tube, he felt certain they'd be buzzed, beamed, or otherwise done away with. Ab was in high spirits. Humming. He wondered about her while he kept a watchful eye out.

His boots went *chack* as they crossed the building's ground level hall. He didn't release his tight breath until they stepped outside into the soft cleanliness of the night city. Then he spun on her.

"Was that smart? We're probably public enemies one and two by now."

"I'm sure we are," she agreed, tucking in her hugger blouse, patting off a speck.

"Then was it smart?"

"Maybe not smart. Right."

"Will you please tell me why—?"

"Because, Mike, this is a sick society. You saw under the masks. You played their Game. Look. There have been other sick societies in the stars before. Gone rotten with war. Soft living. Hypocrisy. There are causes up to here. Why Tome is sick I don't know. Maybe I never will, but it's plain it is. It's no sin to be sick and hunt a cure. But to deliberately hide sickness, to pretend there's no pus inside the boil, it can't be tolerated."

He was repelled by the shape her mouth had taken. From that reaction he got his first true measure of how much she believed what she was saying.

"Irrationality must be called to account, Mike, when human beings are irrational. Nobody but other human beings can do that. Must do that. No matter how much it hurts. No matter how dangerous it is. Humanity itself is the cause, Mike. Tome has to be called to account in the name of humanity. We have to stay because Fochet is terrified we will—and that means I'm right. I think we can win, too. I think—"

She saw his fierce, bewildered stare. Laughed at herself as she inhaled. Leaned into him with her breasts touching. Bent her head, closed her eyes briefly, so like a woman. It was a dirty weapon, he thought, with admiration.

"That'll teach you to throw in with a professional woman, huh?"

"I don't mind," he lied. "I wish I understood better, is all."

"You said you thought Tome was an attractive place at first."

"Right."

"But you don't think so now."

"Nah. It's weird. The prettiness is all outside."

"And they won't admit to what's underneath." She flung her arms wide. "You've got it all! Don't trouble yourself about the rest. Just remember this. We're sane. They're not."

He wasn't entirely positive about that. He refrained from saying so, though. He'd trusted her this far. He couldn't abandon her. And he wouldn't be such a dope as to explain that part of the reason was that she was a woman, and all of a sudden acting with a wild confidence he didn't share. He was a man. Pretty powerful when he had to be. She might need him. Wouldn't admit it, of course. But she might. He'd stay with her. He felt forlorn about it.

They started strolling. They headed across the plaza to the Aquarian Stairs. Mike kept busy watching for signs of trouble. Up a far boulevard, three figures in masks glided, tiny as toys. Otherwise no one was stirring anywhere.

Or so Mike thought until they began to descend the stairs. A figure separated from a shadow cast by one of the zodiac statues.

Ab saw it too. Mike tensed up. They kept moving, down a step, down another. Mike edged his elbows toward the switch plates. Abruptly the lounging figure faced into the light.

Mike recognized the blotchy face pulled all to the right side. Highlighted, moist, the man's right pupil yawed to the right corner of his eyeball.

"It's the mate from the vive place," Mike breathed.

"Evening," Swann greeted them. "That was a heroic thing you did. My congratulations. Those of us in the Downbelow actually broke out applauding."

"Thanks." Ab started on past.

"Wait." Swann caught her arm. She whipped away. He shrugged, as if to apologize.

"Well?" Ab said.

"I rushed over here as soon as the com network flashed word that you'd been taken to the government complex. I was prepared to wait all night. I didn't think they'd release you so soon. . . ." He hesitated. So far, he hadn't gotten through Ab's coldness. "Please," he said. "My mission's friendly."

"Maybe you didn't expect them to release us at all?" Mike chimed in.

"Oh, no," Swann shook his head. "Punishment on Tome isn't violent or overt. It's very subtle." His expression said vile.

"We accept your congratulations," Ab told him in a flip, almost cruel way. Plainly she found the man distasteful. Mike didn't blame her. Those blotches, that hopping eye—yug. "Thanks and good night."

"But I came here to invite you to the Downbelow."

Ab swung around. "The Downbelow?"

"Yes."

"Why would we want to go there?"

"To feel a little more free," he replied, glancing over Ab's shoulder in a way that was meant to add significance.

Both Mike and Ab turned. Two civil servants in copper masks stood in the entrance to the government building housing Fochet's office.

Ab looked at Mike. He scowled, then shrugged.

"I expect they'll never say a word to you," Swann advised. "But they will follow you. Watch you. That's why I came right up from the Downbelow to tender the invitation."

Mike said to Ab, "I want to check this out." He began walking.

Ab followed him to Aleph's at a brisk pace. The waiter, Neel, served them promptly but did not speak or linger. Mike fidgeted. Somewhere along the way, Swann had disappeared.

Across the boulevard, the team of observers could be seen. They didn't move. They simply waited.

"I should take it as another sign we're right," Ab told him. "But it irritates me."

With Mike leading the way, they tried to shake off the followers by walking fast and making frequent turns. At the end of an hour it became obvious they couldn't do it. Fochet's men knew the city better than they did. Unexpectedly, Swann drifted into sight around the corner. His eye was walled out to the right. His teeth shone with spit as he smiled.

"You won't be troubled this way in the Downbelow. They never bother us down there. One day they'll rue being so careless," he added with a malicious glare at the observers halted a block back.

Speculatively, Ab asked, "You don't like the life up here much?"

"Detest it. That's why we live where we do."

She turned her head. Mike saw what she wanted. He signaled okay with a nod.

"Let's have a look at the Downbelow," she said.

With an abrupt giggle, Swann hurried off. His jumping eye flashed out of the darkness into which he led them.

They dropped down a tube smoothly, without turbulence. The tube's circumference would only accommodate one person so Swann dropped first. Ab was next above him at a safe interval. Mike, on top, descended last. His shoulders scraped the sides of the tube. Each time this happened, his metal bones picked up vibrations, some heavy, some light.

"These are so narrow because only service personnel use them," Swann called up. "Seldom more than two or three come down at once. Many times, just one man comes down."

"How many people live in the Downbelow?" Ab asked.

As they dropped through darkness, Swann's voice echoed. "Honestly I can't tell you. Thousands, I think. You seldom see more than a couple of hundred in one place."

"And you all squeeze up and down tubes like this?" Mike grunted to show what he thought of the idea.

"It's handy," Swann answered. "This is a huge city, you know. It extends for kiloms in all directions. A staggering amount of equipment is required to keep it running. There's a service tube every three, maybe four blocks in any direction. You only have to know the locations and how to jim the entrance hatches the way I did."

Between the tips of his boots Mike saw Ab's red hair gleaming like a wire cap. Below her, and below the gently bouncing black shape of Swann, light drifted into the tube

horizontally from many levels and many positions around the circumference.

"How'd you learn all that?" Ab wanted to know.

"It's passed on from one person to the next," Swann replied. "Locations, codes—they're all the oral literature we have. We share it."

They had dropped through the zone of darkness. It was hard to estimate how many levels it included. Mike dropped past the first opening, which was on his left. An exit platform glowed, but much more dimly than the buildings overhead. He saw a few complex bubbles of equipment on the walls surrounding the platform before dropping on.

"How far down are we going?" Ab asked.

"The fifty-fourth level. So far as we know, that's the second from the bottom, which is the level for the waste cesses. Vast rooms there. And it smells. We don't explore it much. It's badly lit and too many have drowned poking around the cesses, so we stay on five four. The bottom ten levels were reserved years ago for extra equipment. Up through fifty-three's fairly crowded. Then it thins out. Ours is quite liveable, since it's unequipped as yet. There's a sense of freedom, spaciousness—well, wait. It's a new experience."

Mike didn't have to wait for new experiences. Each opening at another level revealed something interesting. He saw parallel tracks at the side of one exit platform. Wheelpods of all sizes went hurtling along the tracks, some going one way, some another, purple and amber running lights streaking. Food cargoes arriving? Mask shipments transferring to the docks? No way to tell.

On another level Mike counted what looked like forty dynamos in rows. Still another revealed huge transparent tanks in which blades churned dark solids into a mud-hued paste. Many of the levels contained equipment that was totally incomprehensible, but about half of the openings from the tube led to those small exit platforms walled with equipment. The air no longer pleased the nose with citrus. The tang was more like wipedown oil, or something close to it.

He counted some ten levels on which the noise and vibration of underground maintenance mechanisms were constant and furious. The the nose began to crossfade into another, different sort. He peered between his toes again. The noise came up past Swann, past Ab, from the tube's bottom.

Soon they dropped past exit platforms whose walls held no equipment at all; but there were open bays of different sizes where it could be installed later. The sound from below became recognizable. Voices. Many of them. Excited.

"Here they are, I've got them," Swann cried out. "Stand back, now. Don't smother them, will you?"

"Hey-hey—!" Ab's voice cracked, as if her pleasure were less than complete. Mike discovered the reason as he bumped down to the level where Swann had gotten off.

