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A
SCIENCE
FICTION
NOVEL OF
A STRANGE
QUEST IN
INTERSTELLAR
SPACE

Walter
Moudy

NO MAN ON EARTH



INTERVIEW IN SPACE

Dr. Coi looked at the machine that he had helped to perfect. There was a deep hatred burning in his eyes.

"Garnadia?" he hissed.

"Yes, sir?" the machine answered.

"You are nothing but a worthless piece of junk. A strictly second-rate computer."

The machine said nothing.

"I am going to destroy you," said Dr. Coi.

"As you wish, sir," the machine replied.

"First I shall smash your computer circuits. Then I am going to twist and cross your wires so you will be incapable of giving correct answers to even the simplest problems. And all the time I am going to leave your consciousness operating. That will be the last to go. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir. I understand. As you wish, sir."

NO MAN ON EARTH

**Walter
Moudy**



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To Marguerite

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CHAPTER ONE

The detested seed had taken root inside her. It had been nourished from her blood and protected by her body, and it had grown, it had swelled inside her. On the fifth month it had moved. In the seventh month it had turned and kicked and adjusted itself. The creature was alive and eager to be born.

She waited now for the thing to be born so that it might be destroyed. They were all here. They had come to enforce the law. She could hear their voices, subdued but forceful from the adjoining room. She was alone, cut off from her clan. She could not hope to stand against them, she could not expect their mercy.

Her next pain was sharp and hard. She bit her lip to keep from screaming. The taste of blood evoked a flickering memory, quickly suppressed. Where were her brothers? Where was Jed? Had he deserted her too? She spoke to Olga Vandemier, the midwife.

"Ain't any of 'em comin'?"

"I sent word, honey. I reckon they'll be here."

But the girl did not believe her. Her brothers would not come. None of the clan would come. She was going to have to face this night alone. She groaned as the next pain began. If only her ma and pa were alive. Her pa had been a laughing giant, head of the Stone clan, and the strongest man in the mountains. He would not have let this thing happen to her.

The midwife gave her a white pill from a tiny brown bag. Almost immediately the girl felt a strange lethargy flow through her body. She became aware that she was warm and dry, and most of the pain was gone. She remembered how when her ma and pa were alive she had snuggled into bed on cold winter nights listening to the dying fire crackling in the fireplace as her body had warmed the cold quilts, and her senses had been lulled by the warmth into a gradual,

lazy drowsiness that ended in sleep. Somewhere inside her a tiny voice whispered of black and terrible things, but she refused to listen to it. She wanted to think only of good things, of lying safe and warm in a soft feather bed, of the fire sounds from the fireplace, and of sleep.

But another voice kept intruding, a soft, insistent voice that she heard as if from a great distance. She was vaguely aware that the voice belonged to Olga. She pulled the blanket tightly over her head, but she could not blot out the sound. It was a demanding voice, a voice that could bring back the memory of something she wanted to forget. But it was a kind voice, and she was relaxed now. She began to listen to it. The voice wanted to know, and she began to remember and to tell of it. . . .

On an October evening, unseasonably warm, she had watched as the huge, dark cloud drifted slowly to cover the top of Thunder Mountain. The cloud, blue and ugly, had growled softly, as a lion will growl over its kill, and then had extended an exploring claw to hover over her. The western sun was blotted out, and her world had grown prematurely dark. The dense giant had ceased its uneasy movement. Its voice had hushed, and it had settled, like a cat that sleeps, on the top of Thunder Mountain.

She had felt the heavy, oppressive atmosphere about her. She had breathed the charged air. She had smelled the foul cloud and sensed its evilness, and she had shivered with a sudden, mindless fear.

Without warning it had happened. From the dark heart of that sullen cloud had come a flash of lightning without thunder. The door to her cabin had opened, and the creature had stood framed in the doorway. The murky cloud on Thunder Mountain had awakened with a roar. The creature's eyes had captured the lightning from the skies. It had moved toward her. She had trembled like a leaf in the wind, but she had not moved. She could not move. Nor could she resist as the creature's strong hands had torn her clothes from her. Does a mortal fight a manwitch?

The violent thrusts of pain, the furious savagery of the attack made on her body, had ended at last. The creature had satisfied its desire and gone. She had become aware of a pain in her groins, of a burning inside her. And with a sudden sickening realization she had known that in her belly she bore the devil's seed.

Why had Olga made her remember? She was dimly aware

of her sweat-covered body and of another pain building up inside her. She did not want to think about it. She did not want to think of what had happened or what was to happen. She did not want to think of the men in the next room. Somehow it was easier now to think of pleasant things. She let her mind drift free. She smiled. . . .

There was a man, she could not seem to get his face in focus, but she knew she had dreamed of him before and she smiled because this was one of the old dreams, safe and familiar.

The man she married would be a big man, strong and kind, who would get up in the early hours and light a fire for her in the stove. And when the kitchen was warm, he would call out to her, or perhaps come into their room and shake her gently. She would get up, sleepy and cold, and run into the kitchen where she would dress in the warmth of the stove. She wouldn't mind, after she got used to him, even if he watched her. Then he would go out to the barn to milk the cows and do the chores while she fixed hot biscuits and fried ham and eggs. He would come in from the barn, cold and hungry, smelling a little like the barn maybe and breathing heavy from the walk up the path. They would eat breakfast, and he would smoke his pipe while he had a second cup of coffee.

After breakfast he might take the dogs and go hunting, or he might mend the fence, or work on the harness for spring plowing. He'd be a good worker. But in the winter when there was little to do, he'd sit around with her, and they'd watch the shadows crawl across the valley, and the sun fall behind the hills. They would talk about whatever was in their minds to say, and they wouldn't have to hide things from each other—not even things that most folks never talked about. And they'd make love whenever he was a mind to, even in the daytime sometimes. If he got a little drunk on Saturday night, she'd scold him good and put him to bed. But when they went to the village, people would look at him, and she would be proud of him because he would be a man to be proud of. He might be a little wild, but he would always be gentle with her. And when they had children. . . .

Her mind floated back to reality and swelled again with realization. She began to cry. In her sobs there was the sound of a wild thing, hunted and hurt and without understanding.

“What is it, Maude? What troubles you?”

"Olga, I'm all alone. Jed ain't a-comin'. Ain't none of 'em a'comin'."

"Hush, baby. Olga's here. She'll take keer of you."

She cried still. She could not stop. She was eighteen, and she was soon to bear a child that would not be permitted to draw its first breath. The savage manwitch that had taken her maidenhead had left her with child. She had lost that which men prize and gained that which they would destroy. The guilt men create and then name conscience welled up inside her. A thought struggled for recognition, but she rejected it. The child's fate had been decided by others. *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*, they had said. A reservoir of unreasoned guilt whispered that the sin was hers. . . .

Her mind relinquished its fight with the drug she had taken, and she succumbed again to unreality. A part of her mind that she would not admit existed evoked weird patterns and strange thoughts. She saw again the manwitch as she had first seen him, standing naked and glistening in the doorway, the lamplight flickering on his wet body. She felt again the evil power of his presence, the arrogant confidence of his stance. He had taken her like a mountain lion takes its mate, with feline cruelty. She had been chosen by an immortal to be mother to his spawn. He was cruel and evil, but he was strong and powerful, and he had chosen *her* to bear his immortal child. The child in her womb would have its father's powers. Their child must live. Must live. . . .

"The child must live," she screamed aloud.

Olga Vandemier studied the girl uneasily. Although the hill people were otherwise a hardy race, their women did not give birth easily. Childbirth was supposed to be a prolonged, painful experience, and the mountain women found it so. The girl had already been in labor too long, and she appeared to be growing weaker. Olga wiped the fine spray of perspiration from the girl's face.

She heard the sound of the gate opening. She went out the backdoor of the cabin and made her way quickly to the front yard. In the dim light of the quarter moon, she discerned Jed Stone closing the gate. He was big even for a Stone, and she noticed that he was not even breathing hard after his long climb. Another time, another place, he might have been a professional athlete. She waited for him to reach her before she spoke.

"You come to help the others?"

"I reckon you know that ain't so, ma'am."

"You've heard the stories about her, I guess."

"I heard 'em."

"Do you believe them?"

"I don't rightly know."

"You think she lay with a manwitch?"

"The thing I killed warn't no natural critter. It wuz twice the size of any wolf, big and black, and it moved like a cat."

"And the child?"

"I killed its pa, I reckon, on Thunder Mountain."

"And the child?" she repeated. "Are you gonna let them kill your sister's child?"

"I don't know."

"But if the child's human. . . ."

"I don't reckon it can be," he said flatly.

She sensed the uselessness of further conversation. If he had made up his mind, she would not be able to change it. When the time came Jed Stone would act from motives that were obscure to her. She returned to the girl.

Jed Stone went inside the cabin. There were perhaps a dozen men in the front room. He let his eyes adjust to the weak lamplight. He knew them all, knew some of them well. His brothers had not come. None of the Stone clan was here. He felt the open hostility in the room, but they said nothing. They didn't know why he was here, and they couldn't be sure his brothers were not coming.

Jed straddled a chair and sat down near the door leading to the bedroom and waited. He did not speak nor acknowledge their presence. He was not thinking of them. He was remembering and trying to get it all straight in his mind.

He had killed the manwitch. That much he knew. When he discovered what had been done to her, he had shot the terrified hound whimpering in the yard. He had given it to her as a pup, but it had not protected her when she needed it. He had felt the hot rage build up inside him into a blinding fury that knew neither fear nor reason. His rage sustained him during the long climb up Thunder Mountain. And when he heard the wild, challenging cries of hate the thing hurled toward him from the mountain, he had felt no fear, but only an echoing hate. He had seen the evil eyes flashing in the moonlight. He had seen the black tiger shape the monstrous thing had assumed. The dark shape had come forward, snarling and screaming. He had stood with his back to a rock and held the wooden spear with hands that did not tremble. His rage smothered his fear. When it sprang from

the crag above him, he had caught it on the spear. The thing had not died immediately. It had fought to change its shape and to shake the wooden spear from its heart. And the man who had killed a manwitch had watched its death throes with vengeful satisfaction.

He heard the sounds from the bedroom. He had to make up his mind. He looked at the men gathered in the front room. They were silent still, and they did not meet his eyes. There was Reverend Reed who had baptized his wife, Ezra Kline who used to go coon hunting with him, Charles Gretlin whom he had fought twice and twice beaten. He had known each of them since childhood. Suddenly he was filled with a deep contempt. What did they have to do with this? They had not faced the evil thing on the mountain. This was a matter for the Stone clan. What did outsiders have to do with this?

The door behind him opened quietly and Olga Vandemier came out. She looked at him as she spoke.

"It ain't no witch at all. It's a human child."

The silence in the room was oppressive. Somewhere a night owl hooted, just once.

"The child is a-drinkin' its mother's milk. A witch's child would choke on human milk. It ain't no witch's child."

Jed Stone rose slowly and stood in the open doorway. His huge frame seemed to fill it. A baby lay cradled in the girl's right arm, nursing from its mother's breast with greedy appetite. The child looked normal and a mother's milk would turn to vinegar in a witch-child's mouth. Yet he had killed something alien and terrible on the mountain. He turned to face the others.

"I reckon you all can git on home now." If there was uncertainty or conflict in his mind, it was not reflected in the icy calmness of his voice.

No one moved, but he sensed their uncertainty. "I ain't agonna say it agin. This ain't no witch child. This here's a Stone, and from now on any one touches this child answers to us Stones."

Reverend Reed, who had been seeking God's will, found it in Jed's words. A feud with the powerful Stone clan was likely to prove fatal to more than a few.

"I don't reckon none of us aims to harm no kin of yours, Jed," he said at last. "You tell Maude we dropped by and was askin' about her."

Hours later, when they had all gone except Olga, the girl

lay staring at the ceiling. The drug had worn off, and she understood at last that the tiny, bundled thing that lay beside her was to live. She had been prepared for its death but not for its life.

"He's shore a cute little bugger, ain't he? I swear he's got your mouth," Olga said.

"I ain't looked at 'im yet, ma'am. It ain't no natural baby."

"Why, whut you talkin' about, sugar. Of course it's natural. He's part of your own flesh and blood."

Maude turned her head to look at the baby. Before it was born, it had been easy to think of it as an evil, twisted thing. But it was a beautiful, well-formed child. It appeared to be hungry again.

"I aim to keep it," she said at last. "It warn't fathered by no natural man, but it's a livin' thing, and it's partly me, I reckon. I can't ever love it proper, but I'll try to raise it proper. And I pray to God it has a human soul."

Yes, she would nourish it and protect it and raise it as a human. She would fight for its soul. She would protect it from the powers of darkness.

But as she turned to give the baby her breast, she was aware of a strange exaltation. A subconscious part of her mind was expressing its joy at the survival of a man-witch's child.

CHAPTER TWO

The child stopped nursing, as he frequently did, to ask his mother a question.

"Mama, will I ever be able to walk like you and Uncle Jed?"

"Yes, Thad. When you're older."

"How old?"

"I don't know, child. A year, I reckon. A youngun that kin talk when it's hardly six months old, ain't no tellin' when he'll start a-walkin'."

"How old is a year, mama?"

"That's jest twice whut you are now."

"And will I be able to go up in the hills?"

"Whut you want to see up in the hills, child?"

"I wanna see things. I'm tard a' always stayin' here in this cabin. I don't have nothin' to do when you're not here to talk to me."

"Normal youngun don't need nothin' else. All a normal youngun would need would be a purty feather or somethin' to keep it happy."

"Whut's a normal youngun?"

"A normal child won't start a-talkin', less it's at least two or three years old. I reckon there ain't never been a more unnormal baby than you."

"Why ain't I normal?"

"Child, I wish I knowed. I wish I knowed."

"Are there a lotta babies in the world?"

"More'n you can count, child. There's more babies in the whole world than you can see trees when you look out this winder."

"Whar do they all live, all them babies?"

"Some lives in these hills and some outside. And they're others that lives in heathen nations and behaves in strange ways. You'll learn about 'em when you get old enough to go to school."

"And do all them babies have mamas too?"

"They mostly do and fathers too."

"Fathers? Like Uncle Jed, you mean?"

"Um. And some mamas have a lot a babies."

"You mean like when the hen has her chicks?"

"Yes. Somethin' like that."

"Whar do they all eat, mama? You ain't got but two—"

"They ain't all born at the same time. Usually jest one at a time."

"I hope I don't have to share you with no one, mama."

"I don't reckon you ever will, son. I purely don't."

"How come I ain't got no father?"

"He went away."

"Whar did he go?"

"I don't rightly know. There ain't much tellin'. Now hush and leave me be. I'm tard a always answerin' your questions."

She had never adjusted to it, and she never would. She had expected him to be different, but the nature and extent of that difference was beyond her expectations. She pushed her breast back inside her dress and buttoned it quickly. When he had been very small, she had enjoyed nursing him in a

vague, sensual sort of way. It made her uncomfortable now. She decided to wean him and did so that same evening, abruptly and without warning. He did not ask for explanation. He did not complain. He did not cry. He never cried.

They lived in isolation. She never took him to the village, and she had no visitors except her brother Jed who brought their provisions from the general store twice a month. It was a lonely life for her, but she did not want the mountain people to see him.

When Thad was two years old, she gave him his first present.

"Here," she said handing him an unwrapped box and ignoring the slightly puzzled look in his eyes. "It's a birthday present," she said. "Now what do you reckon it is?"

The child hesitated before he spoke. "I don't know," he said at last.

"Open it," she said.

He took the toy from the box. It was a mechanical man. She had spent ninety-eight cents of her egg money for it at the general store. She wound it for him and showed him how it would waddle across the floor. He watched the toy intently, his face lighting up in genuine delight. When it stopped moving, he picked it up and examined it closely. He re-wound the spring, and studied it again as it waddled across the floor.

She had not taught him to show affection but when he picked up the toy and brought it over to where she was sitting as if to see it better near the lamp, he leaned his head against her thigh and kept it there for a minute. She felt a warm glow pass through her. She had never felt closer to him.

The good feeling she had about the gift lasted several days. It did not leave her, in fact, until she saw the toy man after its spring had been broken. Thad had taken it apart and fixed it with the aid of the curious little bits of spring and metal he was always collecting. The good feeling turned to bewilderment when she next saw the mechanical man in operation.

For the toy no longer waddled—it *walked* across the floor in perfect imitation of a man's stride.

By the time he was three, she grew used to his disappearing for hours at a time in exploration of their mountain and the surrounding woods. She did not worry about him.

She knew he possessed an uncanny sense of direction, and she knew that he was able to cope with the natural hazards of their environment. It occurred to her one day, however, to ask him how he spent his time when he disappeared.

"Oh, I jest sit and watch things."

"Whut things?" she asked.

"The things that live in the woods, the animals and bugs and things."

"Can't imagine that bein' so excitin'," she said. "You see one bug and you see 'em all, I reckon."

"That's right," he said. "They're all alike. Or nearly so. One ant is jest like any other ant. Yet an ant is different from a doodle bug, and a doodle from a stink bug. But the bugs of one kind are all alike."

"A body couldn't expect bugs to be different."

"But don't you see?" he asked, "How can ants that's raised in one place act like ants raised in another place?"

"That's jest instinct, son."

"But how do they git it? They don't learn it."

"They're jest born that way. Everybody knows that." She could tell by a barely perceptible change of expression that her answer had not satisfied him.

"Now coons," he said. "They're more interesting. They got brains jest like us. The ma has to teach the younguns how to swim and how to fish. They learn things."

"I reckon coons are 'bout the smartest wild thing there is," she agreed.

"But a coon knows less about livin' in the woods when it's first born than an ant does. A coon has to learn. And coons are different from each other too. Ain't no two coons jest alike."

"I reckon a coon is sorta like a human," she said. "Ain't no two humans jest alike neither."

"I reckon I'm different from most human folks," the boy said.

"Why do you say that?" she asked in sudden alarm.

"I jest feel like I'm different somehow. I don't seem to have no one to feel at ease with."

"You got your Uncle Jed and me."

"But I ain't like you and Uncle Jed. I got a powerful need to know about things."

"Everyone likes to feel like he's somethin' special. I used to feel like that sometimes."

"That ain't whut I meant, ma. You know that."

"You ain't no different from anyone else. You hear me? You're human jest like me."

"Then why don't we ever go to the village? Is it because I'm different?"

With a sudden flash of insight she sensed his loneliness and saw, too, the uselessness of deception. "Yes," she answered truthfully, "because you're different."

When he was four she found him sitting behind the barn playing with a snake. She dared not move lest she excite it. The copperhead curved gracefully around his bent knees as the boy watched. Once he moved a hand toward the snake's head and then withdrew it with incredible quickness as the wicked golden head snapped at him, its teeth gleaming in the sunlight. He tried it again, slower this time and with a steady movement. The snake accepted his calm caress. When he lost interest in the snake, he dismissed it with an indifferent movement of his leg. She breathed again, but she was disturbed.

That night she brought out the leather-bound bible that had been in her family for nearly sixty years. She tried to control her shaking as she spoke.

"Son, do you know what this is?"

"Yes, ma. It's a book."

"Not a book—a Bible. The sacred book of God."

"Yes'm."

