

Scanned by Highroller

Proofed by an unsung hero

v 2.0

# The Star Venturers

Kenneth Bulmer

## CONTENTS

I

II

III

IV

V

VI

VII

VIII

IX

X

XI

XII

# I



For once Bill Jarrett was minding his own business.

He had just sold a quantity of diamonds he had picked up on a Pluto-cold world to a jowly Terran atom-master and he felt in good spirits. He felt great. He was actually whistling as he strolled down the sidewalks of a New York that hummed and bustled in many levels about him.

The sun shone, throwing patterned shadows, warm. That sun up there was Old Sol, the real honest-to-goodness Number One Sun.

Jarrett, whistling, feeling the thick roll of notes in his pocket, felt legitimately on top of the galaxy.

He turned into a pedway fifty stories above the ground where bright murals beckoned. He strode along eagerly. What should it be? A frosted flagon of red wine—Dragon's Blood? Or a hot cup of java?

The opportunity to make a choice pleased him.

The café appeared nice and pleasant, quiet and respectable. These were qualities long unfamiliar to him, near-forgotten and strange, lost, he had thought, in a dozen years of rollicking on the toughest spots in the galaxy. He had seen a lot of space and a lot of stars since he had last been on Earth.

Jarrett's wide shoulders brushed a pot plant on a shelf as he sat down and his long legs kicked into the chair opposite.

The girl laughed at him.

"Do you always," Jarrett said, making it soft and genteel for the moment, "do you, young lady, always giggle at perfect strangers?"

"How do you know you're perfect?" she countered.

Big Bill Jarrett had to chuckle at that one, especially in the mood he was in. He didn't stop to think. He just rushed in, all big beaming smile and dancing eyes and wide-open teddy-bear loveliness.

"Could be I'd be amenable to some polishing."

Her eyes flirted at him. She was a tall, statuesque girl, with smooth blonde hair plaited and swung low over her breasts. Her features, full and florid, promised a coarse emotive understanding. She wore a short emerald green dress that glittered as she moved and her thighs showed firm and strong. Lacking other female company, Bill Jarrett found her attractive, as he found some orchids attractive.

She said now, her eyes measuring him, "You might be amenable to anything; I wouldn't know."

Along about now Jarrett, in normal circumstances, would have registered the exact pitch on his internal social radar mind-screens. He'd handled enough Harpies on enough strange planets. But here he was on Earth—*on Earth*—the hearthstone of the galaxy. Crudities did not exist on good old Solterra, did they?

The robot waiter chirruped for attention and, making up his mind with reckless abandon, Jarrett ordered champagne. The girl smirked. The robot brought the bottle and popped the cork and poured. Jarrett lifted his glass, not bothering over formality, anxious only to be seen as a *bon vivant*.

The champagne was reasonable. He drank two glasses and as he was reaching for the bottle to pour the third for the girl he felt an amazingly acute pain in the back of his head, a stabbing agony over his eyes and a sick queasiness in his stomach.

He rolled over and sat up.

The metal floor quivered.

The metal walls shook.

A single glow-light in the overhead showed him the familiar outlines of a spaceship's brig.

"What the—!" he said thickly.

No answer.

He put a hand to his wallet—gone. The thick roll of notes—gone.

He groaned. His head threatened to come off.

"Not at my age," he said. "I'm a grown boy. Say it isn't so."

But it was so—indubitably.

It mattered not if the atom-master had instigated the rolling of him to regain his money, or if he had fallen into the hands of freelancers. His cash was gone. His wallet and thus his proof of who he was was gone.

And he was aboard a rustbucket en route for God knew where.

He lay on the metal floor and pondered. His thoughts made his face take on the semblance of a gargoyle's, all hooked nose and thinned lips and jutting jaw. He didn't waste energy railing against fate—rather, he knew with a savage, morose lack of self-pity that the mug had been him; it was all his fault, and he and he alone had dropped himself in it this time around.

Bill Jarrett had stature enough to recognize that life itself is good; but he was not a sentimental fool who thought that the goodness of life could be had free, without some pain. Hitherto, for all his adventures, he had fought cleanly; now he wondered how he would react if confronted with that blonde-haired temptress in the little mural café perched on a pedway fifty stories up in Earth's New York.

When some of the headache had gone he propped himself against the metal wall and shoved himself fully upright. He was a tall man. His head brushed the overhead. He straightened up his rumpled jacket and trousers and then took off one of his real leather spaceboots with the plastic reinforced sole.

He thumped the door with it. He banged that door with all his frustration and anger.

The small polarized window set halfway up flushed pink and cleared and a face peered through.

"Shaddap!"

"Come in here and say that!" blasted back Jarrett.

"Don't give me any trouble, sonny. I'm bigger and rougher than you are."

The door swung open silently. The speaker stepped through the opening.

Jarrett—Big Bill Jarrett—stepped back a pace.

The man was big. He wasn't just tall, he was big all over. After his first quick shock, Jarrett studied him more critically and noticed the swell of stomach and mentally filed that away as a possible weak spot. The man's huge hands enfolded a large-size solid-projectile weapon, the type of gun

normally operated from a mounting.

"You may be bigger," Jarrett said coolly—he had at once reverted to his usual professional poise—"but rougher... you can't prove that with a gun in your fist."

He began to work his boot back on.

The giant laughed, gap-toothed, his lips folded in thick creases. He wore a drab uniform with a brilliant red cummerbund. His face and his body repelled Jarrett.

"I'm proving I'm tougher than you, sonny, because I don't care if I use this squirter on you or not."

At that, the cretin had a point, Jarrett conceded.

They went along the corridor to a comfortable wardroom.

Sitting at the table were two men, men of a certain stamp, hard-bitten spacemen who plied the lonely reaches between the stars for just one motive—profit.

"Here he is, Cap'n," grunted the giant. "He just woke up."

The older of the two officers, the one with rather more gold braid and wrinkles and a stronger leer of evil in his eyes, said, "He don't look like much to me."

The other one, the straight man, said, "Give him a chance. He might be quite—ah—adequate."

"All right, Noggin," said the captain briskly. "Put him to work. And I don't want any trouble."

"You won't get any, sir, not from this bum." And Noggin prodded Jarrett with the gun so that he stumbled out of the wardroom.

He heard the two officers laughing.

Jarrett liked a good laugh, himself.

He was put to work on routine cleaning and maintenance tasks aboard the ship, which proved to be a sizable freighter with a central open compartment for space-refrigerated cargoes. No novice aboard spaceships, Jarrett quickly contrived a simple routine that satisfied Noggin, the bosun, and left him plenty of time for himself. After a couple of ship-days of that he

went back to making the work last full-time. He had never been one for sitting and brooding.

He figured out that he had not been shanghaied merely to work aboard the ship—automatics took care of almost everything. Noggin had to find work for him to do in double and triple cleaning and polishing. He must have been rolled by that tricky atom-master and, when the rich pig had stolen his money back, been shipped out to avoid the unpleasant consequences such a rough and tough specimen from the outer marches of the galaxy would inevitably arouse.

Even so—even so, there was the destination and the complaint he would make then.

Didn't the officers of the ship (she was the Crepuscid Federation's Dnipro Line's *Jacqueline*—an unsavory shipping line at best) didn't they realize he'd report at once to the authorities on planetfall?

They might try to prevent him from landing although he doubted that, for common sense told him he was costing them more in food and necessities than he could possibly earn cleaning ship. If they did try to stop him he would, regrettably, have to get rough.

So there was another reason.

As *Jacqueline* plunged on through space to a destination not revealed to him, Bill Jarrett tried to figure it out.

He saw little of the other members of the crew for they kept to themselves. At watch-changing he glimpsed them striding purposefully to their work and understood they were all of a pattern with the captain and Noggin. A hard ship, the *Jacqueline*.

He'd traveled and worked aboard hard ships before, in his time, had Big Bill Jarrett.

As the tally of ship-days mounted up and the ship still plunged through space at her light-year consuming gallop, Jarrett understood also that their destination lay at a considerable distance from Solterra. As the galaxy had been explored and colonized and opened up, many pockets of stellar clusters and conglomerations had been settled and abandoned, for a variety of reasons. Homo sapiens spread erratically throughout the outer portions of the home spiral arm. Inevitably much communication suffered. Stars and

planets became cut off and isolated from other solarian settlements.

Local groupings sprang up, petty empires and commonwealths and federations of suns. Old Earth looked on and maintained a watchful motherhood. If any grouping looked too powerful, then she would arrange a balancing group or federation, so that nothing unpleasantly violent should break out among the stars.

As you looked out into space and saw the chips of light eternally burning, saw the long swirls of darkness and the whorls of more distant galaxies, you knew that around many of those tiny specks of light orbited planets whereon men—men like yourself—lived and loved and died.

Also, you knew, around other chips of light orbited planets whereon lived other beings, who may have loved, and who probably died; but so far Homo sapiens knew so little about them that only guesses could suffice for answers.

When the orders came through from Noggin that planetfall was coming up Jarrett was polishing for the hundredth time the bright metal stanchions leading into the open area. He put down the rag and gaped back at the big bosun, as though the journey had grown to be a natural portion of life and any cessation of it was out of the normal, strange.

"Planetfall?"

"That's right, sonny. Place called Merton. Heard of it?"

"No."

Noggin guffawed.

"Oh, you will, sonny, you will."

He was obviously enjoying a huge joke at Jarrett's expense.

Jarrett glared furiously at him, feeling the impotence of the ignorant.

When the ship at last touched down and the locks opened Noggin and two other crewmen appeared before Jarrett, who was now dressed in a plain gray coverall, patched and stained, and jerked impatient guns at him.

"Move along, sonny. If you try to run—powee!"

Jarrett's fists gripped into knots.

There was no hope of running. Preceding the guards, he marched down

the ramp.

He took in this planet called Merton. A blue sky, wispy white clouds, pleasant air and gravity. The spacefield showed a few dissimilarities from those Jarrett knew, scattered over many worlds of this spiral arm of the galaxy.

For instance, although there were only four ships on the field and the area itself appeared able to handle only about eight in all, as the gantries and loading and fueling facilities showed, all along two sides of the field long, wide and immense buildings had been built.

As warehouses they were grossly oversized for such a spacefield setup.

The captain waited at the foot of the ramp. A hovercar rested on the ground nearby and a woman's face showed at the window. Jarrett only had time for a glimpse—a glimpse that showed him a wide white brow, dark coiled hair, and a full and ripely-red mouth—before Noggin prodded him on.

The captain bent to the hovercar window. He was speaking to the woman. Jarrett walked stiff-legged across the concrete, then the asphalt, and so into the lowering door of the nearest warehouse. The huge door rolled shut after him with a resonant clang.

He blinked in the sudden darkness.

Noggin's gun herded him on and he went, unwillingly, forward into the dimness.

He was not fool enough to chance a break and a run for it in here. The infrared detector on Noggin's gun would seek him and trigger the gun in a destructive burst long before he could escape. And outside? He had seen no city to which this strange spacefield could serve as port.

Following Noggin's directions—harshly barked commands to "Turn left! Right! Straight on!"—Jarrett fumbled into the darkness. He guessed the bosun was using a radar-guidance map-orientation device to program him through the stacked bales and boxes that covered the warehouse floor.

Their feet hissed on shiny plastic. Echoes bounced jarringly from the piles of boxes. Sweat began to collect on Jarrett's brow.

Light blazed ahead, actinic, blinding. Jarrett blinked. They came into an



open area, glassed in; they entered through a glass doorway that hissed shut after them.

"Like a blasted specimen on a microscope slide," Jarrett said. His voice squeaked and was lost.

"Shaddap," growled Noggin.

The bosun waited, his gun pointed at Jarrett's back, the other two men with him as uneasy as Jarrett himself.

Presently a red light glowed high up and a rectangular section of the floor, six feet square, vanished. Jarrett could see the metal lining to the shaft revealed.

The very coldness, the impersonal consequence, of this experience began to get to him. He was a hot-blooded man. He had accepted the situation aboard the spaceship only because there was nothing else to do. The fact that he had maintained a discreet calmness about it did not mean his blood had not sung with anger and resentment.

Now, here in this glassed-in place, with offstage mechanics taking place, a gun in his back, the harsh actinic light blazing down, he felt more than ever as though he had been summoned for some celestial observation.

The floor segment returned to place with the suggestion of a hiss of compressed air.

On the floor now stood a chair. In the chair, composed, alert, compact, sat a woman—the woman, Jarrett immediately guessed, he had last seen in the hovercar outside.

She was dressed in a long shimmery gown of indigo and silver, constantly moving as transparent but light glinting material slithered over the deeper cloth beneath. On her head a tiara of diamonds blazed with a fire that told Jarrett, who knew about these things, that they were genuine.

"Just like a blasted princess," he said softly, to himself, conscious of Noggin's gun.

The woman opened those richly red lips and said:

"Do you wish to die?"

Jarrett decided on a certain course of action, and remained silent.

Noggin prodded him with the gun.

"Hey, sonny! The princess is talking to you."

Jarrett, through lips he forced to remain supple and capable of speech, said, "What princess? Talking to me? Why didn't she say so then?"

He ducked.

Noggin's enraged blow whistled over his head.

Before the bosun could swing again, the girl snapped out a quick, glittery command.

"Stop! I do not want the subject killed—you stupid grilt."

Noggin winced.

"Yes, my lady."

Jarrett cautiously straightened up.

He eyed the girl with a trifle more respect.

She could handle Noggin, that was clear.

Now she leaned forward and he saw her eyes, unemphasized, were a clear green flecked with black. She put a hand to her chin. "I asked you if you wanted to die."

"So you were talking to me. How nice."

She frowned and Jarrett caught the distinct impression of thunder and lightning playing around her magnificent head. She tapped a silver-slippered foot against the metal-glass floor.

"I ask you for the last time. Then you will die, willy-nilly. Do you wish to die?"

"No."

Noggin, lifting his gun to bash at Jarrett, growled, "Say *my lady*, sonny!"

She frowned at Noggin, who lowered the gun, shrinking.

"I am a princess; but that means nothing to filth like you. If you do not wish to die, then I can offer you employment. If you wish to die, Noggin, here, will oblige you with some pleasure."

Jarrett, aware how near to death he stood, said, "What do you wish me to

do? Uh—my lady."

She gestured. Noggin prodded Jarrett onto the platform beside the chair. The other two men went away through the glassed doorway and their going betokened their gladness to be gone. Noggin guffawed evilly.

The platform sank with a sudden stomach-unsettling *whoosh*. As though musing to herself and yet involving Noggin by the use of his name, the girl said, "He shows no fear, no emotion, nothing the others showed, Noggin. Maybe this is the man we have been waiting for."

Jarrett tried to make sense of this.

"You heard about me, before?" he asked, adding a *my lady* with a quickness that would outpace Noggin's gun.

"Heard of you?" She spoke now with a great weariness, a soft sloughing away of her tough, feminine suffragette facade. "We hear about all the adventurers of the galaxy. You are not an uncommon breed. So far, all have failed."

"Umm," said Jarrett. He remembered Charlie Sjambok, and Jungren Jones—one or two others—tough resourceful adventurers in the galaxy living on their wits and their strengths. He recalled they had dropped out of sight and no one had heard of them lately.

"Failed—all of them?" he asked tentatively.

"You will fail too. I know it. But I must go on trying. When you are dead and scattered into atoms we shall find another strong man and try again. One day, perhaps, we will succeed. Maybe you will. But I doubt it. You, too, will be destroyed like all the others."

## II

« ^ »

With **this** piece of dire information ringing in his ears Bill Jarrett became aware that the downward movement had ceased. The girl's chair lifted two feet into the air on the power of the anti-gravity motors concealed in the base and smoothly began to float down a wide and brilliantly lit corridor.

Noggin prodded; but Jarrett, who had learned to learn fast in the galaxy, was already off the elevator and following the anti-grav chair.

Jarrett had formed an opinion and, with his prior decision on his course of conduct already proven a sound choice, he felt he stood a better chance of life than he had supposed.

All kinds of petty empires and kingdoms and republics festered on the scattered worlds of the galaxy. When a colonist ship arrived, either from Earth or these days more likely from some other outward planet, the people would set up their own culture and fight their environment or meld with it, until they had made their new home a place to live. Often the boss man would call himself a king. When he did so, then his daughters would call themselves princesses. Jarrett had met princesses before. As a breed he was leery of them.

Noggin said, "My lady—is the test—?"

She said tartly, "Keep quiet, stupid grilt! You will know."

Ahead stretched an area of greenish purple curtains, all moving silently and gently in undulating curves. The floor gleamed yellow and alabaster. The curtains curved to enclose them. The chair rose higher, higher, mingling with the many hooded lights of the ceiling.

Noggin looked up. Watching the big man's face, Jarrett saw he was scared, the tough planes of the cheeks caving in, the throat muscles gaunt.

Then, like a shafting column of solid water, a transparent cylinder whooshed down from the ceiling to enclose Noggin like an insect in a test tube.

Jarrett jumped, his left arm going up in reflexive readiness.

Noggin's face expressed relief. He wiped sweat from his brow. He slumped in the transparent tube, and his gun upended and the butt thumped the floor.

So?

Jarrett looked about suspiciously.

A test... ?

The greenish purple curtains, undulating, hemmed him in on all sides. The lights blazed down from above and he could no longer see the anti-grav

chair and the princess-girl. Noggin came alive again and stared at Jarrett with greedy anticipation, licking his lips.

Jarrett began to feel edgy, a cool professional edginess, true; but not as composed as he would have liked, all the same.

A round rubber ball dropped from an unseen source in the darkness between the blaze of lights, dropped to the floor, bounced, quivered, lay still.

The ball opened an eye and stared at Jarrett.

Now Jarrett knew.

He had had dealings with electroplasms before.

The quietness, the uneasiness, the whispering menace of this place should have done its insidious work by now. A man should feel cowed. The round rubber ball clicked sharply and unfolded a tentacle. Six feet long, barely a finger-thick, that tentacle slowly coiled and uncoiled, like a whip. A second tentacle unwrapped itself. The single eye flared with a brightened menace.

Jarrett knew. A flailball. A vicious thing of printed circuits and transistors and multiple aptitude wiring, all controlled by a scrap of protoplasmic matter masquerading as a brain. Half sentient, half robot, the thing rolled over the yellow and alabaster flooring toward him.

He backed off.

He could feel the sweat trickling down his back and chest.

The flailball rolled clickingly nearer. Two other tentacles joined the first two in their unceasing mesmeric weaving and coiling before the advancing thing.

If this was the test it was as severe a one as an unarmed man could face.

A voice, soft and light, like the snowflakes that will kill, drifted down from the black spaces between the lights.

"This is your chance, adventurer. This is where many of those who came before you stopped." A sigh. "I hope— for my sake—you will be successful."

A younger, less experienced man might have wasted time speaking back

in anger and resentment and fear to that disembodied voice.

Jarrett kept smoothly backing away, circling, getting the crystal column containing Noggin between him and the flailball.

As though piqued he did not reply, the princess said again, "Try hard, little man. Try hard—for me."

Again Jarrett ignored her.

Very soon now the column would be between him and this half-mechanical half-protoplasmic monstrosity.

A hiss sounded from the overhead.

Noggin's eyes rolled up and his fingers clenched on the gun. He was more scared of the princess than he was of the flailball. Jarrett kept his eyes on the ball, letting it close in, a step to the side of the crystal column.

She spoke again, like a woman unable to leave well enough alone: "Grilt—did you know?—that thing is a flailball. Grilt—did you know?—it can lash you to death, flay you, lacerate you, cut you up. Grilt—did you know?—you face your death." A sigh, rich and moist and corrupt. "Don't fail, filthy grilt, don't fail—for my sake."

The flailball had only four flails out and weaving. Most of the models Jarrett had previously encountered had possessed six tentacles. At those times he had been armed. Now he faced a monster notorious throughout the human portions of the galaxy as a man-killer, unarmed, nakedly, as though he had just waddled down from a cave without a tree branch, without a flint, without a fire.

Jarrett moved his back in the coverall. He flexed his muscles carefully, as though going through a well-remembered routine, a discipline of bodily force.

He crouched a little, his hands swinging half up before him, the fingers opened and clawed. He kept looking at the flailball as it rolled inexorably closer, looking at it and at the crystal column a step to the side.

One muff, one clip, one miss—and *finis* Big Bill Jarrett.

A six foot long tentacle snaked out in an experimental flick. The lash fell twelve inches short of Jarrett. He had not flinched.

He heard Noggin give a snort.

The ball rolled closer by those twelve deadly inches.

The lash flicked again—

Jarrett moved his body in what appeared a lazy windblown sway to the side and the lash, following him, flicked into the crystal column.

Noggin screamed and cowered up.

Jarrett danced back, showed himself on the other side of the column in time to spring back and avoid the other tentacle as it snaked forward.

He pressed himself against the rear of the column.

The flailball hesitated. Those printed circuits, those transistors, that scrap of protoplasmic brain—Jarrett knew well enough what they were sorting out and arguing about in electronic and cellular judgment.

Which side to go get him?

He showed a portion of his side and at once a flail lashed that way at the column.

Jarrett jerked back and stuck rather more of himself out the other side than he intended.

This time he only just beat the lash as he snapped back.

He had achieved what he wanted. He had the thing programmed now.

Vaguely aware of the princess' voice from the overhead, he ignored that as he would brush away a fly. He saw Noggin heaving himself up and moved his own body so that Noggin's gross bulk intervened between him and the baleful eye on the flailball.

Now he would have a chance—a single chance.

He waited and then showed his hands, one on each side of the crystal column.

A lash flicked—flick! flick!—once, twice, on the left, and another—flick! flick!—on the right.

At his second attempt he took the tip of the left-hand lash and brought it across the tip of the right-hand one. He did this quickly, smoothly, with all the desperate hope of a drowning man.

He bent, pushed, pulled, tucked and looped and...

Jarrett staggered back, smiling, breathing great gulps of the overheated air.

"Get knotted!" he said. And laughed.

The flailball whimpered. Its machinery whined. Its remaining two tentacles flailed and twisted and lashed. But the two other tentacles remained firmly knotted around the crystal shaft.

Noggin gaped, not believing.

Standing there, his chest heaving, Jarrett heard a step behind him. Before he could turn a deep basso voice said, "It is incredible. I would not have believed it possible."

He turned to see a bulky, bearded man rocking back on his heels, his hands fiddling with a chain across his amply waistcoated stomach. His hair, long and straight, sprouted radially from a point high above a broad forehead and hung down lankly to his neck and behind his ears, a stray hank swinging forward and laying an inky brushstroke alongside his chin. He wore square dark glasses of incredibly banal appearance. His beard, bristling, stumpy, was closely shaved down in an arc from nose and moustache to jaw. All in all, looking at him, at the receding character of his fatness, Jarrett surmised the weak-intellectual who talks and talks. He hoped, in that position, to be wrong.

The flailball clinked and struggled against its own bonds.

"You did that—all by yourself?"

Jarrett ignored the fat bearded man. He looked up into the dark spaces between the lights.

The anti-grav chair began to descend.

The fat man's nose, fleshy and porous, twitched. He smiled with a horizontal stretching of his wet mouth.

"It wasn't meant to hurt you, you know," he said with his deep voice apologetic. "Really."

As he spoke he rocked back and forth, dancing his fingertips together on his stomach.

"You could have fooled me."



Jarrett circumstantially felt that the fat bearded man was of an age to think that the right response.

"No, it's true." The apologetic tone in the man's voice nauseated Jarrett. "We only let the flailball go as long as necessary. We sort out the cowards that way, you see. Usually they run and scream. If they react better we see how long and then we can switch the ball off—" His deep voice rose to a squeak as he tried to explain.

The anti-grav chair landed. The girl said, "That's enough, Morel. Keep quiet."

He nodded and danced his fingers between beard and stomach.

The girl stared at Jarrett. He guessed she was a little nonplussed, if what the fat fool Morel had said was true.

He let her wait, damning her, before he would speak. She had tried the old high-and-mighty performance of princess on him and he had remained unimpressed. Now let her open this conversation.

He could feel her as a woman now, waves of darkness coming out of her, demanding, calling to the hidden compulsions in his blood. She had no need to speak to make conversation with him.