A huge crowd pressed in around the exit platform. Despite Swann's best efforts, Ab was being grabbed, patted, tousled, hailed by a collection of beings such as Mike had never seen before. He hesitated to use the description human. None wore masks.

"Let them through, will you?" Swann elbowed and gouged, attempting to push the well-wishers away. Here the light was feeble indeed, drifting from a high, coarse-grained ceiling. Shadows tended to be long. "Let them through, do you hear? Come on, Rolypol, I don't care if they are your wives, pull them off!"

"Big," someone squealed. Mike was pressed on each side, completely unable to move. "Big as he looked on the screen."

"Bigger!"

"And she's pretty-pretty. Ah! Pretty-pretty."

Mike shuddered inside while trying to keep a friendly smile. Hands strained over shoulders to stroke him. He'd never seen so many pitifully misshapen faces—of both sexes, all ages. A young mother held up a naked baby, presumably to let him see it. The baby made fists, kicked, screamed. One of its eyes was aimed at the ceiling. The other couldn't be seen. The socket was positioned down in the area of the upper cheekbone and grown over with a tough-looking veined sac. The baby's skin had a gray cast, either from the light or dirt.

Some of them were more horrible than Swann, others less. Their grotesquerie tended to make their friendly grins frightening. Swann, panting, bashed a path open. The admirers wouldn't give up. They closed it again.

A good distance ahead, Ab busily shook hands. Through the crowd Mike happened to catch her eye. "What's with it?" he wondered. Her face was radiant.

"Hey-yo, Mike, Micropig, hey!"

Mike followed the shout, confronting a man who looked about a quarter Zilur, all bushy gold-orange whiskers to his belly and two curved tusks sprouting down from his upper jaw over the bottom of his lipless mouth.

"Hey-yo, Mike, dint we roster together on *Jeptha O. McIntyre*?"

Recognition. "Goz if it isn't—" Failure of recognition.

"Percy Nasterwahle, 'member me?"

"Hey, Perc, sure! How'd you land here?"

"Lost my berth by oversleeping on a vive divan, next cluster over. Bummed my way this way and it turned out to be the wrong way. They put me through that foggo Game—"

Because the crowd was shoving him on ahead, while frail Nasterwahle was being driven farther and farther away, Mike had to shout.

"How'd you do, Perc?"

"Lost, what else? Was invited here, met a cute little bitchkitty and settled down. You know me, Mike. No place is good, so this is no worse. Hey, man, we got to talk, you know?" Waving, he was washed out of range.

Ahead, Mike noticed the front of the crowd sinking. Their heads simply vanished. Not much time to wonder over that. Too many pulled, off-center faces smiled up at him. Those *are* smiles, you know, he thought, even though they look like horror leers in some cheap fixfax.

"How's it feel to be a real hero, Mike?" A woman with a fingernail-long slit for a mouth whistled at him.

"Thanks, thank you, but we didn't win."

"You beat them. Yes, you did," she whistled back.

"But we didn't—" he laughed.

"Came closer than anybody ever has, then. Nobody's ever collected a win, did you realize? They either collect the loser award or worse."

"What's worse?" he shouted.

"Ask Swann," she whistled, falling back too, unable to stay close to him. "Ask Swann about Griselde, for instance."

"That's enough, you've mauled them *enough*."

Up ahead, Swann sounded less than good-natured. Mike started. The scruffy man had dropped from sight.

As Swann kept berating the well-wishers, most of them began to fall back. Mike managed to walk with less pressure from the back and sides. Suddenly, through a rift between smaller groups as the larger crowd broke, Mike saw why Swann had vanished. He was standing down on the side of a coarse, gray bowl scooped out of the floor of the level.

Ab was right beside him, flushed, excited. She waved to Mike. He skidded down the side of the bowl, which was on the shallow side and astonishingly large. More than a kilom across, he judged. At many places on the surface of the bowl there were large black circular openings, as wide across as Mike was tall. In many of them, as in cave mouths, groups congregated.

Some of the openings contained hovels or lean-tos tricked together out of pieces of metal of differing shapes and sizes. The whole scene had a misty gray evening quality. Now that the excitement was abating, people were moving more slowly.

Ab clapped her hands. "Isn't this an incredible thing, Mike?"

He wrinkled his nose to show his sensors were functioning. "That's an incredible stink, too."

"In these conduits"—Swann gestured to the openings nearby—"we get flowover from gas out of the cesses. You wouldn't smell it if pipes were installed in all the openings. They will be one day. That is, the people up in the city think so."

Ab's glance was calculating. "Why are they wrong?"

Swann sneered. "Didn't I tell you that the city won't last forever? Neither will the rotten, hypocritical regime running it."

"What'll happen to it?" asked Mike.

"There just may be a revolution," said Swann, loudly.

Some camped in nearby openings overheard. They yelled their approval of Swann's remarks. His pupil went flying to the right as he waved off the enthusiastic response with what Mike considered just plain contempt. He wondered whether Swann's convictions were any more than talk.

Ab, however, acted impressed. Or at least she was caught up in the spirit, nodding hard. "That's what should happen, Swann. A society as sick as Tome ought to be pulled down."

"I've been saying that for years." His pupil spasmed back into the correct location. He scratched his crotch as he led them across the slope of the bowl. "You saw behind the masks. You know I was right."

"From what I remember of your conversation in the vive divan, you were more than right."

"There's no secrecy down here," Swann came back. "Here there may be ugliness but it's never hidden. We don't pretend to be what we aren't."

"How do you make all those little hovels and huts?" Mike inquired.

"Send men up to the operating levels. Wreck a wheel-pod, torch it up fast, toss the metal down the tube in manageable sections before a service team arrives." With significance he added, "We can make weapons the same way. Bars and staffs for breaking buildings. Or heads."

Ab seemed delighted. "Where do you get your food?"

"Steal it, mostly. Way up on top. They allow us pretty

free movement up there if we don't cause any overt trouble. Because we've never gotten out of line, we're not much more than a fat boil on the backside of the government. That is, we've never gotten out of line yet."

"You're the people," Ab said with another nod. "Up there it seems affluent. It seems ordered. But you're the people."

That pleased Swann immensely. "You understand the Downbelow already."

But Mike didn't. He wasn't sure he enjoyed this gray place. The people tended to shuffle now that the novelty of the arrival was gone. The stench, as of waste, bothered him. And although he felt slightly ashamed for thinking it, he did wonder how Swann's friends differed from the citizens in the city, apart from the absence of masks.

Well, Ab apparently understood. He'd try to relax. But it wasn't easy.

Here and there he spotted an off-planet face, maybe hairless, or tusked yellow like Nasterwahle's. Refugees like himself. That helped to a certain extent. They were all rebels in the Downbelow, he guessed. By choice or by accident. He guessed they had plenty against which to rebel. Ab said so, anyway.

"This is mine," Swann said, gesturing to a structure of metal plates in the mouth of the opening. "I'll go roost with friends because you've got to take the place of honor as long as you're here. Considering your heroic feats, we all hope that will be a good, long time. You could help make things happen," he added in a lowered voice.

Ab's head cocked. "What things?"

"Things overdue," he said in a bogus whisper.

"And ripe?" Ab countered, setting Mike worrying once more.

"Ripe, yes." Swann grinned. Then he giggled. "What they're all saying about you is altogether true. Nobody's ever gone against the Game—gone against the whole scheme of things up there—the way you did. That was quite a speech you made to the pickups, young lady. Quite a speech." He stepped to the entrance of his metal-plate hovel. "If you'll excuse me, I'll try to find a little food."

After he disappeared inside, Ab hurried to Mike's side. She looked like a woman overcome with passion as she came onto tiptoes. "Mike . . ." Squeeze of his arm. "We may be able to give Fochet what he really deserves."

"Like what?"

"Ruin, love. Can't you tell that these people are stirred up?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, they are." She sounded a bit annoyed. "We may be able to do a lot more than just squall about the way things are on Tome. Swann's influential. An unofficial leader. If we work through him—"

She stopped in mid-breath. Swann had reappeared carrying a limp loaf and two bubbles on a napkin that had, with time, crumbled and grayed into a rag. He invited them to sit cross-legged at the lip of the conduit and eat, as others all around the bowl were doing.

Mike squatted. Did the light level ever change? Obviously the walls glowed, but with a much lower intensity than in the city. It could get monotonous. Even maddening. He bit the bread. It tasted sour.

Ab ate with gusto. Between bites, she said to Swann, "You're a native of Tome, didn't you say that?"

"I am."

"What brought you down here?"

Swann slit his good eye. Mike stifled a laugh. Swann was looking fervent and sinister and angry, or trying to. Maybe Mike was too gozzing tired, but the effect was phony. Still, Swann spat his word.

"Griselde."

"Who was she, Swann?"

His right pupil roved off. "My sweetheart."

"What happened to her?"