"Thad, I want you to take this Bible and kiss it."

She watched as he took the Bible questioningly.

"Kiss it," she said.

He kissed the Bible. Something quieted inside her.

"Do you know what a Bible is, Thad?" she asked more gently.

"I reckon not."

"Well, from now on I'm gonna read to you from it every night. Would you like that?"

"Yes."

She started that night in the Book of Genesis. "In the beginning. . . ." She read a few chapters every day. The boy listened intently as he sat on the chair beside her, looking at the pages as she read. He never interrupted and only asked questions when she had finished.

"It's a wonderful book, ain't it?" she asked one night.

"Yes, it surely is."

"Do you like to have me read to you?"

"Yes."

"Thad?"

"Yes'm?"

"Can you read now?"

"I guess so, but I'd rather you'd read to me."

"Do you believe whut's writ here?"

"I don't know. I don't know enough yet to make up my mind, I reckon."

"When you go to school, you'll learn about other lands and other peoples. But this is the only book that'll ever learn you about God."

"Whar's the school, ma?"

"You can see it from the other side of the mountain. It's the buildin' closest to the river."

"They got lots a books there?"

"Yes. They got all kinds of books there."

"You s'pose they'd let a body borry 'em?"

"You stay away from the village, Thad. Time enough for you to start a-readin' after you start to school."

"But there's so much I wanna know—"

"Ain't much to know. Things ain't changed too much the last two thousand years or so. People got more to do with, I reckon, and maybe they learned to live together without fightin' since the World War."

"A world war?"

"Yes, we fit the Germans in 1917 to make the world safe. Ain't been no war since then. Leastwise not that I knowed of."

"What happened after the war?"

"Why, nothin' of much importance, I don't think. The history books don't say much about whut happened after the World War. People jest went on livin'."

"But that was a hunnert and fifty years ago. Ain't the world different now?"

"I reckon not. We had about everthin' a body could think of. Cars and planes and steamships. I guess we done about everthin' we could think of to do, and we jest kinda slowed down to catch our breath."

"You ever been out of the mountains, ma?"

"No, son. Why should I? We got everthin' we need right here."

"Has Uncle Jed ever been out of the mountains?"

"Ain't none of us ever left to my knowledge. Never was no need to."

"Did you ever wanna leave?"

"Why when I was a little girl, in school, I used to wonder what it'd be like in the cities and all. I reckon all young folks go through that foolishness. I remember I had me a powerful wish to ride in one of them aireoplanes. That'd be real nice."

"Maybe I'll git you a ride in one of 'em when I grow up."

"That'd be real nice," she said.

She grew silent. She was vaguely troubled. It was odd but she had not thought of leaving since she was a child. And now that she did think of it again she was troubled, because she realized for the first time that she would not know how to leave even if she wanted to. But, of course, she had no intention of going anyplace.

She knew that for the past few weeks he had been working on a new gift for her. His last project had been an aireoplane made from paper, sticks, and wires. Having seen pictures of real aireoplanes, she had been sure that the strange contraption would never work. Yet somehow it had. It had caught the gentle mountain breeze and had soared away as lightly as an eagle. She had watched it until it had passed from sight. As far as she knew it was still flying, and this she felt, was what he had intended to happen. When the new gift was finished, he brought it to her.

"I made you this for a present, ma."

It almost took her breath away to see it. On a pine slab, he had imposed with rock dust a thing of beauty, a painting of remarkable artistry and realism. A woman stood framed against a background of clouds and mountains nursing a small baby at her breast. This was her, she realized, as he had seen her as a nursing child.

She studied the picture more closely. There was love in the woman's face, but there was something more, something that flickered in the eyes and that was suggested in the mouth. There was hate—hate that lay hidden deep in her soul. And with a chill running down her spine, she knew that it was true. She loved him, she hated him. She could not understand it, but it was true, and he had seen it in her.

Maude was surprised to see Olga Vandemier coming up the path. Except for Jed Stone she had had no visitors since her son was born.

"Mornin', Miss Vandemier."

"Mornin', Maude. How you been?"

"Jest fine, I reckon. You're lookin' good."

"I ain't feelin' so good jest now. I swear that path must be gettin' steeper. I'm plumb tuckered out."

"I reckon that's a right smart walk for a body to make all right. You wantin' to see me?"

"Yes, Maude. It's about your boy. Is he about?"

"He's inside."

"I'd like to talk to him."

"Whut about?"

"Someone's been a-sneakin' into the schoolhouse and a-takin' books out. Burt Smith said he'd seen your boy comin' outa there the other night."

"Thad don't never go to the village, ma'am."

"I heard tell he don't. But I also heard tell he's been a-sneakin' into the schoolhouse. Can I talk to him?"

"Come on in. Thad, this here's Miss Vandemier, the schoolteacher. She says you been a-takin' books outa the schoolhouse. Is that true?"

"Yes'm. I took 'em, but I put 'em all back when I was through with 'em."

"What'd you want with books, boy?" asked Miss Vandemier. "You won't even start to school until this fall."

"I reckon he reads 'em, ma'am," Maude said. "He picked up readin' sorta natural like."

"You mean to tell me this boy can read?"

"He shorely can, Miss Vandemier. He learned himself from the Bible."

"And whut you been doin' with all those books you took from the schoolhouse?"

"I read 'em, ma'am. But I always put 'em back."

"And the math books? The algebra books?"

"I reckon I read them too, ma'am. I couldn't make much sense outa them at first, but I finally got 'em figgered out."

"Let me get this straight. Are you a-claimin' you can do algebra?"

"It wasn't so hard to figger out, ma'am. I started with the arithmetic books and sorta worked up to the algebra books. Then it all jest seemed to make good sense somehow."

"How many of the books did you read, Thad?"

"All of 'em."

"Now I want you to tell me the truth, Thad. It's very important. Was it you that got into the safe?"

"Yes'm."

"And did you read—?"

"Yes'm."

"You understood what you read?"

"Yes'm."

"Have you talked to any one else about this?"

"No, ma'am. I didn't think I oughta."

"Why, Thad? Why did you do it?"

"I reckon I got curious to know what you'd be doin' with a safe in the schoolhouse, so I opened it."

"How did you get it open?"

"That took a while because none of them books was any help. But I finally figgered out how the thing worked."

"What are you two talkin' about?" asked Maude.

"Are you goin' to tell her?" asked Miss Vandemier.

"Not about the safe," said Thad. "That'll be just between you and me."

Miss Vandemier left then. She seemed quite excited.

When he was eleven he came home from school, his mind filled with new knowledge. With the frankness and cruelty of children they had told him of his origin. He brooded about it all evening. Suddenly he was possessed with an overwhelming desire to see his father's people.

"Ma, I'm gonna climb Thunder Mountain tonight."

Her face lost its color. "What you talkin' about, boy? Who you been talkin' to?"

"It grieves me to think of my father bein' kilt on the mountain. It pains me to think a his bones a-lyin' there with nobody to care."

"You stay away from there, boy. I ain't a-askin' you, I'm a-tellin' you. Your pa's kind'll take you fer one of their own."

"Ain't fittin' to leave my pa up there on the mountain. Ain't right to treat my pa like that."

"Your pa warn't no natural man, Thad."

"I reckon I'll have to see this one thing for myself, ma. I ain't never goin' to be satisfied 'till I see my pa's people. Reckon I'll never understand myself 'less I do."

"You won't be back."

"I'll be back," he said.

Two hours later as he neared the top of Thunder Mountain, he was aware of faint sounds that moved in the darkness when he moved and stopped when he stopped. He climbed a pine tree and waited.

When morning came, he saw two black panthers circling below him. His father's people? He studied them intently. After many hours of study, he came to see and to know the hundreds of subliminal traits the totality of which added up to a panther, to sense, as it were, the essence of a panther. He put aside human thoughts, thoughts that used language, and assumed the thoughts of a panther. It required tremendous concentration to think panther thoughts, to deprive the mind of language and human experience, and to allow the mind to become absorbed with panther experiences and panther thoughts. He felt agility, cruelty, and power. He felt cunning and speed. But he felt no evil nor any unnatural powers.

Still thinking panther thoughts he descended from the tree and approached the female panther. He was scarcely conscious of being human. He playfully cuffed her neck. She growled and landed a lightning blow to the side of his head that sent him sprawling, but her claws were retracted, and she left no mark. With mock ferocity he renewed his attack. She permitted him to wrestle her to her back, and with pretended helplessness she tried to keep him from her throat. The male panther lay in the shade and looked on tolerantly.

Gradually he permitted human thoughts to return while retaining in a part of his mind the savage panther thoughts. He found the right sounds to make them follow him down the mountain. He walked between them, his hands on their backs, feeling the controlled power of their muscles rippling beneath his palms, sensing their uneasiness as they approached the cabin.

When his mother had seen them, he made the right sounds to send them away. They went a few yards and stopped, reluctant to leave him. The female, her maternal instincts aroused, whined anxiously. He went to her, allowing the panther thoughts to dominate his mind, and made the right sounds to assure her of his safety. The two panthers disappeared silently down the path.

He knew now that he had made a mistake. He should never have expected his mother to understand that the panthers were merely animals. For too long she had been taught to think of them as unnatural.

That night, lying on the bed, he heard her enter his room. He saw her in the moonlight that came through his window. He saw what she held in her hand, and he instantly

realized her purpose. This was the other side of her nature, one that he had only glimpsed before in the shadows of her mind.

"You goin' to kill me, ma?"

She stood above him, both hands gripping the wooden stake.

"Kill me then. I don't care no more. If the mother who borned me and gave me suck can think me evil, I don't care."

Her eyes reflected the conflict and torment of her mind. She dropped the stake with sudden revulsion. Even as the danger passed, he knew what he must do.

He dressed silently. He took his shoes and wrapped them in his second shirt. He opened the wooden box where he kept his possessions. He removed his ant collection and emptied it out the window. He made his bed and looked around the room for the last time.

His mother was in the kitchen. He had never seen her cry before. She spoke tonelessly.

"You're leavin'?"

"Yes, ma."

"I'm sorry, son."

"I know."

"Whar you goin'?"

There was a lump in his throat and an ache in his chest that made the words hard to say. He would never be nearer to crying. "To look for my father, the manwitch," he said. And he passed through the door and into the darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

Lloyd Coleman, section chief of the Chicago branch of the FIA glanced at the memo that had just arrived by pneumatic tube. It was from the old man, and therefore demanded his immediate attention.

MEMO

Please look into the disappearance of a boy off the Reservation. The Exec is interested. Don't ask me why. Needless to say you are to give this one top priority. The

file key number is 23B194711. Use Carter and Forbes if necessary.

“Chuck”

This was an odd one. Why didn't the Committee handle it? They were responsible for security on the Reservation. He dialed the indicated key number and waited for the electronic synthesizer to select the proper file. When the tube arrived with the file, he was surprised to find it so thin. Apparently most of the information on the case came from Olga Vandemier, one of the Reservation observers.

He scanned the file hurriedly. The last letter caught his attention, and he read it again. This must be why the Exec was interested.

April 14, 2081

Mr. Claude Schutte
Reservation Committee
U.S. Government Building 14
Kansas City, Missouri

Dear Mr. Schutte:

It is too late. The boy is gone. You refused to follow my advice to authorize an intrusion. Now he has gone. The most brilliant mind, perhaps, of all time has been permitted to escape into the world without guidance.

I have talked to the boy. I believe that he is more than just a genius. I believe that he is different in kind as well as degree. Such a mind will not be buried. It will not be denied. It will serve the world, or it will serve itself.

I do not weep for the world's loss. I weep for what the world will gain should this gifted child turn his talents to destructive purposes.

Please, please take this up with the Board of Governors and find the child before it is too late.

Olga Vandemier

The letter intrigued him. If the boy had escaped from the Reservation, he was the first in over sixty years. He dialed the visaphone operator and asked for Claude Schutte. He turned out to be a pudgy little man to whom Lloyd took an immediate mild dislike.

“This is Lloyd Coleman, FIA. I have a few questions.”

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"We are investigating the disappearance of Thad Stone from the Reservation. How could this have happened?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm not on that end of it. Protection of the field is not my responsibility. I'm a sociologist."

"As a sociologist, Dr. Schutte, perhaps you can tell me why the information regarding the boy was not given to us when it was reported to you two months ago."

"We didn't think it was so important. It was strictly a Reservation matter. It was within our jurisdiction."

"Well, it's not a Reservation matter now. The Exec is interested. Listen, Schutte, you could be in trouble on this thing. It would pay you to cooperate now. How soon can you get Olga Vandemier here for an interview?"

"We can't take her out of the environment at this time. These things take time to arrange."

"Get her here tomorrow. Surely you people can manage that. And I want your security chief here today. Fly him in from Kansas City. Have him bring his maps because I will want to discuss certain aspects of your security program with him."

"But—"

"And remember—there has been a breach of the environment of the most serious magnitude. This thing could cause a shake-up in the committee itself. So don't give me any excuses. The exec wants action."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Just do it," Lloyd said flicking off the visaphone.

He dialed for Olga Vandemier's personal dossier. So far, the only evidence that there was anything unusual about the boy were the observations she had made and reported. He wanted to check her file before talking to her. He was still studying it when his secretary announced that George Burrus, the Reservation security chief, was waiting to see him. Lloyd smiled. Less than half an hour had elapsed since he had talked to Claude Schutte. Apparently the word was out.

The middle-aged man who entered bore himself with a sort of archaic military air. Although security was an independent branch, it was obvious that he considered himself in the presence of a superior officer.

"Sit down, Captain," Lloyd said. "It has been called to my attention that there has been a violation of Reservation security. The first such violation in over sixty years, I believe."

"I'm not sure any breach has occurred, sir." He spoke with dignity.

"I have reports that indicate a boy from the Stone clan disappeared," said Lloyd.

"The Reservation's a pretty big place, sir. The boy may never have left. Or he may have been killed."

"But he might have left the Reservation?"

"I don't see how he could, sir."

"Suppose you review your security with me, Captain."

"Well, sir. First, there's location. None of the hill people live closer than twenty miles from the fence. Second, there's the ground radar stations placed on all the roads and paths leading to the fence. Then there are the scanners that would detect any living thing bigger than a rabbit that got within a half mile of the boundary. The fence itself is equipped with the Eddison sonic system. All these detection systems are tied into the automatic recorder so that any attempted intrusion is automatically recorded and can be checked."

"Remember, Captain, this boy was extremely intelligent. Moreover, he seems to have opened a safe and to have discovered some reports made by one of the observers. He may have realized that efforts would be made to prevent his leaving."

"I still don't see how he could have escaped without being picked up by the detection equipment, sir."

"How about the deliveries to the general store? How are they made?"

"We keep an old truck for that, sir. Once a week we send in provisions and bring out furs and eggs or whatever the hill people have to trade."

"How many drivers on the truck?"

"Only one, sir."

"How does the truck enter the Reservation?"

"Why, through the old Kidwell Road, sir. That is the only gate."

"Now just suppose, Captain, that you were on the Reservation and that you knew what the Reservation was and suspected that it must be fenced and guarded. What would prevent you from hitching a ride on that truck?"

"The truck is checked before it goes out the gate, sir."

"How thoroughly is it checked?"

"Well, we didn't have any reason to think any of the hill people would suspect anything. I suppose it was possible for

someone to have hidden beneath the furs if he thought that the truck might be searched."

"Where does the truck go after it leaves the Reservation?"

"It dumps the furs and other produce in a dump and then returns to the main guardhouse."

"Where is the dump?"

"Three miles from the cruiseway, sir."

"All right, Captain, you may go."

He still could not be sure the boy had managed to leave the Reservation, but at least he had a pretty good idea of how he could have left. He asked Bill Carter in and explained the problem to him.

"You think the boy may have hitched a ride on a cruiser?" Bill asked.

"I think it's possible."

"Well, we could check the cruiseway substation records and see if any vehicle stopped in that area at the time we're talking about. That might tell us something."

"Get on it, will you, Bill? The old man's following this one personally. And the Exec is interested."

While he waited for Bill to check the records, he studied the map. The cruiseway in question was part of a system that led to a half dozen major cities. There appeared to be little chance that he would even be able to determine the city where the boy might have gone. An hour later, Bill Carter returned with a photocopy of the substation records.

"We may have something. Two hours after the truck returned to the main guardhouse, an aircar stopped about one-half mile from where the old paved road joins the cruiseway. I checked the records for one week before and one day after, and this was the only cruiser that stopped within ten miles of the guardhouse except for the regular security transports."

"All right, let's assume that someone stopped for the boy. Is there any way of telling where he might have gone?"

"We're in luck there, Lloyd. The cruiseway system was undergoing repairs on the thirteenth. The only direct routing was to Kansas City, Chicago, and St. Louis."

"Then assuming the kid stopped at the first city he came to, he would have to be in one of those three cities."

"That's right. Do you want me to start a search?"

"No, not yet. We don't have much idea of what we're looking for. Let's wait until we talk to Olga Vandemier."

Olga Vandemier left the Stratocruiser with relief. She had been away from civilization for too long to feel comfortable around atomic ships. She took out her credit card and dialed for a nearby taxi. The receptacle accepted it with obvious reluctance. Apparently the machines were tooled for a more modern card nowadays. Everything kept improving. She punched the coordinates of U.S. Government Building No. 2 and tried to relax as the aircar threaded its way into downtown Chicago at eighty miles per hour.

They probably would have her job. She had already resigned herself to that. Well, anyway they could not take her pension. She had put in her fifteen years of government service, and they could not take her pension without proving treason. Maybe she would go to one of the new controlled climate developments in northern Minnesota, which was becoming so popular. She could live very well there on her retirement pay. She wondered what the hill people would think of retirement at forty-one. It was the new American dream. And, thanks to automation, it was a dream most people hoped to realize.

Although she had only been off the Reservation for a few hours, she was already beginning to view her conduct differently. She reflected upon the enormity of what she had done. It had been the most flagrant case of unauthorized interference with the environment conceivable. She had violated her solemn oath as an observer. She had permitted her emotions to prod her into an intrusion on the culture.

It had seemed such a small thing at the time. After Maude Stone confessed in open church to being raped by a man-witch, it appeared inevitable that the warlock's child would be put to death. She had understood full well the depth of the hill people's belief in witchcraft. But instead of simply reporting the occurrences as they developed, she had started the false rumors that had saved the child's life. She had hinted broadly that the child was actually Sy Perkins' bastard. That had removed some of the communal zeal, particularly among the women. It was she, too, who wove into the witch-lore of the hill people the belief that a witchchild would strangle on human milk.

On the Reservation it had been easy to rationalize, to justify. Once she had been in complete sympathy with the Reservation program. Because of its great natural beauty, the land had first been declared a federal park. But a crowded world had threatened to turn it into a nightmare camping

ground where it became possible to see as many New Yorkers as in Grand Central Station. The native hill people had lived like animals on exhibit.

Originally, she knew, the fence was built for the protection of the hill people. Then, somehow, the project grew and the idea developed of keeping a part of the race apart from the stream of human development. The psychologists and sociologists moved in gleefully. They created a flood of propaganda that the Congress had been unable to withstand. A law was passed creating a Reservation Committee, which governed the Reservation through its Board of Governors. The hill people's history and culture was retrogressed to a period shortly after World War I. Their only contact with the outside world was through the dozen trained observers who were carefully assimilated into the environment. Care was taken to eliminate all stimuli likely to create curiosity about the rest of the world so that by the time of the fourth generation all memory of a different way of life was obliterated.