Morel went across to the crystal column and, deactivating the flailball, let the crystal shaft rise into the air. The tentacles, still knotted, fell away and Noggin, with a grunt of disgust, slipped out from beneath them. They hit the yellow and alabaster floor and lay still.

"You were quick—Mr.—ah?"

Noggin said, "Bill Jarrett, my lady."

"Let him speak, stupid grilt."

But Jarrett remained silent, his eyes fixed on those of the girl. She looked away. Her hand rose to the brooch at her throat.

"You—ah, Mr. Jarrett. You appear to be the man I have spent a long time looking for. I must explain things to you and then—"

Jarrett interrupted. His voice deadly, he said, "Yes, you have some explaining, to do."

She fiddled with the brooch. Then she flicked her fingers, the anti-grav

chair rose, and Noggin, Morel and Jarrett followed her across that shining floor,

A panel of the greenish purple drapes parted and they went through.

The screens in this smaller room indicated its possible function as a signal center. Automatic equipment chirruped away in the boxes and consoles of the computer system scattered over the floor. The princess went to the control monitors banked along one wall and depressed a starting sequence of studs.

The main screen lit up.

"Watch!" she commanded.

Not certain how he should respond to the unfolding history screened in that equipment-choked room, Jarrett perched on the corner of a box and watched, occasionally flicking a glance to Noggin or Morel or to the girl herself in her flying-chair.

As for the history—that was standard formula. A colonist ship, dominated by two men, brothers, taking off with their friends and adherents from a world that no longer wanted them, seeking through the shimmering starfields, finding a star and a planet, settling to earth and founding a colony—two colonies—that were intended to reflect the best in life. The ship had been called the *Ark*. Jarrett sighed and continued to watch.

The history of the planet which the colonists agreed to call Panim—they agreed on precious little else—spanned three or four centuries of terrestrial time. Naturally, a planet as much like Earth as possible had been chosen. The two colonies quarreled; they even indulged their little egos in one or two ludicrous wars. Great rulers rose and fell. Through it all the two bloodlines established by the brothers continued clear and pure. The latest kings could say they were directly descended from the first pair of brothers. Twins ran in the family, Jarrett saw, with a bored smile.

Noggin nudged him with his gun muzzle.

"Wake up and pay attention, you grilt!"

Surprised as he was, Jarrett felt quaintly amused that he had nearly gone to sleep.

He supposed that this planet he was now on, Merton, had some

connection with Panim.

Trouble was—he watched a graphic account of a city being built and engulfed in a giant earthquake that ripped a continent to shreds—trouble was until he knew what lay beyond that door, beyond the curtains, beyond the glass walls, he couldn't make a break for it. Probably an underground labyrinth existed—explaining the spacefield's lack of hinterland—which would also confuse and lose him. He knew enough to know that he would stick out like a chemical rocket in a nuclear rocket's cradle.

Like these people up on the screen now. Fashion had taken one of its periodic crazy turns, and men involved in the planet's parliament and court under the direction of the current king wore fantastic puffed and slashed garments of violent color and cut, great gorgeous erections of cloth and gold and silver threaded fabrics that made each man a walking fairbooth.

Suppose fashions like that were the custom in the underground city he felt sure existed here. His old stained coveralls would betray him in an eye-flicker.

"We're getting into modern times now," said the girl.

Jarrett watched as the gorgeous clothes vanished, it seemed overnight, to be replaced by stark utilitarian uniforms.

War had come to Panim.

Morel, the flabby dark-bearded man, said unctuously, "If he is the one, my lady, then he should be embroiled."

She inclined her head.

With a sliding glance of those poached-egg eyes Morel waddled across to the switchboard and sat down in the powered control chair. He pointed to a second chair at the side, a chair liberally endowed with pads and electrodes and complicated wiring.

"Here, Mr. — ah — Jarrett."

Any thought of resistance was immediately cut off by Noggin and his gun. Jarrett sat in the chair.

He recognized it and understood its purpose, even if he had never bothered to comprehend the electronics as a paid technician and electronics man would.

Electrodes rose, and clamped to his head as though they were alive. Armbands rotated and locked his wrists to the wide arms of the chair. He lay back, awaiting the transliteration.

His senses misted and blurred and through the orange indigo-streaked fog he heard a brisk, angry, frightened voice demanding, "Hurry up with the coffin, Joseph!"

He opened his eyes to peer through the mist. He sat in a small chair in a dusty, musty room he knew lay at the top of his father's castle tower. His father, king of Panim, paced agitatedly. Joseph, old and wrinkled, his fuzz of white hair a bristle above his round brick-red face, his body bent with years of service, dragged the child's coffin toward the balcony.

Jarrett looked down.

The chair he sat in was a child's chair. He saw his own childish legs clad in blue velvet. He saw his puny chest clad in a blue velvet doublet, with the space helmet fixtures' deep mark on the blue plush. The tiny spacesuit lay in its cradle at the side, ready for him to don.

"The coffin is all ready, master." Joseph creaked back. "No one can know of this, not a soul. The young prince will be safe—"

Big Bill Jarrett, whose body sat in an electronic chair in an underground room on a planet called Merton, knew with the consciousness of his mind that he was the prince, he was the child, he was the one to don that spacesuit and climb into that coffin.

The door burst open.

Men crowded in, men wearing crimson and mulberry, men with weapons, men with ugly hating faces, men who cut down old Joseph in a bath of fire. Men closed in on the king and on the little prince.

Men who hated him.

### III

The coffin had wheeled away into the empty dark—the coffin had spun into the dark vacancies between the stars—but the coffin had not contained the spacesuited body of the young prince.

Sitting enchained by electronic forces in his viewing chair, Bill Jarrett saw the end of the man who had inherited a colonial ancestor's planet and title. The king died. The young boy, who in that instant of molecular disruption of flesh and heart and brain became the king, screamed. Rough hands grasped him—Jarrett could feel the callused fingers—*feel them!*—brutal coercion forced him stumbling from the tower chamber. The door gaped before him. He saw the leering, swarthy, triumphant face of a man, stepping mockingly out of his way, his liquid eyes filled with gratified malice, his whole posture one of deference made rampant.

The door jamb passed parallel with his eyes.

The swarthy man with the broad muscular face, the dark stubbled jaws, the wide-smiling mocking mouth, waved a hand in an onward direction.

"The king is dead," he said with an upward inflection of his voice, impudent and strong. "Long live the king!"

Jarrett took note of him. The long corded neck rising like a column from the casually-opened shirt front, the loose trousers, the weapons at his waist, his whole free and easy posture, proclaimed clearly this man's new status.

The doorway passed—and the darkness fell.

Jarrett opened his eyes onto the panels and the switches and lights, with the fat bearded fool Morel bending puffily to release him from the viewing chair.

"Well?"

Jarrett rubbed his wrists.

"You tell me," he said, less truculently.

The girl who called herself a princess said softly: "That was Prince Manrico, who is now the king."

Jarrett stood up. He was aware of the different mood of these people now. Even Noggin, rotund and gray-faced, stood with his thumbs hooked into his scarlet cummerbund, waiting. Which was, Jarrett told himself with a spurting flash of anger, very nice and jolly. Did they take him for a fool?

Didn't they think he would seek to exact recompense?

"Listen, Mr. Jarrett." The girl's indigo and silver dress moved as her body lifted, the silvery transparent stuff sliding over the darker material, light-glinting, as she stepped out of her anti-grav chair.

"I'm listening," Jarrett said stonily.

"We made you experience what little Prince Manrico experienced as those—those men—killed his father and kidnapped him."

"And you couldn't show any more of that film, of course, because as soon as they took the kid outside they moved out of the range of your hidden cameras. I understand transliteration devices tolerably well."

"And do you"—her voice rang out—"understand the smashing of a family, the treachery, the hate, and the diabolical ache of losing a crown?"

Jarrett laughed.

"Crowns are for punks," he said. He lifted a hand in immediate protest as Noggin bunched himself and Morel hissed through his beard and reached inside his voluminous coat. "By that I mean any two-bit explorer can find a planet and set himself up as king. It's being done all the time by retired civil servants. They take their pension, buy a hunk of otherwise useless rock, and call themselves king and the rest of their family their court and people."

The princess inclined her head as though listening to sewer talk.

"Then," went on Jarrett in his stony, heavy voice, "then they can issue postage stamps, diddle income taxes and impost duties, fiddle all kinds of deals. Kings and queens? They're all on the fiddle just like everyone else."

The silence lasted.

Then the girl who called herself a princess said, "We do not know what happened to Prince Manrico. We do not know where he is. All we know is that the man with the swarthy face who killed the king is called Styron Sinclair and he lives, or used to live, on a planet called Toulouse."

"Yes?"

The idea had finally got through to Big Bill Jarrett now.

"This happened, what you saw, the vileness of it, this happened twenty years ago—"

"A twenty year old trail!"

She smiled. Her over-ripe red lips curved, dimpling those white cheeks.

"I compliment you, Mr. Jarrett, on your perception."

The dark waves of feeling poured from her, stifling Jarrett's thinking, ruling his blood, making it dance through his veins. He looked at her dark hair and her wide white brow and her green, black-flecked eyes. Yes, there was no need of conversation between them.

"What's the catch?"

Then, speaking again and interrupting Morel, who had begun to squeak, Jarrett added, "I mean, apart from the tired old routine about you killing me if I don't."

"We can pay." She spoke offhandedly. Jarrett was trying to make up his mind if he liked her better or less for her princessy-about nonsense. Normally, he would have decided long ago that she was not his type.

"Sure you can pay." He chuckled. "How much?"

Noggin, under the stress of money talk evidently forgetting the softer approach, hunched forward, bulking his shoulders.

"If he don't cooperate let me put the boot in!"

"Keep quiet, grilt!"

Noggin subsided; but he gave Jarrett a lurid look.

Smiling wetly, Morel said, "We have the utmost in resources. We have scientists and facilities, and we have money. Your reward need not concern you—"

"Oh, but it does, it does," broke in Jarrett, as before oddly conscious that this man needed to be talked to in clichés.

"Talking of our resources..." The girl touched buttons on the control panel.

A door slid aside in the far wall. Through this opening walked two young girls, each clad in a bikini and boots, each carrying the ornate silver hands of an ebony box swung between them, the hands a left and a right, making a pair. The girls looked to be about seventeen or eighteen. They kept their eyes on the floor, their mounded eyelids modest. Jarrett saw each one had a

small, personal radar-dish mounted in her navel, the device no doubt used as Noggin had used his personal radar to reach this place through the dim and package-cumbered warehouses.

"Stand here, grillotas!" snapped the princess.

She flung Jarrett a mean look.

"This is Cara and this is Mara—they are for work and not for pleasure. Put the box down, grillotas, and go!"

Obediently the two girls bent and Jarrett saw their lithe young bodies, so free, so limber, and a pang went through him. They released their formal handshake with the box and, standing erect once again, turned together and in silence together went back through the opening in the wall.

The door slid shut.

"All right, Morel. You are the expert."

Jarrett glanced at Morel. The fat man licked the hairs of his moustache and beard. His eyes showed a furtive hunted look.

"Very well, my lady." He turned to Jarrett. "Sit in this chair—no, not that one—this."

Taking the indicated chair, Jarrett sat.

At once the chair tilted up, the headrest sank down and the footrest thrust up so that he was lying on a table. Wrist-and legbands revolved to hold him. He lifted his head, the cords in his neck straining.

"What is the need for this?"

"We do not know if you will cooperate or not, you galactic adventurers." Morel sounded as though he both hated and envied that rare class of Homo sapiens.

He held a waldo-box and, punching buttons, guided a lensed hood down from that light-spattered dark ceiling. The hood hovered over Jarrett's face and the lenses glittered in his eyes.

About to protest, to try by words to stem the inevitable, Jarrett felt the rigid clasp encircle his brain; a sort of mental eclampsia caught and gripped him fixedly, squeezing. Yet he was perfectly conscious of becoming unconscious, as though a cortical Novocain had been sprayed into his



central nervous system. He felt detached, removed, disembodied. He viewed himself as through a curtain of glass beads.

Distortedly, lopsidedly, like one of those stupid photographs taken with trick lenses that round and puff the faces of people at the edges of the frame, he saw Morel leaning over him. In the man's fingers, held awkwardly and yet with firm intent, a single lambent eye glowed down on Jarrett.

Attached to the eye was a band of fur, a band that glistened and glittered, each spear of light catching his eye with its own individual beamed reflection, a magnificent artificial pelt.

Morel leaned closer.

Jarrett could feel the man's pungent breath on his face and yet he could not feel it in any way that mattered. Morel leaned around behind Jarrett's head, fastening, the fur opening and banding around the prone man's forehead and back of his head. The eye in the center of the fur band was now firmly fixed square in the center of Jarrett's forehead.

He felt, dazedly, faintly, as from a long distance, a needle-point of pain at the back of his neck.

He tried to move restlessly, in protest, and could not.

Morel's thick lips moved, soundlessly.

A shadow fell across Jarrett's face.

He looked up.

The girl stared down at him, a long flowing look of hatred and passion and love and longing. He looked back, supine, unable to move, prostrate.

The back of his head ached.

The blackness that he welcomed fell on him.

When he woke up he was sitting in the reshaped chair and Morel, perched on the corner of the control opposite, was regarding him as an angler regards a fish on his hook of dubious size, determining if it is to be thrown back or fried.

Jarrett shook his head. It felt—funny.

"Uh," he said, swallowing. His mouth tasted vile.

"Drink this." Morel proffered a glass of water.

Jarrett drank. His head felt muffled, close, hot. He put his hand up and Morel, leaning forward in a fatherly way, said, "Uh-uh, Mr. Jarrett. Not just yet, if you don't mind."

The girl moved into his vision. She was smiling. He supposed Noggin was somewhere around with his damned great cannon.

"You feel well, Mr. Jarrett?"

"Sure. My head—"

"Don't worry about your head, Mr. Jarrett. We will look after that for you."

The door slid back and through the opening came Cara and Mara, their slim bodies tanned and shining beneath the lights. Still they kept their eyes modestly hooded.

The princess said, "Take it away, grillotas!"

They shook hands with the ebony box, lifted it, walked with a free naked swing toward the door.

Watching them, Jarrett understood why some men were as they were.

"Now," said the princess with a quick firmness, a bracing let's-get-with-it purpose surprising to Jarrett. "You now possess a frug, Mr. Jarrett, and I am sure a man of your experience in the galaxy knows exactly what I mean."

Jarrett swallowed.

He knew.

So the ebony box carried in such state by Cara and Mara had contained the frug. No wonder they took care of it. Morel, then, must be electroplasm master as well as Lord Chamberlain. Jarrett licked his lips. He'd about got around to thinking of what they wanted the frug on him for. He didn't want to put up his hand to feel his head anymore.

"That's the way, Mr. Jarrett," said Morel encouragingly. "You are taking this little—ah—alteration in your life pattern with exemplary courage." He turned to the girl. "I feel even more convinced he is the man for us, my lady."

A frug.

For a moment gibbering madness clawed at Jarrett as he sat there with his

stony face set like Gib. A frug! A life leech. The furry band was another of the life-artifacts, like the flailball, manufactured in sterile laboratories of transistors and printed circuits, of solid-state electronics, of all the clever and brilliant artificial systems man could invent. A scrap of protoplasm—real life, even if that life might have begun with D.N.A. hijinks in the scientist's test tubes in the adjoining laboratory—that would control and serve as the guiding instinct. A frug! A stinking semi-sentient thing clasped around his head and sucking with its tentacles at his nerves and spine, probing into his reflexes, testing his adrenalin level, sensing his emotive reactions. A frug! A filthy eye set in his forehead, unsleeping, to watch wherever he went!

*A frug!*

He did not remember jumping up, running this way and that as he tore and ripped at the thing clamped about his head. The electroplasm would not yield.

He became aware—startlingly, agonizingly aware—when he gave the first pull at the frug.

He felt as though he had pulled the top of his head off to reveal the cess-pit of a dank torture chamber. It felt like a million teeth all being pulled at once.

He screamed and his fingers slid from the soft and luxurious fur of the frug.

"So silly, so silly!" Morel was burbling. "Here, Mr. Jarrett! Have a drink. Sit down. Rest yourself. Have a smoke. Really, Mr. Jarrett, we thought you were the iron-man himself. But now... After all, Mr. Jarrett, it's only a frug."

Jarrett fell into a chair. He took the proffered drink, the glass chattering against his teeth. He held the glass in both hands, gripped it like a child. Morel offered a cigarette. Jarrett shook his head.

"Filthy things," he stammered.

The drink—this time it was not water—helped.

So he was stuck with a frug tied into his emotive system.

So.

He looked at the girl.

After his outburst she had resumed her seat. She looked at him coldly

now, impersonally. Aware still of the dark flame from her flesh, smoking from her hair, calling him with all the old dark call of blood, he sensed she had willed all that primal nature into subservience. Now she was all cerebral woman. Businesslike and dedicated, she would now seek to converse with words instead of wordlessly as they had done before.

"You are fully recovered now, grilt?"

He cocked an eye at her.

A spirit of resentment, a feeling he had invariably strictly tamped down previously in his dealings in the galaxy, rose now like a cobra, poised, inflamed.

The frug—the frug! My God, a frug!—he would deal with later.

"I want to hear your explanation," he said stonily.

"It is simple. You have already told me what I want you to do—"

He waved a hand impatiently. "Don't play games with me, Princess!" It was the first time he had used the title. "I know you want me to go find Prince Manrico. So, okay, I'll find him. You'll pay me—expenses plus. So okay." He stared hotly at her.

*"Why the frug?"*

She laughed, a silvery tintillation of evil.

"You think *I* would trust *you*?"

Morel pushed his gross body between them.

"Until you have Prince Manrico the frug will maintain a watch on you. It will know if you are continuing your mission. If you decide not to go on with it the frug will know and will—ah—punish you."

Jarrett shuddered. He knew about frugs. He knew.

"The frug is semi-sentient and keyed to your emotive processes in all their aspects." Morel laughed with a dirty sniggering sound. "You kiss your girl and the frug will know. You think you would like to kill your wife, the frug will know. This one, the one you wear around your head, will know if you stop looking for Prince Manrico."

"I believe you." Numbness was creeping over Jarrett.

"You will start looking and you will go on looking until you find the

prince, or until you are dead."

"What happens to your precious frug then?"

Morel said nastily, "Then Cara and Mara can start earning their keep and go get it back."

You couldn't get a frug off, of course, without the proper process. And in this case only Morel and the princess witch would know the combination. Any clumsy attempt to remove the obscenity from his head would just cause him intense pain. Any murderous attack on the frug would result—

"—the frug has a new killing system, that operates the moment it is interfered with." The princess licked her lips and her eyes shone with reflected lights of red over green as she spoke. "The second you try to destroy the frug it will inject a poison—you wouldn't believe it's so painful a way to die!—into your body. No, stupid grilt, that frug is there to stay until I give the command to remove it!" The numbness increased.

He understood what they were saying; but it made no sense.

Find Prince Manrico. He could do that, he supposed, if the poor little fool was still alive. He had previously managed other investigations and inquiries in the galaxy with tolerable skill. This time, he knew, would be different.

Before he fell into unconsciousness he was figuring the angles on what connections Spike would have on Toulouse.

## IV

« ^ »

**Big Bill Jarrett** stood in the drenching rain in an alley in a tumbledown town on the planet Toulouse and cursed. He hunched his head deeply into the hood of his raincheater and dug his hands vengefully into the pockets. Through the streaming lance-lines of the rain fitfully illuminated in gusts as the wind swung them this way and that in the light falling from the hotel windows, Jarrett watched. Spike had told him, "Toulouse? On Toulouse the man you speak to is Herrman. That's all I know, Bill."

Pressed, Spike had said, "Frontier world, tough, primitive, don't like off-worlders. If you're looking for a man there you either need plenty of muscle along or you need to jump quick."

Without muscle to help, Jarrett had made sure his boots' anti-grav packs were fully charged.

Rain beat into his lowered face, trickled down between his neck and collar, irritated the corners of his eyes. He shook his head and drops flew.

Again he darted a quick glance across the rain-lashed square to the hotel. A shadow moved across the lights. The door swung open on a burst of laughter and jollity, music, the genial uproar of a Saturday night.

A man stepped out onto the porch, shrugging on his mackintosh.

At this hotel, so Spike had eventually said, could be found the retinue of Herrman. A long shot, Jarrett knew; but his only one.

The man hunched himself up and stepped off into the rain. He sloshed through puddles. Evidently, because he had not taken one of the small fliers and helis parked outside, he had not far to go. That might be all to the good.

Like a wraith in the silver spears of the rain, Jarrett followed him.

He was only a few yards behind the man when he turned sharply off the street down an alley. A closed liquor store stood at one corner; the other showed a dark face, shuttered over groceries. Jarrett followed.

The man hesitated, then, with a quick and furtive movement, darted sidelong toward a door in the house beyond the grocery. The houses were a mixture of brick and concrete and fiberglass panels; little natural wood had been used in their construction.

The man pushed the door shut behind him and then went sprawling headlong as Jarrett, coming up like a tiger, thrust the door fully open again.

"What the—?"

The man, twisted on the floor, turned to glare up. He saw Jarrett. A dim light fell on the scene, revealing a hall and staircase, solid furniture, a strip of carpet.

A gloved hand darted for a holstered gun.

Jarrett took one step and put his foot on the man's wrist.

"I wouldn't, friend," he advised gently.

"What the hell do you want?"

"That's better."

The man was no fool. He had known that Jarrett could snap his wrist cleanly with only a slight extra pressure. Jarrett reached down and took the gun. He stepped back.

"Up. Quietly."

The man scrambled up, but he did it gently. He was young, hard-faced, but lacking the ruthlessness that marked Jarrett's own devilish features. His clothes were neat and not ostentatious; only a colored handkerchief in his breast pocket betokened anything special.

"Who lives here?"

The man's lips moved, without words, with a hatred of Jarrett. Jarrett moved in closer. He kept the gun in his left hand, back, and he caught the man's lapels in his right.

"When I ask a question I expect an answer. Well?"

His eyes glared into the young man's—and that wild gaze overpowered the young man as a snake dominates a rabbit.

"An elderly couple—the Levitts—and—and their daughter, Amy."

"Ah." Jarrett understood now.

"They're in bed and you're calling on the girl. Where is she?"

"Here," came a small, contained, tight little voice.

Both men turned sharply.

She stood in bare feet at the foot of the stairs, her long gown tucked up, her hair unbraided and loose about her shoulders and the long flame rifle clasped against her stomach and pointed uncertainly at Jarrett.

Her finger trembled on the trigger.

"Uh—" said Jarrett, carefully. "Uh, Miss Levitt. Just take a little care with that trigger—please?"

Her scared pluck forced admiration.

The young man jumped past Jarrett and snatched his gun back.

"Right, you punk!" he began.

Jarrett brushed him off.

"Shut up, sonny," he said. A ghastly vision of Noggin flared in his mind. "I wanted to ask some questions, is all. There's no need for violence. You drew the gun first."

The girl said in a swallowing voice, "Hadn't we better call the police, Simon?"

"Yes, you do that," said Jarrett. He made it sound very toughly offhand. "They'll be glad to vouch for me. I told you," he said patiently again, "all I want to do is ask a few simple questions."

The girl looked doubtful and the man, Simon, rubbed his jaw. "We-ell," he said.

Jarrett jumped straight in.

"You work for Herrman, right? Good, that must be great, a fine man, fine man. I came in here to ask you—"

"You jumped in here like a madman!"

"Oh, come now! You were knocked down by the door—it's wet out there! You drew the gun... and Herrman has views on guns, as well you know."

The face of Simon showed sudden indecision, fear, reluctance. The girl clasped his arm, the flame rifle drooping.

"What do you want to know?"

"It's very simple. I want to know all about Styron Sinclair."

Narrowly he watched for their reactions, looking for the tiny betraying twitch of muscle beside the eye, the extra clamping of lip, the abruptly uncontrolled movement of jaw—he watched and he saw that they knew the name of Styron Sinclair and that they knew there were things, dark things, to be wary of in that name.

"Styron Sinclair?"

"That's right. Where is he now, do you know that?"

Simon shook his head. He held his gun dangling. "I don't know. He disappeared—a long time ago—"



"Twenty years ago," Jarrett said as though the information were common knowledge. "Well?"