"Well, you see, she was a visitor from Klopton's Chain. Do you know where that is? Never mind, it's a system nearby. She came here on an extended visit. I was living up above, having moved to the city to enter training for the bureaucracy. I wore a mask, then, and a brown robe. Griselde was nothing special to look at. But she was a lovely person, lovely inside. She gave me courage to remove my mask in private. She never laughed. Never." His teeth were tight together a moment.

"We fell in love," he went on. "Then suddenly, the relative she was visiting passed away. Griselde's funds were about to run out. She was relying on the relative to pay her fare back to Klopton's Chain, as he'd promised to do. Of course it didn't work out. The relative's credits were immediately tied up in decease procedures. I was poor myself. So I couldn't help her. Fochet's predecessor offered her a chance in the Game. We decided she should take it—we planned to use the kilocreds to buy passage to Klopton's for both of us."

"You must have loved her a lot to give up a career."

"There wasn't a lot to give up. Oh, at the beginning, I very much wanted to serve the government. The rewards are large. Extremely large." He hesitated. "Of course that attitude predated my discovery of how hypocritical the government is. But it really didn't represent much of a sacrifice."

Now he sounded odder still: half-wistful, half-bitter.

"I did badly in my procedural studies, you see. Not through any fault of my own. They made it difficult for me because I came from the country provinces. All the favorites of the job trainers were city bred."

"What happened to Griselde in the Game?"

"She didn't win, naturally. She was at a disadvantage from the start. She was teamed with a clod. An ordinary spacer who—" Sensing Mike suddenly, he discontinued the thought without glancing around. "She wasn't even strong enough to continue long enough for them to declare a loss, so she could claim a loser's prize. The Game weakened her well before the end. She collapsed. As it turned out, the Game did much more than weaken her. It destroyed her mind, though she survived physically."

Touched, Mike grumbled, "Where's she now? Klopton's?"

"No, she's on Tome somewhere. She's in one of the institutions where they hide the ones who go to pieces trying to win against rules that make no sense. They could help her. They could help all of those like her. Restore them. They know how. It's a matter of budget. It's much cheaper to care for them in a vegetable state."

An odd fall of light turned Swann's right eye livid as he raised his head. "I saw her once. I couldn't stand to see her again. I had heard of the Downbelow, so I just took off my robe and mask one day, left them on the Aquarian Stairs, and came here. Down here I've been able to share some kind of meaningful life with others who realize how rotten Tome has become."

Turning her profile away from Mike, Ab stared across the gray bowl where the people stirred so slowly in the continuous twilight. Some had already rolled up in rags for sleep, alone or in pairs, threes, or fours.

"Forgive me," Ab said, "but I see the sickness of Tome most on the faces."

Swann giggled. "You don't offend me."

"Why are the faces that way, Swann?"

"Generations of inner turmoil do strange things to the genes. How would you like to live every day of your life knowing your society wasn't sane or ordered, but that you didn't dare protest? Pretending can be ruinous. It can dis-

tort. Warp. When the children began to change some generations back, the masks came into being." He fingered his facial blotches. "And isn't it splendid that we've been able to turn the means of hiding our perversion into a financial success?"

Scratching his chin, Mike then stuck up a finger. "Yeh, Swann, but you say this started happening a long while back?"

He repeated. "Generations."

"How come?"

"The stories say that hundreds and hundreds of years ago, there were two distinct social castes on Tome. The lower began to press upward. The upper resisted and, eventually, was forced to kill all those in the lower to stop the turmoil. Billions died. Half the planet's population was wiped out, some say. Maybe it's only a tale handed down father to child, no one can be positive. All the records were corrected. By that I mean"—his hand strayed up to his ill-fitting tunic to itch. He pinched something off himself, killed it between thumb and forefinger, dropped it at a distance from his body—"the records were destroyed. But the government didn't know how to launder minds back then. The memories were poison to those who survived. At first it showed on the faces of grandchildren only a little. It showed more in the next generation. Finally the masks evolved, with an image of sanity and order."

"When did the Game originate?" Ab asked.

"That's lost too. Some say it really was fair once."

"We know differently, eh, Mike?" she said. He just felt like grunting.

"Outside contestants are fairly rare," Swann explained. "Usually, ordinary citizens are chosen by a kind of lottery. They generally cooperate. Playing the Game is considered proof of loyalty to the planet."

Ab's cheeks crimsoned. "I find that blasphemous."

He nodded with glee. "Yes. Yes."

"Blasphemous against life, blasphemous against truth." Her gesture was so violent that Mike knew right away some change was coming, a change born in her desire to beat Fochet and all he stood for. "Something ought to be done," she said. "What about this revolution of yours?"

"On a planet-wide scale, that's impossible."

Swann certainly was quick to put down the possibility of what he preached, Mike decided. But that was another of those statements he didn't utter, because Ab moved too quickly into the pause.

"I agree that maybe you'd never stand a chance seriously trying to topple the whole government. That doesn't mean steps can't be taken. You can show them you know everything up on top is a lie. If you're going to be a boil on the backside, at least be an open boil that smells like this tube we're camped by."

Swann's good eye moved very rapidly. "I have been drawing plans . . . thinking of strategies. . . . I'm not certain I understand your—"

"Shiddings on strategies! Call all your friends together. Let's all go up through the tubes to that Game and show them just how many know it's a sick joke. You imply Tome hurts inwardly, real pain behind the masks. I say shiddings on that too. They don't hurt enough. They're getting away with pretending to be what they aren't. Mark me, Swann. I'm no general. No town-burner. But marching—solidarity—that's nearly as old as star travel. Older, some say. Have you ever done that? Shown them the Downbelow? People who live with truth? Maybe they've even forgotten that living with truth is possible. You might cure the whole planet in a generation."

"I hadn't quite thought—" he began again.

She was on her feet, that long red hair almost like a flag, Mike thought. She was punching Swann happily.

"You've a sick world, Swann. It'll never be anything else unless a lot of them up there recognize the sickness. You have to focus their attention, Swann. You have to start driving out the devils by making them admit the devils exist. Let's go up to the Game. As many as you can muster. Let's show them faces that tell the truth."

Exalted, Swann cupped his hands in front of him. "I knew your coming was a sign. Everyone?" He shouted louder. "*Everyone?*"

Heads turned. A few slouched up from their holes in the stone, shadows with blankets. Ab shot a glance at Mike. He had trouble managing more than a put-on smile. He had no enthusiasm for any of this. But Ab was so flushed and happy, she never saw it.

Swann began to shout again. "Everyone come here! I've a wonderful plan."

Soon they were coming swiftly, and strangers were appearing out of the mouths of the conduits. All at once Mike realized that the crowd was twice as large as that which had welcomed them. More men, more women crawled from the conduits each minute. The Downbelow was spewing out a whole small army.

Swann harangued them. Even Mike was bright enough to catch the fact that his recapitulation of Ab's idea was jumbled, incoherent. No matter. The crowd yelled, hooted, stamped for joy. Ab didn't seem upset by Swann usurping her role, either. Just the opposite. She watched happily, grabbing Swann's arm now and then to whisper in his ear.

Swann giggled as his antic pupil shifted. He kept nodding, always nodding. Before long he had to respond to demands from the crowd. They wanted to know when this rally or trouping to the Game would take place.

"My plans—" he said.

"Tomorrow," someone shouted.

"Tomorrow," more shouted, until it was thundering everywhere. "Tomorrow!"

Swann glanced quickly at Ab. She nodded. He nodded too. The crowd roared.

More and more hunched figures crawled up from openings in the huge bowl. Swann was seized suddenly, thrust up onto the shoulders of admirers. Most were his own people. A few were outsiders like Perc Nasterwahle.

They marched him around and around the bowl. Swann gulped, waved, shot his hands high and wide in a vee, producing even more thunderous cheers. At last, gasping, he staggered to the ground. He quieted them so that he could shout.

"We'll have to plan how we'll all go up. We'll have to spend the whole night planning."

"And I won't get much sleep," Mike said.

"Is that all you're thinking?" Ab said with a frown.

He stared at her gray eyes. "That, and we'll lose."

"We'll win! We'll terrify them up there. We will, I tell you! Where's the old Mike? He'd think so."

"Where's the old Ab? She wouldn't."

Somehow that made her furious. She said, "It must be done, that's all," and turned her back.

He sighed. That signaled he was giving up the idea of any more resistance.

Mike slept badly in Swann's metal hovel. There was too much running outside, too many comings and goings. The bedclothes laid on the hard floor of the conduit were a mess of snips and scraps of rag, plasto sheeting, fibrous insulation blankets and pieces of totally unfamiliar material that felt like wild grass. It all smelled of years of accumulating body smells.

Besides that, Mike heard Ab's breathing nearby. It wasn't

the least relaxed. It hissed fast and soprano, until he was moved to grouch, "Can't you go to sleep at all?"

"Sorry to keep you awake. I'm excited about tomorrow."

"A bunch of freaks marching around won't—"

"Since when have you learned to recognize a freak?"

"Since Tome. Don't worry, I include myself."