Olga Vandemier had believed in the program once. But then she had seen children die of typhoid fever for lack of vaccine. She had seen women die in childbirth for lack of proper medical care. She had seen bright children graduate from her school with no hope of further progress. She had seen superstition and ignorance grow and flourish.

The people, however, seemed happy. And if occasionally the soul of an artist or the mind of a scientist failed to mature and to find itself that was not her fault. She was merely an observer trained to report relevant data to those who were most capable to reach important conclusions from it. Her trouble was that she had come to feel a closer kinship with the mountain people than with the outside world. She had come to feel a measure of responsibility and guilt for death, poverty, and ignorance simply because she knew that much of it could be avoided.

Now she would have to answer for what she had done. As the taxi pulled in front of the FIA building, she resolved to make a complete disclosure. After all she had not committed treason. She could still retire.

"That's about it," Olga Vandemier said. "Chances are that the boy would never have survived if I had not committed a deliberate intrusion upon the environment."

"Was there anything unusual about his appearance that would help us locate him?" asked Lloyd Coleman.

"Why, didn't I tell you? The boy was completely hairless. He didn't have a hair anywhere on his body."

"Anything else?"

"No, nothing except his Reservation dialect. But I doubt that he will keep that for long."

"I take it you have complete confidence in your conclusions as to his intelligence?"

"How many boys have you ever seen who taught themselves to read at the age of five, Mr. Coleman? How many boys have you seen who could talk before they were six months old?"

"Miss Vandemier, I'm not saying the boy isn't talented. I'm simply trying to find out how much of the information we have is factual, and how much is speculative."

"I'm trying to give you nothing but facts, Mr. Coleman."

"Suppose you tell me what led you to conclude the boy had left the Reservation."

"When he stopped coming to school, I talked to his mother."

"I don't recall reading about that in any report."

"Well, truthfully, I was a little hesitant to mention it. Parts of her story were pretty improbable."

"Try me."

"His mother said he came back from Thunder Mountain in the company of two black panthers—"

"Panthers?"

"Yes, the Committee introduced a few twenty years ago as a controlled variable to increase the hazard probability curve. The hill people identified them as witches."

"You say this boy was supposed to have tamed two panthers?"

"Well, not exactly tamed them. According to his mother he had a natural way with all animals. She attributed it to his heritage. Apparently she had always feared that his father's blood might prove dominant, and when she saw him with the panthers, she thought his father's people had claimed him for their own."

"What do you think happened?"

"I think she probably saw the panthers. Few of the hill people have, yet she described them quite accurately. It is possible that she saw the boy being stalked by two panthers

and her superstition supplied the rest. I understand the boy was always wandering off by himself."

"Why do you think the boy would want to leave?"

"I guess he felt he had no reason to stay. His own mother tried to kill him."

"Was anything said that might give us a clue as to where he might try to go?"

"Yes, the boy said where he was going."

"Where?" Lloyd asked sharply.

"To look for his father," Olga said bitterly. "Now all you have to do is find the father, and you'll find the boy."

"You feel sorry for the boy, I take it."

"Do the mortals pity the gods? Why should I feel sorry for Thad Stone? He was fathered by a warlock, his mother tried to kill him, he was raised in a human zoo, and now he's out there somewhere in an alien world that he didn't even know existed until a few weeks ago."

"Then why did you report his disappearance?"

"Because the child presents a threat."

"Aren't you exaggerating? I think the world might survive even an Einstein gone mad."

"You miss the point, Mr. Coleman. We aren't talking about an Einstein. We aren't talking about any kind of genius ever before known to man. I am convinced that Thad Stone is the first of his kind—a mutant variation of the human race."

"You are speculating now."

"True, but if I am right and the child reaches maturity and breeds, what is to happen to the human race?"

"The odds are against his being able to transmit his abnormality, if it exists."

"The odds were a trillion to one against his ever being born," Olga said.

After she had gone, Lloyd spoke to Bill Carter. "What do you think?"

"It makes a good story."

"Do you believe it?"

"How can I? It's too fantastic."

"The Exec is interested."

"The new Exec is interested in a lot of things. I always knew a woman president—"

"Bill, please don't talk politics. I'm only interested in this case. Have you read the entire file?"

"Twice."

"Did you ever wonder who the warlock was?"

"One of the hill people, I suppose."

"But I've run the index on the hill people. Not a single one fits the description the boy's mother gave."

"Well, then, maybe somebody got inside the Reservation."

"I thought of that too. The only way that could have happened would have been for someone to have hitched a ride on the provision truck. But the guards are used to tourists and thrill seekers trying to get onto the Reservation. They always made a very thorough search of the truck before it entered the Reservation. Air access is, of course, out of the question. The radar there is foolproof."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I don't know. Just playing with ideas, I guess."

He had said it casually, but the ideas he was playing with were quite intriguing. The more he thought of it, the more sense it made. At least it was one explanation of the boy's parentage that was consistent with known data.

He stayed down that night. His work was current, but he wanted a chance to think. From his office on the eighty-fourth floor he could see most of New Chicago. Man had created a marvelous thing of plastic, glass, and neon lighting. The mechanical side of the city never failed to excite him. But the people bored him. Everyday they seemed to grow a little more alike.

He thought of his assignment. He could find the boy. He knew that. He could pick him out of twenty million others. It was his line of work, and he was good at it. But for what purpose? So the scientists and politicians could mold him and make him into a superior image of themselves? Suddenly the thought of that eager, struggling young mind in a world grown complacent and safe was like a breath of fresh air. He opened the window and listened to the night sounds of New Chicago drifting up to him.

He knew now that he would not find the boy. To hell with it. Let the world adjust for a change.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kansas City was like a woman, vain, jealous, and sentimental, who wore her neon and plastic makeup with flair and style. She rather fancied herself a lady, but there was a bit

of the bitch in her, and she liked a good time. She could show a good time to those who had the money. Hidden by the planned harmony of color, design, and spacing of her plastapartments dwelled the dolers, the men who did not work, the people who were unable to adjust to the changing society. Occasionally she would cast a corporate eye upon them, and, shedding a corporate tear of woe for them, she would bring in more architects and more builders and with them build more of the round, many-coloured buildings she was so proud of. But mostly she was intent on having a good time.

It was the year 2081, and their ancestors had earned for the human race the right of happiness. Wars have ended; hunger has passed; the intelligent have inherited the earth, and the beast in man is dead—killed by his own terrible savagery. Happiness, the city whispered, insisted, repeated, and shouted, is security, is leisure, is pleasure—happiness is the reason for man's existence. Man's highest duty is to be happy.

Louis Underman, having finished his allotted four hours of pushing little buttons in the proper sequence, decided on impulse to walk the two miles to his apartment. Although the city was enveloped in the most modern climate control system, he could tell it was spring. He had forgotten that somehow. The new climatarium suggested the four seasons by minor variations of temperature and moisture.

He tried to remember the last time he had walked home. Was it two years ago? There seemed very little reason to walk when he thought about it. The tube would have him home in five minutes. Still he was enjoying it. There was no doubt about it: Kansas City was a beautiful city. He stared up at the tall apartment buildings and into the misted atmosphere beyond. He was in a section of the city renowned for its pastel plastics. It was beautiful. He knew that. Everyone acknowledged that. Yet he was aware of a nagging dissatisfaction with it. There was something missing, something he had not seen since he was a small child. There were no stars; he could not see the night sky. He wondered if it was still there.

He noticed a small boy looking at him. He was dressed in archaic, cotton clothes and wore clumsy, leather shoes. He was a striking boy. He was hairless, but that was not unknown since the war. Something about the boy made him feel

uncomfortable. Louis Underman had wanted children, but his wife. . . .

"Can I help you, son?" he asked uncertainly.

"No, sir. I reckon not."

"Are you lost?"

"No, sir."

"Looking for something?"

"Yes, sir, I'm lookin' for my pa. Have you seen a manwitch hereabouts?"

"A what—?"

"If you saw him, you'd know him. He's different. Do such men live in cities like this?"

"Are you making fun of me, son? What's your game?"

"Never mind," the boy said. "Never mind. I'll look somewhere else."

He left the boy then. There seemed little else he could do. Once his interest in children had been misunderstood, and he had suffered intense humiliation while undergoing the psygram tests. Yet there was something about the boy. He could not seem to put his finger on it, but he worried about it all the way home.

Pamalee Dubois, née Mary Johnson, was taking a break between acts. There was a quiet street, seldom used, that ran behind the strip. She often used it to get away from the noise inside. Kansas City's strip was not much different from those she had worked in Chicago, New York, and a half dozen other cities except for the quiet little street. She lit a cigarette and opened her robe a bit to let the cool night air touch the moist skin underneath. Hearing a noise behind her she looked up in annoyance, expecting to find that one of the customers had discovered her retreat.

It was only a small boy, and she sighed with relief. "Hi," she said, feeling friendly.

"Hi," the boy said.

"You here to take in the show?" she asked with mock seriousness.

"No, ma'am. I'm a-lookin' for work. I need a job."

"What do you want with a job, little man? Saving for an air scooter?"

"No, ma'am. I need the money."

"Need the money? You from the Children's Center, sonny?"

"No, ma'am, I ain't. I'm new in town. I ain't been here but three days."

"Where are you from?"

"It don't make no difference. I jest want to git me a job."

"Honey, you know it's against the law to work children before they're eighteen. Why don't you go down to the Children's Center? They'll take care of you there."

"I ain't a-stayin' there, ma'am. I've already heard about that place."

"Where are your folks?" she asked with sudden sharpness.

"I ain't got none."

"Here," she said reaching in her pocket. "Here's five dollars. Take it and buy yourself a good meal. You look like you could use it."

The boy looked at her for a long time. He made no move to take the money. He turned at last and walked away.

"Wait," she yelled. "Wait. I just thought of a job I need done."

He came back slowly and waited.

"My dressing room needs sweeping out and straightening up. I'll pay you five dollars for it."

"O.K.," he said following her inside.

She had trouble finding anything for him to work with, but she finally found an old sweeper and a duster. She showed him what to do, and then changed for her second act. It was Thursday and the big three day weekend had started. She could tell from the raw sound of the crowd that there must be another convention in town.

Her music started. She worked with drums. It was her trademark. She stood in the wings a moment and let the savage feeling build up inside her. Then she caught the rhythm of the drums with her body and danced slowly toward them. She was aware of the crowd's hungry eyes. She undulated slowly, feeling the primitive music, letting it vibrate inside her and find visual expression in her body. There was a subtle change in the rhythm, a slight increase in the tempo. She followed the music. A little convulsive twitch began to break the rhythmic swaying motion of her hips. The flimsy outer garment slipped off one shoulder. She could feel their eyes upon her now, and she could sense the sweaty tautness of their bodies. The drums stiffened; the beat became more intense. She felt the silken garment slide past her breasts and hesitate at her hips. Only the lower part of her body was moving now; only the lower part of her body was covered.

The drums caught the ancient African beat, unrestrained, lustful. The throb of the drums reflected in the wild thrust of her hips. The silken covering that clung to her body and concealed her nakedness began to slide down her buttocks. She was with the crowd now. She knew where their eyes were focused, and she wanted what they wanted. Her eyes clouded as she bit her lower lip. The drums beat a frenzied, sobbing climax, and the white silk came jerking to the floor. She was aware of a sharp, convulsive orgasm inside her that subsided slowly, like a fire that has consumed its fuel. It didn't happen often, but the fact that it happened at all was what kept her in the business. She needed the audience more than they needed her.

On her way back to the dressing room, she remembered the boy. She retrieved her robe from the wings and put it on. The boy had nearly finished his work. The floor was clean and the room was tidy. She gave him ten dollars.

"Come back any time, kid. You did a good job."

"I'll finish dusting, ma'am."

"Take your time. I'm going to change. I'm through for the night."

She changed into her street clothes. When she came from behind the screen, she saw another customer had found his way to her dressing room.

"Get lost," she said coldly.

"Told the boys I was going to meetcha in person," the man said. "What you do when you get off work?"

"You're not about to find out, buster. Now get the hell out of here."

"I just want to introduce you to the fellows and maybe show you a good time," the man said.

"Who needs you? Now if you don't get out of here, I'm calling the bouncer, get it?"

"Tell the kid to get out. I gotta little proposition for you."

"He's my kid brother, and he's staying here."

"Beat it, kid," the man said extending a bill toward the boy. "Go buy yourself a fad. Buy two fads."

The boy did not move. He made no move to take the money.

"I said, beat it," the man repeated. He grabbed the boy's arm, but the boy quickly wrenched it free.

"Don't do that again, mister," the boy said. There was something flat and hard in his voice that raised the hair on the back of her neck.

The man heard it too and in his drunken humor turned abruptly ugly. He came toward the boy, reaching for him with both hands. So quickly that she was never quite sure what happened, the boy slipped beneath the outstretched hands and struck the man in the spine with the edge of an open hand. He collapsed with a boneless little shudder.

"Did you kill him?" she asked, not fearful yet, not panicky yet.

"I don't think so, ma'am," the boy said indifferently. He left.

She stared after him. The man on the floor groaned and moved a hand. She ran after the boy, out to the street that was seldom used. She saw him there in the distance, walking briskly.

"Come back, little boy," she cried. "Come back."

But the boy kept walking, and he never came back.

Lennie Stein, an obscure poet of indifferent talent and less success, was reflecting upon his situation. His credit card had just been revoked. His carded fingerprints would no longer activate even a cigarette machine. His mistress had openly deceived him with a metalurgist who was fat, and his latest poem had been returned by the Star without comment. He could find another mistress; he could write another poem; but unless he was utterly willing to swallow his pride, he could not obtain another credit card. The limited purchasing power of a dole card was hardly worth the sacrifice of his pride. To become a dooler meant giving up his vices. He would as soon ship out as a pioneer on the next ship to Mars as to give up the cool evenings in the Bra Parie, sipping imported wines and writing copious poetry that sometimes (rarely) came alive and sang under the influence of good wine and bad company.

He could sponge drinks from his friends until they grew tired of him. He could even get a job, but he rejected that thought immediately. He could marry a pensioner. Some of them were pretty young. They ought not to be too choosy nor demanding, and if he could sell the artistic temperament bit, he might even retain some freedom of movement. The idea had some appeal.

He became aware that a boy was looking in his window. He was dressed poorly, and he looked underfed. You could walk for blocks and not find another window to look in. Most people who lived on the ground floor used one-way glass to

maintain their privacy. Lennie Stein did not like privacy. He liked to see people, and he liked them to see him. It was a form of communication. What did the boy want? Why did a ragged boy with hunger in his eyes wander around the streets at night? What was he looking for? That was the trouble with the world nowadays. No more hungry kids. No more wanderers. No impetus from the belly's howling need. Even the dolers ate well.

He thought about it long after the boy had gone. He wondered what had produced the boy, what combination of fortuitous events had shaped his destiny and placed him in the midst of plenty. That night he wrote the poem that was to retrieve his credit card and to bring him a momentary fame. The poem caught the imagination of a complacent world. He called it *Earth's Last Hungry Boy*.

Kathering Woolgate-Thompson had seen the boy around the library for several days before she paid any attention to him. She first really noticed him one day sitting in a reading booth staring at a viewer. He had the viewer on scanning speed so that the pages passed by one each five seconds. She thought perhaps that he was looking at the pictures, but then she took closer notice and saw that most of the books were without pictures.

She regarded him more closely in the weeks that followed. She discarded the idea that he was in search of erotica. He did not permit himself enough time even to scan the pages for erotica. Moreover, he was selective. She noticed he always seemed to choose books relating to a particular subject matter. Even more curious, he examined the books in approximate order of ascending difficulty. She decided that he was a compulsive book addict. But why the selectivity?

It was not until he had exhausted the library's history books and had begun to work his way through philosophy that she first realized the truth. He was actually reading the books. It was incredible, but it was true. To test this theory, she asked him about a book on Descartes that he had just finished.

"What did you think of it," she asked casually.

"He proved that he existed," the boy said. "At least he offered a system of thinking by which each person may prove to himself that he exists. But beyond that his arguments lack logic. He did not abide by his own criterion of reason."

She knew then that her guess had been right. The child was absorbing knowledge at an incredible pace, and she was the

witness to his growing pains. There would be times when she would see him stop reading to stare blankly at the walls of his reading room. Was he digesting facts? Carrying theories to their ultimate conclusions? Filling in the gaps left by fragmentary data? She never knew, for she instinctively felt that he did not want close human contact, and she respected his privacy. Only once did he appear affected by what he read.

She was standing at her station at the restricted book desk when she heard a muffled sound like the cry of some wounded animal. Realizing instantly that it was he, she rushed to the room he always used. She found him hunched over the reading desk—his eyes filled with shock and fixed on the rapidly turning pages on the view screen. She saw the title of the book: *Concepts of Witchcraft among the Hill People* by Olga Vandemier. The book was subtitled *The Strange Story of Thad Stone*. Since he had often read about the Reservation, she was at a loss to understand why this particular book should seem to upset him so. But, as usual, she did not question him about it.

As the years passed, as virtually every book and every tape in the well-stocked library passed before his eyes, she made no attempt to encourage or discourage him nor to channel the course of his furious development. He would determine his own destiny. She would accept neither blame nor credit for the result.

After nine years, the time came when she saw him no more, and she knew that for the first time the sum total of man's knowledge and progress was encompassed in the unsurpassed brilliance of one mind.

She waited now for whatever might happen.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lloyd Coleman tried to mask his impatience as the young man across the desk laboriously summarized the Correlater's latest probability reports. He could remember a time, and not so long ago either, when an IBM machine simply processed the raw data and man reached the conclusions. He sometimes wondered if he should have accepted the promotion to area FIA chief. The pay was better, but the hours were longer, and

the work often less rewarding. Maybe it was better in the old days, he thought, when they had city and state police and the federal government did not have to handle everything from petty theft to treason.

"The theft," the young man was saying, "of the carton of copper tubing from the B & B Plumbing Company coupled with the earlier thefts of stretch plastic means there is now a 68.1 probability that the Faraway Jets are planning a serious rumble with the Just Now gang. The probabilities of this happening within the next ten days are—"

"Skip the details, please," Lloyd said.

"Very well. Action?"

"The usual, Tom. You know what to do."

"The last time we used the nerve gas we had a number of complaints from the parents of some of those kids, sir. Couldn't we station extra men in the area and try to break it up manually?"

"Tom, you know better than that. The squawk we'd get if just one of those kids lost an eye from a home-made pellet gun would be heard all the way to the Capitol. Station the usual number of helicops in the area, and the minute the rumble starts move in with the nerve gas. A couple days sleep is not going to hurt these tough punks."

"Very well, sir. The next one involves a matter of policy, and that is why it was marked for your attention. The Correlater reports that if we eliminated external locks in the Class III housing areas we could reduce the incidence of forcible rape by 6.7 percent and of other violent crimes by 2.4 percent. Action?"