"All I know is what we heard, what we were told. How is it you can't get this information—"

"I wanted it from one of Herrman's boys—straight. Go on."

The girl shook his arm. "You'd better tell him, Simon." She gazed at Jarrett with a dark smoldering fire. "He's nothing to do with the police, and he's an out-worlder; but you'd better tell him. He would kill us without compunction—"

"But my gun—the flame rifle," said Simon stupidly.

"They mean nothing. He can kill us as we stand here. And what does Sinclair mean to us?" Her voice spat venom. "Nothing! A traitor, an outcast, vileness personified! Tell him and have done!"

Her voice screeched with hysteria that despite all she kept in bounds, under control, and Jarrett knew she cared for her parents sleeping above.

In that silence following her voice the sound of the rain outside splashed and tinkled. The light shone on the stairs and carpet and the guns in their hands.

Gently, Jarrett said, "I ask not for me, but for another, who needs to know very desperately."

How the princess would have laughed at that one!

Simon said, "Sinclair killed Herrman's father and took all his money. I hear things, I am high in Herrman's favor. Herrman had tried to find Sinclair but his men failed and were killed. He was last heard of on Encudor. That is all I know—"

"How long ago?"

Simon moved his shoulders despondently. "Fifteen, sixteen years? Something like that."

*So, princess, we've narrowed the time. Five years knocked off, if we're lucky. We're getting on...*

"I apologize if I have disturbed you," said Jarrett with strange formality. "But the affairs of the galaxy do not admit of rain or night or sleep—"

The girl clutched closer to Simon. She had been staring at Jarrett from the deep wells of her eyes, shadowed, haunted. Her slim figure clung to the man.

He seemed resentful. "I've told you what you wanted to know," he said, truculence appearing again. He jerked his gun. "I could have shot you —"

"No! No, Simon!" The girl pulled at him. "Don't you see! In the shadow of his hood, that hood that he tries to hide in—can't you see!"

Simon peered closer—and then jerked back. His face blanched. Then, in a shaky voice, he said, "Poor devil! Poor devil!"

Anger and hate burning in him, Bill Jarrett pulled the hood closer around his head, covering that betraying flash.

"So you pity me!" he said harshly.

The girl buried her face in the man's shoulder.

Simon looked up defiantly. "Yes! I have heard of those obscene things, those frugs—and—and—"

"Spare me your pity! I seek Styron Sinclair and Sinclair I will find!" He flung around to the door. "Goodbye!"

The rain pelted down as fiercely as before. He made a run for a taxirank and fell into the shabbily upholstered interior.

"Spacefield!"

The taxi whined off into the rain-soaked night.

Damn that girl! Damn that poor fool! Damn then both, stupid near-morons wasting their lives on a hick planet!

They had felt sorry for him, for him, Big Bill Jarrett, galactic adventurer...

It was all the frug, of course.

She'd seen it, seen the single enormous luminous eye gleaming from the shadows beneath his hood.

And they'd pitied him...

A ship was leaving for an interchange world within the hour, and he booked passage. He felt the need to get away, get away anywhere—

The pain struck down over his head, cascading down over his eyes like

vitriol.

He staggered and grasped at the counter for support.

The girl clerk glanced across quickly, her face concerned. There was little business just now in the spaceport terminal, only a few people waiting for the midnight rocket.

"Are you all right, sir?"

He fought his way up through the layers of pain.

"Yes. Yes, thank you. Just a migraine—nothing."

But it was something. It was the frug, reminding him that he would not be allowed to get away anywhere. The pain was a corrective, administered to chastise him for daring to forget that he was in search of Prince Manrico, whom he would find through the adventurer Styron Sinclair.

There was no escape.

He walked unsteadily out onto the ramp—this planet did not yet possess auto-loaders—and so made his way through to the spaceship's lobby. He had only a small overnight bag carried beneath his rainproof. Anything else he needed he bought en route with the money Morel had plentifully supplied.

Encudor. Well, that might prove interesting.

Toulouse had proved only painful—and wet.

Still, he had knocked off five years from the trail.

At the interchange planet he booked through for Encudor and discovered he must wait a week. This delay infuriated and frightened him.

He dreaded the frug's reaction.

But the thing must have picked up from his emotive system the inescapable fact that he was not to blame for the delay. Jarrett let out his breath in a long whoosh and went out on the town.

"Well, Ferdie," he said to the frug, "at least we've sorted that out."

He called the horror Ferdie out of a sense of bravado, and he was gradually falling into the habit of addressing it directly, as though it were a sentient being capable of thought and judgment and reply, instead of merely a sentient being cable of assessing his emotive system and inflicting

on him pain or death.

He wore a rakish cap with a feather, pulled low; but as the evening wore on and the drinks multiplied, the cap slipped sideways to reveal the strip of fur around his head and the luminous eye balefully regarding the world from the center of his forehead.

Men, drinking and laughing, looked up and fell silent.

Then a grizzled giant called for more wine, yelling heartily, saying, "So he's stuck with a frug. Poor bastard. Sooner him than me! Drink up!"

After that Jarrett worried a little less about people seeing his shame.

The technical and medical profession of electroplasm-master was becoming more widely known in the galaxy. An electroplasm did not arouse the wonder it once had.

He wandered from bar to bar in the interchange planet's single sizable city, a dump called Jerzilon, looking for something he knew he would never find here. Occasionally he let the name Styron Sinclair drop; but invariably received blankness back. He must go to Encudor, that was plain.

He rolled happily into the Blue Sucking Pig, a big bar and dance joint, with a cabaret grinding away on a side stage and an anti-grav acrobatic troupe performing aerial miracles on the other side.

He ordered a minimal two fingers of Scotch and then perched on the bar stool to watch.

Someone took the drink from his hand and said, "Thanks, stranger. You came in at the right time."

Slowly, Jarrett transferred his gaze from the acrobats in the air down to the character who had stolen his drink.

He saw a mean, rat-trap mouth, a pair of black rat-like eyes, a thin body dressed all in gray leather, tough and thin as a rat's tail. The man's hands hung by his pockets. Jarrett did not need to be told that in the pockets nestled guns.

Reaching around to the bar, Jarrett said to the robot bartender: "Another two Scotches."

The rat-like man said, "Why, that's real friendly."

While he waited, Jarrett noticed a corpulent man sitting at a table a couple of yards off. This man wore a patched and faded set of jacket and pants and his shoes were worn down to the uppers. He had an empty glass on the table before him. He looked like a man who knew what a drink was for. Now he stared at Jarrett and there seemed to be in his face an expression of sorrow. Jarrett, as he waited, thought the fat man looked sorry for him; but he could not be sure.

The robot bartender brought the two Scotches.

Jarrett picked one up.

The fat man levered himself up from behind his table, half knocking his chair over and grabbing it upright. The scratchy noise made rat-face swing around sharply. His face sneered.

"What do you want, Todd? Go back to sleep!"

"Now see here, Arnery," began the man Todd in a very high-pitched, squeaky voice that held an amusing note of complaint in its cadences. "You didn't ought to carry on like that. He ain't done nothing!"

"Oh, yes he did," said the man Arnery, reaching out for the second Scotch. "He's bought me another drink."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Arnery!" the high squeaky voice complained.

"You shut your trap, Todd, or I'll shut it for you!" Arnery's hand had almost touched the glass when Jarrett tossed *his* glass of whiskey full in the man's face.

Rat-face shouted and spluttered and staggered back.

His hands dove down into his pockets and Jarrett, coming forward, grasped the man's wrists. He pulled down. The man's head jerked like a cracked whip.

"See, Arnery," Jarrett said pleasantly. "You got your whiskey."

"I'll kill you for this! I'll rip you up—"

Arnery tried to struggle free.

Jarrett laughed in his face.

He knew the man held two guns; but he could not aim them. He said,

"Let go your guns, Arnery, before I break you in half."

Other men at the bar looked across, laughing and joking, one or two making pointed remarks about Arnery. Todd stood behind rat-face and looked worried. His eyes appeared to cross and he held his hands together as though in prayer or pain.

"Now, look here, mister," he squeaked at Jarrett. "Arnery didn't mean no harm, did you, Arnery?"

"I'll rip his tripes out," snarled Arnery.

"Tut, tut," tut-tutted Jarrett. That doesn't sound friendly, does it, Mr. Todd?"

"Just Todd," said the fat man, worried. He looked as though he enjoyed being worried. "Why do you have to act like this, Arnery? The ship'll be sailing soon and then—"

"Get lost, you funny fat freak!" Arnery's saliva spittled from his lips as he snarled at Todd. "I'm going to tell the captain to dump you right here!" The viciousness of his words was quite real.

Todd, as though incapable of perceiving this, began in his high-pitched voice to plead again with Arnery.

Jarrett broke in.

"I'm letting you go, Arnery. Don't do anything silly."

He pushed the rat-like man back.

Arnery stepped back a pace and then, like a cornered rat striking with dazzling speed, he snatched out a gun and aimed it at Jarrett.

In that second Jarrett knew he had miscalculated and that his professional expertise as a galactic adventurer had failed him. Too worried over the frug and all the attendant nonsense of this stupid Prince Manrico...

Dazedly, braced for death, he became aware that Todd had lifted a bottle and crashed it down on Arnery's head.

Arnery slumped to the floor.

The gun clanked to the floor beside him.

Todd looked down wide-eyed.

"My, oh my!" he squeaked in horror and delight. "What have I done? I didn't mean to hit him as hard as that!"

Jarrett came to, his body resuming its stance of action. "You did just great, Todd!"

"But he'll get me fired for sure now!"

Men pushed up from the end of the bar. They saw Arnery. Rat to rat—they shouted and rushed.

Swept away in the tide of bodies, battered and pummeled, Jarrett let himself go, and struck out with vivid energy. His fists landed solidly. He cleared a space and saw Todd put an extremely large fist into the bearded mouth of a rat-accomplice.

"Beat it!" yelled Jarrett.

He and Todd put their heads down and ran.

Laughing and gulping the night air, they burst through and catapulted out onto the sidewalk. They ran with flying heels down the pedway, dropped two stories and ducked into a tiny bistro nestled in the angles of pedway and monorail flyovers.

Laughing, Jarrett said, "You run pretty well, Todd, for—" He stopped and laughed and swallowed and got his breath back.

"For a fat man?" Todd's breathing was heavy and fast but perfectly under control. He wiped sweat away. He beamed at Jarrett.

"If you say so, friend. And thanks for your help back there. I was a goner—"

Todd winked.

"I don't think so, Mr.—ah—?"

"Jarrett. Bill Jarrett."

"I don't think so, Mr. Jarrett—you were all set to dive and you'd have beaten him. He's a quick draw but a rotten shot."

"Is he now? And the name's Bill. So. And what, Todd, do we do now?"

Todd's happily absorbed face crumpled. He took on his worried look again. Light colored, a few freckles still remaining, hair a bush toning to whiteness rather than blondness, his face looked made for innocence and

naïveté. He slumped, fatly dejected.

"What you do, Bill, I don't know. As for me, I'm out of a job and without a single tie in the galaxy."

The bistro robot brought coffee.

They drank. Jarrett looked out of the window beneath the shadow of the monorail, down to a pedway a level beneath.

Men moved out on the pedway. They moved purposefully. They looked up and one of them with a box and antennae pointed.

Jarrett said, "I think your friends are after us again. Have you a bug on you, Todd?"

Todd squealed in helpless rage as he bashed away at the shapeless jacket and pants, to come up with the tiny round burr of a radio-location bug that had been nipped into a turnup.

"The cunning mischievous no-goodniks!" he squeaked, his face crimson, his lips shaking with comical rage.

Jarrett took the bug and paid the coffee bill. They slipped out of the bistro and walked quickly along the upper pedway in the opposite direction. At the first down-ramp they descended from this region of pedestrians only and came out onto a traffic flyover. Jarrett called a taxi.

It curved out of the traffic pattern and came to rest before them. Jarrett tossed the bug inside and then dismissed the taxi.

Todd said admiringly, "Oh, my!"

They strolled off together. From a shadowed alcove further down, with the lights blazing along the road, they stood to watch the group of men burst out of the ramp. They hailed a taxi and all piled in. The taxi shot off.

"Where did you set the taxi controls for?" asked Todd.

"I've no idea where. I just dialed the furthest sector on the map. Place called Moorabbin."

Todd stopped looking unhappy and guffawed.

"Moorabbin! That's right out in the volcanic district! Sulphur springs and all! Stinks! They'll just love that!"

The idea of men with whom he had no quarrel going following a



will-o'-the-wisp into unpleasant odors made Jarrett smile a little—a little, not much. Todd seemed a decent sort; he had given the frug's eye one swift glance and said nothing.

Jarrett said, "What'll you do, anyway, Todd?"

Todd moved his hands vaguely. "I've no idea. They'll get me and duff me up if I stay on the planet, that's for sure."

"All right." Jarrett made up his mind. He was only spending Morel's money. "That's settled, then. You're coming with me to Encudor."

## V



**Todd proved** to be a cheerful comrade and a loyal friend.

Reared among all the modern miracles of science, he possessed a youthful sense of wonder, a zest for living, that all the concrete in the galaxy would not smother. His surname—he said it was St. John-Forbes—was mentioned that once between them. He was a man happy to be worried and bothered and dithering.

They took ship to Encudor and they discussed Jarrett's plight.

"Funny-looking thing, though," said Todd, leaning back.

"I wish I could see the joke." Jarrett automatically reached up to rearrange the cap over the frug.

"I'm an electronics man myself." Todd stroked his jaw thoughtfully. "I mean, I was serving aboard that rotten spaceship because Arnery—anyway, I'm not just a spaceship only electronics man. I wonder—"

Jarrett said, "No. The thing is programmed to torture me first and to liberate a deadly and, if what the princess said is true, agonizing drug into my bloodstream if it's tampered with. No, Todd, my fine feathered friend, I'll just have to find this here Prince Manrico."

Todd stroked the new clothes—smart purple and yellow lounging pajamas for shipboard wear Jarrett had bought him. Jarrett had ordered

sunglasses at the same time.

They do make me look fine, don't they?" squeaked Todd. "But you—you're following a twenty year old trail."

"Don't you think I know that?" The story had not aroused Todd as Jarrett had expected. "It's not the sort of work I normally do in the galaxy—it's small time to me. But, with this damned frug..."

"Well, I'll help you, Bill. I've been to Encudor."

Jarrett sat up. "You have?"

"Funny old place. Can't make up its mind."

"Oh?"

Todd chuckled his light laugh. He reached for an apple on a dish. The cabin for two, which had been paid for with Morel's money, was luxurious and ingratiating in a way Todd found indescribably attractive and Jarrett faintly repulsive. When people traveled between the stars these days they did so in style and comfort, unless they had been shanghaied by brutes like Noggin, but Jarrett for one felt the breath of decadent luxury as a hot breath he did not relish.

"Sure," Todd said, chewing. "Got something to do with the unstable orbit, and the binary—two suns in the sky... weird."

Jarrett had lived on worlds with two suns in the sky and after you adjusted to double shadows you didn't notice too much difference. Some systems, like the famous Hiawatha triplets, for example, were a real riot to live in.

"You've haven't heard of this Styron Sinclair, though?"

Todd shook his fat face; but his cheeks did not shake loosely. He was not a flabby man. "Lots of people in the galaxy, Bill. Even extraordinary characters take a lot of advertising before they're known beyond a cluster or two. But if he's the man we think he is and he's been on Encudor, we'll smoke him out."

Jarrett hid his smile at Todd's determined and confident use of the inclusive "we." It pleased him.

Encudor turned out—at first—to be just another world in the human section of the galaxy. At first.

They booked in at a middle-class hotel and Jarrett took the opportunity to wire back across the light-years to the *poste restante* address given him by Morel for more funds. The credit would be light-flashed back across the gulfs between the stars and he could pick up the cash at the local bank.

Carefully, he and Todd began to ask questions.

On Encudor, as on many other still-barbarous frontier worlds, despite their sheen of respectability and conformity, a new planetary culture was being built up dependent on science. While a place was still needed for the rugged pioneering individual, the streets of the towns more and more filled with scientists, engineers, accountants and technologists. Civilization was creeping up on Encudor.

Because of this Jarrett wore his hat pulled low over his face, the brim curving down to conceal in shadows the lambent eye of Ferdie the Frug.

"It's a respectable place, Encudor," squeaked Todd, moving his enormous shoulders uneasily. "Never really did get used to it."

"Haven't you been on Earth?" Jarrett asked and then a wry picture of himself being so easily duped back there in the little mural café perched on a pedway fifty stories up in New York made him realize wildness and lawlessness exist where they are found; the pretty package conceals all. He heard Todd speaking in his squeaky way as they walked leisurely down the town's main business street.

"Earth? Never. Too straitlaced for me. I like to be out in the galaxy where a man can show a bit of hairy chest if he has to."

"Oh, they'd love you, back in a café I know," said Jarrett ironically.

About them the busy traffic of the town continued.

Presently Todd said casually, "That frug of yours must have caught someone's eye. That man behind us—there, in the dark green suit and the straw hat—he's following us."

"Sure?"

"Uh-huh, sure."

Jarrett had already had the man spotted as a tail; out of devilment, out of a desire to test his newfound comrade, he had waited until Todd should react. Todd had spotted the man only a few moments after Jarrett. Could be,

the galactic adventurer decided, could be that fat Todd was going to prove valuable.

"What d'we do?"

"Oh," Jarrett said offhandedly. "We'll wander up some convenient alley and threaten to duff him up if he doesn't tell us what he's up to. Okay?"

"Sounds a reasonable course of action to me," squeaked Todd in huge delight.

They found an alley running between the stone and concrete business buildings, such an alley as is found anywhere where men have built to ownership lines. In a direct line from the inscribed boundary stones of Sumer through all the fence disputes and the quarrels over frontiers, this simple little alley still existed in its own right, a piece of communal property in a town divided by big engineering concerns and financial houses. Todd just hustled down it energetically, his fat shoulders working. Jarrett flattened his back against the alley entrance, beneath the unlit sodium-lamp, and waited.

He flexed all his body, a single preparatory exercise in the secret physical discipline of which he was a master. Then he was ready.

The man succumbed like a chicken beneath a fox.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," he garbled out, Jarrett's arm around his neck. "Anything at all; but please don't hurt me."

"Now, isn't that nice!" exclaimed Todd, beaming.

"Just tell us, laddie," Jarrett said.

The story sounded banal. Jarrett wondered if he should believe it; he was old enough to know that no story is what it seems on the surface. Only children and idiots think that.

"It's true, true! I swear it!"

"Let me get this straight." Jarrett absently twitched the arm tighter. The man choked. "You are following us because your boss told you to. You're an engineer. You are engaged in terraforming this planet. You work for a firm run by this Mr. John Fleming." He relaxed his arm. "Why does Mr. John Fleming want us followed? Hey?"

"I don't know! Honest, I don't!"

"D'you believe him, then?" queried Todd dubiously. He wrinkled his round face up, pursing his lips, debating. Jarrett chuckled. Todd could ham up the part beautifully.

"Believe him?" demanded Jarrett, playing up. "Why, of course not! He's lying."

The man jerked as he tried to speak and Jarrett's arm constricted.

"Oh, I don't know," said Todd in his squeaky reflective voice. "He looks like an honest little fellow. He's only doing what he's told. He's tame."

"He's going to do what he's told, right enough. He's going to do as we tell him." Jarrett put his mouth close to the man's ear. "Aren't you, little man?"

The man nodded convulsively.

Jarrett slackened his grip. He had been wondering if Ferdie the Frug might construe all this as being irrelevant to the quest for Styron Sinclair. So far no wash of pain had flowed down his head. Maybe the frug understood that this little man represented their only lead on this planet to Sinclair.

"We," Jarrett told him, "are going to pay your boss, friend Fleming, a little visit. I'm sure he'll welcome us."

Todd chuckled.

"What's *your* name, tame one?"

In a strangled voice, the man gasped out: "Purdy."

"Right, Purdy, lead on."

As they left the alley and joined the bustling people moving energetically about the planet's business, Todd said softly, "Oh, and, Purdy, we don't have to remind you of what will happen to you if you—ah—try to run away, or call a policeman, or do anything silly. Do we?"

"No," Purdy said, rubbing his neck tenderly. "No—ah— sir."

"Good."

They moved along the sidewalks in the orange light of the sun En, stepping carefully half a pace behind Purdy. He led them down two blocks and across the street by a traffic-free pedway, until they reached the ornate façade of the town's tallest skyscraper.

Jarrett cocked his head back, stared up.

Over the lintel he read out the name: the **Fleming building**.

"Your chief is a big man, Purdy. I wonder just how big you are?"

"Big enough to take you right to the top!" snapped Purdy unexpectedly.

Maybe, Jarrett wondered, the sight of his own office building had put a fire into the little man's belly. Maybe he was a big fish, after all. Maybe he just thought that Jarrett and Todd would be recaptured if they dared venture into the sacred precincts of the Fleming Building.

Jarrett nudged Purdy.

"Take us in, Purdy, right to the top, right to Fleming. If you make a silly move, *you* won't come out of it, whatever happens to us."

Purdy drew his shoulders back, marched into the building.

Inching back a fraction, Todd whispered to Jarrett, "Is it wise to go straight in to this character, Bill? He might be—ah—unpleasant."

Jarrett smiled. "They strike me here as a very tame bunch, Todd. They're engineers, engaged in terraforming this planet; they're not the rough, tough hoodlums we might have expected. I think we can talk to them."

"I just hope you're right," Todd said mournfully, happy to have something to worry over.

They went up in an express elevator reserved for executives. That worried Jarrett. This man Purdy, now. Was he an executive of Fleming Terraforming? Or was he a small-time private detective? Or was he just a file clerk asked by Fleming to do him a favor? Something didn't add up here, and all Jarrett's expertise as an adventurer about the galaxy wasn't helping him unravel the problem.

The offices were vast, luxurious and lavish in their scope and equipment. Huge expanses of plate glass reflected the smoky orange glow of the sun. Enormous miles of red carpet covered the hard-block flooring. The susurrations of air conditioners, the muted click and clack of electric typewriters and the distant bee-like murmuring of computers combined to form that strange lulling drumming of sound, sharply punctuated by the trill of telephones, that marks out an office complex from any other conurbation of humans in the galaxy.

Quietness was the hallmark of Fleming's inner suite of personal offices.

They went through the entrance foyer and past a bored guard, sleepy in his blue uniform, who nodded politely to Purdy.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Purdy."

"Afternoon, Burton."

They walked on. Jarrett's back felt itchy.

"If he'd wanted to give us away," Todd whispered, "then was his chance."

Purdy smirked.

"There is no need," he said, and the touch of arrogance sharpened in his voice and bearing. "Mr. Fleming will be pleased you have come to see him."

Jarrett could guess what that might mean. He walked on, determined, not too sure that his belief that these soft-white-handed people would do nothing violent was so valid, after all.

The inner office contained a receptionist manicuring her nails. Her honey blonde hair caught the overhead lighting as she lifted her head to look at the new arrivals. Her hair glowed like molten gold—Jarrett did not shrink from the comparison for he had seen molten gold, unlike most people, and the dark, smoky brilliance of gold in her hair caught that breathtaking color exactly.

"Miss Smith," snapped Purdy excitedly, "tell Mr. Fleming at once. I have the man—"

But Miss Smith was staring hard at Jarrett. She had stopped manicuring her fingernails, and the file hung limply from her fingers, her hands poised, unmoving, rigid. She stared at Jarrett in a fascinated glare.

He moved his shoulders and said, belligerently, "Haven't you seen an eepee before?"

She swallowed, convulsively. She looked like someone who had just come out of a shocking experience, bitter with memory. She shuddered and the nail file fell to the carpet.

"Miss Smith!" snapped Purdy, back into his oily groove as a master of typists and receptionists and file clerks. "Get Mr. Fleming at once!"

She opened her mouth and tried to speak. Her blue eyes stared naked and innocent at Jarrett. She was a young girl, stripped of pretense and

sophistication, soft and almost ripe and butter rich, a soft and tender shoot just branching into pale greenness. He felt like a clumsy, bark-like, rough and awkward growth beside her.

"Miss Smith!" yapped Purdy. He strode forward to grasp the girl's shoulder beneath the thin blue office dress. "Wake up, girl! I know you're new here; but we demand discipline here—"

He didn't finish. Jarrett lifted him under the armpits and dumped him back into a revolving chair by a desk.