Intake of breath. "Oh, Mike. You sound so—"

"Sure! I'd rather be hunting up our passage."

"I didn't mean what I said. I apologize."

"S fine."

"But you don't approve."

"First, I don't see what good it'll do. But then we've already argued that. Next, I think there's something funny about Swann. He acts like the mate in charge of this crowd, but you're the one who really sparked them to moving. I wonder how much of what he's saying is anything but blow."

"Mike, our being here may have been just the push he needed."

"Right. But how much faith do you put in that kind of guts?"

"All right. I'm taking a chance. Admitted. I think it must be done."

"You said that, so I'll go along. But I think this bunch'll either be laughed at or, worse, there'll be real trouble and goz damn if we'll ever jet away from Tome then."

"Mike, if you feel—"

"I'll go, I'll go. Let a spacer snatch a wink, huh? Do you know how long a day it's been? The Game, then Fochet, then this."

Her voice sounded small. "Don't tell me. I'm so tired I could cry."

Immediately he regretted ragging her with his complaints. Sure, he didn't understand all the little twisty turns of her reasons. He supposed Tome was rotten, as she said. But he'd as soon leave it alone, goodbye, forgotten. He couldn't because of what they'd been through. That personal feeling rode over his worry that she was planning something stupid, made him say, "You might sleep if I held you."

She came readily. As she snuggled into the bend of his arm she accidentally hit the switch plate where his left ribs had been. Half his circuits activated. Her cheek was close to his ear. She heard, laughed low. He turned off and laughed too.

"I thought for a minute you were going to squeeze me, Mike. Not Diego Dieppe style but all the way—pop."

"You kidding? You're the only *comrado* I've got. The rest are bugs."

"I'm flattered. You still think I'm sane."

"Yeh, sure." The smile in his voice made it all sound light.

"Glad." She snuggled down, murmuring.

He wriggled out as comfortably as he could with her weight against his side. Where he'd been sleepy before, now he was sharp and awake. Ab's breathing fell off low and slow. Goz if it didn't seem like things on Tome were constantly changing place, reversing themselves.

He slept little. He was kept awake by the frequent foot-falls clattering across the bowl outside. Outside too, or in his mind, or both, voices kept repeating, "Tomorrow." How he hated fools.

After a morning meal, Swann assembled his friends and followers. He addressed the crowd in a gibberish of number and letter combinations. Frequently Mike heard the word grid. He took to counting the crowd. Less than one eighty in all. There's been many, many more when Swann announced his plans the night before. That made Mike feel good in that it confirmed his belief that the march idea was lunatic. A lot who had heard about it evidently felt the same, as witnessed by their fading away into the conduits overnight. But it also made him feel dismal. Smaller numbers meant larger potential trouble.

"—everyone up their assigned tubes." Mike snickered. "We'll meet in an hour at the Aquarian Stairs. From there we'll walk to the Game."

As Swann wound it up, the Downbelowers scattered, some fast, some slow. They disappeared into the various holes in the sides of the bowl.

"We'll take the tube we came down in," Swann announced. "Just the three of us. Privilege of leadership." He giggled. Mike had never seen Swann's pupil shoot from center to perimeter and back again so fast and often.

Three abreast, they crossed the bowl. Ab strode in the middle. In spite of the gray light and bad night, she looked fresh, vibrant, eager, a vital figure of black with red top and bottom. The beading spelling Eros on her kit sparkled.

The trio lounged on the Aquarian Stairs in the pink day. Men and women in robes and masks kept passing. Mike leaned on the balustrade, his arms folded. Behind eyeholes he sensed attention reserved for himself and Ab. The pedestrians disregarded Swann, even with his bare face.

—Perc Nasterwahl was first to arrive with ten Downbe-

lowers. Soon the number grew to thirty. The pedestrians stayed on the side of the Stairs away from the crowd of laughing, jostling, unwashed-looking people, who looked to Mike even more unwashed by daylight. The men and women of the Downbelow ignored the stares of the masked people. With Swann and Ab at the center, the crowd grew, all joking, punching one another, sitting, standing, a few even singing, funny minor-key progressions.

Mike worked himself to the crowd's rim. Glad he did, too. He was first to spot the new attention. Being tall, he could wigwag above heads to make Ab and Swann notice him. When they did, he thumbed his left hand over his shoulder.

Up on the plaza, a half dozen civil servants in dull brown and copper had emerged from one of the government buildings. There were twenty-four in evidence by the time Swann decided all those who should be present were. He led off down the Aquarian Stairs with his arm linked in Ab's.

Mike stayed at the back of the pack, paying more attention to the rear than to the front. Perc Nasterwahle, of the lined yellow face and tusks, ran back to him.

"Hey-ho, ole Mike. Isn't this a maximum blast?"

Squinting, Mike watched a dozen of the civil servants trail after them down the Aquarian Stairs. The other half rushed in twos and fours to the different buildings fronting the plaza. Mike growled, "I don't think a party's what Swann and my girl exactly have in mind, Perc."

"We'll show those foggers we hate the Game, though."

"Sure, Perc, we will," he said, watching rearward.

"You don't seem glad to see an old lanemate, buddy."

"Talk to me when we're not the big attraction, okay, Perc?"

Perc made a face which Mike only saw from the corner of his eye. "Still the loner type, huh, Mike?" Clearly he disapproved. "I was only trying to be civil."

"Perc—"

"You don't buy it, fine by me. Oughtn't expect anything else from a gozzing mech man, that's what they always said on the *Jeptha O.*"

This last trailed off nastily under Perc's breath as he hurried back forward to find some more amiable companions. Mike was sorry he'd hurt Perc's feelings. But not for long. He hadn't liked Perc much, as he recalled. He hadn't liked any of his spacer mates much, he recalled.

In among the civil servants following the Downbelowers, Mike noticed four new ones. These four were equipped with those lanternlike devices hanging from chains at their

waists. He promptly forgot any worry whatever about Perc Nasterwahle's feelings.

The marchers took up the middle of a wide boulevard. Masked men and women on the mosaic walks at either side halted to watch. The farther they marched, into a district that looked familiar, the larger the crowds grew along both sides. A wall of masks floated by and behind in whichever direction Mike looked. Beautiful masks. Lovely in their decoration, and without visible flaw.

"What's the idea?" one masked man shouted to the marchers.

Ab tossed her lacy red hair. "Follow and see."

"But where are you bound?"

Swann gestured over his head. "To the Game. Come along to the Game."

That tore it, as Mike discovered when he checked the rear again. Swann's gratuitous news was overheard by the patrol of civil servants following a block behind. Two immediately faced out to the right, blended into the crowd on the walk, then disappeared.

When the marchers arrived at the outlying district where the Game was located, a group of about fifty civil servants waited outside the low stone rail around the building.

Light was failing. It had taken nearly all morning to assemble, all afternoon to march. Among the Downbelowers Mike heard complaints about tiredness.

A third of the civil servants carried the lantern devices. Swann held up his hand. His followers shambled to a stop in the center of the boulevard at various degrees of speed. Mike backed out of the rear of the crowd, eased up around the right side. From the walks across the boulevard, masked man and women watched. More were pouring into the area along boulevards which ran into the one where the confrontation was taking place.

The civil servants displayed no overt hostility. Just seeing them posed against the backdrop of the Game building with its familiar squared roof was enough to tinge the whole scene with menace for Mike, though. From his position at the right front of the crowd, he was able to see Swann and Ab and the front rank of civil servants in profile. He kept his elbows close to his sides.

The civil servant in charge was shorter and heavier than the rest. He carried no lantern. Swann stood smirking as the portly man stepped forward. Ab's face, by contrast, was frozen and mean.

"What's the reason for this assembly?" the civil servant asked.

"We want the Game shut down," Swann said.

"You're citizens of the Downbelow?"

"Citizens of Tome," Ab corrected.

The civil servant paid her notice. "You're not. You and the big man"—his mask swung to Mike—"you were contestants."

"We're living in the Downbelow," Ab retorted. "With nothing hiding what we are."

"I must inform you," said the civil servant, "that assembly in this manner is in specific violation of ordinance empowering act number—"

"We want the Game torn down!" Swann cried. He slung his jaw forward and clenched his teeth, trying to look threatening. "We want the hypocrisy ended. This heroic girl showed that the Game is a complete sham, a plaything of crazy men, and we're here to say that the Downbelow demands a halt. I— No, don't raise your hand or tell me to be quiet. I'm native-born, and entitled to a hearing, and I'll have it. We demand that the government of Tome admit its malady and madness. We demand that the Game be canceled permanently, that steps be taken to find ways for this society to become healthy again, so that its citizens don't have to hide behind masks. We're not afraid to show our faces. We're not frightened of admitting that the sickness of life on Tome disfigured us. We want the government to do the same. Close down the Game. As an even better first step . . ." Excited with the moment, Swann raised his hands. No, hold it, Mike thought. He saw what Swann didn't. Civil servants were in motion in the rear ranks. "Take off the masks." Swann's hands slipped under the chin of the spokesman's mask. "Show the truth." He started to wrench.