Here it was again, Lloyd thought, that same cold logic that could, probably, eliminate crime altogether. Hardly a week passed that the Correlater did not suggest another restriction on its human masters that would reduce the crime rate. But at what price? Must two million dolers give up the privacy and security of a lock on their doors to prevent a few more rapes?

"No action," Lloyd said. "Next?"

"The next one is somewhat peculiar. It originated in some programming the anti-trust boys were running through the Correlater. They thought we might be interested, so they had a duplicate file made for you. It concerns a possible relationship between three seemingly unrelated events."

"Well?"

"First, there is the matter of the somewhat spectacular success of the Music Company of North America."

"Never heard of it," Lloyd said.

"I'm not too surprised, sir," Tom said, "but if you had a teen-age son, you would know the name. In less than two years they have come from practically nowhere to the third largest seller of popular tunes in the nation. If this rise continues, they will dominate the industry."

"So?"

"So it's rather peculiar, sir. They specialize in junkie tapes; yet their payroll records do not show the name of even one person who is known to the industry as a composer. They market an amazing number of songs, but who writes their music?"

"That sounds like a reasonable question, Tom, but I suppose you don't know the answer or you would not be asking."

"There's more, sir. A New York company that calls itself The Ageless Corporation has purchased national TV time to advertise a product known as Doctor Dogood's Hair Restorer. Their ads do not hint at a healthier scalp—they do not promise to retard hair loss. They actually claim to restore hair."

"It would seem to me that this would be a matter for the Pure Food and Drug Administration."

"It is. They have confiscated the first shipment of the stuff and have set a court date for the company to appear to show cause why the shipment should not be destroyed. Of course, quacks have always been palming off some phony hair restorer on the public; but this is the first time a company has ever advertised its product on national TV. They ran their ads four nights in a row on prime time. They must have over two million tied up in advertising alone."

"I presume the Correlater found a connection between all of this?"

"Yes, but first let me tell you about one more thing. A Kansas City company registered as The Martian Company has purchased twelve hundred acres of wheat land on the Kansas prairie and has begun letting subcontracts on what appears to be the largest space ship ever attempted."

"So far, Tom, you've told me about three rather bizarre companies that have no apparent connection. Why is security supposed to be interested in all this?"

"Because there is an 82.3 probability that the ownership of the three companies is interlocking. The income-tax boys

are working on the holding company setup they are using now, and their investigation is expected to increase the probabilities of a common ownership."

"That's very interesting," Lloyd said. "It's a rather peculiar investment portfolio, wouldn't you say?"

"It's more than peculiar, sir. It's downright astounding when you consider another factor: Not one of these three companies has the kind of people you would expect to have working for it. The music company does not have one composer. The Ageless Corporation has not one single chemist. And The Martian Company appears to have the design for an advanced spaceship without one established space-design engineer on its payroll."

"And the conclusion?" Lloyd asked trying to contain his mounting excitement. He knew the answer, of course. Once, years ago, he had permitted a force to remain at large that was bound to assert itself and now it was making itself felt. Tom's answer, when it came, surprised him.

"The Correlater thinks there is a 58.1 probability that, in some fashion, a group of scientists have secretly banded together to market the products of their own inventiveness in violation of the Corporate Loyalty Act of 2042."

"How about the other 41.9 percent probability?"

"Most of them are too small to merit much consideration. There is a 5.5 probability that a foreign government is trying to establish markets here by use of an illegal domestic holding company. There is a 1.7 probability that—"

His voice droned on. Yes, Lloyd thought, and there's a hell of a good possibility that the whole thing springs from the creative genius of one fantastic mind. But, of course, the Correlater would not recognize this possibility because nothing like this has ever happened before, and therefore, could not be happening now. Only it is. Somewhere a mind of unsurpassed brilliance was struggling to express itself and to make itself known. There was a new force loose in the world, and to a large measure the responsibility was his. Had he made the right decision? Suddenly he had to know.

"Action?" Tom asked when he had exhausted the probabilities.

"Yes, well—ah—why don't you assign twenty men to work with the anti-trust people. Check out all composers, chemists, space designers, and so forth who might be moonlighting. That sort of thing. We might as well get to the bottom of this thing."

"Very well, sir. Any particular crew?"

"Yes, take them from Bill Carter's section. And ask Bill to come in, will you? I'd like to discuss this with him."

"Very well, sir. Anything else?"

"No, that will be all, Tom. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, sir."

In a few moments Bill Carter buzzed, and then came in. At forty-four, Bill was four years older than Lloyd and at least sixty pounds heavier. He was never brilliant and seldom original, but he was methodical and dogged. And he was loyal. His personal loyalty was what had induced Lloyd to bring him to Kansas City as one of his section chiefs when he had been promoted to head the midwestern department. Now he wondered how much he could safely tell him.

"Sit down, Bill," Lloyd said. "I want to discuss a few things with you. How's the section?"

"About the same, chief. We got our usual quota of brain boys from last years graduation crop. I don't know where I'm going to find work to keep them all busy."

"That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. I may have a couple of projects for your section if you can spare the men."

"If I can spare the men! Chief you know better than that. Of course, if it's good, honest investigation work like we used to do, I don't know. But if you want some glamour boys or theorists fresh out of FIA school, I got plenty. I can probably give you fifty men or women who are willing to pose as dope addicts, con men, prostitutes, or become an inside man in some two-bit gang. I doubt if I could find a dozen men in my whole section who are willing to go out on the streets and make the door-to-door investigation like we used to. Too dull for my bunch."

"All right, fine. Give me a crew of twenty glamour boys for a little problem I have to look into. They don't have to be any good because I don't think they're going to find out much. Tom Easterwood can fill them in on the details. Put one of your junior officers in charge."

"Is that that new corporation thing the Correlater dreamed up, chief?"

"You've been reading the summary charts before they are brought to me again, haven't you?"

"Sure. I do it every day. If you think some of that stuff you have to pass on is dull, you should see the files I handle before they ever get to you. Like today, there were over twenty

robbery predictions. Why should you have to handle junk like that?"

Lloyd let the question pass. They had argued about this before. The problem was that Bill might miss something, might fail to see a pattern in isolated facts.

"Anything else, chief?"

Lloyd thought a moment and then said, "Yes, Bill, there is, and I'd appreciate it if you would keep it confidential for the time being. You remember when we were working together back in the old Chicago office and there was that breach of Reservation security?"

"Sure, I remember. Some kid was supposed to have slipped off the Reservation. Why, what's up?"

"I want to find that boy. His name was Thad Stone."

"That's funny. I always thought maybe you weren't trying too hard on that one, chief."

"We made all the usual missing persons checks," Lloyd said little defensively.

"Maybe, but somehow I figured at the time you were just going through the motions."

"Well, I'm not going through the motions now. I want to find him bad. Can you give me some good men—some men who aren't afraid of a little hard work?"

"The trail would be pretty cold now, chief. And his prints wouldn't be on file, would they?"

"Not unless he's applied for a credit card or employment. But somehow I doubt that this one ever did."

"How important is this, chief?"

"It's important enough that I'm giving you authority to pull any man in your section off his present assignment for as long as you like."

"Care to tell me why you're suddenly so interested in this boy?"

"Not yet, Bill. Let's find him first. It may not amount to a damned thing, and again it may be the biggest thing we've ever handled."

"I'll find him," Bill said standing up. "I'll get the file from Chicago and get started on this tonight. As I recall there were just three cities where he could have gone. If he's still alive, we'll find him. Nobody can just disappear anymore. Anything else?"

"No, no that's all. But, Bill, keep this quiet for the time being. O.K.? No use sending any reports into the central office just yet."

"Whatever you say, chief."

"Goodnight, Bill."

"Goodnight, chief."

Three weeks later, Bill's small but efficient crew had completed their assignment. "Some of this stuff is almost unbelievable, chief," Bill said fingering a pile of reports. "If these weren't my best men, I'd swear these reports were some kind of a hoax."

"Suppose you summarize them for me, Bill. I'll tackle the details later."

"Well, first we found the man who picked him up on the cruiseway near the edge of the Reservation. That is, we didn't find the man because he died two years later, but we did interview the man's widow, and she remembered her husband mentioning it. It was an unlikely thing to happen."

"Where did he take the boy?"

"Here to Kansas City. And from there we had less trouble than you might expect. He was the kind of a kid that people remembered. Even when he shed his Reservation clothes and got rid of his Reservation dialect, people noticed him. You'll see the interview reports in the files—over a hundred of them. Many don't amount to much, just people who'd see him around, or perhaps see him only once but remember him for some reason or another. But pieced together, these interviews give us a pretty good picture of how he survived and how he's spent the past eight years. You were right about one thing, chief. He never applied for a credit card or a dole permit. We still don't have his fingerprints."

"How did he live then?"

"Simple. Simple at least for this one. You know that first group of doler plastapartments they put in on the north side? The kid jimmed the maintenance door and fixed himself up with a nice little apartment down there. He filched bedding and other furnishings from one place and another to make the place livable, and then devised a means of diverting water and electricity from the trunk lines for his own use. This is the first thing that seems hard to believe. You know how those trunk lines are metered to show any tampering. How an eleven-year-old kid figured a way to do it is beyond me."

"How about food?" Lloyd asked.

"Again no problem for this boy Thad Stone. Most of the dolers buy food from one of the food dispensers, using dole chits rather than going to one of the area stores. There's a

dispenser located on every block. He jimmed one of the machines. It was that simple. The kid must be a mechanical genius."

"At least. What about the people in the neighborhood? Surely they knew what was going on."

"Sure they did, but you know that neighborhood, chief. Those people don't file reports to the Correlater, and they don't take their troubles to the FIA. It's not their style. As far as they were concerned, if some kid was making it, then more power to him."

"Did he join a gang?"

"Nary a one, and that in itself is quite a story. As you know, the turf lines in that area have never been clearly established, and this had led to a number of border disputes in the past few years between three of the toughest gangs in the city. I'm going to tell you how he managed to survive without joining a gang, but I want to warn you in advance you may not believe me."

"I'll try hard, Bill."

"Well, he had his first run-in apparently right after he got here, for he was still wearing his Reservation clothes. You probably don't remember Billy Joe Fallon. He's doing a ten-year stretch on Mars now for second-degree murder. My section handled the arrest, and I remember him well. He was one of the genuine tough ones. Later on he turned just plain mean, but eight years ago he was one of the toughest boys in the King Kong gang."

"I don't seem to recall him," Lloyd said.

"Well, anyway, Billy Joe and two of his friends were striding sidewalk three abreast, you know the way they do when they're walking their own turf, and our boy failed to step aside. Naturally Billy Joe knocked him out of the way without even breaking stride nor so much as a backward glance. They hadn't gone far when they heard this sound behind them and here was this kid running at them. Billy Joe didn't hardly know what to do. He was sixteen and big for his age, and this kid was only eleven at the time. But he was walking turf, so he knocked the kid down again. Only this time he didn't walk away. He watched, and damned if the kid didn't get up and come at him again. I guess Billy Joe wasn't used to this so he really lowered the boom. Only he missed. But the kid didn't. He hit Billy Joe in the stomach. Probably didn't hurt Billy Joe too much, but it made him mad, and this time he came in swinging and out for blood. Once in a while

he'd hit the kid, but the same thing never worked twice. This kid learned fast. What I mean—real fast, if you can believe the two boys that were with Billy Joe that day. When it was over, Billy Joe was cut to ribbons."

"I suppose they left him alone after that?"

"Are you kidding? In the next two years, that kid must have had twenty fights. Only toward the last, I don't hardly see how you could call them fights. It got so he wouldn't even take off his coat. Then one night a four man scouting party from the Invaders gang came over looking for trouble. They found it when they ran into our boy. Two broken arms, four broken ribs, a broken collarbone, and numerous miscellaneous abrasions, contusions, and sprains were the totals for that night. It was the first time he had showed them he could be really mean if he wanted to. After that they pretty much left him alone."

"How did he spend his time?"

"Oddly enough the answer to that question didn't give us much trouble. Until a little over three years ago, he spent all of his time in the public library. Not one of the branch libraries, but the main one downtown. We interviewed a Miss Kathering Woolgate-Thompson, the head librarian down there, but we didn't get too much from her. I have an idea she's not telling us all she knows. But some of the library employees saw the kid coming and going a lot, and they said he had an unrestricted card. Where he got it, I don't know. He used a private viewing room so none of them noticed too much how he spent his days, except that he was always dialing for some book on the restricted list—sometimes twenty or thirty at a time."

"You'd think someone would have reported this to the Correlater," Lloyd said.

"Yeah, maybe. But then again you get a lot of oddballs hanging around a library, and people get used to seeing them around."

"You said up until three years ago?"

"Yes. About three years ago he stopped going to the library altogether. He started hanging around the metal restoration plants and places like that. Apparently, he could be an engaging little cuss when he wanted to be, for the watchmen would let him have lots of junk that was supposed to be put in the presser for reprocessing. He even got his hands on a spinner lathe that was supposed to be too worn out to work. Every night he came home with a box of the stuff. He seemed

to know precisely what he was looking for because he often asked for it by name. Then one night he disappeared into his basement and didn't come out again for six months, except for brief forays to the jimmied food dispenser."

"What did his neighbors think?"

"They were curious, of course. They could hear him working at the spinner lathe and so forth, but they were used to his odd ways, and didn't get too excited about it, I suppose. Then one day a new noise began coming from the basement. It was the first sign that he might have even one normal teenage interest. It was—"

"Junkie tapes," Lloyd said interrupting.

"How did you guess, chief? Yes, he seemed to have developed a sudden taste for popular music."

"Is he there now—in the basement, I mean?"

"No, he's not. Two months after the music started, a moving van came by and picked up some kind of machine or other he'd put together in the basement. He went with the van and hasn't been seen in the neighborhood since."

"We've lost him then?"

"Not so fast, chief. We got a lead on the moving van from one of the neighbors. We had a little trouble locating the driver because the kid had paid him to forget the whole thing, but we got onto him when we checked the van records for the date in question. It's not everyday a van will move something from the north side to a villa."

"You've located him then?"

"Yes, chief, we've found him. The only thing that bothers me is now that we got him what do we do with him?"

"Yes," Lloyd said, "that's been bothering me too, Bill."

"Anything else, chief? Do you want the house kept under surveillance? Shall we try to get a plant in his house?"

"No, nothing more just now. Your men got a good result, Bill. I'll see to it that they get a letter of commendation. Very nicely done."

"Care to tell me what this is all about?"

"Not yet, Bill. Let me think on this thing awhile, if you will, and I'll let you know if I need anything else."

"O.K., chief. See you in the morning."

After Bill Carter had gone, Lloyd spent several hours reading the more detailed version of the reports, trying to get the flavor of the boy, trying to create an image of him in his mind. There seemed little doubt that Olga Vandemier's early predictions for Thad Stone were justified. Different in kind—

not just degree, she had said. Had he done wrong to unleash such raw intelligence into a world so delicately balanced? He had to find out because the responsibility for the boy's ungoverned development was his.

Why, he thought, a mind like that could dominate the world. If his hunch was right, Thad Stone was already the owner of three prosperous and potentially powerful companies, and he was only nineteen. With his inventive genius, perhaps even the meta mine system could be broken. No, he thought quickly, not that. The system was foolproof. It has kept the peace for over one hundred years. Scientifically infallible, the scientists say.

Nevertheless, it was an alarming thought. He knew now that he must act—must make a full report regardless of the consequences. Ultimately the Exec would have to pass on this. That was becoming increasingly obvious. But first there was something he must do. First he had to see Thad Stone face to face.

CHAPTER SIX

Thad Stone's villa was located on the eastern edge of the city thirty miles from downtown. For the past five miles, Lloyd had noticed the lots growing larger and the villas more secluded and luxurious. Thad's villa was typical of the neighborhood. It was located on two acres of green-lawned, tree-shrouded land. The house itself was an uninspired plastic, although it seemed somewhat larger than the others Lloyd had seen in the area. The front lawn was equipped with one of the more modern movable sidewalks that conveyed him to the house by a circuitous route that led past a musical fountain and through a neatly manicured garden.

The effect was so pleasant that Lloyd caught himself being lulled into a sense of unrealism. You could imagine the owner being the successful manager of some respected company or a conservative corporate lawyer perhaps, but it was difficult to attribute to the owner of this conventional villa any originality, and certainly not genius. The housekeeper who appeared on the outside view screen in response to his ring did nothing to dispel the illusion of conventionality. She

was middle-aged and reserved. Lloyd knew that if she mistook him for a salesman she would cut off the view screen immediately, so his first words were: "My name is Lloyd Coleman. I am from the FIA." He showed her his identification seal.

"Yes?"

"I'm here to see Mr. Thad Stone. Is he at home?"

"Mr. Stone is at work, sir. Please leave your message with the message taker, and Mr. Stone will get in touch with you."

"Is he at home?" Lloyd asked, beginning to lose patience.

"He's at home, sir, but he is working. He left strict orders that he was not to be disturbed. Mr. Stone never receives callers when he is working, sir."

"Look, ma'am, would you just give him a message? Tell him that I am Lloyd Coleman, midwest section chief of the FIA. I don't have a warrant, but I can have one here in five minutes. I intend to see him, and I intend to see him now."

"Very well, sir. I'll deliver your message, but Mr. Stone never sees anyone when he's working."

She turned the view screen off. In a few minutes she was back. "Come in, sir. Mr. Stone will see you after all."

"I thought he might," Lloyd said as he stepped inside. The room he entered amazed him only by its continuation of the conventional theme that dominated the exterior of the house. If the owner had deliberately set out to mimic some of the more pretentious affectations of the wealthy neighborhood to which the villa belonged, he could hardly have achieved a more appalling result. There was even an airflow couch. Lloyd would have hardly been surprised to find that the stools in the bathrooms were marked "his" and "hers."

"What a pleasant room!" Lloyd said.

"Yes, we like it," the housekeeper said. "Mr. Stone let me choose the furnishings. Everything is very up-to-date. You probably noticed the 3D door viewer."

"I certainly did," Lloyd said. "And the automatic sidewalk, too. Those old button operated models are dangerous, if you ask me."

"Well, the sidewalks were already installed when Mr. Stone purchased the villa from the estate. But all the furnishings are new."

"I imagine Mr. Stone enjoys what you've done for this room. You surely must have been a professional decorator at one time or another."

"No, sir, as a matter of fact I was not, but I have worked

in some of the finest villas on the outer limits, and I do think after a certain amount of time you just acquire a certain amount of taste. Unfortunately, Mr. Stone doesn't get a chance to enjoy this as much as he would like, poor man. He spends so much time in his laboratory. He's an inventor you know."

"Of course. That's what I'm here to see him about. His latest project seems pretty exciting, doesn't it?"

"Oh, I wouldn't know anything about that, sir. He never discusses his work with me. I only know he works awfully hard. He stays up all night sometimes. I don't see how he keeps it up."

"Well, anyway I suppose his friends can appreciate what you've accomplished here."

"His friends, sir? No one ever comes here except that Mr. Wally Spencer, and he's almost as bad as Mr. Stone. All they ever discuss is business."