"Simmer down, Purdy! This young lady is—"

She interrupted him. Without a single glance for Purdy she remained sitting with her eyes gazing hard at the frug as she spoke.

"Did you know Charlie Sjambok?"

That shook Jarrett. It rattled him. He had not expected it.

He nodded.

"Store. Everybody knew Charlie."

"He's my father—I'm Sue—he was my father."

Jarrett picked out the important part. "*Was* your father?"

She nodded and the misery in her face swamped out the innocence and surprise that had in their turn swamped out the office sophistication and aplomb.

"I'm sure he's dead. He said he would write to me; but nothing—nothing since he wrote from here—"

"And he was wearing a frug. And so am I. I see."

Jarrett could see that part of the story. Right now was not the time to explore further. Gently he said, "I think perhaps Fleming could help us, Sue."

Her brave blue eyes met his and then she colored up, the blood fresh and bright beneath that creamy skin.

"Yes. Yes, of course. But—" She looked across at Purdy. "Mr. Fleming has left the office. He's gone home."

Purdy uttered an inarticulate strangled cry.



Jarrett wanted to say to hell with Purdy and Fleming and Sinclair; but Ferdie the Frug with his diabolical poisons would apply immediate and stringent correctives to that attitude. Jarrett wanted to sit down and talk to Sue Sjambok—he smiled a slow gentle understanding little inward smile at the name; no wonder she'd passed as Miss Smith—and he wanted to tell her about her hair and her eyes and her mouth, tell her wonderful things, things he had never particularly wanted before to tell any girl. Most of all he wanted to tell her not to worry about her father—old Charlie Sjambok had been a tough nut in his day—tell her not to wear that miserable, frightened expression, tell her that he, Big Bill Jarrett, was here to look after her.

For all that desire, he said, "If your father's still alive, Sue, we'll find him. And we've got to reach Fleming first."

She nodded. "The last letter I had, Dad was on Encudor. He seemed to think Sinclair was here. Then, nothing. That's why I came—I got a job with Fleming Terraforming. Dad had said he thought Fleming and Sinclair were tied in together—"

Purdy had been moving slowly, sidling toward the desk. Now he lunged for a phone. He pressed a red button in the base and shrieked: "Help! Help! Bandits!"

Then Todd hit him—gently. Purdy passed out peacefully.

Jarrett lifted an eyebrow at Sue Sjambok.

She proved then that she was the daughter of a galactic adventurer. Without fuss, without frills, understanding at once, she picked up the ball and ran with it, as the sporty types would say.

"That alarm will bring the guards. They'll know the location. We've got about fifty seconds."

"It's a long drop," said Todd, nodding toward the windows.

"*We've* got!" echoed Jarrett.

She stood up and he realized afresh what a gorgeous girl she was. She walked with a free swinging lilt toward the rear section of the reception area.

"Sure," she said over her shoulder, tartly. "Sure I said *we*. If you think you're going to find my father you don't think I'd let you go off on your own, do you? After working my way here all the way from Solvenus? Hey?"

"Lead on," he said. He didn't know whether to explode with laughter or burst with anger. She was no age at all, really, just a slip of a girl; and that was her trouble. Old Charlie hadn't brought her up properly, that was for sure—no respect for her elders. She'd be calling him Bill before long, he bet.

He and Todd followed her across the office to the fire escapes at the rear.

They had about fifteen seconds left when Sue thumbed the slash-panel and a window fell in to give them access to the anti-grav floaters parked alongside the wall. This high up no one was going to run down fifty stories of fire escape ladders—the whole building would be gutted before they'd reached the bottom. The anti-grav floaters, little shoe-shaped plastic anti-grav devices, would float you out and down to the ground while the fire department did their de-oxygenation stunt to the flames.

"After you, Sue," said Todd politely.

They stepped aboard their floaters. Far below them the traffic thundered along its canyon, the noise strained and filtered by height. The orange glow from the sun En striped the opposite walls with color. They pushed off and began to sink through the afternoon air.

Looking back and up, Jarrett waited for the inevitable.

A guard put his head through the window they had just quitted.

He was just a white face and a pair of black-clad shoulders at that distance; but the oval dark shape formed by his mouth as he shouted reminded Jarrett instantaneously that the man was that: a man, and not just a depersonalized guard lifting a gun and aiming it at the descending floaters.

A sharp sound like that of ripping canvas stuttered close to Jarrett. The guard suddenly collapsed and lay across the sill. His gun slipped from his fingers and pitched spinning into the abyss.

Todd said, "How about that!"

He spoke admiringly.

Sue sat her floater primly. She held the needler as though she had handled guns before. She was ready, clearly, for another shot, should a second guard be so foolish as to poke his head through the slash-window after his comrade.

"So that's what the modern miss carries in her purse," said Jarrett. He

disapproved of guns; but he had to admit that at the moment Sue had been the one to save them. They wouldn't have stood a chance drifting like puffballs down through the orange-sunlit layers of buildings toward the dark slit of the street.

"If we could only guide these crazy flying bathmats!" squeaked Todd. He shook the plastic shoe-shaped flyer irritably. Jarrett looked down. Like beetles scurrying in disciplined lines, the traffic flowed north and south. Pedestrians criss-crossed the main street on flyovers and pedways, mere ants in their profusion. Orange sunlight bathed everything on one side of the street in a suffused smoky glow; the other side lay in an ochre shadow. Gently, they drifted through the afternoon sunshine.

"Cu doesn't rise until later in this northern hemisphere," said Sue. "It gets hot whenever both suns are in the sky at the same time. Down south it's like an inferno. They've been working there recently."

"Can you recall if your father said anything else about Sinclair that might help?" asked Jarrett. Again he looked down. By this time a reception committee must have formed.

She shook her head. She hadn't looked down once.

"No. Nothing. He seemed convinced that Fleming could lead him to Sinclair. After that—silence."

"Well," said Jarrett grimly, "we'll have to add that to our inventory of questions."

How much nearer they were getting he had no idea. But in his own ironical fashion he thought, *The trail is keeping nice and warm, Princess. And the answers I shall require of you increase.*

Todd pointed down.

"There."

Where his finger indicated a group of men waited.

Clad in decent black business suits, relieved only by the flash of impeccable white handkerchiefs or the latest brilliantly colored tie fashions, the men looked somehow menacing through their very quiescence. Like a flock of Harpies ready to rend and tear yet for the moment waiting and gloating, they stood silently staring up and watching the lazily descending

floaters.

"They'll grab us like kittens in a sack," squeaked Todd.

"They want to ask us some questions," Jarrett said. "But I'm not in the mood for answering right now."

His experience of fire-escape anti-grav floaters was about on a par with anybody else's. Being a professional galactic adventurer might accustom him to all kinds of bizarre situations and people and techniques; but it didn't automatically confer omnipotence in everything. He knew practically nothing about the floaters. Had he known more he might have been able to tinker with the drive unit and increase the power in a single surge that, while burning out the unit, would have enabled them to rise to a pedway a hundred yards off, which now slowly rose into the sky above them as they fell.

He could do that to any normal anti-grav unit; but he flinched from the thought that this drive might be different—it probably was anyway—and that he would pitch them all to their deaths on the concrete below.

Another crossing pedway, a slender railed walk, appeared from the latticework of crossovers beneath them. Far below that the guards had already worked out where the three floaters would touch down, and were there, waiting. Jarrett concentrated on the nearest crossing pedway.

"You'll never reach it, Bill!" wailed Todd.

"We can try!" said Sue, putting her Quankley needler away. She looked tense and capable, restored to the sophisticated poise that had been upset by the sight of Jarrett's frug. "We've got to! Those men down there are deadly! Fleming is a monster—I ought to know!"

Jarrett filed that away. He nudged the three floaters close together. They swayed and swung in the afternoon sunlight. Their anti-grav units were small passive drives, capable of lowering the floaters gently. Jarrett's own anti-grav unit was the surge type, of which he had two mounted in his boots. The surge unit gave a concentrated kick, a jolt of energy, that burned itself out in microseconds, ready for the next surge. Neither floater nor boots contained a normal steady-state anti-grav unit. Jarrett found the situation as amusing as he found anything where his own neck was at stake.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Sue. She did not appear

frightened; her color was still high, her blue eyes sparkled dangerously, she breathed fast.

"Grab Todd around his vast middle, Sue, and both of you hang on to me. We're kicking goodbye to our floaters."

Todd squeaked, "You'll never do it!" But he dutifully clasped Sue and Jarrett in his pudgy arms. Like the three Graces they clasped each other, standing awkwardly in the three bumping and swaying floaters. The light grillwork of the pedway drifted up toward them.

Jarrett Judged his moment with the knowledge that if he muffed the leap, if he didn't pull it off, he would end up with his two companions as squashed red jelly on the concrete so far below. The thought tightened him up.

Todd was breathing harshly through his widely-opened mouth. Jarrett peered down over the fat man's shoulder, very conscious of the nearness and warmth of Sue at his other side. If his anti-grav boots failed him, if he misjudged the distance, if his fingers couldn't find a hold, if—if, if, if...

He shut his mind to everything except the secret rhythms of the physical discipline within him, and to judging the moment when he should trigger his boots.

The pedway drifted nearer. It was a long way off. Farther than he had hoped. The jump would be a big leap. Todd went on stertorously breathing, sweat rolling down his fat cheeks. Sue remained silent and intent, hugging him, a warm alive weight.

The moment—the moment he judged, *hoped*—came.

He triggered the boots.

He leaped with all the feral strength in his long sinewy legs hurling him outward.

Wrapped together, like an ungainly package, they flopped through the air. They began to topple. The surging charge from his boots, spent in the instant of its birth, flung them outward. His muscular discharge of energy added to that initial thrust. But they began to topple with the weight of Todd pulling down lopsidedly against the slender form of Sue on Jarrett's other side. They toppled as they thrashed through the air.

"We're not going to make it!" squeaked Todd in an access of terror.

Sue gasped, a high-pitched sound that squealed past her clenched lips.

Jarrett deliberately forced his muscular body down hard on Todd. He thrust down and levered himself around, the air rushing past his ears and fluttering through the frug's artificial pelt. He thrust down and twisted.

"Geez!" yelped Todd, pained through his muscle.

Jarrett reached out. They had spun through the air in a long diagonal fall toward the spidery pedway. Mere heartbeats had gone by. The latticework rushed up to them. Jarrett reached out—he reached out with both hands now, iron claws bent and hooked, waiting for the cruel razoring bite of the railing.

The railing came in suddenly and treacherously in the last microsecond. The railing cut up beneath his forearms.

Jarrett gasped with the shock.

Then his body disciplines took over, without conscious thought, without the need to think, without the pain reaching through to him to block his reactions. He gripped down hard, letting his body swing in toward the footwalk. Todd and Sue hung from him like baby monkeys clinging to their parent—only Todd's gross bulk dragged down on Jarrett with tremendous frightening force.

Todd yelped again.

"Don't drop me!"

"Grab the pedway, dolt!" raged Jarrett.

Sue grabbed first, swinging in smoothly, her long nyloned legs kicking free of her skirt and wrapping around a stanchion like two white arms. Jarrett had the railing firmly under his armpits now. He heaved. They rose up and Todd was able to topple himself inward like a gross crab and tumble onto the pedway walk.

"The whole thing shuddered then!" griped Jarrett. He could only feel happy they had made it. Sue climbed up over him, hand over hand, bringing her long legs in last. Both she and Todd reached out to hand Jarrett in over the railing.

The three of them stood up, ruffled, puffing, but beginning to laugh.

They stood there, laughing like loons.

A few yards up the pedway a matronly lady with a Pekinese on a leash had stopped as the three had climbed over the railing. Clad in the latest smart galactic tailoring, drenched in jewels, with a hairdo that must have cost a fortune, she stared at them with icy disapproval. The dog barked and tried to get at them. Without taking her contemptuous eyes from the bedraggled trio, the matron jerked the dog to heel.

"Well, really!" she said in a high, puffy, genteel voice.

She turned on her heel and marched back the way she had come.

Sue, Todd, and Jarrett only laughed harder.

## VI



By the time the black-clad reception committee from far below on the street had raced up to the pedway, the three out-worlders had gone.

Walking down a side street with the sun En slipping below the bastions of the town and casting long ocher shadows across the faces of the buildings, they could simulate ordinary people leaving offices and factories; with their ordinary clothes, which they had made look respectable, they did not attract unwelcome attention.

Sue wanted to know all about Jarrett. Todd wanted to know what they did next. Jarrett, while he shared both their thirsts for knowledge, was more interested in what Ferdie was making of all this. So far, the frug had not responded. To keep on after Fleming, it would seem, would be the best way to keep on after Sinclair.

"Fleming took to me the moment I came around for a job," Sue said, in answer to Jarrett. "He's a nasty piece of work. Clever, though, and a good engineer. He's going to make this planet a decent place—physically—one day; but already it's a monstrosity, like he is, morally."

They kept walking steadily, following Sue's directions, heading out for Fleming's private house on the superior outskirts of the town.

She said now, flirting her eyes up at Jarrett, "That's a good trick you have with your body, Bill. Where'd you learn it?"

He'd been right! She was calling him Bill!

"Oh, just a few tricks I picked up," he said, casually, offhand. He wasn't going to tell a chit of a girl about the secret body disciplines—hell, no! "Come in handy every now and then."

"The way you catapulted over, in midair like that, and then grabbed that rail and hung on—my!" She showed acute signs of hero worship. "That was terrific!"

"All over me, too!" sighed Todd, mournfully.

Jarrett chuckled. Life, for some inscrutable reason and despite Ferdie encircling his head like a futuristic leech, looked good.

"We'll find this Fleming and this Sinclair all right," he said, with a ring of confidence he really did feel.

Fleming lived in a quiet and respectable neighborhood. That suited Jarrett, even as it amused him. From what Sue had said, reluctantly, Fleming was that typical life form, a hard-working technician who ran the planet as he wanted to, planting his own seeds of debauchery and evil in all he came in contact with.

Fleming's house lay like a black block against the night and the stars; the last glowing rays from the sun had dwindled into darkness and now the galaxy could shine down on this planet of Dor. Only three windows showed lights: two high up and one, smaller, by the entrance.

"And the ones at the top?"

"Probably Fleming himself. He has a study up there. I've heard of what he studies." She shuddered. The night was not cold.

Jarrett hadn't time for alien-worlder's fun and games now. He stared up at the building. He frowned. The topmost floor showed a blocky pattern against the stars, crenellations and pinnacles sticking out as though stuck onto a base structure and not organically a whole. He began to see the picture more clearly.

"He's the man we came to see and we haven't time to wait until morning. Ferdie wouldn't like that. But the place will be alarmed and bugged from



here to hell and beyond."

Todd said in his squeaky, complaining voice, "We'll never get in there, Bill. It's crazy!"

Jarrett looked at Sue, a look full of meaning. She lifted her face, stared back, frankly.

"Fleming has been—after—you, hasn't he, Sue? Could you get in there, I mean, if you were still working for him?"

She laughed, the shudders forgotten.

"He's been trying to get me in there for the past six months. He has his pick of girls. He's fussy. He hasn't tried anything rough, just gentle polite propositions. He's taking his time. He thinks I'll give in one day. Meanwhile—he has that study of his."

Jarrett could imagine.

Just as a test, just to see if what he feared deep down was indeed true, he stepped back a pace. He thought: *It's no good trying to get in there ...*

He couldn't go on. He doubled up. The ring of fire around his head bit like a corrosive. He reached his hands up and clasped the frug. Its soft fur sickened him. He almost lost control so that he was about to yank the thing off, or try to—then he managed to gasp out, "Okay! Okay! We'll go in..."

The pain ceased.

Todd, worried, asked, "You all right, Bill?"

"Yeah. Just Ferdie reminding me, is all."

If news had reached Fleming, then Sue was likely to be shot on sight. Unless, that was, Fleming wanted her alive for less reputable reasons than a clean death. Judging by the absence of lights and excitement the alarm had not been raised.

Jarrett started walking for the entrance.

"If we hang about any more we'll miss our chance. Come on."

The robot porter peered with lensed eyes at Sue. She stood to smile at the thing in its armored box, flanking the gate, the machine guns aimed by remote control giving a level killing-zone clear across the front gravel drive.

"He doesn't trust a soul on this planet," whispered Todd.

"That's understandable. He's the top man, the engineer who's terraforming the place over. He's susceptible to bribery, corruption—and assassination. This is still a frontier world, Todd, despite all the attempts—the towns, the skyscrapers, the offices—to make it into a nice safe homeworld."

"Miss Smith? For Mr. Fleming—just a moment." The robot's prerecorded voice screeched in the night. A pause, then, "Please go in, Miss Smith."

"I have two friends. Mr. Fleming will be pleased to meet with them—"

"Enter."

It was not as easy as that, Jarrett knew. Purdy must have recovered by now and the first thing he would do when he had reoriented himself would be to ring his boss and explain. There was a chance he was still unconscious or out of the running and unable to raise an alarm; this place seemed quiet enough.

From the night they walked into an interior of luxury and decadent beauty; soft lights, deep carpets, murals and statues, subjects that made Sue pass scornfully by with raised chin.

They followed a butlerobot to the elevator.

"The elevator will take you directly to Mr. Fleming's penthouse study. He awaits you there."

The robot stepped back and the elevator gates closed.

No, Jarrett felt, no, it couldn't be as easy as this. The catch would come, as always, when he wanted out.

This place was fitted out as a fortress. Jarrett, that galactic adventurer extraordinary, had had experience with fortresses before. They contained a close, dank machine-oil atmosphere of confinement despite lavish installations of air conditioning.

They left the elevator to walk straight ahead across a foyer banked with cool green growing plants and through a crystal and silver doorway. The rooms beyond were garishly fitted out as a study: books—or more likely, covers—clothed the walls; ladders to reach the upper gallery, tables and chairs and leather benches, all polished and throwing off cherry-red tints, shaded lights, deep carpets, all this munificence contrived somehow to

convey a groping after a culture outside the credibility of the owner. A micrometer lay hard and steely on a table; that, Jarrett considered, more truly reflected the owner of this place.

Fleming rose from a deep chair to face them, half smiling. His two guards, hard blocky men with their guns already pointing, flanked him like obelisks.

"Ah, Sue, my dear," he said in a suave and somehow throaty voice, like a passionate frog's. "You must know how delighted I am to see you here."

He wore a flame- and chocolate-colored dressing gown, pure silk, shining, sliding. His face, an unremarkable putty oval with thin shark teeth in a narrow mouth that shone wetly, peered down on them. His eyes, small as currants, betrayed nothing.

"These—uh—are my friends," said Sue huskily.

"We don't need them, do we, Sue?"

"They came—" She swallowed. She was in difficulty.

Jarrett said distinctly, "Sue wanted us to put a proposition to you, Mr. Fleming. I think you'll like it."

Fleming turned around, in a vulgar way reaffirming himself as the master of this house, and sat down. He'd let Jarrett and Todd up here only because he was completely confident in his own powers. This man ran the planet, didn't he? Under cover of his terraforming business—and what more important business could a newly opened up planet have than that?—he dictated to the puppet government, and he had the banks in his pocket. He found a long amber cigarette holder and one of his guards lit his cigarette for him. Soon he was filling the air with foul tobacco fumes.

"I don't want you or your proposition," he told Jarrett. His voice softened. "Sue. Come here. I've been waiting for you so long—"

"You might not want to talk to us, Fleming," said Jarrett, and he caught hold of Sue's arm, feeling the biceps under his fingers. "But I fancy Styron Sinclair does."

Fleming sat forward. He took the cigarette holder from his mouth. His piggy eyes remained blank.

"Styron Sinclair? What do you know—" Fleming stopped speaking as Jarrett, in a single savage movement, pushed the brim of his hat back.

"Ah!" said Fleming, on a breath.

"How much do you *hate* Sinclair, Fleming?"

Almost, almost, Jarrett had muffed and said *like* instead of *hate*. But however much you would like to deal with likes in the galaxy you had to pollute your mind with hates. One day, perhaps, it would be different. He waited, seeing the guards' guns.

Fleming puffed smoke. He liked to put a lot of the holder into his mouth and work it around. Jarrett regarded him with weary contempt.

"So Sue did not come to me of her own free will." This was the first point he picked up. He looked mean.

"If you're frightened of Sinclair," snapped Jarrett, trying to put a bite into his words he found increasingly difficult with the tiredness in him. "If you want help in dealing with him, then all right. Purdy wasn't following us for nothing. If it's something else you want—then no deal."

"I don't think you appreciate your position. I dictate the deals. I can have you killed just—like—that." And Fleming snapped his fingers. They plopped, with their fatness.

"Don't be silly!" Jarrett let the naïveté of that lie. "If you were such a madman as to kill us Sinclair would flay you, feed your hearts to wolves and your guts to hyenas."

Fleming considered.

Any minute, now, surely, Purdy would ring.

"What have you to tell me about Styron Sinclair?"

"Ah!" said Jarrett in a long soft sigh. "You told Purdy to follow us because I wore a frug; maybe we can help you deal with Sinclair, if—"

The shrilling of a videophone penetrated the brittle understanding toward which these two men were feeling. A guard bent to a side table and pressed the stud. The screen flickered and cleared to reveal the bruised and pallid features of Purdy, a hand to his mouth.

"Mr. Fleming!"

Jarrett said to Todd, "You left, me right. I'll take Fleming."

Todd didn't reply. Instead he hurled himself in a portly long low lunge at

the left-hand guard. Jarrett saw no more as he kicked the right-hand guard in the stomach and chopped the side of his neck with an iron-edged hand. He twisted sideways and the needle spray from Fleming's gun flick-flicked wickedly past his head.

Then he kicked Fleming where he lived—and the three Fleming men in the room were down and Todd and Jarrett could stand up, jerkily, smiling, breathing out with a whoosh.

"Mr. Fleming?"

Jarrett switched Purdy's mauled face off.

The two guards were bound and gagged in their own clothes. Fleming was seated in an ordinary chair—not his personal padded piece of luxury—and tied down with wires ripped from the exterior phone.

Fleming was still gagging, his face green and hollow.

"You hit him too hard, Bill," tut-tutted Todd.

"He'll come around in time," said Jarrett harshly. "He'll have to. Purdy's friends will be here soon." He smiled at the girl. "You all right, Sue?"

"Just fine. Funny—I feel a little sorry for Fleming."

Fleming coughed and drooled.

Jarrett picked up a handy flagon of water and hurled the water over him. He held on to the flagon—just.

They were in a tight spot. But this travesty of a drooling man would get them out of it. Otherwise...

Jarrett held Fleming by the chin. He waggled the man's head. "Listen, Fleming. I want to know where Styron Sinclair is now. I want to know fast. I haven't any time to waste on you. So, in your own interest, you would be well advised to tell me—*now!*"

The brisk lead-in, the feeling forward, and then the snapped command had all worked before.

"What—" Fleming swallowed. "You can't hurt me!"

"I *can* hurt you, *and* I will."

Fleming licked his lips. His face had lost some of its greenish pallor; but he looked a most unhappy man.

"I'll tell you what I can do to you, Fleming, if you wish." Jarrett elaborated for a few moments. Sue turned away with a little shudder; a simulated shudder, Jarrett thought. She knew him better all the time, a state he found profoundly depressing, and yet—he dragged his mind back to Fleming.

"I'll tell you—only, only—please—"

"No promises, Fleming. Just talk. Then we'll see."

"I'll talk," sobbed Fleming.

*We're getting nearer, Princess, a little nearer. ...*

"I run this planet," said Fleming weakly, lolling in his seat. "Sinclair runs his own affairs and he came to me, asked me to hide him, no questions; he's a more powerful man, even, than I am. Hundreds of stellar systems in it, he said. Cut me in. Take over the whole lot—"

Below, the sound of movement and heavy authoritarian voices reached them faintly. The elevator, which Todd had brought to the *up* position and then, with the gates open, had jammed, resounded to men's impatient hammering.

"They won't shift *that!*" squeaked Todd in high satisfaction. "There aren't any stairs."

Fleming was looking at Jarrett.

"It has to be in the *up* position for the place to work," said Jarrett.

Fleming's face went meaner and he abruptly looked far more frightened. He jerked.