With a yell the civil servant leaped back. One of those in a rear rank moved laterally, bringing up his lantern device at the same time. Mike went to full power, kicked off from the pavement, breaking it into spiderwebs as he did. He hit Ab and Swann with a yell and a blur, spilling them.

The white beam passed through the space where they'd been. It struck a Downbelow woman who had a swollen belly. She toppled in convulsions. The civil servant in charge got his mask settled on properly, then called a halt to the beam. It snapped off.

While Swann and Ab picked themselves up, Mike was already going into a turn and down to half power. He

crouched, awaiting more trouble. Day was almost done. There were long shadows.

Ab looked with loathing at the civil servants. "You're afraid of us." Then she looked at Swann with a cruel smile. "You see?"

"I urge you to disperse," said the civil servant in charge. "We can't permit you to continue to assemble this way, or trespass on the grounds of—"

"You see?" Swann cried in an ugly, parrotty voice as he faced his friends. "You see, we're right! They're afraid of us!"

But except for a few growls, he failed to rouse much enthusiasm. All the civil servants had lifted their lanterns to ready position. Mike noticed the fat-bellied woman rolling on her buttocks. A black wash was creeping out beneath the upper part of her tunic suit. He pushed Swann aside, tapped Ab.

"You better look after that woman. She's bleeding."

Ab knelt and crawled to the woman, who was breathing heavily and moaning now and then. Ab lifted the woman's tunic. One of her hands disappeared. She lowered the garment and looked at the civil servant in charge.

"Whichever one of you put that beam on her should feel very heroic. It brought her baby half out. It's dead."

Someone retched. That sound broke the mood and the fight.

At the same time, it roused a curious response in Mike. He looked at the poor, grotesque woman pressing her hands on her half-collapsed belly and pitching her hips from side to side. As she moved, her clothing grew damp and black in many spots, quickly. Mike hadn't ever felt so intense about anything before.

"It will be to your advantage to disperse—" began the official.

"Butchers!" Swann screamed. "You mad butchers!" He flew forward.

Ab jumped. She caught him as the official darted out of the way. She hurled Swann around so they were face to face.

"Help your woman! That's the most important thing now. We've proved our point." She slid in close. Mike hurried up to hear, and caught the last. ". . . too many weapons. We'd be fools to stay when we can come back with more people to do it right."

It took Swann a minute to catch her meaning. When he did, he giggled. He waved wildly.

"That's it, call it quits for now!" He yelled the next at the civil servants. "But we'll be back!"

"In your own best interests, I urge you to reconsider, and not risk—"

"Two of you pick up the woman," Ab said. She didn't say it loudly. But somehow it silenced the chief civil servant.

The rest of the Downbelowers began to scatter. They tried to be defiant about it, cursing, shaking fists. But Mike knew they were relieved to be away from the bad odds of the lanterns against nothing. He was going to volunteer to carry the woman but three were already bearing her away.

The Downbelowers kept to the center of the boulevard to avoid the crowds of spectators lining the walks. Mike joined in step with Ab. She looked sweaty and ecstatic.

The civil servants remained in position like sculptured pieces. The Downbelowers hurried on. Mike didn't feel relieved till he was in a tube floating down through dark.

Back at the bowl, a group out of a conduit brought news that the woman with the stillborn infant had also died during descent to the Downbelow. Swann went livid. Ab jumped up and cried for silence.

"Did you see how they reacted? Terrified! We're right. And we'll go back. This time we'll take weapons. We'll be equipped to do what should be done: tear the Game down to the ground. Swann, gather as many people as you can, understand? As many as you can."

Swann's wild pupil jerked back and forth. "Yes. Oh, yes."

He sent runners. All night long, recruits poured out of the conduits into the bowl. All next day, on an upper level, Mike operated at half power, dismantling a wrecked wheelpod with his bare hands, then another, then another, faster than ten of the Downbelowers could have done it. The sheared, ragged bars, plates, struts, castings were passed back along the chain of hands, and dropped down a tube to the bowl. Mike tore up nine wheelpods before a service team's lights bobbed in the distance.

Perc Nasterwahle whistled. The wreckers broke for the tube. Mike carried the two slowest under his arms, operating on all circuits. He reached the tube well ahead of the pursuers' lights.

In the bowl all that night there was clanging and spurting fire, as they torched the wreckage to clubs, billies, spears, maces for the march.

Mike grabbed an hour of sleep during what he guessed

was the middle of the night. Ab rolled him out of it sooner than he expected.

He folded himself up from the waist, yawned. "What time's it?"

"We're due to start in an hour."

"An hour!" He shoved up to full height so fast that his head clanged the roof of Swann's hovel. He started outside, stopped when he saw Ab shake her head.

"We're postponing it, Mike."

"Postponing! After what they did to that woman? Here I'm volted up for the first time about this business—"

"I'm glad. Nothing has changed. We won't postpone long. But Swann's picked up some new intelligence. You should hear."

Knuckling his eyes, Mike followed her outside. The bowl was filled with five or six hundred people. A big bunch of them surrounded Swann at a nearby conduit. A thin, bow-backed young man stood next to Swann, shuffling his feet. From the underlip, the young man's profile angled inward. Lower face and neck were one, unbroken by a chin.

"This is Topey," Swann explained. "He was up at the Game during the night. Tell them what you saw, Topey."

Topey acted self-conscious. He enunciated with difficulty. "The government's moved in a whole lot more men. They're three or four deep around the Game."

"How many exactly?" Mike asked.

"Didn't count," Topey admitted. "About as many as are here, I'd say."

"They have special arms, don't they, Topey?"

"Yeh, they do, Swann. Long tubes. Copperlike."

"What are they?" Mike asked.

Swann's pupil shifted. "None of us has ever seen such, so we don't know."

"The point is, Mike, we've really gotten to them up there," Ab said.

"How do you figure?"

"The government couldn't manufacture weapons overnight, so obviously they've dipped into some arsenal. They've brought out their heaviest or best. Weapons they've never used before because nothing like this has happened before."

Mike chewed his lips a while. "Swann, you don't act very happy about all this. I mean, aren't those tubes a sign Fochet's crowd is shaking?"

"Yes, but our undertaking becomes much more dangerous with the introduction of a factor like that."

Ab's reaction was quick. "Of course it's dangerous. You're

always talking about revolution. Didn't you ever stop to think about it?"

Swann started. "Naturally! In theory—"

"In theory is the only way you ever thought about it?"

"Hey!" Mike eased big fingers around Ab's arm. She flushed, then slipped out of his grip. She acknowledged her too-swift anger with a movement of her head.

Topey raked his nails over his continuous lower face and neck. Several moist blotches opened. To Mike he said, "They put up barricade shields too. All the government men are standing behind them. Just waiting."

"I think we need a larger force now," Swann said.

"I think he's probably right," Ab agreed. "We want to make a meaningful strike. Damage the Game building if not destroy it. That's why I consented to Swann's suggestion that we wait one more day."

Swann flung around to face her. "Saying *consent* insinuates that I'm not in charge of—"

"You are. But you're slowing down."

"I am not. I simply want to make the next march effective, not"—he swallowed between the last word and the next—"a massacre."

Ab turned to Mike so that Swann couldn't see her face. "We'll go in the morning. Swann really is in a better position to judge the meaning of this new opposition than we are. Barricades and unfamiliar weapons probably mean the government isn't going to be easy on us. So we should have as many with us as we can. Swann wants to send more runners through the conduits."

"I'm positive we can gather several hundred more," he told them.

"We should do it, Mike. Only numbers will do it if the government's roused."

Swann rolled a bar from the weapon stacks back and forth between his palms. "I intend to go out personally. I know the nearest large settlements better than almost anyone down here. I can reach at least two or three of them, and send recruits back by morning."

Somehow, Swann's eagerness to change the plan upset Mike a great deal. Who was he to call strategy, though? He shrugged.

"It's your march."

"I'm putting Perc and Topey in charge while I'm gone," Swann said.

Mike shrugged again. He felt cheated. Here he'd finally come around to believing the struggle might be worth it.

Seeing what the copper-masked bunch did to the woman with the baby had convinced him. Now all his enthusiasm was bubbling away like the flavor of an overcooked pot. The same thing was happening to the enthusiasm of the Down-belowers. They stood listening to the discussion with little reaction. Many talked in low tones among themselves, or just started wandering in a tired way.

Ab seemed compelled to say, "Don't look so downcast, Mike. If we do it Swann's way, we have an honest chance to wreck the Game permanently."

"I didn't say anything, did I?"

"But you don't like waiting."

"No, I don't like waiting."

He walked off.

With half the day gone, Swann's first recruiters returned with seventy-five. An hour later, Swann himself brought back a scattering of more than two hundred. He went out again through another conduit on the opposite side of the already overcrowded bowl.