"I see. Tell me, does—" Lloyd broke off as he saw the young man step out of the hall elevator. He was not a tall man, five feet nine inches perhaps, yet he seemed to dominate the large room. His features were striking, not handsome exactly, but finely etched and distinct. There was a difference about him, a difference so subtle you had to look closely to see it at all. It was something about him, a slight difference perhaps in the way his ears set back on his head, or was it that peculiar flair of his nostrils? There was a complete absence of hair on his head, but this seemed to Lloyd only to emphasize—not to create—the other, less obvious, difference he perceived in him.

"Yes?" he said as he came forward to shake hands. His eyes were bland and noncommittal.

"Thad Stone?" Lloyd asked. "I'm Lloyd Coleman from FIA."

"Oh, yes. I thought you people would be showing up sooner or later. Why do you want to see me, Mr. Coleman?"

"This visit is more or less unofficial, Mr. Stone. You are not accused or even suspected of any crime. I'm here primarily to get acquainted."

"Good. Then why don't we go to my library? Martha, will you please see that we are not disturbed?" Thad led the way down the hall to the one room Lloyd was to see in the house that was tastefully done. After he had closed the doors, Thad said abruptly, "Now suppose we stop wasting time, Mr. Coleman. I heard you pumping my housekeeper. What do you want to know?"

"Everything, Mr. Stone. We're very interested in you."

"To save time, why don't you tell me what you already know?"

Lloyd hesitated. It was bad investigative technique, but he decided to chance it. Perhaps the direct approach was the only one that could succeed with this young man. "We know," he said, "where you came from. We know where and how you've lived. We know about your education. We know of the three companies you own and the source of their patents. We know you are different from the rest of the human race, Mr. Stone." For the first time Lloyd thought he detected a flicker of emotion pass over Thad's face.

"You seem to have been most thorough, Mr. Coleman. I am a little surprised that my enterprises should have created such a stir."

"We are less interested in your enterprises to date, young man, than we are in you and the projects you may be planning for the future."

"I see. I can assure you that you will find nothing illegal about my activities. I am not subject to the Corporate Loyalty Act since I have never been employed by a corporation. All taxes are promptly paid. My business manager can make all the records available to you if you wish."

"I am a little surprised that you should find it necessary to hire a business manager, Mr. Stone."

"Oddly enough," Thad said, "Wally Spencer has more talent for running the business than I do. At least he has more interest in it, and that amounts to the same thing."

"I had heard that all music could be expressed mathematically," Lloyd said, "but I never thought it was possible that a machine could actually *create* music."

"Oh, you mean the composeum. I'm afraid I was a little proud of that machine when I first put it together. But it doesn't *create* music, Mr. Coleman, it simply combines various musical possibilities. Great music will never flow from the composeum. For that you still need a soul."

"You believe in the soul, Mr. Stone?"

"Why, of course, Mr. Coleman. All warlocks believe in the human soul."

"You can't possibly still believe that your father was a warlock. You're far too intelligent and too educated to cling to that superstition."

"Why, Mr. Coleman, do you have a better explanation of

my parentage? I understand from my reading that Reservation security was foolproof."

"I am beginning to think that no security system is foolproof," Lloyd said thinking of the meta mines. "Tell me, Mr. Stone, what other projects are you working on?"

"I suppose you will find out eventually. All of my holdings are legally registered, and I am sure that you could trace my ownership. You've heard of my hair restorer?"

"Yes. Do you actually think something like that can work?"

"I believe it is considered improper to comment on the merits of a case in advance of trial. The hearing on the hair restorer will be held in two weeks. Then there is my Martian company. We are trying to develop a space ship that we hope can make the round trip to Mars in less than twenty-four hours. Construction is proceeding slowly just now because of the lack of sufficient cash flow from some of our other products. There are certain other products that are beginning to hit the market now from the Futurian Chemical Company—a flavor explosion pill for use with synthetic food, a rather effective cure for hangover, and other miscellaneous chemical by-products. To date that's about everything. I'm simply an inventor, you see."

"I wish you were, Mr. Stone. I wish it were as simple as that. You asked me not to waste your time, now I'll ask you not to waste mine. You know who I am. You know why I'm here. What you may not know, Mr. Stone, is that to a considerable extent you are my responsibility. I could have found you two months after you left the Reservation. You would have become a ward of the government and your talents most certainly put to use by the government. For some reason, that I haven't figured out to this day, I let you grow on your own. And now, so to speak, you're my baby. And if you present a threat to this world you were born to, then—and I warn you now—I will be the first to destroy you while I can."

"You are most direct, Mr. Coleman."

Lloyd thought he detected a hint of respect in the young man's voice. "What is it that you want to know? I'll answer your questions as honestly as I can."

"I have to know if you are telling me the truth. Would you consent to questioning with a lie detector? I can have a portable unit sent out, if you prefer."

"Unfortunately," Thad said, "the system won't work with me. I promised to be honest with you. I have to admit that

I have been able to develop a considerable measure of control over my own body. I could give you any kind of result I wished, or I could give you no result at all. You are welcome to try, however."

"No. No, that won't be necessary. I believe you. I guess I'll just have to muddle along with an old-fashioned interrogation. What do you want, Mr. Stone? Money?"

"No, not money. At least no more than is necessary for my own use."

"Power then?"

"Not power either. I want enough power to be left alone. That's all I ask."

"Then for God's sake, man, what does motivate you? What do you want? Have you none of the ordinary ambitions?"

Thad paused a moment before answering. "Yes," he said at last. "I think I do. But to make money or power your ambition requires a strong ego need. Years ago, as I gradually absorbed man's knowledge, I came to know that nothing I could accomplish here would ever satisfy whatever hunger it is that I have inside me."

"You mean to say you have no ego?"

"No. I mean that I cannot satisfy my ego needs on this planet. I did not realize this in the beginning. When I first came here from the Reservation, when I saw your splendid city and your scientific progress, I was impressed. I thought that here in this world there must be truly great minds to have devised such marvels. I approached your books with genuine reverence. Then as I began to learn, as I studied the people around me, as I began to see this world and how it had developed, I was filled with a great contempt. I was a true egotist in those early years. I knew that I excelled in everything, that I could, if I chose, rule the earth."

"And now?"

"Stop to think, if you will, Mr. Coleman, what it might be like for a being who knows—not thinks, but knows—that no matter what he puts his hand to he can exceed anything that has ever been accomplished before. Athletics? I can run a three-minute mile without even breaking into a sweat. I can whip the heavyweight champion of the world with my left hand. Money? If I wanted it, I could flood this world with so many new inventions that your present science would look like early eighteenth century. Power? Why should I wish to rule? What would it prove that I don't already know?"

"You feel contempt then for us—the ordinary people on this planet?"

"No, not now. When I first discovered what you were, I was contemptuous perhaps. Like most people, I felt that the space I occupied was the center of the earth, and at first it seemed to me that the whole Reservation program was a plot to bury my mind in ignorance. But I have since come to respect the human race. They have accomplished much with the few men of genius history has seen fit to bestow upon them. Without the basic research on the nature of the atom done in the past two hundred years, for instance, I could never hope to have arrived at the acceleration principle that is the heart of my star drive."

"Star drive? You mean the Martian ship?"

"No, I mean a star ship. The Martian ship will have a more conventional power source."

"You intend to leave this Earth?"

"Yes."

"Can it be done? I mean an actual star ship?"

"I think so."

"Einstein's theory of—?"

"I hope to prove him wrong."

"But why?"

"I shall look for others of my kind. For, as you have said, I am not entirely human. I have known for some time that my father was an alien."

"You mean from another planet."

"I think so."

"And you think your father's race will have others like you?"

"I think I may seem like a child to my father's people."

"You intend never to return?"

"Oh, I intend to come back—after I have found my father. You asked if I believed in the human soul, Mr. Coleman. Perhaps you think I cannot feel? If to feel is to have a soul, then I have a soul. Did you think I did not love my mother? Did you think I shall ever forget that night she tried to kill me because she thought I had been fathered by a manwitch? Did you think I could not hate? You asked what motivates me, Mr. Coleman. I live for the day when I shall find my father."

"And then?"

"And then—who knows? He shall be punished, I can assure you of that."

"I guess you've pretty well answered my questions, Mr. Stone. I'll have to make a report, of course. One of the things I will have to explain is a certain disregard for the rules we have made to live by."

"Yes, for some time I did not feel these rules were applicable to me. Your world had seen fit to make a special set of rules for my people on the Reservation, so I saw no reason why I should abide by your laws. But I think you will find that all my activities are entirely within your laws now."

"Yes, I'm sure we will," Lloyd said smiling.

"To whom do you make your report?" Thad asked.

"My report goes to headquarters and eventually probably to the President himself."

"The President? Surely he is not interested in this?"

It occurred to Lloyd then that in some ways this young man was naïve. Surely he must understand the nature of the threat he presented to the world and, conversely, the danger he himself was in should knowledge of his genius become generally known. Did he not know that his intelligence had marked him and set him apart from his fellow man? Did he think he could forever remain obscure? What man fears, he must destroy. And many would fear Thad Stone when his genius became known and fully appreciated. Lloyd had an urge to warn him of his danger, but he did not. His primary loyalty had to be to the rest of mankind, and at this time he preferred a Thad Stone who was not on guard.

"Well," Lloyd said at last, "I guess that will be all for now, Mr. Stone. We'll be in touch with you from time to time."

"Call me Thad, Mr. Coleman, if you will."

"Why certainly, and you call me Lloyd. Goodnight, Thad."

"Goodnight, sir."

Lloyd knew as he left the villa that he would remember this interview for a long time. On the surface everything had seemed ordinary enough. But why was his shirt drenched in sweat? And why did his hands tremble as he opened the door to his air car? The strange part about it was that he believed the man, believed everything he had told him. But could he trust his own instincts in this instance? Couldn't a man as clever as Thad deliberately create a feeling of believability? He could make just the right admissions, use just the right tone of voice to influence him.

At least, he thought, as his air car cruised downtown, he does have one area of vulnerability. He is capable of love

and hate and probably possesses other human emotions. And a man who can love and hate is vulnerable. Perhaps there was an answer there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She had the kind of beauty that, when encountered unexpectedly, can cause a man to catch his breath. Her name was Laura Jones. An improbable name for one so beautiful. She was short, five feet two inches tall, but she bore herself with the pride of a woman descended from queens. In her eyes danced all the lights of a gypsy caravan. Her face was dark, a pleasing tribute to some ancient Mediterranean race. Her hair swept down halfway to her waist like a rivulet in motion. Her teeth were small and even and flashed pure white whenever she smiled a slow, rare smile. Her nose was short, chiseled by some fine sculptor to harmonize with this face and no other. Yet there was a mystery in the face, a trace of sadness even when she smiled. Many men had seen it there.

Laura sat at a side table alone, surveying the crowd casually, her eyes distant and aloof to discourage any chance adventurer. The club was crowded and noisy, but she was not approached by any of the young men. They seemed to sense that she was waiting for someone, and she was. She had come here every night for the past two weeks. She waited patiently, knowing that he would come. She had heard that he often came back to the old neighborhood.

She saw him the moment he stepped inside the café. She recognized him instantly. He had not changed much in six years. He was wearing a tight-fitting, loose-neck stretch shirt that clearly outlined his body. He was not tall nor were his shoulders broad, but there was a suggestion of restrained power in the way he walked. There was something exciting about just watching him as he made his way slowly through the crowd, a kind of magnetism in his stride.

He looked about the room for a place to sit. For a moment his eyes locked with hers, and it was like a shock to her nervous system. She forced herself to remain casual, while at the same time she let her eyes drop momentarily to the empty

seat beside her and then back again. He started her way, but by the time he arrived, her eyes were again noncommittal.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"May I join you?"

"Yes."

"Are you from this neighborhood?" he asked as he sat down.

"Yes," she said. "I used to be. Don't you remember me?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. And if I had met you before, I'm sure I would have remembered."

"I've changed a lot since you saw me last. Also I don't think you got a chance to see my very well."

"You know me?"

"Sure. I used to live two blocks from you when you were staying in the basement. I used to think you were a funny sort of kid. We all did."

"I'm sorry. I just can't place you."

"That's funny when you think about it," she said. "I've remembered you all these years. If you are curious, I came here tonight because I thought you might be here. I wanted to see you."

"Why?"

"To thank you. I was too young at the time—and too scared. I just ran. Later I would see you passing on the street in the evenings sometimes, but you always seemed so occupied with your own thoughts I just never did—that's all. You were always a little distant, if you know what I mean. Then too you were probably two years younger than I and didn't seem to be interested in girls either. Then I got a scholarship and moved out of the neighborhood, so I never got around to thanking you."

"Oh, you were the girl that night who—"

"Yes, I'm the girl that was nearly raped by two punks trying to score a coup on some foreign turf."

"I'm glad I happened by."

"So am I."

"Have things gone well with you?"

"Well enough. I got my degree. I'm doing public-relations work now."

"You are an extraordinarily beautiful girl. You could have had a contract."

"I didn't want a contract. I've known some contract girls. It's a subtle kind of slavery when you look at it."

"Do you like your work?"

"No, but most people don't expect to like their work nowadays, do they? Put in your four hours, go home, and forget about it—and be glad you're not a doler."

"Do you want money?"

"Sure. Why do you think I worked so hard for that scholarship? I'm not a naturally brilliant person. And you know the kind of marks a doler has to make to get a shot at a university scholarship."

"Are you subject to the corporate loyalty act?"

"No, I was lucky. The firm I work for is a partnership, so I didn't have to sign."

"Good."

"Why all this interest in my career? Are you fixing to offer me a contract?" She asked the question in jest, but he seemed to take it seriously.

"No. Certainly not, but what would you have said if I had?"

"I wouldn't have said anything. I would have laughed my fool head off. I saw you pay the waiter with cash. I bet you don't even have a credit rating."

"As a matter of fact, I do not, but I'm not interested in a contract mistress either."

"You're a strange kind of guy, do you know that? You always were. We used to wonder about you."

"Why did you look me up?"

"I told you. I wanted to thank you."

"I'm glad you did. I think I've been waiting to meet someone like you."

"What about you? Are you going to college?"

"No, I have had very little formal education."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I had hoped maybe you'd won a scholarship too. There's no future for a young man nowadays without that degree."

"I work hard. I try to get ahead."

"I'm sure you will. A college education isn't everything. What do you do for a living? Do you sell?"

"No. I'm kind of an inventor."

"Oh?"

He laughed suddenly as if at some private joke, and strangely the sound of his laughter released some of the tension that had built up inside her. "Let's dance," he suggested as the band started. They moved to the floor. The band was playing one of those Congo melodies that were be-

coming so popular in the east. A new step had been invented for this rhythm, which was called the basket weave. To her surprise, he ignored the conventional step and began instead to weave a new and intricate pattern of his own to the complex beat. He danced as if the music had entered his body, carrying himself with the grace of a tiger; and beneath his shirt she felt a smooth, effortless flow of motion that guided her into the pattern of his step. Miraculously she found that she could follow him. She lost herself to the dance. It was one of those rare moments when existence ceases to have a past or a future and becomes now. She was vaguely aware that the others had ceased to dance and were watching them, but her only concentration was on the improvisation of the dance and the music. She was filled with a zest for life. What a wonderful thing it is to be alive, to be young, to be admired, to be loved, her body whispered. What a wonderful thing it is to feel, to want, to know, to exist, the music echoed.

The dance ended. There had occurred a rare moment of communication without words. She was reluctant to relinquish the mood by speaking, but the dance was over.

"I'll never be able to do that step again," she said.

"I'll never ask you to," he said. "It would be too monotonous."

"Where did you learn to dance like that?"

"I didn't learn. I told you I am an inventor."

"I'm glad you came tonight."

"So am I. But let's go somewhere else. I only come here when I get hungry to be around people."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't care. The Olympia Club?"

"That's awfully expensive. Would you rather—"

"I would rather go to the Olympia Club."

"All right. Let me go to the powder room for a few minutes, and then I'll be ready."

In the ladies' powder room she selected a private booth and inserted her credit card in the visaphone. In a few moments Lloyd Coleman appeared on the screen.

"I only have a few minutes," she said, "so I'll make this short. He came tonight, and I have made contact."

"Good. Now don't rush things. Let him control the situation. If you show too much interest in him, he may catch onto you."

"I think he likes me. We're having dinner tonight."

"Good," Lloyd said. "That's why we picked you. How did you manage it?"

"No trouble at all, chief. It was all his idea. He seems pretty normal in a lot of ways."

"Don't underestimate him, Laura. You're seeing him in an unaccustomed role. In some ways he may be very inexperienced, but I can assure you he's like no one you've ever known or are ever likely to know again."

"Any instructions for tonight?"

"No, you'll just have to play it by ear. Be yourself, but stay in character. You'll be pretty much on your own, you know, and we don't know how he might react if he finds out you are a plant."

"Don't worry. I can handle myself."

"I know you can. That's another reason I chose you. Well, good luck, and report to me as soon as you get a chance."

"Goodnight, sir." She turned off the visaphone, and went back to where he was waiting. This was her most important and her most exciting assignment. Was that why her heart beat so?

Dinner at the Olympia Club was fun. Thad selected a fine Portuguese wine and ordered a beautifully planned meal in perfect French. She had time to study him more closely now. There was a vitality in him that reflected from his eyes even when he seemed relaxed and at ease. He talked freely on a variety of current subjects with considerable enthusiasm. Occasionally she found herself looking at him and wondering about the extraordinary brilliance that supposedly lurked beyond those dark eyes, but she always forced herself not to believe it. She must see him as he was trying to make her see him.

After dinner Thad ordered another bottle of the Portuguese wine, and she noticed, to her delight, that he was perhaps a little tight. At least his speech was becoming more distinct and precise, and that would be the way this one would show it, she thought. "Would you care to dance?" he asked when the band began. Again that feeling of being lost, of being a part of the music. When they returned to their table, she was a little breathless.

Without warning he said, "I love you."

"You what?" He could not have surprised her more if he had thrown his drink in her face.

"I think I love you."

"Well, that's fine," she said, "but I don't love you."

"I know you don't, and you probably never will. Still I love you and that sort of makes you responsible for me, doesn't it?"

She did not know quite how to react, so she laughed. "I almost took you seriously for a moment there. Do you use this line with all the girls? You're pretty smooth for a nineteen-year-old kid."

"Don't let my age fool you, Laura. I warn you I am no ordinary man."

"I know you're not, Thad. Someday you're going to break a lot of hearts. I'd like to know you five years from now and see what you've become. You have real possibilities."

"You don't take me very seriously, do you?"

"Should I?"

"Perhaps not," he said.

A tall man who had been sitting at a nearby table with three other men interrupted their conversation.

"Care to dance?" he asked Laura.

"No, she does not," Thad said. "She can't dance," he added insolently.

The situation had developed so unexpectedly she had no time for surprise. Thad's words were virtually an invitation to fight, yet he kept his hands on the table and seemed, if anything, to relax.

"Look," the tall man said, "I was talking to this lady. Is that all right with you?"

"No, that's not all right with me. What do you mean disturbing our table?"

"Thad, please!" Laura said, but it was too late. The tall man swung from the hip, a short, powerful blow meant to catch Thad off guard and to end the fight before it started. Thad moved his head a few inches, and as the man's momentum threw him off balance, he struck him with the edge of his left hand at a place just below the neck. The tall man folded up and crashed into an adjoining table.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Thad said leaving a bill on the table to pay their check.