"I know," Jarrett said, hard. "Did you think I wouldn't know?"

"I've told you about Sinclair. He's a very rough man indeed. I don't envy you. As for your frug—" Fleming was forcing himself up against his bonds now. "As for you, frugged fool, I hope it kills you long and slow!"

"Oh," said Jarrett with offhand coolness, "Ferdie and I have come to an arrangement by now."

The noise from below redoubled.

"They've brought something up, Bill," said Todd, worried, putting his fat face near the door. "I think they might blow up through the floor."

"They'll have a job," grunted Jarrett. "But we'd better leave. Fleming

knows how we're leaving..."

"Well, I don't!" said Todd. In a situation where he would normally be feeling the fear strong upon him he could act and talk in confidence, trusting in Bill Jarrett. "We'll never get past them below, and the windows—"

"You try climbing through those windows and you'll be crisped to ash!" Fleming enjoyed that taunt.

"See?" said Todd, with a delicious shudder.

"I have some experience with this type of personal fortress," Jarrett told him, smiling at the fat man's comical reaction to Fleming's remark. "Just so long as I haven't forgotten the sequence of severances—"

He stood in front of Fleming. He towered over the man. He held his hands limply at his sides.

"Fleming," he said in a friendly voice, "I need your key. You know the one. Where is it?"

Fleming knew when to fight and when to yield.

"In my inside pocket—there's a booby trap."

"Thank you." Carefully, feeling as though he had eyes in his fingertips, Jarrett felt inside the man's pocket. The booby trap would have chopped his fingers off. Using the owner's normal methods he took out the key, safely.

He looked about the study, frowning slightly.

"*The Rainbow*." Fleming spoke tiredly. He had given up, it seemed.

Between *Sons and Lovers*, and *Women in Love*, the volume was pushed forward a little. It was a genuine book. Jarrett took it out, inserted the key into the keyhole in the back of the bookcase, turned.

In the center of the wide shadow-shrouded room a console dropped smoothly from the ceiling. It descended smoothly, betokening powerful servo motors in leash. Jarrett went across and sat in the control chair facing the rows of familiar instruments.

"It's a flier control!" said Todd, marveling.

"This is a fortress designed to a well-known specification," Jarrett said, chuckling with the relief. "At least, well-known in circles in which I move. The owner insures against final defeat. If the fortress below is broken into

and all is lost, he can detach the whole top floor and fly off." He heard Sue gasp and then laugh. "Which is just what we are going to do."

He went through the severance drill, cutting the connections between the house and this top floor, which was really an internally-powered flier. The lights flickered as he changed over power supplies.

"They'll know, now, down there," he said, tautly.

He went through the rest of the sequence fast, turned to look at them, smiled, said, "Here we go!" and pressed the takeoff button.

## VII



**Bill Jarrett** had never owned one of these flying fortresses—as an adventurer of the galaxy he had never owned a stick or stone and had had no truck with mortgages—but he had flown them before.

The massive anti-gravity engines turned sweetly in immediate response although they had not been used since the day they had lowered the top floor onto the building beneath. The study room and the foyer rose into the air.

Brick and masonry, fiberglass and concrete, broke and split. The whole sheathing of roof cracked open like an ice field when a submarine-fired missile blasts off.

Masonry, brickbats and tiles cascaded down as the roof collapsed and poured in smoking rubble into the garden and street. They heard no yells from below over the din. The flier, now revealed as a stumpy and only partially streamlined shape, rose briskly from the building like an insect breaking free of its chrysalis and soared into the air.

A few shots were fired after them. They bounced from the flier's hull.

The flier soared through the night sky and Jarrett at the controls felt again the mystery and the mastery of flight.

"Where away?" he said to Fleming.



"Due south." The terraforming engineer spoke huffily, as though hating them he hated himself for his own weakness most of all. His piggy eyes had sunk deeply.

"Pretty hot down there," Todd squeaked. "I was down there on a surveying trip, six, seven years ago. Had to refrigerate the engines on the trucks."

"If Styron Sinclair is down there planning devilry, then that's where we're going." Jarrett took for granted the fact that Todd was accompanying him. Sue, too, was now with them, and with as good a reason as Jarrett's, really. A hundred miles south, still in darkness, they descended to a forested area a mile or so from a huddle of lights denoting a frontier township. Jarrett kicked the two blocky bodyguards out.

As they went through the foyer, Fleming yelled after them, "You're finished, you two!"

Jarrett just said, "You can walk to that town. It's not far."

The two guards slouched off into the alien night.

Fleming grunted and moved awkwardly. Jarrett loosened the wires but he kept the man securely tied. Fleming swallowed.

"I've met your kind before," he said. "You're not the first to come trying to find Styron Sinclair."

"No?"

Jarrett was aware of Sue trembling with strung-up intentness, shaking, her hands gripped into fists.

"No. There was a man called Jungren Jones. He came asking questions."

"What happened?"

Fleming snickered. "He wore a frug, too. We took it off."

Jarrett felt sick.

Then, remembering, he said, "That explains why you set Purdy on me; but what happened to the frug?"

Fleming pouted. Evidently the memory rankled.

"It was Purdy's fault, really. He told me some stupid story about two girls wearing bikinis and boots in a ship full of armored eepees. An odd story but

I chose to believe him. Purdy's useful. But the frug was gone."

Jarrett felt the anger in him.

Fleming finished; "I expect he sold it on his own account. Cost a lot of money."

"So the witch knew the trail extended this far," he said. "But it doesn't take a genius to guess why she made me start at the beginning." He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering the flailball.

Sue leaned forward. Her breasts rose and fell sharply beneath the drab office dress. She had to force herself to ask the question.

"Anymore?"

Fleming nodded. "A man I used to employ told me he'd sold information to a man called Charlie Sjambok—"

Sue's indrawn breath gusted quickly.

"What happened to my man," Fleming said with a remembered relish, "was not pleasant—for him. But we never found this man Sjambok—if he ever existed."

Jarrett put a hand on Sue's shoulder and gripped. The understanding between them was growing deeper.

Todd perked up. He had found refreshments in wall cupboards and had gone straight for the liquid variety.

Thinking about Sinclair, Jarrett concluded that he had been employed to kidnap Prince Manrico and that afterward he had robbed Herrman; and on those proceeds he had settled here under the protective cloak of Fleming. But Fleming had mentioned factories, so had Sinclair settled down or not?

When the first sun, En, rose, it spread a long orange flush up the eastern sky, spear-points of emerald light flashed briefly like outriders. The glow grew and suffused the air with a permeating ochre stain, spreading and extending. The ruddy orange light beat down with a smoky sense of the heat to come.

"En's bad enough—" began Todd.

Fleming shifted uneasily. "We're going deep south," he grumbled. "Down there Cu and En are in the sky together, overhead. When Cu rises it'll be

*hot!"*

Jarrett laughed harshly. "If Sinclair lives there then so can we."

"Yes, but he lives in a scientific frontier-world complex of habitations geared for survival. The air conditioning, the refrigeration, all his power comes from the very suns that will fry us!"

"I'm sure this fortress flier has refrigeration devices. It's in the usual specifications. And Sinclair will welcome a visit from the terraformer who allowed him to settle on his planet, won't he?"

Fleming could only grunt with baffled anger.

On and on the flier sped, high and clear in the morning sky, a black dot beneath the lush magnificence of the orange sun En.

An hour later the sun Cu rose. Bright and hard and golden sharp, it popped over the horizon and cut a swath of level yellow light through the flowing orange stream of En's more liberal fires.

Jarrett operated the flier's air-conditioning system thoughtfully. The control fascia told him much of the flier's capabilities. It possessed a small nuclear-power source; but its main supplies for refrigeration, should the heat become intolerable, would come from heat-exchangers. The balance appealed to his sense of rhythm. The hotter the suns radiated the greater the power they contributed to the refrigeration devices. But he did not wish to swan around in a nice coolness in here when at any moment they might have to land and step outside. He kept the temperature well up into the high seventies.

"Get plenty to drink," he told his comrades, briefly.

When they touched surface he would think again about this heat adaption theory.

The rearward-looking radar cheeped.

Fleming started against his bonds.

"Bogeys," said Jarrett calmly.

On the screen coupled to the rear radar two dots showed, closing fast. The range numbers on the console spun around, lessening quickly. The dots looked ominous and unhealthy.

"I just hope you didn't skimp on the armor on this thing," grunted Jarrett.

Fleming sweated and said, "It's as good as money could buy!"

"We'll soon see just what your money did buy!"

He glanced over at Sue, who sat with her eyes closed in a large comfortable chair. The artificial gravity of the fortress flier exerting its one G downward conferred an unreal and macabre air of normalcy to the situation. Outside, down that brilliant sky, two dots were seeking them with intent to kill.

Fleming knew the score, too.

"They'll try—" He swallowed. "Purdy—"

Jarrett said to Todd, "Give him a drink, Todd."

Todd did as he was bid, jerkily. He fidgeted. At last he squeaked, "What can we do against them out there?" He pointed a comically wrathful finger at the screen. "They're mighty nasty customers! Look to me like atmosphere interceptors and they've probably got energy weapons, and —and—"

Jarrett interrupted. The tension of impending disaster was beginning to rend the relationships in the study room in the speeding flier and he had to cut off any disposition to mutually-destructive hysteria.

"This flying heap has weapons, too. You know my dislike of guns; but this time it's different. I'm not shooting at a man I can see, in flesh and blood—how anyone can fire a gun at a man amazes me—but pressing a button to aim a weapon I can't see at a flying machine. It's like a target. I'm shooting at a machine."

Fleming said nastily, "That's hair-splitting! That proves you're a fake!"

"I'm aware of the anomalies of that position!" snapped back Jarrett. "But some men can stomach pressing a button and killing a million people they can't see with a hydrogen bomb when they'd puke at the thought of sticking a knife into another man's belly!"

Sue said, "You're like those men who believe that all enemies should be alien and unseen and unknown. It must work for a time; but you have to own up to reality in the end."

"Any enemy is an unknown, as soon as you lift the quarrel out of the purely personal level. No country or planet fights another on a personal

basis any more. Enemies *are* faceless, otherwise you couldn't face what you do to them."

Todd said, "I'd gun a nasty piece of work like Fleming down without too much conscience; but as to wiping out a million people—that I dunno. I dunno about that."

"Here they come!" said Jarrett, centering his attention back to the board and the screens.

Todd put a nervous hand to his lips. His eyes became very round.

On the screen the two dots sprouted wings and empennages and resolved into Consolidated Dynamics Wasp atmosphere interceptors. Fast, they packed a heavy conventional punch of missiles, nuclear weapons not being in their inventory. If they had been retro-fitted with energy weapons the study flier might be in for a tough time; otherwise Jarrett felt confident that the machine cannons and the Kungsens could deal with the interceptors.

Fleming Terraformers, as a governing body, could so simply have called on the planetary defense forces for help. Purdy, if he was Fleming's number two, was seizing his chance to take over.

The interceptors tried to play it clever and split their approach, one from high right and rear, the other zooming up from low front and left.

"I'd imagine there were pilots in them," offered Jarrett.

Todd just grunted, not sure. Sue had no opinion.

Fleming said, "Purdy was always frightened of robots."

Jarrett set up his firing patterns. All he could do, really, was program the computerized brain of the flier to handle whatever was thrown at it, to block off danger and to destroy anything seeking to destroy it. The central nervous system of the flier, transistorized and computerized and using solid-state electronics and all the welter of cybernetics and googologics, would take care of the flier.

He pressed the button.

The flier canted steeply across the sky.

Everyone remained neatly sitting or standing as the flier's artificial gravity fields maintained a normal one G downward; but the flier swung under massive acceleration sweeping across the sky beneath the blaze of orange

and the lance of gold.

The interceptor diving down tried to swing in compensation so that his missiles would be released on optimum course; but they started off wide, showing their slim sides. Rapid machine cannon rattle broke out. The machine cannon pulverized the missiles in midair. The same thing happened to the missiles released from the fighter boring up from beneath.

The machine cannons fell silent, their racket an ache in the ear.

"Those Consolidated Dynamics Wasps usually carry six missiles," Jarrett said. He stared at the screen. "Machine cannons can handle them. The Kungsens won't be necessary, I'd imagine."

Fleming roused himself. "The charges for the Kungsens fire only when all the cannon rounds are gone," he said.

"Economizing, is that it?" said Jarrett, without taking his eyes away from the screens.

The flier had been programmed.

The study room that was a flying fortress had been given instructions to protect itself, and these two buzzing interceptors were trying to destroy it. The flier did not like that. Already it had smashed up a missile attack and it knew another attack would be launched any minute, for such was the nature of these buzzing winged insect-like fliers.

The fortress flier went after the interceptors.

It scudded around, trailing a bubbling wake, and skimmed up to the higher interceptor. Its machine cannons crashed out even as the interceptor was releasing its missiles. Cannon shells ripped into titanium, lacerated stainless steel, pulverized delicate instruments and revolving machinery.

The interceptor exploded.

The missiles must have gone up in the blast, too.

The second fighter, to give him his due, reversed and in a wide speedy arc came in again, shark-like, releasing all four missiles as he did so.

The study flier picked up the missiles on its forward radar, flicked into a reverse turn, and its machine cannon coughed in delicate little bursts. Radar, computers, solenoids and servos combined to direct the shells on target.

All four missiles erupted.

The study flier bored on. Nothing was stopping it now. It lit up a signal on the board, indicating it was changing from proximity fused shells to contacts. It bored on lethally. The interceptor turned to flee and the study flier knew its speed would take it out of range within a few seconds. But those seconds were enough for a last and mortal stream of shells to flash out and incandesce the interceptor.

On the console a light that had been blipping red now steadied down to a lambent green radiance.

Jarrett blew the breath out in a gusty sigh.

Todd said, "Oh, my!"

Sue smiled, a little shakily, and stood beside Jarrett, looking at the empty screen.

Fleming, relieved he was still alive and forgetting enough to smirk, said, "Now you can see what my money bought. Satisfied?"

The fortress flier cut a great purple swath across the sky, sweeping around to resume course for Sinclair's laboratory-complex down south, roaring in a boom of sound above the few scraps of smoking ruin from the fallen interceptors below.

## VIII



No **doubt** existed in Bill Jarrett's mind that this John Fleming was a most unpleasant person, ostensibly an engineer terraforming a planet, in reality the man running that planet to his own desires. As a scientist-technologist he had been able to handle everyone he met.

Now Jarrett wondered.

Styron Sinclair—what sort of man was he?

Ruthless, powerful, dominating—all of these, most certainly—also a scientifically-trained technician, so Fleming claimed; Sinclair must be a

stronger personality than Fleming, too. So Jarrett reasoned in quick, intuitive leaps.

Jarrett's own roots back on Earth had bred him tough and quick and ruthless in his own way. He felt that Todd, that fat, high-voiced and comically underrated man, also had grown through a tough and hard boyhood. Already Todd had grown in stature and self-confidence since his meeting with Jarrett. There would be no more Arnerys in Todd's life. As for Sue Sjambok, she meant to find her father, alive or dead—and Big Bill Jarrett meant to help her, because...

So they must journey on now, thrown by fate together on the trail of Styron Sinclair, and through him to find Prince Manrico, going on because there seemed to them nothing else in the galaxy to do. Now Jarrett wondered if he went on just because of what he wore around his head and glaring from his forehead.

The land below them had gradually changed in character from the forested northern slopes to a wide savannah and then a sparse and isolated tundra. Now, as the twin suns rose in the sky and shed their chromatic aberrations upon the sand beneath, a desert opened out below the scudding flier. The desert showed rocks and lava deposits, swaths of untrodden sand, glinting white and yellow and red as the suns' light flayed it and leached the color away.

Below them now lay barrenness.

Todd gulped.

"It doesn't look exactly homey down there," he complained.

"Just be thankful you aren't walking," Jarrett advised him, hiding his smile.

Ahead of them, an indigo smear against the horizon, a darkness other than desert came into being. As they flew swiftly nearer the ground humped and contracted, great rocks exploded upward with howitzer force, lava streams glittered through cracks in the earth's crust. Steam and smoke hung in an indigo, ocher and streaming silver cloud above the caldron beneath.

As quickly as they had happened on the upheaval they had passed it.



Sue smiled, a little apprehensively. Todd wiped his forehead.

Fleming said, "Why don't you undo these wires and let me up? I'm broiling."

Todd lifted an eyebrow at Jarrett, who nodded curtly.

"If you do anything silly, Fleming," he said quite matter-of-factly, "remember, you're expendable now."

Mountains rose ahead.

Lilac and saffron, dancing hazily in a far off and mistily remote and beckoning haze, the mountains rose over the curve of the world.

"Sinclair sure wanted to get away from it all," observed Todd, squeaking and swallowing imaginary spittle.

"The approaches are easier from the other side, the southern side. He's nearer temperate climes there than he is on this northern side." Fleming, Jarrett guessed, was trying to prove he wasn't expendable. Trying to read any fleeting emotion from that putty face was difficult; only strong and overpowering fears and lusts would alter that slack and somehow dough-man physiognomy.

The mountains took on form and color and began to acquire outlines which remained at first still hazy and dancing with misty veils until, slowly and imperceptibly, they assumed harder outlines with more regular peaks and valleys. The mountains hardened into stone bastions, clawing the sky, changing from insubstantial cloud-mountains with their feet in haziness. Colors sparked brilliantly on their slopes. Snow masses crowned them with hoary powder.

"He'll have picked us up by now." Fleming massaged his wrists, although the wires had done no more than mark the soft skin. "There's no really effective radar-scrambler aboard here."

"The money run out?" jeered Jarrett. Then, "No matter. Fighting off those interceptors was money well spent. We've plenty of time before we reach those peaks."

Jarrett let the automatic controls carry them on. "You'd better call Sinclair up—we only ripped out your house video circuits. You can use the screens." Jarrett rose and loomed deliberately over Fleming. He glowered down. "But,

first, I want to show you an old trick. It's very old. Ancient. But I think you'll get the message it still carries."

He stepped away and picked up a book from the desk; a thickish book, fat, a reading directory to local planetary supply services. He riffled it. He found another thick book which, with a paper or two, bulked up to the same thickness as the first book. He pressed them down and felt approvingly their springy reaction. He placed them a foot apart on the desk and across the gap he put the wooden flap from the desk drawer. The gap between wood and desktop was about four inches. The wood was, perhaps, an inch thick. It looked like mahogany.

"The trick is," he said, "not to hurt yourself."

He scattered thumb tacks, point up, on the desk beneath the wood. They formed a mat of points, thirstily sticking up.

"Normally we'd use something much more unpleasant; but it's all we have available."

He took a deep breath. He held it, let it out slowly, took another. He held his forearm and hand stiff but not rigidly.

Todd stepped forward, anxious, squeaking, "Hey, Bill! You'll lacerate your hand—if you don't smash it. That wood's thick!"

Sue sucked in her breath.

Fleming gazed with pig-like fascination, his face pale.

Jarrett lifted his hand. He knew what he could logically expect his body to do for him, what he could force his body to perform under the control of his mind—as a master of the secret physical disciplines he knew. Without any huffing or puffing, no sudden shout, no brittle invocation to any false gods—*smash*—down ripped his hand. The edge struck the wood, the wood splintered in half and up bounced his hand. Not a thumb tack had been ruffled, the two halves of the wood bouncing away and up through the spring-action of the close-backed leaves of the books.

"It's like the old one of punching powder on a wall. You either miss, then you're chicken; you do it properly and come back with your knuckles powdered—"

"Or," interrupted Todd, aghast, "or you smash your hand to blazes!"

"It's body control. I have it." Jarrett swung on Fleming.

"I can snap your neck like a rotten twig—like that desk flap. No guns need be used. Just call up Sinclair all nice and friendly and tell him to expect guests!"

The look on the planetary terraformer's doughy face puzzled Jarrett. That white face with its expressionless pudginess could be hiding any number of unpleasant surprises. After his capture Fleming had gone through phases of truculence and fear; but now Jarrett sensed a fresh thought in that cunning and devious brain.

Fleming went across to the screens when Todd prodded him up, releasing the wires with contemptuous little jerks.

Sue gave a nervous gesture with her hand.

Jarrett pressed the right buttons to set up the screens to call out on the personal wavelength Fleming selected. Jarrett motioned Todd and Sue away to the side, off-screen of the TV eye picking up the picture of Fleming that would be relayed into Sinclair's laboratory.

"All right, Fleming. Do your stuff."

The screen lit up and the face of a man appeared, a thin, weasel-face with a black-line moustache and wet eyes.

"I wish to speak to Styron," Fleming said.

The man's weasel face disappeared. Fleming carried weight, evidently. Jarrett felt pleased. The prizes in this galactic game must be high. Onto the screen flashed the face of the man Jarrett had last seen from the eyes of a small and frightened boy being hustled out into the blankness, a face broad and swarthy, with the old wide-smiling mocking mouth. But the years had eroded the sharp edges, had piled fat beneath the skin, had dragged down the firmness of mouth and jaw.

His jaw was now cleanly-shaven and yet the blue tide of rebellious subcutaneous hair remained. His dark eyes still mocked, he still held within himself that impudent bearing, that grand free and easy way of looking, his head cocked up, raffishly.

"Fleming!" he said. "Well, now."

No need, here, for pleasantries.

"Time I paid you a visit, Styron." Fleming sweated; Jarrett could see the shining globules below the hairline. No doubt Sinclair could see, too.

"All right, if you wish." Sinclair gestured lazily. "You know the way. Come on in."

The screen blacked.

Before Fleming completed his gasp and relaxation of attention, Jarrett had slapped the send switch down and off. That TV eye could still be sending betraying images from here into Sinclair's watching screen.

Todd let out a gusty breath and squeaked, "He bought it!"

"Why shouldn't he?" snapped Fleming, sweating. "He may be a big and mighty man in the galaxy but he knows he's on Encudor by my say-so!"

Outside the speeding flier the twin suns poured out their orange and gold and the far mountains grew taller and nearer, rearing against the radiance in the sky. Jarrett estimated times.

"We've time to have something to eat before we get there, if we're quick about it," he told them. "Fleming as well. He's bound to have food cached away. Todd, go sniff it out—I prefer to go into something like this with a full stomach."

As they ate the quickly-heated meals from the food containers, self-heating and tasty, Jarrett watched his comrades broodingly. He leaned toward Fleming, who was greedily spooning up the last of his gravy.

"You have extra clothes in here? Good. Dig out a spare shirt and pants for Miss Sjambok. That neat office dress is incongruous."

Feeling more comfortable after the meal but a little bristly about the chin, Jarrett plugged in Fleming's shaver and trimmed himself up, watching the screens with a dangerous carelessness of his skin. The mountains now showed an unending barrier against the sky, walling in the world and towering sharp and pitilessly into the glare. Now that the suns had burned off any excess vapor no clouds hung about those barren and snow-strewn heights; Jarrett didn't care to dwell on the vagaries of weather possible here.

The flier took them darting down lower. Fleming had coupled in a homing device, which, he told Jarrett, would take them directly to Sinclair's landing platform.

The main item Jarrett now had to concentrate on was Sinclair's reaction. From Jarrett's own point of view he could claim merely that he was visiting Sinclair to obtain information on a twenty year old kidnapping, without any legal strings whatsoever. But Sinclair must by now have had a good look at the craft in which the planetary overlord was visiting him, and whatever quirks such people might have, using a fortress flier from the roof of the house was scarcely likely to figure as one of them. The study flier sped low over the sands, preparatory to the last swoop up to the aerial platform jutting out from the mountain flank above the laboratory and factory complex. Jarrett, the satisfying meal inside, his chin smooth, thought he could figure the angles.

"Call up Sinclair again," he told Fleming. "I want him absolutely convinced this is just an ordinary visit. You can do it if you try. If you can bluff him until we hit the ramp, that's all I'll need."

When Sinclair came on again his wide face showed deeper lines spreading out and down from the corners of his eyes. His nose appeared more beaked. He looked like an upset cobra.

"Now what, Fleming?"

"We're coming in now, Styron—thought you'd like to know. We've plenty to talk about. It's certainly nice to see you again."

Nothing warned them.

No abrupt movement on Sinclair's part, no lifting of eyebrows, no rictus of lips, no snap of fingers gave them the slightest indication of the holocaust to come.

Fire blossomed cherry red all across the screens.