Two more recruiters showed up before evening with about a hundred apiece. Swann returned with another fifty about the time Mike was beginning to feel sleepy again. He went out a third time. Shortly a band of eighty arrived. Then a band of forty.

Mike wandered inside the metal-plate hovel. He lay down and tried to doze for the better part of a couple of hours. He was still fidgeting when he heard a shout outside.

"Topey's back!"

He rushed out. Further down in the bowl, Ab and Perc Nasterwahle plus representatives from many of the groups clustered around the chinless boy.

"They haven't brought in any more men. They haven't put up any more barricades," Topey reported.

Ab clapped her hands. "Then we go. We have at least twice as many as yesterday. See, Mike? It was worth waiting."

"Where's Swann?"

Perc shot him a glance that wasn't very friendly. "He'll be back."

Mike scowled.

Morning came. No one in the bowl was still asleep. The billies, clubs, spears and maces had been distributed during the night. Topey paced up and down, watching various conduits.

"He's bound to be here. Any time."

A Downblower with a cyclopean eye asked, "Could he got lost maybe?"

Nasterwahle vetoed that with a slashing gesture. "Not Swann."

The crowd shifted and muttered. An hour passed. Another.

Ab looked bleached out. "He's not coming, Mike."

"Sure looks that way. Something bad's happened to him, I suppose."

Several men tossed down their handmade maces. Ab rushed up to Topey and Nasterwahle. "Do you know which tubes we should use to go up?"

Perc Nasterwahle said, "Yeh, of course. But without Swann—"

"If we wait any longer we won't march. Swann wanted this. Badly. We owe it to him if something's happened to him."

Topey and Nasterwahle exchanged dubious looks. Nasterwahle said, "I don't know about going without—"

"Gather around, everybody!" Ab cried. Softly, to Mike: "Help me." Then louder: "We're moving out. Push in here and listen. Something's happened to Swann. He isn't back. You know what that probably means. They did something to him. Trapped him, maybe, because they fear us. Well, it's time to show them how much they *should* fear us. We're armed, we outnumber them now according to Topey's report, so we're moving."

Very few showed signs of being moved by her appeal. Ab gasped between her teeth, mad, worried. Her helpless look at Mike sent him ranging out among the groups squatting in the conduits. He merely tapped shoulders, one here, another there, keeping up a steady chatter:

"Let's move out, move over there to find out which tube you're taking, let's go, now, double it, hurry over there for your assignment—"

A touch from Mike, tall and unsmiling, was enough. Sometimes his height was a blessing instead of just a big bother because of doorways. He touched a man with a melted-looking face and the man jumped to obey. At first the crowd shifted toward Ab, Nasterwahle and Topey in small groups. Then in larger ones. Mike rounded them up like strayed animals. As he loped to the far side of the bowl, intending to work his way backwards to be sure he got them all, he heard Topey and Perc Nasterwahle barking numbers, grids.

But he didn't really enjoy himself. Postponement plus

Swann's failure to show up had robbed him of the nice sense of expectation that had developed when, finally, something in his head had announced that Ab was right. Slow to arrive, this conviction was swiftly gone, leaving him muddled and going through the motions.

Ab carried a homemade spear. Perc and Topey had billies. The four jogged to the tube reserved for leaders of the march. All over the bowl, groups of tens and twenties disappeared into the conduits, with noticeably lagging step.

At ground level, the sky outside the city's atmospheric dome shed pleasant pink light. Unusually large numbers of masked men and women lined the streets in the vicinity of the Aquarian Stairs where the marchers rallied. Unusually large numbers of civil servants drifted into the crowd of citizens that congealed behind the marchers, following them.

Some from the Downbelow shouted insults to the crowd. Not many. Virtually all the civil servants mixed in with the ordinary citizens carried lanternlike devices on chains.

By the time the marchers had gone halfway to the Game, Ab was limping and complaining about sore feet. It's not working, Mike thought dismally. But he said nothing.

The marchers should have been happy, quick-stepping, eager. Instead they kept their heads down, slouching along in slovenly postures. None of the citizens watching from the sidelines or following the marchers acted unduly alarmed. That made Mike tighten up all the more.

Ab kept flicking her eyes from side to side as if expecting attack. Topey rubbed his metal billy like a good luck charm. From some blocks off, Mike caught the dull glare of barricades set up in the street outside the Game. As they drew closer he appreciated the honesty of Topey's estimate. Fochet's government had indeed turned up a large number of civil servants. Most of them were equipped with long, slender cylinders resembling blowpipes. The civil servants guarded the perimeter of the Game in a continuous line six men deep. Those in the front ranks crouched behind the barricades. The strange weapons were thrust out through slots.

Perc Nasterwahle scratched his orange-gold whiskers and sucked at his tusks. Topey whispered to Ab, "What do we do? Run at them?"

"No, give them a chance first. Let me handle it."

"With pleasure," Topey breathed. "Think they'll let us through?"

"I don't think so. But talking will give our people a chance to spread out in a wide line. That way, if we have to charge, we can do it man on man. And large numbers are less likely to get hurt."

Perc Nasterwahle faced about. "I'll pass the word."

The cadence of the Downbelowers, which should have been a purposeful drumming by now, changed from slow to a rhythmless shuffle as the marchers went the last block to the Game. Ab pulled Mike's arm. He slowed down, giving those in back time to thin the line.

The marchers had approached the Game down a boulevard. It intersected at a right angle the wide boulevard parallel to the long side of the Game building. As the marchers spilled into this boulevard, Ab remained at the center of things, letting the others lengthen the battle line a long way down on her left and her right.

Then she changed course, angling obliquely to the right, toward the heaviest concentration of barricades backed up by civil servants: a wall of metal barriers, a wall of dull brown tunic suits and copper masks behind.

Ab walked to the center of the boulevard and stopped. Mike was on her right. The raggedy line of Downbelowers came up into place so that it faced the line of defenders of the Game. Mike eyed the blowpipe devices the civil servants held at their sides. He'd never seen weapons of that type. His arms hung at his sides so that he could power up fast.

"You know why we've come," Ab called.

A civil servant with a smile sculptured into his mask, but no chin cleft, stepped forward until he was practically on top of his mates who knelt behind the cluster of barricades. Mike glanced nervously over his right shoulder. Behind, lining the walks, the plazas in front of the saberlike buildings, was an enormous crowd of people of Tome, all masked.

All up and down the line of Downbelowers, faces turned right or left to watch Ab. Mike realized that even Perc Nasterwahle and Topey were hanging back, standing about a pace behind her. Nice, he thought, all grim.

He was conscious of whispering among the thousands who'd turned out to watch from behind. Despite that, the silence was stunning. The morning air was full of that citrus tang, too sweet for words.

Ab's lacy red hair fluttered in a light agitation of the air. "I said, you know why we've come. We demand you let us into the Game."

"Of course we can't agree to that demand," said the

civil servant who had come forward. Another glided in behind him.

"Then we'll go in by ourselves without your permission."

"That would be ill-advised," returned the civil servant. "However, if you return to where you came from, without causing trouble, there will be no reprisals."

Under her breath Ab said, "Mike, we're going to have to—"

"Listen to what he just said," cried the civil servant who had taken a position behind the first one. This new speaker was addressing the Downbelowers more than Mike and Ab. "Go home and nothing will happen. The government only wants those two—the ringleaders. The rest of you won't be punished."

Gray, Ab said, "Who's that? Who is that speaking?"

"I know who it is," Mike shouted, now that the truth had struggled up to where he understood it. But he didn't, really, though it impinged with sudden force and meaning—or lack of it. Dull brown tunic, copper mask with smiling sculptured lips—

Only a few of the civil servants here wore such masks.

"Christ Ancient," said Perc Nasterwahle. "That can't be—"

"Go home, all of you," called the second civil servant. "Trust me and you won't be hurt. You've been misled. I've recognized the error of my thinking. That's why I'm standing here. I promise you won't be punished."

"It's Swann," Topey whispered. Then, yelling for all of the Downbelowers to hear: "It's Swann, Swann's there; it's Swann!"

Ab looked absolutely ruined for one instant. Her whole body seemed to jerk with pain. Then she recovered, walking forward with slashing steps, almost to the barricades.

Mike followed quickly, though not as far. He figured this could very well be the finish. He didn't want to be so close to the barricades and the jutting blowpipes that he couldn't maneuver. He edged his elbows up against the fabric of his dirty liberty grays. Barely touching his clothing with the insides of his elbows, he waited to see whether he'd need to fight going down. He was convinced he'd have to. What a rotten way to end things.

"That's why you never came back," Ab accused. "They got to you."

"I've seen the error of my ways," Swann's voice repeated behind the mask.

"Fochet got to you. Goz damn. You never had any guts for this. I saw it but I wouldn't admit it and he got to you."

When? Last night when you went recruiting? Or had you decided even before then to sell out?"

Spit flew from her lips, ruining her beauty. It hurt Mike to watch her become so ugly. "It's not necessary for you to know the details," Swann told her.