As they rose to leave, the three men who had been sitting at the tall man's table blocked their path. "Just a minute," one said. "We want to look into this. Bill may be hurt."

"Then call a doctor," Thad said coldly. "We're leaving."

"Hold it," the man said blocking Laura's path. "Nobody

leaves until we get to the bottom of this thing." She was frightened. The three men who blocked their path to the exit were in an ugly mood. She felt Thad's hand on her wrist then, and his hand was hard and firm as he pulled her behind him. The three men closed in. "Why doesn't somebody help him," she screamed aloud, but the other patrons seemed too stunned to move. There was a jumbled tangle of bodies, and then someone fell. And then another. And then another.

"Let's go now," Thad said. "Quickly before the FIA arrives."

Outside he dialed his air car. "Who are you?" Laura asked as the air car sped toward the outer suburbs.

"I think perhaps you know who I am, Laura."

"That was pretty impressive. You know that, don't you?"

"I meant to impress you, I guess. I don't know why else I did an idiot thing like that."

"You are a tiger when you get riled up, aren't you?"

"I can't figure it out. I never picked a fight before. It doesn't make sense."

"Emotions don't always make sense, Thad."

"Apparently not."

"Thad. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Have you ever been with a girl?"

"No."

"Why did you say you loved me?"

"Because I do."

"Can it happen like that?"

"Yes. With me it can. I seem to have a talent for appreciation. I like to discover the essence of things. When I was a boy, I used to study animals. I would let my mind flow from me until sometimes I used to think I was like that animal, that I could almost think its thoughts."

"People are not like animals, Thad."

"I know. They are far more complex, but tonight as I watched you I began to feel that I could sense the essence of the person called Laura Jones. I had never done this with a person before, and it jarred me—for I recognized in you some kinship with myself."

"You are an unusual person, Thad. Let's go somewhere—away from the city."

"All right."

"Have you ever been to New Orleans?"

"No."

"The scenic route is lovely by moonlight. Let's go to New Orleans," she said.

Later she broke apart from a long kiss to ask, "Thad, do you want to make love to me?"

"Yes."

"How could I stop you?" she said, taking his hand. "How could I stop a tiger like you?" she said as her lips brushed his ear lobe. "How can you stop chained lightning and thunder?" she asked, feeling the caressing hand beneath her dress. "How could any girl say no?" she whispered hoarsely as her lips parted to a soft kiss that deepened, and then turned into a wild fury.

On the scenic route to New Orleans, the air car slipped through a moon-drenched night. Over small hills and larger hills and over sharp peaks to the gentle valleys beyond. Past waterfalls that roared like thunder and through exploratory quiet routes and warm, moist places where the smell of nature was damp and primitive.

"Wake up, darling," Laura said softly. "We're almost there. The moon is down, and I can see the city control lights ahead."

"Did I sleep long?"

"Darling, how could you have? Now hurry up and get dressed before you tempt me again."

"I love you."

"I know you do, and I think I love you, too, but hurry up now and get your shirt on."

"I'm hungry," Thad said.

She laughed. "How like a man. What an animal you are. Well, I'll feed you, pet. I know a good restaurant in New Orleans."

How beautiful he is, she thought, and she leaned forward to kiss him with passion. In the middle of the kiss, she felt something stirring within her that she thought had died for awhile. "If you pushed the midspeed button, we would still have twenty minutes before we get to New Orleans," she said.

Play it by ear, Lloyd had said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In answer to the President's summons, Lloyd Coleman arrived at the White House. The Exec who looked up from the ancient oak desk was a slight, gray-haired man whose ascendancy to the Presidency was one of those unpredictable political upsets that periodically confound the pollsters. He displayed little of that external vigor that had characterized his female predecessor; yet Lloyd would rather have endured a stormy outburst from the last Exec than a frown from the new one.

"I've been studying your reports, Lloyd." The President spoke softly.

"Yes, sir."

"It looks like we have a problem on our hands, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so, sir."

"In fact, Lloyd, I'm afraid the problem has reached crisis proportions. Why did you let the Martian ship leave? Surely you knew the danger in that."

"The ship was built under Title 14USCA, giving private companies the right to build and use spaceships. No government loans were applied for, so we did not even have the right to demand an observer on board."

"Well, the thing is done now. I've been on the hot line to Moscow half the day trying to explain that the ship's success surprised us as much as them, but I doubt if they believed me. Is there any alarm among the people?"

"Not yet, sir. Right now Thad Stone is some kind of hero to them. The commentators have stressed the fact that the ship can bring the cost of a Martian holiday to within the reach of the ordinary man. But in a few days the fanatical element of the anti-war party will start screaming that the balance of power has been upset. We can expect trouble then."

"You know," the President said, "that one of my fondest hopes has been to speed the colonization of Mars. It was part of my platform in the last election. That ship could take five hundred colonists to Mars in six hours. If we had a dozen like it, we could ship to Mars enough of those new oxygen

plants we've developed to enable men to live on that air-starved planet even above the mean elevations. I should be happy about this news, but I'm not. The damned thing frightens me. It's too sudden, too big."

"I know what you mean, sir."

"Now that hair restorer. That was different. I like to see a young man get ahead, and I laughed just as hard as the next one the way that trial turned out. Imagine using Anthony Rogers and Christopher Bryan—two of the most notoriously baldheaded lawyers in Washington—as exhibits *A* and *B*."

"I saw that on TV, sir. I liked the part where the DA tried to pull the 'wig' from Mr. Rogers' head."

"But this is a different matter, Lloyd. And we both know it. Whatever happened to your agent? Why haven't we got any reports from her?"

"I'm afraid she's crossed over, sir."

"Crossed over! You mean deserted the force?"

Lloyd knew that the Exec had read the files and knew all about it; nevertheless he said, "I'm afraid so, sir. It looks like she managed to gain his confidence, but unfortunately he also won her confidence. She's been staying at his villa the past two months."

"No reports at all?"

"None, except the one in the file. She says she is sure that he means no harm to us."

"That fellow could do more harm without meaning to than a conventional army could inflict intentionally."

"That's entirely possible, sir. Yet I don't think he will if we leave him alone. It's hard to judge someone like that, but I had the feeling, too, that he means us no harm."

"Would you bet your life on that judgment?"

"I think so."

"Would you bet the lives of one billion people on that judgment?"

"Only you can make that kind of bet, sir."

"Quite so," the president said. "When can we expect them to return from Mars?"

"I don't know, sir. Unfortunately our only Mars agent in the area of the baltac is a second-generation colonist. His reports are lacking in detail."

"Your agent says they are mining the baltac."

"I don't know much about the science involved, sir, but apparently they are mining the baltac. I seem to remember

from my college physics that the baltac could never be mined—something about the peculiar way the atoms interlocked when the two meteors collided in space. Anyhow he seems to have found the key to unlock the atoms.”

“I suppose it is no more incredible than some of the other things he has done. Do you have any idea why he wants the baltac?”

“Only a guess, sir. The metal is extremely valuable, of course, because of its rarity, but I don’t think he intends to sell it. My guess is that he intends to use it in building his star ship.”

“How long will this trip take him?”

“Not much longer, I’m afraid. As you know, all the baltac is contained in the Etline Crater. Up until now, the only pieces brought to earth were the few scattered fragments chipped off when the fused meteor impacted. A diamond won’t scratch that stuff, but he seems to have found a way to mine it, using some kind of power source from the ship.”

“Lloyd, I don’t want that ship to return to earth. Not just yet anyhow.”

“I don’t see how we can stop him, sir. We only have a dozen agents on the entire planet. I don’t think that is enough.”

“Then I want Thad Stone placed under arrest as soon as he returns. I want to see him here.”

“On what charge, sir?”

“Any charge. You think of one.”

“I thought you were a stickler for the law, sir.”

“Not this time, Lloyd. There’s too much at stake.”

“And the girl?”

“Bring her too. And, Lloyd, do this as quietly as possible. I don’t want the press in on this.”

“Very well, sir,” Lloyd said. He started to say something more but changed his mind. What was the use? After all the responsibility belonged to the Exec—not him.

There was in the crowd a fierce need to adulate, to identify with something outside themselves. They had come to welcome heroes. Their throats were raw from cheering and from the harsh October winds, but they did not care. They had been here for hours waiting—waiting on a chilled Kansas prairie when they could have been watching from private view screens in the comfort of their own homes. As they watched, there was a flicker in the northern sky that waned

and bobbed and then grew into an orange flame. The ship was sighted next, an oblong object that seemed to grow as they watched it. As the ship began its final descent, they heard a muffled roar like a waterfall might make deep in some distant cave, and then they could see the sleek outlines of the ship itself as it slowly lowered, flame first, on its pad. A hush that was not caused by the muffled roar of the ship fell over the crowd. The ship was larger than imagination, larger than a spaceman's dream; yet it settled to earth as gently as a leaf in the wind. The flame and the roar ceased, but the crowd remained silent. Not until the ramp slid forward and the three figures stepped forward was the silence broken by the crowd's hungry voices. This was why they had come—to feel the greatness that they had imparted to the three distant figures reflected back at them. They screamed their adoration.

On the ship's ramp Laura tried to speak to Thad, but she could not hear her own voice. Wally Spencer caught her arm and motioned toward a waiting air car guarded by four men in identical gray suits. On legs not yet adjusted to the new gravity, she followed the two men into the air car. Thank God! It was soundproof. "Did you ever see anything like it?" Unwittingly she had yelled.

"Great," Wally Spencer said. "Did you notice the zoom cameras on us? We've got five million dollars worth of free publicity for the new ship out of this."

She was annoyed by his words for some reason. Wally Spencer often annoyed her. He was one of those hard driving types who sometimes achieve success from sheer drive and concentration and the force generated from their own egotism. She had never understood this type of man. She had often wondered why Thad had hired him. Wally had told her once that when he had met Thad he was third vice-president in a small and unimaginative plastics factory. When Thad had bought his contract, he had told her, it had been like a release from prison.

"Did you ever see such a welcome?" she asked again as the air car began slowly to edge its way through the crowd.

"Yes," Thad said. "A crowd is an odd thing. Given the right circumstances, the right propoganda, this same crowd could be back tomorrow yelling and screaming to be at our throats."

"What a horrible thought!" she said.

"As a matter of fact," Thad said. "I don't like this—all

this excitement. It's too close to hysteria. I had hoped for less publicity."

"I'm afraid those days are gone forever, Thad," Wally Spencer said. "And I, for one, am just as glad. It's part of the price we pay for success."

They were free of the crowd now, and the air car had picked up speed. "There may be a greater price than that," Thad said.

"What do you mean?" Wally Spencer asked.

"Did you notice the locking system on this particular air car?" Thad asked. "This car is equipped with a Gothum lock."

"But that means this is an FIA car," Laura said with some surprise. She was not alarmed yet.

Wally Spencer grabbed the phone. "What is this? Where are you taking us?"

"We're taking you to the airport at Kansas City, sir," the driver said.

"Why weren't we consulted?" Wally Spencer asked.

"Why, sir, we're acting on the Exec's orders. He wanted to see you."

"Oh," Wally Spencer said. He hung up the phone. He appeared to be satisfied and perhaps a little flattered, but Laura was beginning to become concerned. This was not the way the FIA worked. She had always relied upon the firm guarantees of the law; yet they had been picked up by four armed men without a warrant and without charges. She felt suddenly naked and unprotected.

They were taken from the Washington airport directly to the White House. She breathed a little easier. At least they were going to see the President himself. He was supposed to be a gentle man. It was difficult to imagine him doing an unkind thing. The President was in his office, and Lloyd Coleman was with him.

"You are Thad Stone?" the President asked.

"Yes, sir."

"We have been investigating your activities, Mr. Stone."

"I know."

"You represent a third force in the world, Mr. Stone. Did you know that?"

"I have not given much thought to it, Mr. President. I have no interest in politics."

"Have you no interest in war then?"

"I abhor war."

"You may have read about the Final War, Mr. Stone, in the history books. But have you ever studied the films of that war? Have you seen the horror of atomic war even on a restrained basis?"

"I have not studied the films, sir. I have no taste for war."

"You probably know the war started when the Russians used one small atomic bomb to put down a rebellion in Warsaw. Acting on standard orders, we let go a series of atomic warheads and destroyed the site in Russia from which their missile was launched. The Russians retaliated by destroying St. Louis. Four days later, we wiped out Leningrad. One by one, we each destroyed the other's cities.

"Fear of retaliation produced some restraint. Washington and Moscow remained untouched. When the people saw this, there was created in them an abiding hatred of war and of their governments. In the capitals there was safety. In the rest of the nation, there was sudden death by explosion and lingering death by radiation, hunger, panic, disease, and all the horrible concomitants of atomic war. In each country, the little island of safety that was the capital city was sealed off from the pestilence and sickness outside.

"The war ended, as you surely know, when Major Francis Duggin of the United States Army trained five hundred megatons of missiles on Washington, D.C., and demanded a declaration of instant, unilateral peace. A more direct approach in Russia resulted in the complete loss of Moscow by a Russian missileman. China's attack on Russia following the destruction of the Russian government and the part the United States played in subduing that attack, all of these things enter into the attitudes that shape our philosophy today and make the waging of war unthinkable."

"If you will pardon me, sir, all of these facts are well known."

"Yes, Mr. Stone, they are well known. But I mention them to you for a purpose. You must realize how a world has developed that accepts the meta-mine system as a way of life."

"I have studied that much history, sir."

"Our scientists tell me," the President continued, "that scientifically the meta mines are fool proof. Once the mine is surgically inserted into the heart organ, it cannot be removed without exploding. There is no doubt that no wearer of the meta mine could escape instant death in the event of another atomic war."

"Then what is the problem, sir?"

"The problem, Mr. Stone, lies in the one weakness of the meta-mine system. Our allocation of meta-mine wearers is ten thousand. We may select any citizen of any nation in the world for the 'iron heart' as our press prefers to call it. The system has worked well in the past. We naturally chose the top government people, the best generals, the chief scientists, and the most important or powerful people from those nations that we view as a threat. The Russians and the others do likewise. As long as the integrity of the system is maintained, it will prevent war. Some of us like to think that there is some justice in selecting the same class of people who were spared in the last war to be the first to die in any future war. The system has become so much a part of our way of life that it is considered an honor to be selected for the meta mine. There are some things we cannot do, of course, like touring an atomic plant or any kind of space travel. Still the system has proved effective—at least until now."

"Again, sir, what is the problem?"

"The problem is that you have upset the balance of power. I wonder if you fully appreciate the impact your ship has had upon Russia. A ship with power sufficient to propel several million pounds through space at a speed of one-half the speed of light can give to the nation that possesses it a weapon so powerful as to enable it to dominate the world—even with conventional weapons."

"But surely—"

"Already we have evidence that there will be trouble. For several days the Russians have refused, on one pretext or another, to deliver a promising young scientist whom we selected for insertion of a meta mine. This is no coincidence. The meta mine system won't work, you see, if any nation refuses to comply. In another thirty or forty years, there would be few left who wore the mines. War would again be possible, and, I fear, even probable."

"Perhaps there is a solution," Thad said.

"We would be most interested in any ideas you may have, Mr. Stone."

"Make the plans available to Russia. The ship is designed along conventional lines and can be easily reproduced. Even the power drive is basically a simple mechanism."

"You would make the plans available?"

"Certainly. Of course, I would like to receive some compen-

sation. I am a bit pressed for money right now. I need a half billion dollars."

"I have heard you were already a wealthy man, Mr. Stone."

"You probably know that I intend to build a star ship. I have it in mind to tour the galaxy. I will need more money."

"That's a lot of money, Mr. Stone."

"Then let the Russians pay for it."

"And, of course, if you build a better ship than your first one, aren't we back where we started?"

"No, for I don't intend to make the star drive available to anyone. When I build the ship, I'll destroy the plans. I have no desire to push earth's technological progress too far."

"Do you intend to go alone?"

"No, Mr. President, I intend to go with him," Laura said, speaking for the first time.

"No scientists? No sociologists? No anthropologists?"

"I had not planned on anyone else," Thad said.

"No representatives from our world to act as ambassadors? This could be a momentous event, Mr. Stone."

"I cannot be sure of success, sir. Even if the ship performs as planned, I cannot be sure that we will discover even one planet with intelligent life."

"Think, if you will, Mr. Stone, of what it would mean to the world if you were to take just two representatives selected, say, from the two nations that have done the most in the way of space exploration."

"You mean a representative from the United States and one from Russia? Perhaps you are right, sir. I have thought about your suggestion, sir, and I believe you are right. I see no reason why both nations should not have an observer along. Of course, neither nation shall have control of the ship, and I alone shall determine our destination."

"When you thought about it, I was sure you would see the desirability of this approach. One other thing. Before your ship can possibly be complete, Mr. Coleman will have reached optional retirement age, and he has expressed a desire to retire from service. Mr. Coleman is an avid rock collector. There will doubtless be many interesting specimens among the planets."

"I see no reason why Mr. Coleman should not accompany us," Thad said.

"Well that's settled. We—and I am sure the Russians—will buy your Martian ship at your price. Tell me, Mr. Stone,

what do you think of us—the ordinary inhabitants of this planet?”

“Mr. President, I have a feeling for every living thing. I have a feeling for the human race. Someday, I think, it will achieve a great destiny. But not now. Not for a few thousand years. The form has not yet perfected its biological evolution. Until it has, it is best, I think, that the human race remain near the sun that spawned it.”

“You are not one of us, are you, Mr. Stone?”

“Not entirely, Mr. President. My father was from another world. I am not a mutant—I am more of an alien.”

“Do you realize the Russians may select you for a meta mine?”

“That would be unfortunate for them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I would have to find a way to remove it. I will not be confined to this planet.”

“Some members of my cabinet think that you should be killed.”

“I had hoped you would find a better way.”

“I had too.”

“Why did you bring me here, Mr. President?”

“I wanted to see you and talk to you myself.”

“You wanted to decide whether I should live or die?”

“Yes.”

“The same decision was made once before.”

“I know.”

“Who will make the decision this time, Mr. President?”

“I will.”

“When?”

“Now. You are free to go.”

“To go where?”

“Wherever your genius can take you. We will buy your spaceship. I wish you luck, Mr. Stone.”

“I thank you, sir,” Thad said.

“We all thank you, Mr. President,” Wally Spencer said, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

They were accompanied by the same four guards on the trip back to Kansas City. Wally Spencer, who appeared not to have adjusted yet to the idea that they might have been executed without trial, observed their presence with distaste.

“Why do you suppose we rate the honor guard?” he asked.

"I think they have orders to kill us before we reach Kansas City," Thad said.

"I don't think the President would—" Laura began.

"I doubt if the President knows anything about this."

"What can we do?" she asked.

"Get them over here," Thad said.

Not without some misgivings, she asked the guards to join them for a drink. Thad then began to talk to them very quietly in a voice that droned monotonously on. In a few minutes, all four guards were responding to his questions with unguarded answers. Their orders had come from the subsecurity chief while the meeting with the President was taking place. Neither Lloyd Coleman nor the President had been advised. Thad gave them a couple of post-hypnotic suggestions, and then brought them back to consciousness. They had forgotten their old purpose, but they had a new one to take its place.