The study flier lurched sickeningly.

Sue choked off a scream and gripped Jarrett.

Fleming screamed, "He's shooting at us!"

On the screens showing the forward vision and the flank of the mountains a streak of fire lanced from a mountain peak. Up there Jarrett thought he could just make out the shining domes of a robotic fortress. Light seared from it, half blinding him.

The flier jerked and shuddered.

Smoke began to gush from a side control as overloaded circuits burned out. The stink of breaking-down insulation, charring into uselessness, choked in his nostrils. The lights flickered in a ghastly whirligig of yellow and red and blue.

Desperately Jarrett clawed at the control board. The flier had been sorely stricken. Her defenses had been sheared and battered and half obliterated in that first sleeting storm of fire. He saw the red alarm lights glowing across the board like chicken pox.

The money paid out by Fleming had not been enough to buy protection from the energy weapons gouting from Sinclair's mountain arsenal. The heat grew overpowering.

"The treacherous swine!" Fleming was yelling, his mouth open, gaping, his face expressive now, fully expressive, of horror and panic and fear.

Jarrett jumped across and shook him. He yelled at Todd, "Grab Sue! We've got to get out of here!"

Then, harshly, to Fleming: "It doesn't show on the board. Where's the escape capsule? Come on, man! There must be one! You didn't save money on that, too, did you?"

The terraformer slavered. His head flopped with the violence of Jarrett's shaking.

He screeched, "The foyer!"

"All out!" yelled Jarrett. Pushing Todd ahead of him with Sue, he dragged Fleming out of that silver and crystal door leading into the foyer.

The flier shuddered, deeply stricken, and they felt the creepingly erratic sensations of normal whirling forces from the rampaging changes of direction as the flier lurched about the sky. The artificial one G downward mechanisms had been damaged.

Sue needed little assistance from Todd. She looked, after that first shocked awareness of what was happening, composed and ready to follow Jarrett's lead. He warmed to her. Her gave her a quick encouraging smile.

Fleming flapped open a cover on the wall to reveal a small compact control board. He punched the big red button in a frenzy of fear.

The foyer jittered under them and a scream of sundering metal ripped

into their eardrums. The study flier was flinging itself all over the sky as a hooked tarpon flings itself about in a spray of water at the end of a line. The foyer section broke free. Catapulted on explosive charges, it rampaged up and away from the finished study. The four people clung to hand grips that had snapped out the moment Fleming pressed that red button.

The green potted plants cascaded all over the place like a jungle gone mad. The foyer upended itself, swung, gyrated. Then, as its own small anti-grav motors took hold, it steadied, began to let down on stilts of power.

They dropped toward the surface.

"The mountains!" Todd gasped. "We'll never make a landing there!"

Fleming drew his lips back. He swallowed. He seemed to have overcome a little of his fear now that they had successfully escaped from the doomed flier. "Don't think I didn't pay for a good fortress!" he snarled. The performance, in their plight, rang hollow. "The flier couldn't outshoot the robotic fort so it took evasive action. The flier ran. We're over open country now—"

"What!" snapped Jarrett. The news had jolted him. "You mean we're coming down in the desert?"

"Just that!"

"But the heat..." whispered Todd.

"I thought at least we'd get into the mountains!" Jarrett felt betrayed. He'd planned on getting at least up into the mountains. And now... Now!

"We've all had it!" sang Fleming.

Jarrett glared at him; the man's mind had refused at last to face reality. And, outside in the searing heat, there would be little time left. Soon, dreadfully soon, the twin suns would destroy them.

"We're all dead!" sang Fleming, past reason, past hope, drooling. "All dead—dead—deadyoh!!!"

The foyer, detached from the study flier as a safety capsule, touched down in the soft sand of the desert and came to rest on a corner, one edge uplifted and the four occupants flung down in a heap among potted plants and rich dislodged earth.

What refrigeration devices existed for the foyer would soon be overwhelmed, even with that neat balance of sun power and refrigeration power; the foyer was like a small child cut off from its parents' protection and trying to act adult in a grown world. But, Jarrett thought thankfully as he scrambled up, it had at least saved them from the destruction now engulfing the study-flier—the parent was dead but they lived on.

He looked carefully from a window, seeing the immense flaring ocher-orange and the level beam of yellow-gold from the twin suns.

A gush of flame erupted high up.

"That's the last of his study, then," squeaked Todd. He, too, seemed happy to be down in one piece.

Sue clung to Jarrett's arm, struggling up, and he felt pleasure at the contact. Fleming was sitting on an upturned potted plant, the leaves and stem bent and broken, singing to himself, quite happy.

Heat burned off the surface of the desert. Willy-willies shimmered in whorls of abstract color. A hundred yards or so away a group of rocks offered possible shelter. There could be clefts and shadowed crannies in there. The twin suns flayed and scorched mercilessly.

*Well, Princess, the trail is not so easy now...*

High up, a group of dots twinkled silver glints down from that rose-flushed indigo. Jarrett frowned.

Fleming was singing happily away and there was no further help or guidance to be had from him. The obvious thought occurred to Jarrett that the engineer was faking his breakdown; he could be, easily, and Jarrett had no time now to discover the truth. As to why he should want to do that, again, Jarrett was too pushed to investigate.

"Aircraft," Todd said, staring up through the window. "Interceptors and heavier jobs. I don't believe there are any space vehicles up there." He was



using a pair of field glasses fallen from a cupboard where some outdoor survival kits had been stored. Jarrett's lips thinned as he saw thick parkas, electrically-heated clothing, huge mittens. Evidently, Fleming had been anticipating going north...

"It's my guess they think Fleming has been kidnapped by Sinclair. They're going to hit Sinclair's complex and get their boss back, or have a showdown—"

"But that means—" began Sue. She looked excited.

"That's right."

"And it's beginning to warm up in here."

"Grab happy boy there, Todd. He's useless now but we can't leave him." Jarrett shook his head. "Or can we?" A glance at Sue confirmed his decision. "No, we can't."

The large under-floor and above-ceiling resources of the study flier had gone. The foyer would not last long. Jarrett licked his lips. He felt helpless and trapped.

Todd looked through the glasses again.

"They're beginning their attack," he said flatly.

Fleming looked up and giggled.

As Jarrett began to move, Sue spoke. "I suppose we could put up a flare?" she suggested diffidently.

"We could." Jarrett again became aware of that terribly unusual sense of uncertainty. "If they saw us and if they investigated and if they picked us up—they might not be happy with us when they saw their chief."

"I wish we could be sure just what their reaction would be," Todd said. "As it is, they're attacking Sinclair now, right enough."

From the mountains gigantic peals of thunder and vivid flashes of lightning boomed and hissed, crashed and struck. Those coarse bolts of light and those rumbling shards of sound were not produced by nature on this alien planet; they resounded and coruscated as man fought man. Shafts of fire gouged at the fortress and answering lances of flame swished and swashed at the darting aircraft. Gouts and gobbets of smoke darkened the sky.

Jarrett pinpointed the cause of that uncertainty in himself.

For himself he would have put up a flare and if he had been lucky would have been taken off. Then he would have faced what Fleming's men could hand out with the same aplomb he had previously used to fight his way across the galaxy. But now he recognized he was responsible for Sue— and Todd—and that he could not easily hand her over to Fleming's henchmen. Fleming's Terraformers might appear to be a prim and properly respectable engineering concern; but in this affair already they had shown themselves to be as mercilessly ruthless as any dictatorial government could be. His decision was complicated by factors he had never previously needed to take into consideration.

Smoke rose blackly from the mountains.

"They're taking an awful hammering!" shouted Todd in his high excited voice. "I've seen at least four heavy aircraft blow up."

"If Styron Sinclair is half the man we think he is, then those planes aren't going to scratch him."

For Jarrett the sensation of watching a fight without being involved was both novel and illuminating. He wondered why Ferdie hadn't done something about this hiatus in the search for Prince Manrico. Come to that, he supposed, as two heavy bombers blew apart and ripped into smoking fragments high over his head, he was still on the trail, still seeking a way to get to Styron Sinclair.

Down from the sky whirled a bomber, shredded and collapsing. From its nose its escape capsule jettied. Spinning in an unstabilized descent the capsule jittered across the sky, trailing a thin line of smoke. Jarrett watched it coming in.

"So they didn't use robots after all..."

Todd said with surprising authority, "Robots are fine for lots of things. Some people prefer robexes, some robots. This sort of affray is not exactly them." He was sweating profusely now, his great bulk rotund in the heat, his orange shirt a limp and sodden rag.

The capsule thunked into the sand half a mile off.

The roarings and bellowings from the mountain lessened. Flame no

longer speared goutts of fire into the brilliant sky. A few aircraft limped away into the distance, back over the horizon, gone—and no little flare from the desert below was going to stop them.

"They didn't even stop to pick up their comrades!" squeaked Todd, outraged.

A shower of dots rose from the mountain.

Tiny brilliant specks, shining, multitudinous, they fluttered up from Styron Sinclair's mountain lair and spread out over the desert.

The heat about the four people as the refrigeration broke down grew in intensity. Crimson and ocher whorls gusted past, the sand began to move and whisper. The brilliance of the streaming sky threw layers of color and movement across the heavens. A wind, a hot suffocating smothering wind, began to stir the grains of sand. The whispering and hissing increased.

Jarrett looked again at the clump of rocks.

It would be a chance. There were most likely holes and caves in there that would be cooler than the foyer and safer from the coming sandstorm. Most likely—but there might not be.

They might stagger across the unforgiving sands to the rocks; he doubted if they'd make it back.

The chance daunted him. He glanced at Sue. He would not have hesitated before; but now...

Ferdie the Frug reminded him of his duty. Pain drenched him. He doubled up in agony, his hands unable to rise and grasp the frug.

"Bill!"

"I'm all right," he managed to choke out. "We've got to make a run for it. Only chance."

The pain vanished.

Those fragmented black dots from Sinclair's lair had scattered across the sky, assuming color and shape, taking on their own baleful pseudo-life, defining themselves and their objects. They pattered across the sky. They spun down from above, strewing their forms across the desert, seeking out the life capsules and the anti-gravity chutes from the shattered aircraft.

A group landed near the capsule that had plunged into the sand half a mile away.

Jarrett looked at them. He swallowed. Before he could speak Todd said something in a voice that, with squeak and high-pitched excitement and all, yet rang a somber note in the suffocating foyer.

"Electroplasms!"

"Those horrible eepees!" cried Sue. She looked transparent, waxy with heat, trying to choke down her fear and her repugnance. Her shirt—a white silky thing—was opened to her waist. Her pants clinched her figure tightly. Jarrett put an arm around her. He hoped she wouldn't faint.

The electroplasms hovered about the capsule. Two moved in with dangling tentacles writhing. Presently they rose again and this time, dangling in the clasp of those long sinuous tentacles, two human bodies lolled laxly.

Sue shuddered deeply.

"They're only semi-sentients, like Ferdie!" Jarrett said, as much for his own morale as hers. "We've got to get across to those rocks. So forget the electroplasms."

He remembered the flailball. There would be flailballs among those semi-sentients sent out by Sinclair. Electronically-structured and isotope-powered, compact and strong, with a scrap of protoplasmic matter to provide a guiding intelligence and to control with more than mechanical virtuosity the computerized brain deep within the armored shell, the electroplasms were a powerful and ghastly addition to the arsenals of the galaxy.

Half alive and half robot, half living tissue and half electronic muscles, they posed problems and asked questions that, perhaps, mankind was not yet ready to answer.

He shook the black mood from him; now was no time to go broody, especially with his new responsibilities. Sue stared at him from wide eyes. Todd hitched up his preposterous purple pants and waited, Fleming slung under one arm. They were ready to go.

Jarrett arranged some of the more shady fronds of the potted plants as

affording them some protection and a betraying giggle of amusement shook him as they all solemnly held the plants upright over them, like small children play-acting.

There was no water in the foyer that had not spilled and run away from the violence of their descent. They were on their own.

He looked at them for what might be the last time.

"If there are no safe hideouts in the rocks," he said toughly, "we'll have to beat it back here."

He was lying, of course.

This foyer would offer no protection, split as it was, metal in the heat, burning; they would not be leaving it otherwise. If the rocks offered no shelter until nightfall, they were done for.

He went on: "When night comes we'll start out for the mountains. Okay?" He grasped Sue's arm firmly. Todd had Fleming. "Right. *All out!*"

They stepped out into the suns' direct shine.

The heat clouted them over the head.

They reeled for a moment. Jarrett felt his own head seem to contract as though the frug had tightened up like a steel band. He had difficulty in breathing. Each breath felt as though he were trying to draw; a bulky suffocating mass of hot nothing into a wide-open mouth. The feel of soggy blotting paper over his face, sweat starting out all over him, keen daggers of pain driving into him as the burning fires clawed at him—he yet staggered on, dragging Sue with him.

Very soon he knew they were not going to make it.

The sand danced and jumbled under his eyes. Stronger and stronger the wind-blown sand pattered against him. The ground seemed to be streaming away before him as though in motion, lines and curves of sand streaking away, breaking and re-forming, blown and eddied, treacherous.

He staggered on, plunging and lurching over the sand.

They weren't going to make it.

The rocks came no nearer.

His body disciplines, secretly mastered over many many years, could

only force him to go on and on until he drove himself into the sand. The thought occurred to him that without Sue dragging on him he might conceivably be able to dash the last distance to the rocks. Todd could always drop Fleming. He turned his head back, painfully.

A step to his rear Todd ploughed on, his massive stomach thrust out, his head back, the dangling man under his arm like a doll. Step—step—step—Todd thumped his feet up and down. He marched stolidly, and the wind and the sand screeched about him, tearing at him.

Todd's face was now a sand-covered mask. His sweat had caught and trapped the sand as fly-papers catch flies. Only his eyes glared forth like deep pits of light in an abandoned waste. His lips were sand-dry, cracked, bitter.

Jarrett supposed his own face, too, must look like that.

He didn't dare look at Sue.

"Todd!" he croaked. "Drop Fleming—let him go!"

The fat man didn't seem to hear. He plodded stolidly on, a monumental bulk in the sand eddies.

Sue was still gripped by Jarrett. He still held her. He couldn't let her go—much as he clamored to drop into the clinging sand, much as he wanted to bound forward himself to the safety of the rocks, he could not let her go.

The heat had flamed now into a bath of fire, dragging him down, melting him, taking his senses away in a long whirling arc of flame.

Something thin and cold and biting gripped him around the shoulders and under the armpits.

He thought for a moment he had followed Fleming into the illusory safety of madness.

Then his feet left the ground and he was dangling in the tentacles of an electroplasm.

Sue had been caught up, as had Todd and Fleming.

They hung like trapped insects in the dangling webs of enormous spiders. The blowing sand dropped away below.

Any struggle would be quite useless.

The electroplasms lifted into the sky. Some of that stifling earthbound heat slackened. They could breathe again. The semi-sentients set a straight course, traveling in a line, heading undeviatingly for Styron Sinclair's complex of laboratories and factories in the mountains.

Jarrett caught a vague glimpse of other eepees carrying their freight of downed aircrew heading toward the fortress. What, he wondered, would Sinclair make of all this? A quick and summary sentence, probably, after he had extracted all the information he required.

Some of the electroplasms were not simply the tentacled rescue jobs that carried his party. He could make out the beaked and clawed, the flailed and projectorized, the lassoed and lanced types that could virtually overpower any likely opposition. Some were so heavily armored that a hand-model of a Kungsen energy weapon set on full power and continuous discharge would probably not destroy them before they had reached the firer of the Kungsen and destroyed him.

Jarrett didn't like guns; but he would use one and willingly if he had to against an electroplasm whose guiding protoplasmic intelligence was set on his annihilation.

Whoever Sinclair was employing as electroplasm master here must be a wizard in his field, judging purely on the variety and the competence of the eepees Jarrett witnessed.

His own reaction and relief at being so summarily whipped up off the desert, like a new lease on life, must be subordinated to his own intelligence to face what must come. Sinclair, by the power of these eepees alone, must have built a sizable manufacturing complex here in the desert. Did he just build eepees? And if so, what for?

They flew steadily on and up toward the buildings.

Styron Sinclair's own castle-like house had not been built on one of the topmost pinnacles of the mountain range. Up there oxygen would have to be piped in. His pile perched atop a lesser peak flanking a pass, a great cut through the flank of the mountains, dominating the trail between the desert to the north and the lesser desert to the south.

Mysterious and remote, the stronghold brooded down over the laboratory and factory complex, and over the desert; strong and gaunt, it

towered above all reason and all thought, a landmark to all that was dark and somber in mankind.

A surprise awaited Jarrett. He had composed himself now, and in accepting his fate he had regained his normal tough attitude to life. But the eepees slanted down to a narrow ledge on the mountain below the stronghold and, still flying on their anti-gravs, ghosted through a wide tunnel artificially bored in the rock. They came through the mountain peak and could look down the further side. They were high up the side of a valley that smiled with greenery, that sparkled with running water and gave off a myriad subtle perfumes beneath the crystal protection of a single-span dome above their heads.

"So this is a sample of terraforming!" commented Jarrett to himself acidly. This was mere walling off a sample of old terrestrial conditions against the fury of the alien planet outside. Nevertheless, he understood, he was grateful for the change from the hammeringly hostile desert. This was what science on a frontier world could do until the terraformers completely made over the planet.

The electroplasms swooped down toward the laboratory complex snuggled against the rocks, bowered in palms. Jarrett caught a glimpse of gevs moving swiftly, of white-coated technicians, of banks of solar mirrors soaking up the twin suns' free energy. Then they were carried through a glass and plastic door into a laboratory. The atmosphere struck coolness and quietness and education—yet dismantled sections of electroplasms piled casually here and there, meters and gauges and all the paraphernalia of the electronics man and the biochemist, told Jarrett clearly that this was the den of the eepees.

On glassed-in shelves stood row after row of transparent plastic bottles. In many of those bottles in a pickling liquid writhed the protoplasmic scraps of pseudo-intelligence that would guide the semi-sentients. When the bodies had been built the controlling scrap of life to bring to the partnership that vitally unrobotic fact of random-choice would be inserted, and the programming would take over.

A voice chuckled under his ear.

The tentacles of the eepee let him go and he slumped to the ground. Before he could organize his muscles into some attempt at resistance an



eepee shaped like a chair trundled up and seized him in iron-band arms, squatted him down forcibly and clamped him in place like a wretch bound to the electric chair.

Jarrett squirmed, facing the bitter realization that he could not break these bonds. A bedraggled cluster of airmen from the unsuccessful attack and his three companions were also strapped into the animate seats.

The voice chuckled again. The man who stood regarding Jarrett with an amusement he found hard to understand at first looked strangely out of place in this den of super-science. Then Jarrett saw the man's febrile movements, and understood he was acting under the compulsion of some drug or post-hypnotic suggestion.

"I see!" chuckled the little man. He stared intently at Jarrett's head. "A frug! How rapturous!"

He was a small man, a man with a dynamic little body from which his skeletal arms and legs protruded at angles with a movement at once jerky and twitchy and yet controlled as though on wires; he gave the impression of a sparrow-like access of energy. This was the electroplasm master.

Under his caustic directions the humans were ranked in their animate chairs facing a large tank, transparent and shining, fed by many coiled and massive pipes, squatting centrally in the laboratory. The impersonality of the proceedings daunted the fliers and even Jarrett felt a lowering of the blood. Sue was trying not to cry. Neither she nor Jarrett had missed the significance of the eepee master's attitude to the frug.

The little man rubbed his hands in child-like glee. His pinched face with its recession of features showed happy absorption in his task. He wore a clean white smock and instruments shone from the breast pocket. He looked very pleased.

"We were running low on protoplasm," he chuckled. "What a bountiful supply! Oh, yes, Mr. Sinclair will be very pleased!"

Jarrett went cold.

He glanced at the ranked bottles where strange shapes writhed in their ambient liquid. Many shelves supported empty bottles. The containers shone evilly, waiting.

"We'll soon have you all frozen down," the electroplasm master burred on. "Nice and frozen and packaged ready for dissection."

The man's very joyous acceptance of his task frightened Jarrett. His callous inhumanity sat so oddly on his sparrowlike energy.

The men who obeyed the master's directions with such silent alacrity wore dun coveralls and rubber boots and they showed dull faces, human and alive but over-laid with a brutish, uncaring obedience very chilling to see.

The workers began to place the captured fliers at the head of the line into the tank, two at a time, the eepee chairs relinquishing their loads, so it seemed to Jarrett in his taut state of mind, reluctantly. Gas hissed. The fliers were removed after a clock had revolved its hands once, in about sixty seconds. The fliers were as stiff as boards. They were placed in transparent plastic containers, which dropped on an open elevator beneath the floor. The coveralled men worked silently and efficiently, and the number of fliers dwindled. Soon Jarrett and Todd and Sue would be deep-frozen and placed in the storage vaults.

The barred cages emptied with frightening swiftness.

Jarrett stared around, helplessly.

Sue cried out, "Bill! They're going to cut us—"

She could not go on. She slumped in her animate chair. Her face looked ghastly, sand-caked. Todd tried to break free and fell back, beaten.

The blood pounded in Jarrett's brain. He felt the twinge of pain as Ferdie the Frug stirred into comprehension of what was going to happen. "It's no good you torturing me, Ferdie!" snapped Jarrett. "This is where the search for your Prince Manrico stops—dead!"

The pain cascaded down over him as his chair was unstrapped and the workers trundled him toward the tank.

X

"Not that one!"

The chuckling voice penetrated hazily to Jarrett.

He managed to think through the blinding torrents of pain. *Hold off, Ferdie, you lunatic! Maybe we can go on.... Just let up and give me a chance!*

Slowly, as though reluctantly, the pain went away.

He was poised over the tank.

Sue and Todd stared at him in horror, their faces pale and their eyes tragic. The coveralled workers drew him back from the tank.

On the wall a screen had lit up. The face of Styron Sinclair showed, fierce and swarthy and dominating. At the side a TV camera eye indicated observation coverage monitoring this laboratory.

"What's going on down there, Wiston?"

The little eepee master capered; his little sparrow body twitched.

"This one is wearing a frug, Mr. Sinclair—"

Sinclair's face tightened up. Determination tautened bleakly. "Another one!" Then another emotion crossed that dark raffish face. "Hold that pudgy one up—quick now! I want to see his face!"

Workers pulled Fleming around. He was still absolutely out of this world.

Styron Sinclair let out a breath.

"Fleming! And a man with a frug! So that's why he came! I think I see some answers now. Send them up."

"This man and this girl were with them too, Mr. Sinclair."

"Send them all up. Don't waste time."

Sinclair spoke off camera for a moment, and Jarrett, alert once more with the resilient toughness a galactic adventurer must have, heard the rumble of other voices.

Sinclair turned back. "Time for your medicine, Wiston. Come up with them yourself."

"Yes, Mr. Sinclair."

The screen went black.

The electroplasm master, Wiston, twitched and jerked his orders and coveralled men herded the four refugees from Fleming's study flier into the elevator. At once Jarrett began to think along familiar lines. He might be bone-tired, but there had to be a way out of here; any other line of thought would be disastrous.

It wouldn't be easy.

"Just let me alone," he told the frug impatiently. He had no real hope the frug would comprehend the finer details; he just hoped the thing wouldn't misinterpret what was to happen and gyp him with pain at an inconvenient time.

The elevator rose.

*Well, Princess, maybe the trail hasn't ended, after all.*

Styron Sinclair lived in style. Stylish Styron. Although his body had run to fat twenty years since his kidnapping of Prince Manrico he yet affected modern gorgeously brocaded clothes, dazzling with jewels and pearls, magnificent with silken threads and gold and silver embossments. He seemed sculptured into his garments. The style might be up-to-the-minute; it suited Sinclair's dark and raffish appearance.

The room in Sinclair's private mansion-castle into which Jarrett and his comrades and Fleming entered had been fitted out without thought to cost. Chairs and contour-fitting couches stood on deep carpets. Television screens occupied one wall and the wall at right angles to them was a single pane of triple-glass affording an awesome view of the mountains and the cleft between them. Here, Styron Sinclair lorded it in his lair.