"But they must have offered you something special. I mean, your mask has a smile on it. That's special."

"In return for confessing his errors, Swann has received a government post of considerable status. In addition—"

But Swann pushed the first official aside, preferring to finish it himself.

"Let me. I want all my friends to know that I've sincerely recognized the rightness of the government's point of view. The government is correct in promoting and maintaining order." He was growing progressively louder with each word. "That's why I've already interceded on behalf of all of you. You've been misled. I was partly responsible. These two radical troublemakers are the ones who will be punished, not you. So long as you disband peaceably—"

"You shidding thing," Ab screamed low, nearly jumping over the barricade as she snatched the bosom of his tunic suit and twisted it. "What else did they buy you with? Money to go with the mask?"

"They gave me back Griselde," Swann said. Did the mask smile more?

Ab let go, stunned. "Griselde?" She didn't remember.

"His girl," Mike said.

"They'll restore her to sanity," Swann said. "They have the techniques. She's already been removed from the institution where she was kept. She's being flown here right now. I'll have her again, don't you see?"

Ab wilted, actually shrank in size, it seemed to Mike. "Oh Christ Ancient."

The first civil servant began to gesture to the Downbelowers, who had all stopped whispering. "Disperse, therel" he called. "Return to your homes. We've negotiated in good faith with Swann. You won't be pun—"

Ab swung to face the marchers. "Attack them! Charge them! Attack them!"

"Ab, you better not. . . ." Mike began as other civil servants edged forward, lifting those peculiar tube devices to waist level. He no longer cared about his own safety. Hers was another matter.

"Charge them, attack them; come on, what's wrong?"

The Downbelowers didn't move.

The first civil servant reached across the barricade to

take Ab's arm. "We're taking you into custody as a ring-leader or—"

"Help me, Mikel!" she yelled, bashing the civil servant's mask. Mike turned onto full power.

He grabbed the nearest barricade, folding it inward from the edges. Worms of white smoke began to squirt from the tubes in the slots. That was their reserve weapon, some kind of narco gas, Mike thought as he folded the barricade together.

Two civil servants caught between the metal shrieked. There were sounds of snapping, then squishy sounds. Mike flung the barricade, bodies and all, high into the air. The other civil servants scattered. Ab strained to get her hands on Swann's mask. White smoke from tubes hid her face. She fell.

There was wild yelling to Mike's rear. A lot of feet hammering. The Downbelowers were scattering for home, for hiding places. He operated at blur speed, one kick demolishing the barricade that stood between him and Swann, who was skating backwards, tipping from boot to foot, off-balance. The shattered barricade snapped apart. The one Mike had tossed up came down, crushing four coppery masks beneath it.

He changed course as men in brown swirled around Ab, picked her up. Tubes thrust near his face. His invisible hands caught two, snapped them, caught four, snapped them. Six or eight others pushed smoke into his nostrils.

He had no defense against it. His circuits were unaffected but he wasn't entirely circuits. They ringed him with the tubes. He was lost in a fog of white smoke. He swung his fists back and forth but the civil servants stayed out of range. He was conscious of a jetting sound, multiplied many times, as the tubes sprayed their clouds around him.

He began to weave from side to side, slowing down. He reached for masks to maim. Saw them, copper-highlighted, in breaks in the whiteness but couldn't get hold.

What would the smoke do? Finish him? He supposed so. Executive Fochet had probably insisted on that.

Mike couldn't shift his feet. His circuits began to overload, smolder and smell. They wanted to respond but the directing elements of his mind were phasing out in the odorless smoke. He couldn't feel his fists at top speed any more. He was sawing the air, but very slowly. And he couldn't drag his legs one way or the other.

Yet the circuits operated. He felt very hot inside. Hotter

by the moment. Gozzing way to wind up. He'd warned Ab. . . .

The conscious centers of his mind gave up. He toppled forward. Automatic sensors registering his mind gone, shut the switches off. He swirled the smoke as he dropped and crashed on his face, bending his nose sideways.

A coppery face floated over him. Then another. A hand crept out. Touched him.

Mike didn't move. Behind a mask, someone laughed with the voice of Fochet.

Pan's Love III, on which they woke up, bore first class registry flags. She was on the order of 920,000 metric tons. She was a property of the Spirotis line, probably the number one commercial entrepreneur firm operating in the stars. Competition was fierce to serve aboard any Spirotis vessel. Mike had never seen one before, they were that legendary. Disgruntled spacers whose hopes of a Spirotis berth would never have a chance of being fulfilled grouched that preferment, in violation of all regs, went to an infinity of cousins of descendants of the long-dead founder.

The immense shipper had the largest, cleanest med bay Mike had ever been in. The bay was equipped with eight chrome treatment pods. Only a fourth of these were occupied. By Mike and Ab.

She wore a sexless gown and so did he. All treatment was handled by flexor and wire web extensions of the pod. Mike was receiving no treatment as such, only automatic bathing, and meals out of the serv cluster at the widened lower end of the pod. Ab was irradiated by yellow light from a wire web that dropped down out of the pod canopy several times daily. She didn't talk much. She slept most of the time. She looked deathly. He fancied he saw her blood moving under her tight-stretched cheeks.

The Lightcommander, a hook-nose fellow with a likeable smile but fierce dark eyes, visited them the first day they woke. He came back every day thereafter. No human functionaries attended the bay. Lightcommander Alkbiades told them—or Mike; neither man could be positive that Ab heard the first time—that they were 47,000 light-years from Tome and speeding away, with no intermediate stops scheduled, for a big artificial planet named Poke's Rock. The planet was no more than an outlying transshipment station.

Lightcommander Alkbiades informed them that *Pan's Love III* had called at Tome for a cargo of masks. The masks filled but one of the ship's seven hundred separate

freight areas. At Tome, Mike and Ab had been put aboard unconscious by government officials. Their fares were prepaid to *Pan's Love III's* farthest point of call this run. Also, a more than generous kilocred balance had gone to the Spirotis line for their care.

After several days, Mike grew restless. He wasn't angry. There was no purpose in it. There was nothing to fight. Nothing to hate, either. Except maybe his own failure, which he couldn't exactly explain to himself.

They could have succeeded on Tome if Fochet hadn't bought Swann. But he had, and Mike and Ab had been rendered unconscious by spray from those tubes. That in itself was humiliating. Nor did it help to think repeatedly that a good measure of how close they'd come to really shaking Fochet's bunch was this gleaming, silent bay.

Here they were, carefully shipped off to the far side of the known stars, and paid for, too. It couldn't have been cheap.

Fochet could have made arrangements with a shabbier line. That he chose Spirotis, the finest and most notoriously expensive, showed how certain he wanted to be. Lying around in a blue nutrient bath that filled the pod at intervals, or pacing the bay, or watching Ab, or waiting for Alkbiades' daily visit, gave Mike ample time to dwell on the fact that something awful had gone wrong somewhere. He never felt like grinning even once.

On the seventh or eighth day, Alkbiades called as usual. This time an orderly accompanied him. The orderly rolled a device with an oval screen. He positioned it between Mike's pod and Ab's. He applied the brake and gave a little salute.

The swarthy Lightcommander touched his eyebrow. The orderly went out. The slight noise woke Ab. She turned on her side, shoving red hair off her left eye.

"I saw on the monitors that you absorbed plenty of nourishment last night," Alkbiades said. He took a tape from his jumper. He inserted the tape into an aperture at the rear of the wheeled device. "I thought you might be up to this today."

Ab yawned, then scowled. She didn't care for letting her weakness show. "I really think we can forego therapeutic entertainment. I feel fine."

"This isn't entertainment." Alkbiades punched up the machine. "It's a short message from one of the government people on Tome. The ones who paid your fare."

The oval screen turned pearly, then popped with color dots. Ab grinned all at once. Like a little girl, Mike thought. Now what brought that on?

He watched glumly as the dots resolved into an image of a civil servant of Tome behind a floating desk. The coppery mask smiled. The chin was cleft.

No sound came out. Alkbiades swore and kicked the reader. He let the tape unspool a while longer, then apologized.

"Let me wind her back, please. We don't have a lot of call for this portable unit. Obviously she needs servicing."

While he punched up reversing buttons, he made conversation to cover his embarrassment over something owned by the Spirotis combine not working perfectly.

"Are you feeling better today, Mike?"

"I felt fine when I woke up except for this bent nose."

"Um, ah. You didn't take a bit of treatment, did you? Nothing to treat, according to the monitors. All wires and microminny hash. Remarkable." Alkbiades grinned in a disarming way. "I hope you aren't sensitive about—"

"Nah, I don't mind. I sold myself to a research outfit, the Trelawny Institute. They filled me up with the spaghetti. I know I'm a freak but sometimes it comes in handy."

Not very, though. How could you fight what was behind the masks of Tome by powering up? You couldn't. You fought only the surface. He'd lost because he knew only simple ways of responding to simple surface stimuli. But things weren't simple, he had discovered.