Two days later, a subsecurity chief was killed by his own agents. The press reported that the four killers claimed to have had a good reason for their act, but they professed to have forgotten what it was.

CHAPTER NINE

She looked at the young man who had just made love to her. He moved to get off her, but she held him fast a while longer. This was the best time. This was when he belonged to her. She studied his face in the dim light. She always liked what she saw in his eyes afterward. She felt the beat of her heart slowing, felt her body begin to relax. Like a tiger, she thought, and he comes uncaged inside me. She got caught up, lost sometimes, in the fury of copulation and forgot that he was a god—or forgot that she was not—and became like an extension of his own body. But life was not just one prolonged orgasm, and most of the time she was very much aware of the difference between them. She let him go.

"I wish it could always be like this," she said. "When we are together like this, I can feel close to you. I wish it could always be like tonight."

"It is my destiny, I suppose, to alienate those I love," Thad said.

"It's not your fault, darling. I love you, you know that."

"Yes, I know."

"It's just that I can't forget how different you are. I must seem like some kind of moron or something to you."

"No, of course, you don't, sweetheart. I think in some ways you know a lot more than I do."

"You mean sex?"

"No. No, I meant you have probably made a better adjustment to your environment than I have to mine."

"Did it bother you, Thad, that I was not a virgin?"

"No, of course not."

"You never asked about it, you know."

"I'm not asking now, Laura."

"I would have told you if you had asked me."

"Laura, I don't even want to know."

"I would have told you anything you wanted to know about me, if you had only asked."

"I never—"

"Thad, I have to tell you about myself."

"No, you don't, darling. I don't care about your past."

"I've been wanting to do this for a long time. I have to tell you now. Did you ever hear of the ES branch of the FIA? I'm not surprised that you have not because it's top secret. It's a small branch of highly select volunteers who are concerned exclusively with external security. Its members take an oath of absolute obedience. They are completely devoted to their mission. There is nothing—nothing at all—they would not do to preserve the security of this country from an external threat. And they are loyal. In the sixty year history of the ES branch there has never been a single defection."

"You don't have to tell me this, Laura. I—"

"I was with the ES branch, Thad. I am the first one to have betrayed them. I have to tell you that I was a good agent too. Because I was physically attractive and a good dancer, I was usually sent on special jobs where my talents would be most appreciated. I had an affair when I was seventeen with a Middle Eastern ambassador who was suspected of spying. Since then I've had other missions that I do not care to remember."

"Are you through?" Thad asked.

"Yes."

"Then may I tell you that I've known most of this and

guessed the rest the first night I met you. I suspected you were with the FIA before we ever went to New Orleans. And as for the other, I knew they would not have sent anyone on this mission whose scruples might interfere with her work."

"You've known all this time? And never said anything?"

"I didn't think it was that important. I don't care, darling. That's not the way my mind works."

"Oh, Thad, you have no idea how much better I feel. I've been afraid to tell you for so long."

"Let's say no more about it then. O.K.?"

"O.K., darling." She lit a cigarette, and then she had another thought. "Thad?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Do you think we could have a baby?"

She detected a momentary shock pass over his face.

"Probably," he said after a pause. "But I don't think we should. I plan to let my line die out."

"But why? Why shouldn't you preserve your inheritance? Are you afraid your sons might not have your genius?"

"No. I'm afraid that they might."

"I don't understand, Thad."

"I do not wish to see children born who might one day divide the earth among themselves. Nor do I wish children who must remain apart from mankind."

"Sometimes I feel so sad for you, Thad. Did you ever wish that you were less than what you are?"

"Often. But then happiness is not the destiny of all of Earth's creatures."

"You use that word 'destiny' often. Do you really believe in fate?"

"No, of course not. I believe in science, but it's a good word to explain those things for which there is no other explanation."

"You are not happy with me, then?"

"As happy as I have ever been since I was a very small child. I owe a lot to you, darling. I hope you never regret having known me."

"I never shall," she said. She stubbed her cigarette and walked over to the balcony. They were on the eighty-second floor. A heavy mist obscured the street below.

"When will we be able to move back to our villa, Thad? I liked it better there."

"I'm afraid we never will, Laura. The villa was bombed two days ago. Completely demolished."

"Oh, no. Who would do such a thing?"

"I'm not sure. The inner circle of the anti-war party or any one of a half-dozen other fanatical groups, I suppose. It really doesn't matter."

"Why do people hate so, Thad? How can they absorb so much hate? How can they live with it?"

"I don't know. I don't know the answer to that."

"You would think after the President's speech that the world would be cheering you on."

"Officially they are. If the Exec had not made this appear like a joint U.S.-Russian venture, it would be a lot worse. It's only the offbeat groups that are trying to destroy the project."

"I'm getting tired of moving to a different apartment every day, Thad. I'm beginning to feel like some kind of hunted animal."

"I know, darling. I was going to save this as a surprise, but I guess I might as well tell you now. We can move inside the field tomorrow. The power has been turned on, and the fence is operating now."

"You mean we can stop running? Wonderful, darling. I'm so eager to have a home of our own again. Can we have a cottage? I think I would prefer that to a villa."

"Whatever you want."

"It's going to be so wonderful."

"You should remember to take everything you'll need. Once inside the fence, you won't be coming out until we leave in the ship. There will be a commissary, of course, for the workers, but there won't be many luxuries available."

"Oh, I don't care. I'm so eager to get started. Can't we leave tonight?"

"I had arranged to have a helicop here in the morning."

"Let's leave tonight! We can take an air car. It's only seventy miles to the field."

And in the end, that's what they did. Thad cruised around the circular streets until they were absolutely sure they were not being followed, and then set the controls for the field where the star ship was being built. They were ten miles beyond the outer city limits and cruising at two hundred miles per hour when it happened. Without warning the power went dead. The wheels dropped down and contacted the emergency guide lines on the cruiseway. As the air car rolled to a stop, there was a clatter that could have been popcorn popping in the kitchen. Only it wasn't. The first burst was wild and struck to the rear of the car. The second burst did

not miss. One bullet struck her in the throat, another in the stomach, and another broke an arm already limp. A living thing had been made dead.

Five men arose from the grooved shoulders of the cruise-way and slowly approached the car, which had stopped a hundred yards beyond. "Did you get 'em, Ed?" one asked as they came slowly forward.

"Sure, I got 'em. I got 'em both. You think I'd miss at that range?"

"Keep your eyes open," a third said. "This fellow's tricky and hard to kill."

"Don't worry," Ed said. "I put thirty slugs into the cab. A mouse couldn't have survived that."

They approached the car carefully, two on one side, two on the other, and another to the rear. Their weapons, small deadly submachine guns, were trained on the air car. One opened the door. "He's not here!" he said.

"What do you mean he's not here?" Ed said.

"See for yourself. You got the girl, but you must have missed him."

"No, I didn't. See there's blood leading from the car. I winged him. I knew I'd hit him. Bring the torch, we can follow the blood."

"Wait a minute. Where's Charlie?"

"What do you mean where's Charlie? He was right back there a moment ago."

"Well, he's not there now. Charlie! Charlie! Where are you? Come on back."

"I don't like this. We ought to stick together. Turn that torch off. There's enough light from the moon to see by. Why make a target?"

"A target for what? He wasn't armed. Let's start searching the shoulders. He couldn't have gone far."

"Say, what is this? Hey, it's Charlie! He's not breathing."

"Look around there. Do you see his gun anyplace?"

"It's not here. I can't find it."

"That means he's armed now. We better get back to our car. I don't like the way this thing's turning out."

"Me neither."

"It was all your fault, Ed. You were the one who said we shouldn't have men on both sides of the cruise-way."

"Stop griping, goddammit. We can talk about it after we get out of this place."

"What was that sound?"

"I didn't hear nothing. Shut up, will you? We're almost there."

"I wish you didn't always—"

"Shut your damned mouth and open the door. Let's get out of here."

They opened the door and heard the words they were to carry with them into eternity. Thad Stone sat in the front seat of the air car, the submachine gun cradled in his left arm.

"I have been waiting for you," he said.

For the third time in two weeks, Lloyd Coleman received a call from the President. "No word yet, Lloyd?"

"Not yet, sir. He won't answer my calls."

"Then go see him in person."

"I can't, sir. He's got that damned fence operational. Nobody can get in or out."

"You suppose he blames us for this?"

"I don't see how he can, sir. He had not asked for protection, and from all we have been able to learn the five men who were in on it were not acting on orders from any group, although their leader did have a history of political radicalism."

"It's a sickening business, Lloyd. I'd have given anything to have prevented this."

"We did everything we could, Mr. President."

"I know you did, Lloyd. I'm not blaming you."

"There was a fantastic element of luck involved. We know now that they spotted him as he left his apartment that evening. Instead of trying to follow and taking a chance on losing him, they decided to set up a roadblock on the cruiseway leading to the field. Why they thought he might be going there, we will probably never know."

"Where did they get the neutralizer, Lloyd?"

"I don't know, sir. We are working on that. We have known for some time that there were a few bootleg units in circulation. Perhaps they got hold of one of those."

"I don't suppose you've overlooked the possibility that they obtained an FIA unit?"

"No, sir. In fact, in view of what nearly happened when Thad was in Washington, we have to consider that as a real possibility."

"I hope this has not changed his mind. The Russians are beginning to hint that we will use this as an excuse to cancel our understanding with them."

"Have they selected their representative yet?"

"Yes. They picked a woman."

"A woman? That means they—"

"Yes, I think we can presume she is a spy. That's the way they operate. If she is young and pretty, I think you can be sure of it. That gives them a tactical advantage, wouldn't you say? The only woman with a crew of three men on a long voyage."

"What about the U.S. representative Yan Oxhufwud? Is there anything I should know about him?"

"No, Lloyd. Absolutely nothing. He is a first-class space pilot and, incidently, an accomplished pianist. He was a logical choice for the assignment. His mission will not be the same as yours."

"And my orders, sir?"

"You must never let Thad Stone return to earth. How you do it is your affair, but he must not come back. I'm sorry, Lloyd—there is no other way."

"You ask a lot, sir. I have become rather attached to that young man."

"I'm sorry, Lloyd," the President said again. "And if you ever weaken—I know my orders won't mean much out there—I ask you to remember that earth's future could depend upon how well you carry out your assignment."

"I'll try to remember that, sir," Lloyd said, turning the view set off. Was there a time, he wondered, when his job had only involved problem-solving with no moral side issues? If keeping Thad in space meant killing him, would he be able to do it? That was a decision, he knew, that he could not make until the moment arrived. In any event his most immediate concern was to reestablish contact with Thad. He was thinking about the problem when he received a call from Thad.

"I understand you have been trying to reach me, Mr. Coleman," Thad said. There was no sign of his wound of two weeks ago.

"Yes, I have, Thad. I can't tell you how sorry I am about Laura. I was always fond of her. The President asked me to convey his sympathy."

"Is that all?"

"No, that is not all. I hope this tragedy has not changed your plans."

"It has."

"Surely you don't think the government had anything to do with it?"

"Where did they get the neutralizer?"

"We're looking into that, Thad."

"You need not bother. The FIA agent who furnished it is no longer living."

"Thad, you can't go around ignoring judicial process like that. We could have handled it."

"Can't I? I've decided to go back to my old methods, Mr. Coleman. From here on out I make and enforce my own rules." There was a hard, flinty sound in his voice that Lloyd had only glimpsed before.

"You couldn't enforce your own rules even if you wanted to, Thad. You're not that strong yet. You still need us."

"Are you sure, Mr. Coleman? I want you to pass the word along that any aircraft coming within twenty miles of the field will be destroyed immediately. And if you doubt me, I suggest you take a fix on the Martian ship. It is equipped with an automatic weapons system and it is in stationary orbit over the field. As for the fence itself—you may try it if you wish."

"I'll take your word for it, Thad. Nobody wants to harm you—at least no sane person. But what about your pledge to the President? Are you going to stay here now?"

"No. I intend to leave as soon as possible. Probably in two months."

"And the representatives who were selected to go with you?"

"They may come, if they like. I gave the President my word. You also, Mr. Coleman. But I want you all inside the field right away. I'll give you two days."

"We'll be there, Thad."

"Very well. Goodnight, Mr. Coleman." Thad switched the view screen off.

After he had called the President to relay the latest development, Lloyd took an elevator to the bar on the top floor and ordered a double scotch. Thad had changed. He was obviously bitter. In such condition he could be extremely dangerous. And for the first time Lloyd felt that he could, if necessary, bring himself to kill Thad Stone. He thought about that for a moment, and then ordered another double scotch. He had made up his mind. There would be no further indecision. But first he would get drunk.

CHAPTER TEN

As they waited for Thad to arrive, Lloyd lit a cigarette and stood looking out the circular window to the star ship below. As used to the sight as he was, it still took his breath away to see it. As big as a city block, as black as ebony, as brilliant as a pearl—it was a beautiful but strangely frightening thing to see. Its sleek lines bespoke power and speed. Basic to the ship's design were three radically new and untried theories. Nobody knew yet if the ship—or any physical object—could exceed the speed of light. Even if that were theoretically possible, would Thad's propulsion theory work? It was known that the ship's power was based upon the energy released acting as an accelerator for the energy not yet released. But even if acceleration was unlimited, they could not hope to complete their investigation in one lifetime unless the anti-acceleration chamber inside the ship was successful in producing a counter force to neutralize the acceleration forces exerted upon the ship.

Tomorrow they would have the answers. There was to be no advance testing. Thad was either sure of the ship's capabilities, or else in his impatience he was willing to take any risk. Tomorrow there would be no turning back. They would either pass into oblivion or else embark on the most incredible journey known to man. How casually he had seized upon the chance to leave this earth to explore the galaxy. Lloyd felt that the odds were against success, and yet—such is the nature of man—that had he known for a fact that the odds were one hundred to one against survival, he would have elected to take that chance. A galaxy awaited, and there was something out there. There had to be.

"What's keeping him?" Wally Spencer asked with irritation. Wally Spencer had been biting his nails during their two month stay inside the fence. Thad had insisted that all communications be severed with the outside world, and Wally had been unable to guide the financial empire he had helped Thad to build. The star ship had created a heavy drain upon the cash reserves of the holding company that managed Thad's enterprises. The one-half billion dollars paid by

the United States and Russia for the Martian ship had proved to be inadequate. The two hundred million dollars paid for the hair restorer formula was also exhausted, and Thad had begun to tap his last resources.

"He'll be here," Yan Oxhufwud said. Yan was a handsome Swede who had graduated from the United States Astronaut Academy with one of the highest grade records in history. In the seven years since graduation, he had compiled an admirable record in the Space Corps. He had been the leader of the seven man crew that made the first successful landing on a Saturn moon, and already an astroid had been named in his honor. Their two month's stay inside the fence had been particularly trying to Yan, Lloyd realized, because Thad had given them no instruction on the ship. He had not even permitted them inside it yet. Yan's impatience to be gone probably came as much from his eagerness to try the ship's controls as it did from his desire to explore the galaxy.

"Thad Stone has been a very busy man," Sondra Petrovich said. "We must not expect him to adjust his schedule to ours. After all the success of our mission depends entirely upon his talents." She was young, and she was beautiful, and she undoubtedly was a spy; yet Lloyd could not help liking her. The Russians had made an excellent choice for the assignment. She spoke flawless English, was a trained cosmonaut, and possessed the emotional stability the trip would require. Of the four of them, she was the only one who had voiced no criticism of Thad during their enforced inactivity of the past two months.

It was strange, though, that she and Yan should have developed for each other such an immediate and intense dislike. Was it because each realized the other was a spy? For there was no doubt in Lloyd's mind Yan had orders direct from the President with respect to the ship, and it would not surprise him at all if those orders did not bear a remarkable similarity to the orders the Russians had given Sondra Petrovich. Or was there some other reason for their mutual hostility?

From his station at the window, Lloyd saw Thad emerge from the star ship, pass through the workmen, and head for the control tower in which the conference room was located. He was dressed in the coveralls that the other workmen wore, but even at this distance there was no mistaking the man. The workmen who were loading the supplies onto the ship paused as he walked by. It was a mark of their respect for

him. Thad's success with the workmen was almost unbelievable. Over twenty thousand men were involved on the project, and there probably was not a one of them from the most highly trained engineer to the least skilled laborer, who was not willing to put in a fourteen-hour day to complete the ship on schedule. Their enthusiasm for the project transcended their natural pride in being a part of such an exciting undertaking—it involved a high degree of personal loyalty to Thad. It was as though they had adopted his ambitions as their own. Yet it was more than that, Lloyd realized. Thad's dedication to his task had created in them some kind of an emotional response, some pride in accomplishment perhaps, that they had lacked when putting in a four-hour shift in an automated factory. Thad was *creating* something, and they were proud to be a part of it.

This was to be the first meeting any of them had had with Thad since the day they came inside the fence. Lloyd would like to have known if Thad's indifference toward them came from bitterness, disinterest, or from the fact that he had been working so hard. For the past two months Thad had spent nearly twenty hours a day working on the ship. He had personally supervised every step of the assembly of the power system. He had trusted the quality control machines on the rest of the ship, but not on the power and guidance systems. Lloyd hoped Thad's preoccupation with the ship explained his failure to meet with them until today.

When Thad arrived, Lloyd introduced him to Yan Oxhufwud and Sondra Petrovich, and they all gathered around the conference table.

"We leave tomorrow morning at six o'clock," Thad said abruptly. "There are no weight limitations on what you may carry, but space will be somewhat restricted. Each of you will have a nine-by-twelve foot room. In addition there is a passenger storage room that is twelve by twenty. Spacesuits, food, medicines, weapons, and other supplies of that nature have already been provided for you. I would advise you to give some thought to your wardrobes. We shall probably be gone several years, and the climates may vary considerably. Any questions?"

"Yes!" Three voices spoke simultaneously.

"Very well. Miss Petrovich?"

"Will we be permitted to contact our governments before we leave? My government will want to know what has hap-

pened. Not having heard from me for two months, they may be quite alarmed."

"I see no reason why any of you cannot send any messages you wish now. I blocked communications because I did not want the workmen to be influenced by outside judgments."

"What about the Martian ship, Mr. Stone?" Sondra Petrovich asked. "It was part of our agreement that the plans would be made available to my government."

"A set of plans has already been delivered to the Russian and American ambassadors, Miss Petrovich. As for the Martian ship itself, as soon as we orbit in the morning, I shall radio the automatic controls and send it into the sun. I do not want the ship's weapons system made public, and I have no time to dismantle it."

"What about our training program?" Yan Oxhufwud asked. "Shouldn't we all be able to operate the star ship in case something should happen to you?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Yan," Thad said, "but a twelve-year-old child could learn to operate this ship in two hours time. I'll show you the controls after we are on board."

"But what about guidance?" Yan insisted.

"The ship is equipped with a scanner that can memorize the relative positions of billions of stars. The biggest problem there is in knowing where you want to go, but you will not have to concern yourself with that. I shall determine our destination. Should anything happen to me, you may always return to earth by merely pressing a sequence of buttons that I will post in the control room."

"One other question, Mr. Stone. Will the thing work? I mean do you really think we can travel faster than the speed of light?"