Sinclair stood by a perspex and silver table on which a number of bottles and glasses indicated his addiction to liquid refreshment. The other men in the room, all of whom were gorgeously dressed in sycophantic imitation of their master, and the women with their veils and their silks and nylons, were mere decoration to the central fact of Sinclair. In this ultra-modern scientific world created out of an alien barrenness by terrestrial technology he was indisputably master.

"Fleming!" he said, coming forward.

Jarrett had to admire him. He was obviously prepared for any eventuality.

Fleming laughed, and his head lolled.

Todd said softly, "Cripes! It's like you said, Bill."

"What has happened to him?" Sinclair spoke to his personal physician, a dry, snuffy little man with a large head and wet lips, who peered with head hunched forward like a gnome.

He mumbled half to himself.

"No loss of limb-control. He's still standing... sphincter muscle still functioning... eyes normal, lack of anisocoric protrusion... no eyelid granulation... saliva rates normal..." He held his little medicokit electronic diagnostician to Fleming's face.

"Well?" snapped Sinclair.

The doctor mumbled. "Just shock, Mr. Sinclair. Nothing permanent, at least, not to present-day medicine. He might have been incurable a few hundred years ago. I'll give him a shot, a sedative and then a phedrine—that's the way to start straightening him out."

Sinclair's face showed Jarrett quite clearly that Styron Sinclair, himself, wanted to do the straightening out around here.

"Get on with it, then. Just don't let him interfere with the program."

The doctor led Fleming away. Sinclair swung his heavy face on the remaining three. About to rap out at them he remembered the electroplasm master, Wiston, and his face took on a cynical patronizing leer.

"Wiston—you'd better go with the doc. Time for your medicine, you know."

Jarrett marveled at the cooing note in the man's voice.

Wiston did not look so happy. His jerky movements became more agitated and his chirpy face crumbled.

"But, Mr. Sinclair, I don't feel—"

Sinclair cut him off brutally.

"It's not what you feel; it's what I tell you to do! Now go get your needle and don't waste my time!"

Like a beaten cur Wiston slunk off after the doctor and the terraformer.

Sinclair breathed hard through his nose. He faced Jarrett and Todd and Sue.

"Now," he said with a bellicose lack of patience. "What's this all about?"

Jarrett knew well enough Sinclair did not mean what was he doing here, or what was Fleming doing here; the man meant what the hell were they both doing here together.

Slowly, Jarrett said, "I've no quarrel with you, Sinclair. You knew Fleming was visiting you, yet you shot him down—"

But Sinclair cut him off with a bull roar of rage.

"You stupid grilt! What do you know of anything! That frug on your head brands you—you think I don't know! And if you believe Fleming is going to intercede with me on your behalf you're mistaken!"

Of that torrent of clichés Jarrett picked out the single word *grilt*. He had only a vague idea of what a grilt was—some bestial enormity of repugnant animal life—but there were so many life forms in the galaxy no one man could be expected to catalog them all in his memory.

No—the interesting fact here was merely Sinclair's use of the term.

It brought up gay little memories in Jarrett's mind—like dodging a flailball and jollities like that. He perked up. He was regaining his old bounce despite the sand caking his face and his thirst and tiredness and despite where he was—probably because of the latter—and despite the worrying presence of Sue.

"I repeat I've no quarrel with you. We were caught in the middle when Fleming's aircraft attacked you."

Sinclair might swallow that. Unlikely...

"You were with Fleming!" Sinclair said, and his cheeks plumped with the violence of his words. He seemed personally affronted. "You came here with him—I've suspected he intended to attack me, grab it all for himself—"

Jarrett shook his head.

"That won't wash, Sinclair. You were warned about me by someone back there who kept tabs on Fleming and Purdy. You knew I was coming out to talk to you—"

"And now you're here!"

It all boiled down to this. All the verbal fencing, all the attempts to appear what they were not, it all came down to this. Sinclair had known they were coming and, Fleming aboard or no damn Fleming aboard, he had shot them down. Now—now the fliers' attack had made him want to know the answers in more detail. Was Fleming in it, too, then? Jarrett could clearly imagine him thinking. He had to know the answers, and he had to know why—and badly.

"You'll tell me," Sinclair said, his bellow gone hard and cutting. "That fawning Princess Manrica can't leave well enough alone. She must keep on and on, picking at a scab. She keeps sending men to me, keeps on—well..." He straightened up, finding a black humor in his thoughts. "Well, we always need men, Wiston does, for my eepees."

Desperately Jarrett tried again.

"Fleming is a sideshow, Sinclair. That's between him and you. I didn't even know the princess' name until you just told me. I was trapped into it—this damned frug—and all I want to do is find out where Prince Manrico is. You needn't come into it at all this long time after. Give me a lead to find him and we'll leave at once. It's no skin—"

"Fleming is not a sideshow. And I don't care if you wear a dozen frugs!"

"All right!" Jarrett felt the shame in him as he pleaded. But there was Sue... He had to take a different line when her life was at stake, hadn't he? "I'm not your enemy, Sinclair! All I want to do is find the prince and get this ghastly frug off my head!"

Styron Sinclair laughed.

"You," he said levelly and spitefully, "can go to hell for all I care."

Jarrett felt sick. He had failed. Still, he managed to say, "Have you seen—Have there been any other men—wearing frugs?"

Sue tensed at his side.

Sinclair beckoned to his guards.

"They know nothing I don't know," Sinclair said. "They're only poor deluded fools sent by the stupid grilt Manrica to find her precious brother. They can do no harm. As for other men with frugs—" His face went mean,

revengeful. "There was one, a giant of a man, but he—eluded me. Don't speak to me of him again!" Wiston had come in, rubbing his arm. "You, Wiston, take them away and process them!"

The electroplasm master nodded. He looked subdued now, his twiggy movements dampened down, dull.

"Come with me," he ordered and, shepherded by his men, Jarrett, Todd and Sue were hustled toward the elevator.

Sue whispered to Jarrett, "The giant with the frug! Bill—that could have been my father!"

"And he escaped this terrible place, Sue—don't forget!"

Action was the keynote now. And yet, the princess was the brother of Prince Manrico, an interesting fact for a galactic adventurer with a frug wrapped around his head and a temper gradually growing to eruption point.

Todd whispered harshly, his squeaky voice roughened.

"Once they get us in that freezer of theirs we'll be done for, Bill!"

"It makes me—but I won't forget!" shivered Sue.

Action now, that was what Jarrett had to face, and he must perforce forget his speculations about the greater machinations of the galaxy. He must forget his sand-caked face, the ache in his bones, the thirst scorching his throat; he must let the secret bodily disciplines take over and drive his powerful frame on with all the force of his mind.

They were pushed off the elevator, Wiston's men handling them with a chilling absence of feeling, and driven back into the laboratory. The animate eepee chairs were not used again. All the fliers had been processed, frozen. Only the three out-worlders remained.

Ten guards. One electroplasm master.

Jarrett—and Todd.

Four of the guards had been trusted with guns. Even so, the guns were ninety-year-old Quankley needlers as Jarrett could clearly see as they swung in heavy plastic-leather holsters, showing that Sinclair had been faced with the perennial problem of arming suspect servants. A Quankley, firing its spray of lethal needles, would do your business for you as sharply as a Kungsen energy weapon. Sue had proved that floating down from the



Fleming Building. That gun now lay somewhere in the sand outside.

"The two with guns your side, Todd," he said with no change of inflection.

Todd, with vivid memories of their earlier fights to sustain him, squeaked assent. They moved on, into the center of the laboratory, into a cleared space before the tank beneath the lights, still in a compact bunch. Jarrett let his body slacken, let the well-remembered disciplines take over and mold a readiness into all his aching muscles so that he walked as a great cat of the jungle stalks, feral and ferocious and deadly.

"Go!"

Todd was away as he spoke, almost before he had himself swung, hit the nearest armed guard in the stomach and surged on to kick the second. The four armed guards were down and the only people who had moved of their own volition were Jarrett and Todd.

Sue stood, her hands to her mouth and her eyes bright with the reflections from the laboratory ceiling.

Todd moved through the guards like a reaper, like a huge-girthed Samson cutting down the unbelievers in droves. Despite their ordeal in the desert beneath the two suns, the two men, sand-crust and haggard as they were, yet moved with a crispness in marked contrast to the drugged guards.

Four down, six to go—correction: six down, four to go—correction: eight down, two to go—correction...

Yes.

Sue said, "It was awful—and wonderful!"

Jarrett, breathing evenly and deeply, smiled. The sprawled bodies of the guards lay laxly around them. Todd's face expressed huge delight.

"Oh, my!" he squeaked, looking about, portly and disreputable and altogether pleased with himself. "What came over me!"

Wiston, the electroplasm master, cringed in the open space. His twitchily uncontrolled movements, dulled by the drugs just administered by Sinclair's tame doctor, spasmed with abruptly comprehended alarm. For the first time in a long long time, Jarrett guessed, Wiston had bumped into raw violence against himself.

"Hit that TV eye, Todd," snapped Jarrett. "I'll check with jittery here if there are others."

Todd nodded. Before he started off for the TV eye beside the screen he bent and picked up two of the guards' Quankley needlers, thrusting them down into the waistband of his purple pants.

Watching, Jarrett frowned. But he made no comment.

Sue looked again at the recumbent guards.

"I didn't mean it was wonderful," she said, shaking her head, trying to express what she dimly felt as an important point. "It was wonderful—in a different way."

"Yeah," said Jarrett. "I know what you mean. Now just make sure none of the sleeping beauties wakes up. Hit 'em over the head with an iron bar or something. Look on the benches." He smiled jovially. "Now, Electroplasm Master Wiston! We have need of a little conversation, you and I—"

"There's another TV eye over there!" babbled Wiston. "Don't hit me—please don't hit me!"

"Not if you're a good boy. Todd! Over there!"

"Check!" called Todd, walking quickly across.

Now the fat man's electronic know-how was being put to the test. For a flashing moment Jarrett marveled at the big man's deft and confident expertise. Todd handled the TV camera eyes like old friends, like tame dogs, fondling them, jimmying them, turning them in on themselves.

He jumped down onto the floor with a rippling crash of flesh. "If Sinclair switches on for a look-see now," he said genially, "he'll receive a very bad picture indeed."

"Now, Wiston," said Jarrett with a grim kind of joyousness. "Tell us all about it, all of it, spill it all out, little man."

"It's the drugs!" Wiston squealed. He bobbed and jerked and wriggled. "I hate Sinclair—hate him, *hate him!*"

"Ha!" said Todd with great acumen.

"I'll help you; I can—I'm the best electroplasm master this side of Centauri. I know. I'll help." He writhed with his sincerity. "Sinclair keeps me

drugged—if I step out of line he'll torture me—only the drugs make me succumb to his terrible demands. As soon as the drug wears off I'm my own self again—"

"Well, we'll just have to keep a friendly eye on you until that last injection wears off."

"I'll do that," promised Todd, thumping one beefy hand into the other, smack, smack, smack.

Ferdie the Frug stabbed a jolting reminder down to Jarrett. He blinked. The sudden fierce pain, like a ferret's teeth, fastened for a moment into his temples.

"Sinclair," he said roughly. "He's the next target. We've got to take him and question him. I'm—"

"That rotten frug jolted you then, Bill, right?" demanded Todd, truculently.

"So?"

"So I thought so." Todd turned away.

Jarrett looked after him a little wonderingly, by this time aware that Todd did things his own way and that he had a reason for what he did, despite appearances to the contrary. Todd mooched across to Sue. They put their heads together, whispering.

Jarrett went back to figuring the angles. All his instincts and experience told him to get the hell out of here fast. Time for action was upon him; but still he hesitated. He couldn't dispose of Sue so easily. He had known her for so short a period, and Todd for little longer; they owed him nothing. Then Sue and Todd came back.

"It's not going to be easy to grab Sinclair, Bill." Todd looked uneasy, furtive. Jarrett felt the chill of dismay.

"Well, hell, I know that. But it's all we can do—"

Sue took Wiston's arm firmly. With an inconsequential shock Jarrett saw she had a Quankley needler thrust down the waistband of her slacks, distorting the slim line. She marched Wiston away, talking familiarly to him. Todd stood by Jarrett, nervously, fidgeting, smiling.

Jarrett took a deep breath. "What's going on?" he demanded wrathfully.

"Anyway, *I'm* going to get Sinclair!"

"Sure, Bill," Todd soothed him. "Sure. But Sue and I have a little business to attend to first. We have to think of ourselves."

Outrage hit Jarrett. He felt as though he trod quicksand. He had thought he understood these two—but after all they were only new acquaintances, Todd picked up in a drinking den, Sue in the office of an enemy. He didn't *know* them, not really. And he had been the one to drag them through hellish experiences near to death.

They could sell him out, make a deal with Sinclair.

Why should they risk their necks searching for Prince Manrico? They didn't have a frug around their heads. Sue's father, Charlie Sjambok, had got away from here. They owed him nothing.

His own idea that he could judge any man or woman in the galaxy pretty near as dammit right first time had taken a knock. He couldn't trust his judgment again. Now they were walking back toward him, smiling. Wiston looked quite bright, cheerful, happy.

"What the blazing seven-barred hell is going on here?" he roared at them as they advanced.

Todd took his arm. Sue took the other. He could have thrown them off; but stupefied paralysis held him. Like a striking snake Wiston leaned forward and a pressure-injecting needle flicked in his hand, stabbed Jarrett's arm, bit.

He winced back.

Unable to move, rigid, in stasis, he felt himself lifted and carried. Sheer horror gripped him. His friends had allied themselves with the enemy. He was at their mercy. They carried him toward the shining tank. Treachery had surprised him. And now—and now...

Remorselessly, silently, they slid him down into the freezing tank.

Vague visions and phantasms and strange hooded apparitions swung remotely and brought insubstantiality and incoherence and mistiness to envelop him in drifting clouds of pleasant and easy languor. He swung idly and emptily, lost on the vast bosom of time.

The needle of gritty pain stabbed his skull.

He screamed and red flashes burst and broke in soundless blossoms of blood before his eyes.

He hurt. His body hurt, his head hurt—*his head hurt!*

Then pain dwindled and went away and once more that mood of lotus remoteness and lassitude swept down upon him with downy wings—but he resisted. He fought back. He would not once more be suffocated beneath the feathers of forgetfulness.

He opened his eyes.

Todd and Sue were bending over him, looking down, and their darkened faces held expressions of absolute power and determination, of deliberate urgings of life to live again.

"He's opened his eyes!" Sue's voice thrilled like a struck chord.

"He's coming around!" Todd's squeak zithered up the scale to near hyper-sonic frequencies.

Wiston, the jerky little electroplasm master, elbowed them aside. He radiated an aura of competence and professional power in his chosen field.

"Let me see him. Humm! Yes, yes, he seems sane enough—"

"You'll run checks?"

"Of course, my fat friend, I will run checks. Do you think me devoid of scholarship and skill?"

Sue said, "You're doing all right by me, Wiston, you old wizard."

"D'you mind telling me what is going on?" demanded Jarrett. But his tongue garbled around in his mouth and all that came out were unintelligible burblings.

He marveled at the way his two friends spoke to the eepee master. Then he remembered. Of course.

Friends no longer, they had sold him out. In making a deal with Sinclair they had saved their own necks.

Then—then why—why in this galaxy was he awake with them bending over him in solicitous concern?

A pressure-Jet needle stabbed his arm and he slept.

When he awoke this time he was alone and in darkness. At his first movement a stirring rustled beside him and a shaded light broke out, revealing in blued-blurred outline the form of Sue bending forward from a chair.

He lay on a comfortable bed which was close cramped between two plastic paneled walls, with the other walls almost as close and confined. The ceiling lowered on them. The light threw soothing shadows over wall and ceiling and bed. There was a sliding door and no windows.

"He's awake," Sue said into a transmitter she picked up from her chair. "Looks horrible; but I think he'll live."

A small faint hope fluttered in him. Maybe, after all, he had not been betrayed?

A round hole appeared in the ceiling in the small area above the floor left vacant by the bed and chair. A transparent tube like the one that had descended to enclose Noggin slid down, bringing with it the small electric form of Wiston. He peered in a kind of crackling happiness at Jarrett on the bed.

"Feel better now, Jarrett? Humm? Good—I'll give you a little niazidrine—that'll startle your red blood corpuscles into doing something for their living again. Hmm..." He injected the stuff into Jarrett's arm. At once Jarrett felt better.

He sat up, pushing against the pillow, ready.

"Well?"

Sue laughed, a tinkle of genuine amusement. Wiston jiggled and hummed happily. His happiness, Jarrett thought, was no longer that of the drug-enslaved dupe. The atmosphere spoke eloquently to Jarrett of a coming time of greatness. He felt anxious to be on his feet again.

"Feel good, Bill?" asked Sue in that open laughing way. Her lips showed

sweet and red and appetizing.

"Yes, I feel fine," he said, exasperated. "But—"

"Feel your head, Bill," she said impudently.

So he knew.

So he understood.

So, at last, he knew what sort of comrades he had found.

A great gushing wave of warmth for them overwhelmed him. He couldn't speak for a moment. Then, forcing his jaws to move, he mumbled, "Thanks—thanks, Sue—and you, too, Wiston. Where's Todd?"

"He'll be down in a minute." Sue smiled. "You understood fast, Bill."

"I can feel. I feel like a man who's had his first haircut in a couple of years. Cold and naked. But wonderful!"

The transparent tube lifted and returned bearing a beaming Todd who looked as though he had put on ten pounds. He squeaked out a riotous greeting.

"But where is it?" demanded Jarrett. "What did you do with Ferdie? And how—I mean—*tell me, someone, for the love of Allah!*"

"Bismillah!" chuckled Todd. "The only way to get Ferdie off you, you'd said, was when you were dead. The key was kept by Morel and the princess. You'd told us that. And Wiston, here, is a wizard with electroplasms."

"All we did," Sue broke in eagerly, "was kill you and take Ferdie off!"

"Charming," commented Jarrett. He felt a cold breeze rustle over him. "So?"

"We froze you in the deep-freeze. The suspended animation process completely fooled the frug. It thought you were dead. And so Wiston here had no trouble lifting it off—"

Wiston hummed, and Todd said, "And he did it as neat as skinning a rabbit."

"Ugh!"

"But you jumped me," complained Jarrett. "You—"

"Sure!" Todd beamed with the triumph of a successful conspirator. "If you'd known what was to happen the frug would have reacted. He'd have killed you for sure, would Ferdie—we all knew that."

Jarrett swallowed. "He would have, too..."

Sue sat on the edge of the bed. Her body curved the tattered silk shirt and stretch pants. Her hair glowed in the light. "But, Bill!" she said with deep excitement. "You don't need to go chasing after Prince Manrico now! Wiston is helping us. The doc's fixing his jabs. We can take a ship and go home. We can do it, Bill—we can go back home!"

"I have no home." He looked levelly at Todd. "You think you'd like to go home, Todd?"

Todd squeaked and huffed himself up. "Oh, my!" he said, squeaking sadly. "I knew it! Look, Bill! You're lucky to be alive. Get out now, while you can."

Slowly, conscious of the multilevel layers of meaning, Jarrett said slowly, "And what of Charlie Sjambok?"

"Oh—" Sue gasped, a hand to her throat, long and lovely in the opening of the shirt.

"Okay." Jarrett stood up, shakily, one hand going suddenly to Sue's shoulder to steady himself. She felt good under his fingers. "Okay. You can go on home. And thanks. I mean that. I'm indebted to you for my life. But there's Sinclair—and Princess Manrica—and Morel. If you think it through, isn't that where we're likely to find Charlie, your father, Sue?"

"Bill!"

"I want to finish this thing properly, in style, like I always try to do. I'm going to carry on." He ploughed on, not looking at them. "Where did you put Ferdie?"

Wiston pulled out a flat enameled box from under the bed. "In here "

"Thanks. And where are we?"

"I keep a few secrets Sinclair doesn't know," Wiston said stiffly. "He got me into trouble with the authorities back home—and never mind where that is!—and he was the only one who would help me. But I felt under no pains to be grateful to him. My electroplasm work was perfect, in research, and he



forces me to manufacture fighting epees for his own dark purposes." Disgust soured Wiston's voice.

Then he went on. "We cleared out the laboratory and I brought you down here. Then Todd hit me and"—he fingered the fading bruise on his chin—"staggered back to join the guards on the floor as Sinclair's men came down. They've been looking for you all over. They now incline to think you tried to make it across the desert—south. They've written you off as dead."

A new alertness and a live surge of power went through Jarrett. With odds like that on his side he felt the sweetness of success already within his grasp.

When Wiston pronounced him fit and well, a day or two spent in the small room with Todd or Sue for company, when they were not sleeping in chambers through the sliding door, brought him back to full fitness. They all ate prodigiously from Wiston's lavish provisions. They cleaned themselves up. Wiston quite obviously had swung over fully into his private rebellion against Sinclair.

One night, sitting on the bed with Sue and conscious of her near presence, the warmth of her body in the silky shirt, the way her eyes lay on him, he thought of Princess Manrica and smiled secretly to himself.

"It was always a funny old life," she said. "Being the daughter of a man who made a living adventuring about the galaxy. Private schools, academy on the moon, learning more about guns and spacecraft than dancing or etiquette. He was conned into that last job, Just like you were. He wrote; but he didn't come back." Her lips did not tremble and Jarrett did not take her in his arms.

Instead, he said, "Tomorrow we move. It's all going for us, Sue!"

When the suns En and Cu had finally sunk to a twinned sleep beneath the horizon, Jarrett moved.

Led by Wiston, who knew every alleyway and corridor in the labyrinthine laboratories and manufacturing complex, they set off. Like ghosts they prowled. Twice guards were surprised and dealt with. Todd carried Ferdie in the enameled box. Sue still had her Quankley needler thrust down the waistband of her pants. Jarrett's hard-edged hand crushed down three more times. They they stepped from the shadows into Sinclair's

bedroom.

Darkness and mysterious gloom, luridly lit in sectioned bars of smoky brilliance by tall and narrow neon-tubes in rectangular frames, a scent of rank poppies, unterrestrial, and a tense closeness in the atmosphere choked at their senses as they entered. Movement thrashed on the wide low bed beneath overhanging curtains. A single white spotlight splashed a revealing pool of radiance across the upper end of the bed, to reveal Sinclair's intent face and the face of a limp and vacuous girl. Her eyes looked wide and blind in the light.

"Turf her out of it," snapped Jarrett.

Todd took the girl and held her, one hand over her mouth. Jarrett lifted Sinclair by the hair, dragged his head back, thrust his own demoniac face down close.

"Any alarms, Sinclair, any at all, and you're dead!"

"No—alarms—" Sinclair managed to gasp out.

His face glared with an awful maniacal stare, strung tautly back, broad and swarthy, sweating.

"You have to feel sorry for him," Todd squeaked. "I mean, she's a nice girl, and he was almost there. Shame."

Sue laughed. Jarrett didn't like the sound.

He nodded to Wiston.

The electroplasm master put the enameled box on the bed.

Sinclair watched with wide awful eyes. His very idiocy of bearing betrayed him. He would spring when he was ready. Wiston threw back the lid and lifted out Ferdie.

Sinclair screamed, but before the sound could reach his lips Jarrett had, quite gently, tapped him across the throat. Sinclair gulped and heaved and was silent. Jarrett threw him down on the bed, strained his head up, presented it to Wiston.

The eyes sunk in Sinclair's face blazed with terrible anger and fear. Berserk and sudden, they promised torture and damnation for these intruders into his room. Wiston chuckled happily.

"It's quite easy, for a master like myself," he burred.

"Yes, it would be," decided Jarrett, recalling Morel and his lights and the way the frug had gleamed like a magnificent artificial fur pelt with the single enormous lambent eye glowing from the center. He recalled all that as Wiston reached around behind Sinclair's head and affixed the frug, settled the wires and attachments in, did all his clever electroplasmic operations with the neat deft movement of a man accustomed to operations.

Sinclair slumped. The lambent frug eye gleamed from his forehead. The pelt encircled his head like a tartar swordsman's cap. Gorgeous in its barbaric magnificence, Ferdie the Frug capped Styron Sinclair.

They stood back to admire their handiwork.

Sue said, "I feel sick."

"Don't be." Jarrett spoke in instinctive sympathy, understanding. "The man toyed with forces he couldn't handle; he has far more right to Ferdie than I had."

"That's true."