"Here we go." The Lightcommander indicated the oval. Fochet's voice issued from the speaker.

"I am speaking to you with—hopefully—a wide gulf of space between us. I want you to know that what you did on Tome has had no effect whatsoever on the population of the city or the planet."

Fochet sounded neither angry nor pleased, merely reportorial. His hands, in color, were folded and the scars on the backs did not stand out.

"Conditions are normal," he continued. "Your erratic behavior caused no more than a minor disturbance, which has been quelled."

Propped up on one elbow, Ab leaned against the side of her pod. Her plain gown was tight across her bosom. Lightcommander Alkbiades noticed. Ab smiled, Mike saw with surprise.

"To the one of you who goes by the name Micropig, I have this to say. Under the infrequently invoked code of

Tome, you could have been incarcerated and treated. In your case, I imagine, treatment would amount to dismantling. Or whatever one does to someone who's more contraption than man. You did kill five of my subordinates and maim two more while resisting tranquilization."

Mike blinked. This was news to him. He remembered hitting out but couldn't remember striking. Fochet sounded a bit pleased all at once, a shade more forceful.

"Some of my subordinates, indeed, suggested you both be imprisoned without fair trial. Even done away with. Perhaps that shows you how high feelings were running for a time. I chose to overrule those suggestions. There have been outbreaks from the Downbelow before. There may be again. But I did not wish to award either or both of you martyr status, to be used against this society by malcontents at some future time. It was by my order that you were kept in the drugged state until I arranged passage, of which you are now aware."

The Lightcommander watched Ab with unusual interest. "What the hell did you do?"

She glanced at him, glanced away, then back. There was a different light in her eyes, a change in her smile.

"I'll tell you something. Sssh."

". . . under sentence of death," Fochet said from the screen.

"Hey." Mike gestured. "Reel that back, can you? I missed part."

The Lightcommander obliged. Fochet repeated himself. "It is my duty to put you on notice that should you ever return to Tome, you will both find yourselves under sentence of death. You committed an unspeakable crime in questioning our way of life. Tome has long prided itself on maintaining an oasis of sanity and order in a sorely troubled universe. So I repeat"—his voice burst out uncontrollably louder. The scars on his clenched hands paled—"you dare never return. Is that clear?" Fochet rose. He was shaking. "Never. Never. Never." His voice cracked. He pressed his palms on the floating desk. "Never, do you hear me? Never, never, never, nev—"

The image became stuck in the heads, jerking violently as one microframe was repeated over and over. Fochet's body moved in a repetitious way, his voice saying the same syllable countless times:

"Nev-nev-nev-nev-nev-nev-nev-nev-nev-nev-nev-nev-nev—"

Lightcommander Alkbiades hit the reader. The pitch of Fochet's voice changed, going higher. The Lightcommander

tugged his hook nose, punched in signals. Fochet shrank to color dots which quickly vanished.

"Mechanical failure," said the Lightcommander. "Sorry."

"Not just," Ab smiled. "Not just. Oh, Mike. Did you see how we had him? He was frothing under that phony face."

"I thought it was the machine on the blink."

"No, we had him. Oh, we really had him. He was afraid. We shook him. How many do you suppose have ever done that?"

His silence admitted he didn't know.

"Doesn't that make you fell better?" she asked.

"I dunno." It didn't. "You think we won?"

"We didn't and we did. It depends on how you look at it."

"Well," he grumbled, disliking the funny new radiance of her face, "that's sure a weird way to look at it. I'm glad you're happy."

Her face fell. "I'm afraid I taught you the wrong things."

"I don't know what you taught me, so forget it." He only wished he could go back to the way he'd been when *Shawnee Sachem* made planetfall.

As he recalled, he felt jolly then. At peace. Undisturbed even when others mocked him. Now he felt dark and miserable. He left the pods, walking after Alkbiades, who was shoving the reader toward the automatic hatch.

"Lightcommander, what happens to us when we hit Poke's Rock?"

Alkbiades' dark eyes grew flat. "Your fare runs out. I'll drop you off."

"Yeh, but I still have to make a living. I'm qualified on most any class of ship. I thought maybe you—"

Smoothly, the Lightcommander interrupted, "You should pick up a berth with no difficulty. Poke's Rock has heavy traffic. I'm sorry that all the berths aboard this ship are filled. I've no more room for any more men."

That last unnecessary sentence made sense to Mike a couple of seconds after Alkbiades bowed out. He especially caught the significance of the Lightcommander staring back into the center of the bay when he said it. Mike scratched his olefin hair. He didn't know everything that had happened on Tome, but now he was catching on to little subtle things much faster.

Such as to whom Alkbiades had truly been speaking.

So that was how it would be, he thought. He turned and stared at Ab. She avoided his eyes.

Poke's Rock had a carefully engineered resort area crowded with lodges for spacers and passengers staying over. Mike took a room but Ab declined. They walked out onto the terrace of the largest lodge at artificial sunset on the night *Pan's Love III* made planetfall.

Though an illusion, the red sun was pretty. It was designed to be restful out there at the end of a fake vista of chimney rocks and land rubbed clean by wind. The wind whistled, fan-activated. The air inside the sky dome was dry, of moderate temperature, and smelled of sage.

Ab looked pretty as anything. Her cheeks were freshly washed, her hair combed. Even her shabby waist-length cape had a certain flair. Her step was jaunty as they went to a table. Her kit bounced against her hip. The beaded word, Eros, which he still didn't understand, flickered and flashed in the red light.

"Buy you an Orbiter?" he asked.

"One. I haven't much time."

Mike grinned, though he didn't feel like it. "You going with him?"

"Uh-huh. Alkbiades lost his wife a year and a half ago. He wants me aboard."

"Seems like he's okay."

"I think so. It's time I got back to my full-time profession."

"Being a woman."

"Mike." She touched him.

"Nah, nothing's wrong." He drew his big, metal-boned hand back. A four-footed waiter, a silly round-headed Gim, brought their drinks, hissing from its gills. Mike took his time popping the Orbiter open. Then he couldn't contain what he felt any more. He hunched forward fast and exploded, "I just don't know what we proved!"

"Tome is a sick society—"

"And still is."

"—trying to pretend otherwise."

"And still is. Ab, we didn't make any difference."

She cocked her head. "I think we did."

"How?"

"We made them afraid. By making them realize we knew the truth."

"It's too deep for me," he complained. "They beat us in the Game, they bought off Swann, they ruined the march—you tell me how we won anything. All I got out of it, frankly, is a big pain in the head. Before, I always thought that life wasn't too bad. I've changed my tune. Look how easily

they got hold of Swann. Like nothing." He snapped fingers. "That fast. I never knew any people could be that strong. You'd say wicked, I guess. I say strong." His eyes gleamed sullenly under his olefin brows. "I don't mind admitting they scared me, Ab. Everyplace I go from now on, I'll have to look at people I meet, masks or not, and wonder what's in there to be afraid of."

"Oh, you shouldn't feel—"

"You tell me that but I'm goz damned if I believe you."

"Mike, Mike." They were attracting attention. She cupped her smaller hand over his huge, syntho-covered one. "Before we arrived on Tome, everyone played the Game even if it slaughtered them. We showed them we knew how mad it is. We made them remember to fear the strongest thing in all the lights of the universe."

"What's that?"

"The truth."

He had beer at his mouth, and spewed it, foam here, there, flecking the balustrade that overlooked the sere, simulated desert turning maroon as the faraway sun sank. He gasped between words:

"Oh—I'm sorry, kid—oh—I made a mess but—listen. If we're the big heroes, Ab, if we're the truth, I'd like you to tell me just one thing: How come the truth got the shiddings beat out of it, huh?"

"Because—"

"You can't think we won anything."

The four-footed Gim peddled up. "Anything wrong? Anything wrong?"

Mike nearly switched up to half circuits. "Space away, slimeface." The Gim left quickly.

"I think we were a qualified success, Mike," she said after a moment.

"Balls. You either are or—"

"The truth doesn't prevail, Mike. But it persists. We helped."

Deep in his own self-troubles, he didn't reply for some time. And then only with a whiny, "Whatever that means."

"I think you'll figure it out sometime." She dazzled him by smiling. "You're not so dumb."

"Not any more, thanks."

A hooter sounded high up on the lodge roof. Three hoots, then two. Ab stood. She smoothed her hugger blouse.

"That's the Spirotis call. I promise you I won't ever forget you. I hope you don't ever forget me." She bent, crushed his head between her palms and her mouth in one kiss.

Then she walked off, waving, with her bottom swinging.

He ordered another Orbiter. Presently the sand-scoured desert shook with the sympathetic tremors of a big one departing. He finished his beer.

"Waiter? Bring me one more."

But the artificial sun had set. The waiters had gone inside.

Mike sat on the terrace in the dark, bitterly wishing he could be his old self again. Another ship coming in rumbled. He glanced up, hoping he'd feel something good.

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