"And," went on Jarrett with acceptance of the brutal justice of his actions, "Ferdie was programmed to torture his wearer into seeking Prince Manrico. He will kill Sinclair if he doesn't go after the prince—"

"And Sinclair is the man who kidnapped the prince!" Todd guffawed squeakily. "Oh, very P.J.!"

"P.J.?" asked Sue.

"Poetic justice," said Jarrett, stealing the fat man's thunder. That frug pelt will suit his taste in clothes. Come on. We've got to get near a ship platform—"

"But Sinclair—" protested Todd, coming back for more punishment.

"Sinclair must go after the prince. But he doesn't need us. *We* have no hold over him; only Ferdie has that. He'd have us killed so fast our dissipating atoms wouldn't touch the ground."

"Or worse," grouched Todd.

"Charming!" said Sue, smiling.

Still wearing his flamboyant pajamas—all gold and purple and scarlet, fit

wear for a would-be scientific mastermind—Sinclair was hoisted up by Todd in his right arm. He looked at the thin slip of a girl he held in his other arm. Her nakedness had palled now. Her eyes remained blank pools, mindless, accusing in their helplessness.

"That's Moira," said Wiston. "She hates Sinclair—and—" He screwed his face up. "I like—that is, I feel sorry—"

"That's one way to start," observed Jarrett. "Grab her clothes and bring her along. Don't hold us up. We have important affairs to attend to—and I mean just that."

Both Todd and Sue, tacitly, in face of the search for Charlie Sjambok, had forgotten their idea of going home. Also, they seemed to think home was where Big Bill Jarrett was. Odd.

They prowled down the corridors toward landing platforms.

In the lead, Jarrett kept an alert eye out for trigger-happy guards, anyone at all, anyone who was going to try to stop him from seeing what that Princess Manrica back on Merton was made of. The others followed, Sue showing an aptitude for shepherding the reeling and shattered Sinclair.

He had been almost there, too, when they'd burst in on him... Shame...

Rapid footsteps pit-pattered after them.

The Quankley needler in Todd's capacious hand appeared there, leaving his waistband with no discernible motion.

"It's the doc," he whispered up to Jarrett at the head of the column.

But the doctor didn't whisper. The dry little man with the snuffy appearance and the wet lips looked agitated and overwhelmed. He kept hunching his head forward as he spoke—and he spoke to Wiston directly.

"Wiston! You promised me! Sinclair will know now—he's bound to! You promised me!"

Wiston turned to Jarrett.

"The doc has been injecting me with harmless stuff; that's how I was able to break away from Sinclair's domination. But Arnold's right. Sinclair will know—and—"

Jarrett sighed. "We're getting to be a real mob. All right. Bring Arnold. At

that, a doc could be useful."

The party moved on toward the landing platforms.

Lounging human guards talked idly before the doors and even as he guessed at Sinclair's lack of trust of anyone Jarrett flung himself forward. He gave the guards no chance. He hit them low down, one, two, three, and they collapsed under his razor hands. He motioned his party on. The boat chamber lay silent and echoing, vaguely lit by angled blue lamps, beckoning and menacing. The silence emphasized in trickling echoes the slightest noise they made.

"This will do." Jarrett nodded toward a ten berth cruiser on the ready ramp. Her smallness gave the impression she was all power compartments. "She's an interstellar job with Macarteneys engines, fairly fast. She'll take us where we want to go."

They made their way past the various fliers and interplanetary craft in the boat chamber toward the ramp. The Macarteneys-engined ship lay on the ready ramp pointing outward past the landing platform. On her bows, high up, had been painted floridly *Panim Two*.

"*Panim the second?*" said Jarrett. "That's interesting. That opens up possibilities."

Moving with swift purpose they made for the ship's ramp, which lay fully extended. Jarrett felt absolutely sure she would be fully provisioned. A man like Styron Sinclair would not keep an unready craft on the ready ramp.

A shout rang out in the boat chamber. A shout hard and iron-ringing, commanding, a shout that ordered them to halt and give themselves up.

Jarrett swung, crouching, his face animal-like in rejection of that order, his lip ricked back. Shadows moved at the edge of the dim blue illumination.

Whether the men out there in the shadows saw Styron Sinclair or not Jarrett didn't know; but they opened fire anyway, immediately, spraying a scything shower of needles. Only Jarrett's body discipline saved him as he leaped sideways, taking off standing, landing running.

The others scattered. Shouts and shots rang out. Jarrett crouched, cursing, peering through the blue dimness. There was a Kungsen out there, too. Anyone trying to board *Panim Two* up that open and inviting ramp would

be cut down the moment his feet hit the treads.

A reaper shape of red and yellow light struck down from the high wall. Red and yellow, mingling in a familiar way, the light broadened and grew. Narrowing his eyes, Jarrett glanced up. They'd been longer at their night's work than he'd planned. A vast segment of the wall next to and including the opening through which the ship pointed fanned out, sliding open, like a flower expanding to the twin suns.

Another ship hung out there, bulkier, heavier, a warship. Curses and shouts lifted from Sinclair's men hiding in the shadows to cut down the escapers. Metal scraped the floor, powerful engines whined. Jarrett could guess what would happen now.

Into the boat chamber from Sinclair's laboratories poured a flood of fighting electroplasms. They were the warrior eepees: flailballs, armored giants, torpedo-spouting tank-like fliers, crushers, pincers; they flew and hopped and jumped over the floor, heading in a clicking and tentacle-writhing mass for the ship outside.

From that ship another horde of electroplasms surged. Their bodies shining, their tentacles flailing, the two enraged armies of semi-sentients rushed upon each other.

For what it was worth, Jarrett guessed, someone had blundered.

He scrambled clumsily across to Todd and Wiston, crouched beside a little flier runabout. Their faces showed their different reactions. Todd held Sinclair very firmly, competently, like he would a venomous snake.

"What is it?" screamed Sue, peering out from beneath the runabout. "What's going on?"

"My eepees!" moaned Wiston. His face showed the conflict within him; pride at his handiwork's martial prowess, despair at its destruction.

With a smashing crackle like the noise of a collapsing suspension bridge, the two armies of electroplasms clashed.

Deafened by the noise and blinded by the energy discharges, the little group of hunted humans huddled stupefied beneath that titanic conflict.

## XII



With streaming eyes and bludgeoned ears, his nostrils filled with the stench of burning electroplasms, his fingers and body vibrating to the thunder of energy discharged and his mouth tasting the flat foul odor of charring things, Bill Jarrett yet could use his brain for thought. He could still think. A glimpse—no more than that—through the control room windows of the stranger ship that hung outside the landing platform had shown him—had he been right? He *must* have seen!—the slim forms of two girls wearing bikinis—the boots had been hidden below the windows—staring out on the chaos.

He must have seen them; they could not have been a delusion.

Cara and Mara had come for their frug.

No doubt that ebony box with its ornate silver hands waited aboard for Ferdie.

So he judged that someone had blundered.

The princess and Morel wouldn't expend this amount of electroplasm resources on regaining a single specimen, so that meant they had run into this order of opposition and the two girls had blindly gone ahead, attempting to bring back their frug. Chance had brewed this conflict.

Lightnings thundered and splintered the air about him. Already the heat began to mount, deadly foretaste of the heat outside on the desert. The ship out there must be in the range-shadow of the mountaintop robotic fortress. He saw Sue, under the runabout, firing her Quankley needler and, astonished, he half-turned to see running men collapse, their attack on Jarrett's party crushed.

"We can't last much longer!" shouted Todd, high. Moira's icy reserve had broken and she was sobbing on little Wiston's shoulder. Jarrett wriggled across to Sinclair. The man looked insanely alive.

"My men will get you and fry you alive!" he shouted at Jarrett. "And the

devil-witch's eepees will all be destroyed! This is just the beginning of her destruction!"

"Have you made Ferdie's acquaintance yet, Sinclair?"

The man did not comprehend.

Jarrett, knowing this was his passport, insisted.

"You've got to find the Prince Manrico, Sinclair. *Got to*. If you don't you're a dead man!"

Choking smoke billowed past. The chatter of a needler on full automatic chattered nearby. A Kungsen splashed a greenly-nacreous fire to envelop and incinerate four of Cara and Mara's electroplasm.

A writhing bunch of tentacles fell from overhead, clashing and struggling on the floor as the electroplasm fought to control itself against burned out wiring and damaged circuits. It looked like a dying beast, metal glinting, a chimera of science and biology.

"What do you mean?" shouted Sinclair. He looked afraid.

"Try thinking you can't find the prince—"

Jarrett had no need to go on.

Styron Sinclair doubled up. His broad swarthy face stricken in agony, the sweat drops lying thick, the lips twisted and ricked, he screamed, "No! No!"

"You'll find the prince, Sinclair! You have to, now!"

Ferdie eased up on Sinclair. He stared with a vindictive hatred at Jarrett, a look of malignant corruption.

"I'll—"

"Yeah! I'm sure you want to. But, Sinclair, right now, lead on to Prince Manrico!"

Yellow oily smoke gushed from an eepee collapsing beside the runabout. A tentacle clanked on the floor. The brilliance of arc lights scythed down. The floor vibrated.

Sinclair jumped up. Like a crazy man he raced for the ramp of *Panim Two*. Jarrett, in a flying tackle, brought him down. The blast of electroplasm-fired needles skittered inches above their heads.



"You fool! Keep your head down! Below the boats!"

"Manrico!" choked Sinclair.

"Yeah. Ferdie kind of gets to you."

"We've got to go to Panim!"

"Panim!" Jarrett marveled. The only time he'd tried to find out about Panim from a galactic directory Ferdie the Frug had nearly torn his head off. No one he'd spoken to knew the planet Panim. It was an enigma. And here was Sinclair mentioning the place, saying they had to go there— and Ferdie wasn't reacting by a single poisonous injection!

The runabout bulked beside them, glittering in the light.

Through the uproar and the smoke and flashes Jarrett yelled, "Todd! Grab everyone. Get 'em aboard the runabout. I'm taking her out to the ship out there!"

In the blue-shot dimness and yellow-red suns' radiance luridly splashed by the discharge of energy weapons they managed to climb aboard the runabout without detection. The controls were simple. Jarrett took the craft up and out in a controlled arc that began on the floor and ended at the air locks of the ship outside. Fire fell away below.

They bustled through, Jarrett and Todd in the lead.

A flailball barred their way.

Todd and Sue deluged it with showers of needles, hissing and clinking; but the thing shook them off and rolled on.

Jarrett had to summon all his expertise now. He had to use his body disciplines as he never had before, for now there was no handy pillar, only a corridor and a bunch of frightened humans behind him.

Even as the last of the needles chinked to the metal deck Jarrett ran and dived low. His hands spread wide. A flail whipped out at him and he ducked, feeling the evil wind whistle. He socked solidly into the flailball and pressed himself tight up to it. He grabbed two of the tentacles. He was past thought now. His heart pumped fast and steadily, he breathed quickly and shallowly, he sweated. But he held on to the flailball, tearing at the tentacles, exerting all the dynamism in his tough whipcord body.

He managed to knot over the first two tentacles, gripping them so the

palms of his hands burned.

The flailball turned all its attention on him.

"Slip past!" he shouted, mouth gulping for air. He couldn't last much longer. "Hurry— *hurry!*"

"Bill!" screamed Sue.

"Go on! For God's sake—go on!"

Frightened, panting, his comrades edged along the corridor. A tentacle gonged against the metal wall. Desperately, Jarrett grabbed it, tied it into the big clumsy knot he was building. All his muscles ached. His back struck cold and he knew his coverall had been ripped and his back lacerated by a whipping flail. His blood dripped. Todd grabbed for a tentacle and was knocked back, reeling.

"Hurry!" shouted Jarrett, and the shout was a croak.

He gripped the last tentacle, held on to it. Then Todd, his gun held high, leaped in and brought the butt down again and again on the flailball's luminous eye. Glass shattered and plastic splintered; a mucous liquid dripped.

Between them they bundled the flailball into a room off the corridor. Half-fainting, blood-daubed, Jarrett staggered on toward the brain of the ship.

Cara and Mara were there, slim and winsome and fetching in bikinis and boots. Todd said, "Oh, my!"

Sinclair laughed uglily.

"We're going back to Panim!" he said venomously. "Do as you're told and you won't be shot. Move!"

The interlock of motives and powers was complete; Sinclair could call off his own robotic guns—he was still dominated by Todd's needler. Silent, frightened, white, the two slim girls obeyed. The ship rose into the sky, leaving the laboratories and manufacturing complex of Sinclair still echoing to the raucous sounds of electroplasm combat. Jarrett collapsed onto a couch. He was aware of Sue and Arnold, the doctor, bending over him and then he opened his eyes to see the same faces looking down on him.

But now he lay in a bunk and time had passed.

"We're just coming into Panim, Bill." Sue smiled. "Arnold says you're all right now. Todd wants you."

He had been under sedation. Yet he could rise and go forward alert and ready, thanks to the doctor's revivifying drugs. Todd looked keen and Sinclair hungry for action. Ferdie the Frug gleamed balefully from Sinclair's forehead, a magnificent devil-mentor.

They already flew low over the surface of the planet. Below them showed a fair land, broad with wheat acreage, smiling with forests, glimmering with rivers, agriculture and urbanization balanced and wholesome.

"This is my land!" exclaimed Sinclair, swollen with pride.

Jarrett understood a little more of the picture now.

Cara and Mara stood, pinched-of-face but still very confectionable, by the controls. Sinclair laughed. "I know them. And I know Wiston. This frug is coming off the moment we—"

"You can do what you like the moment we've picked up Manrico!" snapped Todd sharply.

Jarrett chuckled as he surmised with friendly malice what this trip had been like as he had lain unconscious in the sickberth. Todd had taken over superbly. Now they all wanted to know the answers at the end of the trail. Princess Manrico was in for a shock.

He stretched. His back felt fine. Sue smiled at him. They were searching for something together, looking for Charlie Sjambok, outside the passions of Sinclair's dark ambitions. He felt good.

They came down in the small spacefield in the private grounds of an ultra-modern living unit, all glass and perspex and strange alien timbers. Across a wide river hills rose greenly. Graceful alien trees bowed gently to a zephyr, and many-hued bizarre flowers rioted in herbaceous borders flanking the swept gravel paths leading to the main living unit, a single-span anti-grav supported dome of crystal luster. Men wearing crimson and mulberry uniforms came out to meet them.

Jarrett hesitated. The last time he had seen those uniforms had been through the eyes of the frightened young prince. Now Sinclair came into his own. He waved the guards' guns down. He turned arrogantly on the

visitors.

"You forced my hand," he said with all his old jaunty arrogance back. "This place has been kept secret for twenty years. But it is all one to me, now. Galactic politics demands precise thinking, an understanding of men's motives and desires, a human computer for a brain—and these I have." He gestured. "Wiston, you will be taken to the laboratory. You will find it well-equipped. Make ready the preparations for removing this frug. Move!"

Wiston, with an agonized look at Jarrett and Todd and a grimace at the uniformed men's guns, scurried away, guarded.

And still Sinclair had not writhed with anguish as Ferdie struck. The frug must sense the end of its task.

A door opened and an electroplasm of the chaired variety trundled forward bearing a young man, clear of face, pale, his downdrawn brows very dark, his womanish mouth hard set. He wore neat clothes, modern, plum-colored, youthful.

"Behold!" said Sinclair, gesturing, savoring the moment. "Prince Manrico!"

Jarrett smiled. "Well, now," he said.

He had most of the threads in his mind now; they formed a net of intrigue that had been plaguing mankind for a goodish long time. He needed only more more fact.

He said, "This is Panim—that's not the sun Pa and the planet Nim?" He saw Sinclair mocking him. "No, I thought not. Is it, perhaps, the sun Mer and the planet Ton?"

Sinclair nodded. "Surely. What is it to you?"

"Only that I think you will need my friends and me if you hope to succeed without too much bloodshed."

"I shall succeed. Never fear for that. I have science on my side—"

"Merton?" gasped Sue, grasping Jarrett's arm. "But that was where the princess put the frug on you!"

"Yes." Jarrett nodded. "We were on Panim then and I didn't know it. Panim is the local name, like Earth, and Merton the galactic, like Solterra. But everything is clear now. Except"—He flung the words at Sinclair—"why did you wait, Sinclair? When you had kidnapped the young prince, why did

you wait to take over?"

"Legality," Sinclair said precisely. "Twenty-five years of age, legal coming-of-age in this context—eighteen and twenty-one mean nothing here. I want Manrico as a legal puppet!"

Jarrett realized he was fighting for his life now, for all his comrades' lives. They had walked confidently and blindly into this living-machine. Was this the way Charlie Sjambok had died? He glanced at Sue. They would have to go on looking, despite their inmost thoughts.

He had pleaded once before with Styron Sinclair and had lost and been condemned to death. Sinclair would not be likely to spare any suffering to the man who had put a frug around his head. Sinclair would have to be convinced...

Have to be.

"The princess will—" began Jarrett.

"I have everything organized," said Sinclair. "Everything. Two brothers created the dynasties on this planet, and ever since we've fought. Princess Manrica reigns now; but with her brother as my puppet I shall depose and destroy her."

"I had guessed the princess wanted her brother found so she could kill him," Jarrett said. "All the time you held him she was not safe. Now, by finding him, we have led her back to you—to both you and her brother."

A guard shouted. Everyone whirled to look through the trees at the sight Jarrett had already seen, the sight that had finally tied up all the loose ends in his thinking.

"Ferdie!" whispered Todd.

"Yes." Jarrett nodded. "How else could Cara and Mara find him again? A tracking signal sent out by Ferdie has brought the entire battle fleet of Princess Manrica down."

"She wouldn't dare!" raged Sinclair. He began to run for the living-machine and the others followed. They turned their faces away from the staggering sight of row after row of fighting fliers and electroplasmic soaring high. They bulked over the lawns and the alien flower beds, coming closer, sweeping down to encircle the living-machine. "She knows I have my

own battle fleet!" His face suffused with blood. "Very well, then! If she wishes for a confrontation on this level, I can accommodate her!"

In scant seconds, as they bundled into the crystal-domed hall, Sinclair's men set in motion his own battle fleet. With sadness and horror Jarrett witnessed the stupendous clash of the armed technologies of the two hemispheres of this world. All the scheming had led to this. As the fleets fought and struggled, as electroplasm battled electroplasm, Jarrett could finish with it, finish with these people. Sinclair had robbed Herrman and lived on Encudor incognito until the time when, having built up his power and the prince had come of age, he could install Manrico as his puppet.

The princess had staked out her own plan—Jarrett, the staked-out sacrificial goat—and when at last one of her frug-cowed galactic adventurers had discovered the location of her brother, she could rage down to destroy not just her brother alone, but Styron Sinclair as well.

He remembered the princess. She had what Sue could never have. But she could keep it.

The fighting outside sprawled all across neat flower beds and gravel paths. Smashed electroplasms trailed shattered wiring and oozed drops of plasma across the emerald lawns. The ordinary and sane was being invaded and despoiled by the macabre and insane. A massive fighting flier landed half outside and half on top of the dome, slithered. Steel and glass bent and crackled under the impact. Everyone in the hall was flung full-length. Dust choked on the air. Jarrett, somehow, with Sue and Todd with him, clawed up.

Men wearing dark gray uniforms burst in, became immediately embroiled with Sinclair's crimson and mulberry uniformed guards. Electroplasms burst in, flailing and scything and energizing themselves into a mad chiaroscuro of self-immolation. Semi-sentients killed semi-sentients. Men killed men.

Sinclair stood back against a crystal wall, a Kungsen in his hand, his face wild, eyes staring, not believing what he saw. The wall partially shielded him.

Prince Manrico huddled at his side. Smoke drifted. A radio transceiver lay on the floor close by. Jarrett started across. "That's a quiet corner," he

shouted. "Sinclair and the prince are well out of it! Come on!"

The wall above their heads bulged and showered glass and crystal inward. An electroplasm flailed through the noise. On its chest it bore an enclosed seat, an armchair, padded and comfortable, armored by transparent panels.

She looked down on the inferno beneath her feet with a gracious dark inclination of her head. She looked fabulous, gowned all in white, jeweled, tiaraed, sparkling like some great sexual gem of allurements.

Sue looked up. "So that's the princess!" she said cattishly.

Manrica settled the electroplasm lightly on the shattered floor. Styron Sinclair crouched, watching her as a crocodile might watch a python.

She saw Jarrett. Her perfect eyebrows arched.

"I thought you were different from the others," she said.

Then she turned her attention to Sinclair and her brother. That was all she said to Jarrett. He might not have existed anymore. He certainly did not in her scheme of things.

"Our ancestors should have finished it!" she spat at Sinclair.

"You've lost, Manrica!" Sinclair shouted, hard and high, for all his evil a proud and somehow glittering figure in his triumph.

She shook her head. "Not so, Sinclair, not so. For you have not proclaimed my brother—hail miserable sibling, hail your death!—and I am still the rightful ruler of all Panim."

The sense of vast and imponderable forces clashing behind the scenes possessed Jarrett. This planet of Merton—that its inhabitants called Panim—swung in space at a vital nexus of world-lines, of stellar expansions for the future. Being the power-overlord—call that post president, king, chairman of the board, what you will—of all Panim would confer far greater power than appeared; the ruler's sway would extend over not one planet but over a vast scheme of interrelated solar systems and stellar clusters. The prizes these two fought for here were vastly more than they appeared.

That sense of occasion, however profound, could not stop Jarrett's trained reflexes from acting. He saw the vital reflexive movements. He spotted the point of no return in both Princess Manrica and Styron Sinclair.

Sinclair would not acknowledge her victory.

"It is you who have lost, Manrica! You! I hold the ace!"

"And I the trump, you miserable grilt!"

Princess Manrica must have seen the frug with its single baleful eye gleaming on Sinclair's forehead. She must have noticed the nakedness of Jarrett's forehead.

Styron Sinclair laughed, high and glittering. He looked strangely as though sheathed in diamonds, bright, hard, glittering with triumph.

The contemptuous aloofness of the princess behind her transparent shield acted like an irritant; her scorn when it blazed forth acted like an abrasive. Sinclair, diamond bright, reacted to that word *grilt*.

"You have come here to your death, Manrica! I had planned it differently, but this is the moment of destiny!"

He lunged up, triumph, hate, mastery, revenge, all working in his face, turning that broad swarthy countenance into a battleground for his own elemental passions. He lifted the Kungsen. The energy weapon could bite through Princess Manrica's transparently-armored shield.

She stared down at him, aloof, surrounded by her own sexual allure, dark and devious and of the underworld. Her feminine passions could not remain quiescent beneath the strong male unleasement of Sinclair's hard brilliance. She lifted her chin, breathing deeply, magnificently.

"You have failed," she said softly; but her voice was a penetrating dagger of sound. "You have failed and the frug must do its duty now! Farewell, Styron Sinclair!"

"You speak truth! It is farewell—for you, Princess Manrica!"

Big Bill Jarrett chose that moment to dive headlong for Prince Manrico and bundle him up and away. A grotesque mask of horror clamped down over Sinclair's face. His finger contracted on the trigger. Greenly-nacreous fire gushed from the falling Kungsen, washed over the armored chair and the electoplasm, dripped them into a sloughed puddle of nothingness.

Even as Ferdie the Frug did his duty under the compulsion from the princess, so the dying Sinclair washed away in the clean sundering of atoms the authoress of that command.



Jarrett picked up the radio transceiver, clicked it on, slapped the gain up full.

"Your new king, King Manrico, will now speak to you. Stop all fighting! We have work to do making this planet fit again for men!" He thrust the microphone at King Manrico. The boy took it firmly, bracing himself.

Sue and Todd walked across. They looked at Jarrett with respect; he looked on them with a great joy.

"Is it goodbye, then?" asked Todd.

The fighting had stopped. The new king was saying something appropriate. The smoke was beginning to clear.

"Never!" shouted Jarrett, catching up Sue. "I used to be a galactic adventurer—big deal! But now I know what real friends are! Panim is united now—well, so are we."

Sue clung to him, looking up; Todd was beaming his great fat fatuous smile.

"We've got to keep looking for Charlie Sjambok. And we'll find him!"

Jarrett felt a single pang for Princess Manrica and a strange valedictory acknowledgment for Styron Sinclair. Then he turned to his friends. He knew where they were going, now.