"If my theory is correct," Thad said, "there will be no limit to our speed or distance—no limit at all."

"And if it is not correct—?"

"Then we shall probably pass out of existence."

"Can you tell us anything about our destination, Mr. Stone?" Sondra asked. "My government and its people would be most interested."

"Our first destination is a star cluster some twenty light years away. I am seeking, as you probably know, inhabited planets. We will be exploring planets circling suns similar to our own. More than that, I cannot tell you at this time. We shall probably learn more as we go along."

"And if we find intelligent life?" Lloyd spoke for the first time.

"Then we shall make contact. As you know, the ship carries a small skipper in its belly. I plan to leave the star ship in stationary orbit and to conduct planetary exploration and landings with the skipper. You all know that my mission is personal. I do not plan on spending much time on the less advanced planets. Our most immediate objective will be to find a world whose technology includes a star drive and that may have knowledge of the race I am seeking."

"Do you really think such worlds exist?" Yan asked. His eyes were shining.

"Yes, I am convinced they do."

"Think of the advances our science could make if your theory is correct!" Sondra said. "We could bring back a treasure load of information."

"We will bring back nothing except the knowledge you can absorb in your own mind," Thad said. "This is not a scientific expedition. Nor do I expect you to find the people on other worlds eager to make their own progress available to you. I would advise you all to study your purpose well in attempting this voyage with me, for that purpose will have to sustain you for years to come and possibly for hundreds of light years away from your own sun."

"Since we are all risking our lives to go with you, I think you can assume that we are willing to accept any limitations you wish to place upon us," Yan said.

"Good. Any other questions?"

"Why did you name the ship *The Witchfinder*?" asked Sondra.

"A personal whim," Thad said. "Anything else?"

"I have a request," Yan said. "We will be gone a long time. Do you think there would be room for a piano on board? I'm going to miss that baby-grand piano."

"I have no objections," Thad said. "I neglected to mention that there will be a recreation room in the central portion of the ship. You may install it there, if you like. There will also be a rather extensive selection of books, music, and view tapes. We will probably have to spend more time on the ship than on other worlds. Boredom could be a problem."

"I was going to ask about my clothes," Sondra said. "Should I stick to standard cosmonaut uniforms or are dresses permitted?"

"Use your own judgment," Thad said. "If you would

rather wear dresses, then wear dresses. The gravity will be earth normal minus one fourth, and the temperature on board ship will be controlled. Any other questions?"

"Yes," Wally Spencer said. "Yes, what about the company?"

"What about the company, Wally?"

"You can't just let the company wither away. For two years I've sat back and watched you drain its assets into this project. Now your job is completed, but what about your obligations to the company?"

"The company has served its purpose, Wally. It has financed my ship."

"Yes, it has served your purpose, but what about my purpose? You never did have any feeling for the company, Thad. I've poured my soul into it, but it doesn't mean a thing to you. It was just a way of making money."

"There won't be much left, Wally. Less than twelve million dollars after we've paid the workmen their bonuses."

"Their contracts did not call for any bonus," Wally said. "I don't see why we have to give each man a five thousand dollar bonus. After all—"

"Wally, don't argue this point with me. My mind is made up. Ask for something else."

"What about the patents then?"

"What do you want?"

"Everything. Did you know that engineering has identified over one hundred patentable ideas in your construction process alone? And the scanner—that opened up a whole new field of optical science."

"What else, Wally?"

"Well, there's the baltac—"

"No. The baltac is limited. It belongs to whoever can take it."

"The star drive?"

"No."

"The computer systems?"

"All right, Wally, you can have the rest. I'll sign the patent rights over to the holding company and give you a proxy to vote my stock. Is that what you wanted?"

"That's what I wanted," Wally said smiling.

"Then if there's nothing more, I'll see you all in the morning. You'd better contact my loading foreman to make arrangements to get your things on board. I suggest we meet at the ship at five o'clock. Good afternoon."

As Thad rose to leave, he motioned Lloyd aside and said, "Lloyd, I'm glad you are coming along. I hope you know that."

"I'm pleased to hear it, Thad. I was wondering if you'd rather I didn't."

"I may need you on this trip—more than you realize. I'm counting on you to keep an eye on those two for me. Well, see you in the morning, Lloyd," he said as his elevator arrived.

Lloyd could not have been more jarred if the building had collapsed beneath his feet. Thad guessed then that the others were not merely observers or ambassadors. Only his long years with the FIA erased the surprise from his face as he returned to the conference room where Yan and Sondra were hastily composing a final message to their governments.

Did he have a final message for his President, his nation, or his world? What could he say? Dear Mr. President, I know you are counting on me to save the world from the disease of genius, and I understand perfectly how you feel. But someone else has just now told me he is counting on me, Mr. President, and somehow the odds don't seem even. I leave aside the fact that his biggest fault appears to be that he was born. I won't mention, sir, that he is a human being with human emotions and a compelling loneliness—because I know you will weigh that against what you consider to be the best interests of the world, and the scales just won't balance. Nor will I argue that the real threat comes from lunatics and crackpots like that bunch that killed Laura—because I know you'll tell me that that cannot be changed, that the world will always have its quota of crackpots, and that we have to learn to live with them. I could mention that I have come to love him like my own son, but you would probably consider that irrelevant. And so, Mr. President, I shall not write you at all because I'm just a little sick from the thing you have asked me to do.

Lloyd got no sleep that night. Tomorrow would be the beginning of a fantastic search. It would be like looking for a particular grain of sand in the Sahara Desert. And the knowledge that each of the four who were to make the trip was in direct opposition to each other did nothing to relieve his anxiety. At least, he thought, it promises to be an interesting voyage.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hear me, oh men of Aelna, hear what I say. For am I not Unruh of the tribe of Baalom and of the house of Corcan? Did I not stand before you but one moon ago and warn you not to attack them? And did your fangs feel their flesh or your claws rend their bodies? Nay, for their great shell protected them, and they moved among you as so many insects and gathered me, Unruh, into their metal shell so that I might describe to you the glory of these gods.

How shall I tell you? How to describe these gods? On your backs, you mortals. Bare your necks to Unruh. How dare you stand in the presence of Unruh, he whom the gods have chosen to dwell among them. You have been told by the old ones that the gods were gray with claws of gold and fangs of silver. I, Unruh, who have dwelt among the gods, tell you that this is not so. The gods are white, hairless beings, with small fangs and weak claws. What need the gods with fangs and claws? They walk upon their hindfeet and they use their forefeet to work their great magic in the land. The smell of their flesh is the smell of wild things upon the moor when the moon is full. And although my blood ran hot when I smelled their blood, yet I did not attack them, for they were gods, and they moved with confidence.

The house of the gods, who could tell of it? Each god has his own lair where neither cold nor heat can penetrate. When the gods would eat they go to a large den and press upon its metal walls, and food appears magically before them. They take a small egg, which breaks in the mouth and flavors their food. When the gods would drink, they press upon the wall and water appears.

How great is the wisdom of the gods! From their high home they can peer at a white skin and see how their unworthy subjects do walk upon the earth. I myself have seen this thing. For did I not see the last brail hunt and how Sali drew back from the pack until the brail lay bleeding and powerless to raise its horns? Hear me, oh people of Aelna, for the cowardly Sali was the first to claim the brail's heart as spoil from the hunt. Know then that this has displeased the

gods, and they speak through their servant Unruh. Sali shall leave the tribe and dwell forever upon the plains. None shall help him in the hunt. His food shall be of the small things that burrow in the ground. It is the will of the gods.

And why come the gods among us? This was a great mystery, and many were the tests I passed in unraveling it. First they pretended not to know our language. Finally, when one among them spoke to me, he pretended not to know the tales of the gods. Much time did I spend in answering his questions about the tales of the gods that are handed down to us by the old ones. Why should the gods, who know everything, pretend ignorance of their subjects? Who can answer such a mystery?

It has pleased the gods to give me the answer by indirection. I know now that the gods did test the worthiness of their servant, Unruh. Unruh, has been chosen to speak for the gods. The wisdom that is Unruh's shall belong to Unruh's oldest whelp and to his whelps after him. My words are the words of the gods, and it shall be your law. Now hear the words of Unruh, spokesman of the gods: Hereafter unto Unruh shall belong the heart of the brail. Hereafter Unruh shall not join in the hunt, for Unruh must dwell in the largest lair on the softest furs and think god thoughts. Hereafter unto Unruh shall be brought the tribal women. Unruh shall beget many whelps for the benefit of the tribe. Thus speak the gods.

And the tribe said: There are no gods but The Gods and Unruh speaks for The Gods. Long live Unruh.

But there were two who did not join in the chant. Sali and his young mate Alaak, who had combined to draw first blood on their last brail hunt, trotted quietly off to the moors. Alaak's whelps would soon be born and there was much to teach them of gods and of men.

I thought never to see an elf. Oh, they are sly ones, those elves. They would have tricked me had I not been so careful. But I was on to all their tricks. I had heard the old tales and knew better than to trust them for a moment. Who would have thought I would be the one to catch one? I was never very lucky.

I was in the woods that lie to the north of our village, seeking firewood. I had gathered a few tons of good dry wood and had tied it into a neat bundle for easier carrying when I bethought myself of the nice turfles that grow near the bluffs. My mother really knows how to fix a turfle. She rolls

them in pok seed and fries them in dippen grease. I decided to look for ripe tuffles.

Halfway to the bluffs there is a small stream that in places is six or seven feet deep. I rolled up my leggings above my knees before wading across. Mother's always cross when I get my pants wet. It was just then that I saw the elves. They had been bathing in the stream. They must have seen me at the same time, for they began to scamper in all directions. I might have caught more of them except I thought first to catch the one that lagged behind. He dodged around so skillfully that by the time I managed to seize him, the others had disappeared into that metal chamber the elves are said to travel in.

I held up the one that I had caught. Oh, but he was a slippery one. He wiggled and squirmed every which way, but I kept a firm grip. If you catch an elf, you must never let him go until he has paid his price. This is the way you have to treat an elf they say. Of course, not everyone believes in elves. My mother and father, for instance. But I have always believed—and now I had a real one in my hands! I was so excited I must have squeezed too hard, for he yelled as though in pain. I relaxed my grip. I did not wish to harm him.

I waited then for what he would do next. He would try to trick me, of course. An elf will never part with his treasure if he can help it. Sure enough he began to talk to me in some funny gibberish-like way. But I paid no attention to him. He was not going to fool me that way. That was an old elves' trick. I kept telling him what he must do to gain his freedom. I knew he could understand me well enough if he wanted to.

After awhile, I went back to where I had dropped my wood and started to fix myself a fire, for the sun was going down. Only that turned out to be quite a problem because I could not trust him not to slip off someplace, and I needed both hands to start the fire. I tried to tie him up, but the minute I turned my back, he had slipped half the knots and very nearly got away. Well, I thought, if that is the way you want it, we will do without a fire tonight.

Then he did a strange thing. He gestured toward the wood as though he would start the fire. I put him down, but I watched him closely. Who could tell what he might do next? As I watched, he took a small metal object and pointed it at the woodpile. As quick as a blink, the wood was burning.

I was so astonished I almost forgot to catch him up again—which undoubtedly was what he had expected me to do.

All night long we sat there by the fire. I keep talking to him, trying to get him to tell me where he has hidden his treasure, but he would not answer me. Toward morning, I guess I may have talked about other things. I had never stayed away from home all night before. And I was getting hungry. I thought about my mother's fried turfles until my stomach tightened in longing. And still I was no closer to his secret.

Morning came, and at last he spoke. I guess he had decided that game was not getting him anyplace with me. At first he pretended to speak only a little, but as the morning wore on he abandoned that pretense and began to speak real Gantorese.

Where is your treasure? I asked. What treasure? he asked. All elves have treasure, I said, and if necessary we shall stay here another day and another night until you have made me rich. I know the ways of the little people.

At this he seemed greatly excited. Are you often visited by the little people? he asked. Not often, I said. Many have claimed to have seen them, but I am the first to have caught one in a long time. And I intend not to let you go until you have given me your treasure.

And do the little people always give treasure? he asked. Not always, I said. Only when you catch one. Then if you keep them long enough, they will give you treasure. But you must not let them go.

I see, he said. And what treasure must I give you if you are to let me go?

Why as for that, I said, I cannot say. For who can know the ways of the little people. Once, long ago, they say that an elf gave a stone that glowed in the dark (although I have never seen this), and another gave an image-maker that made paper pictures. Another gave an enlarger that brought objects close to the eye when looked through.

I can see, my elf said, that you are not to be tricked. Take me back to my carrier, and I will give you a great treasure.

You must promise, I said.

I promise, he said.

I took him back to his metal chamber then, for every one knows that an elf will not break a promise. In a few minutes he was back. He brought a funny looking thing with him.

Is this your treasure? I asked.

It is, he said.

What is it? I asked.

It is a sun catcher, he said. During the day you must place it where the sun will strike this dial. At night you must bring it back inside. The sun that you have captured will then warm you the whole night through.

As I said I was never very lucky—that is, I did not use to be. But that was before I captured one of the little people. Now folks come from miles around to see my suncatcher. Yes, you might say I am pretty lucky after all. I never did like to carry firewood.

There is a madness in the land. Had you noticed? The psychosis has spread from the capital city. Everyone has been affected by it. Especially the younglins. Our ancient customs are in danger. Our way of life is changing. Can any one doubt it?

It began in the twelfth night of the season of three moons.

The younglins had already adopted summer metabolism. Most of the elders had not finished molting, and for a few weeks more must remain in sanctuary behind closed doors.

The madness started at the marketplace. We know that now. My own son was among the first affected. I should have realized that something was amiss when he invaded the privacy of my sanctuarium. His first words confirmed my worse suspicions.

He had been to the marketplace, he said, searching for dried plors to augment our dwindling supply of candied yadobs when he saw a flame in the sky above and heard a roar like wind whistling through the reeds. The flame came, he said, from a metal object shaped like a naguk egg. As he watched, the metal object lowered to the earth on the plain outside the city gate.

Ah, son, beware, I said, already alarmed by his strange story. Please to be more accurate in your details. The object was not oblong as you have described it, nor was it made of metal. Surely you know that a fortillion is not made of metal nor is it shaped like a naguk's egg. And the flame you have described came not from its tail but consumed the ship's whole body. For surely you realize that a metal fortillion cannot drift upon the wind. Nor can a fortillion long endure the taste of flame. Moreover, you neglected entirely to

describe the sails that permitted the ship to sail upon the wind.

But, father, he said, the object *was* made of metal, and in size it was as long as the Empress' palace. And when it had landed, the flame ceased to be and the metal object developed a small opening. Inside it was hollow, as I could plainly see.

I realized then the extent of my poor son's lunacy. I suppose, I said, that next you will say that there were human beings inside the metal shell.

There were, he said. Not only I but the other younglins saw them. That is to say, they looked human, except they had no hair upon their bodies and their nostrils projected outward from their faces in a most curious manner. Also they have five fingers on each hand.

Now indeed did I appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Not only my own son but the other younglins had caught this strange new malady. There was always a certain amount of madness, of course, among the younglins during the mating season, but the mating season would not begin until the time of the two moons. There had to be some other explanation for this strange behavior. So great was my concern that I toyed with the idea of going to the Empress' palace and taking the matter up with her. But I knew that I could not bring myself to do it. My pelt was still blotched and spotted and I could never withstand the humiliation. There had to be some other solution.

You have imagined all of this, I told my son. I know you think you saw the things you have described, but since such things cannot be, it is obvious that you have imagined everything. Tell me, what else did you think you saw?

I thought I saw four beings come from the metal shell, father. Three were male and one was female, I think, because she appeared to have two mammary glands on her chest. I imagined then that one of them began to learn our language and that in the space of four days and nights was able to converse freely with us.

And what did they tell you, these men who have taught a metal object to fly? I asked, hoping to jar my son's mind back to sanity by encouraging him to display the full measure of his delusion.

Then, father, the one who so quickly learned our language asked us many questions about our land and about ourselves. He asked if other iron objects had landed here. He

said they were from a world that circled a star so distant that we could not see it. He said there were many other worlds and many other suns. He said, that on some of these, man had learned to fly in metal ships at a speed so fast the eye could not follow. In such a ship they had traveled to our land.

Now you surely see how your mind has lured you into a devious path, I said. For all men know there is no other world. Go back to the marketplace, and say no more about this matter. Soon mating season will be upon us, and you must prepare your lair if you hope to win your wife this season. You will forget this nonsense soon enough, I venture, when you have to dig for your own yadobs. He started to speak, but I would hear no more. This matter will pass, I thought, with the coming of two moons.

Alas, I was mistaken. Molting time has passed. Mating season has come and gone. It is the time of no moon, and there is a chill upon the land. The elders are troubled and shake their heads without speaking when passing in the streets. At night the young men look at the stars and there is wonder in their eyes. When they meet, they talk only of the metal ship. One has said that a liquid that burns could be used to push the metal through the air. Another speaks of wings like those of a bird. Our young men have become dreamers.

There is a madness in the land.

They came, they said, from a faraway planet. They came to our chief city because experience had taught them that there they could most quickly find information concerning other space travelers. One of them learned to speak our language, and he was, I suppose, the most remarkable among them. But one of them came to us already speaking a language we could understand, a language of incredible beauty. The song he played was the song he had written during the course of their journey.

Night after night we came to the Hall of Arts to listen. The instrument on which he played was called a piano. We have recorded his concert, and there are few among you who have not heard it. But I was there for that first concert—when the tide of his music swept through the hushed hall and swayed us like ripened wheat caught by the wind. How shall I describe to you that moment, the beauty and revelation of that music?

You must remember that they had arrived only four days

before. There were those among us who were jealous of their science and suspicious of their motives. Our biological differences were magnified by lack of a common language.

There were two thousand of us in the hall. The lights were darkened so that we could attune our minds to the music. Then the utter quiet in the great hall was broken by the first clear sounds from the piano, and we were carried by the music to a distant land. It swelled in our ears, capturing our minds and our emotions. We felt the great intensity and drive of this race from the planet Earth, the raw power of their restless search for their destiny. We felt their intelligence, their artistry, their brief removal from the primitive. We followed the first fleeting idea in the music for the spaceship, we caught the resolution that sprang from the scientific genius of one man, the ominous, repeated movements of his motivation. We shared their exhilaration as the ship moved into space. We felt the endless, cold blackness of space. We glimpsed the strange planets they had visited. And through it all we felt the strong purpose of one man's quest. What he was seeking, we could not know, for the music made a mystery of it. But the cold, hard determination of the man chilled our blood and made us shiver in the night wind, and we were glad we were not the object of that search.

When the song was finished, there was a pause, and then a brief flutter of wings that grew into a roar. I myself waved my wings until I could no longer raise them. Four cauldron guardsmen swept downward, seized him, and bore him with them into the air, above the hall, and over the city in triumph. We all followed on wings made light with joy.

From that time on we did not fear the Earthmen. The one called Thad, I am told, was a man of incredible science and intelligence; and the rest, I am sure, were people of courage and daring. Yet always will we remember Yan—the great Yan who had the courage to lay bare his soul for an alien audience.

They come among us with their new philosophies, these strange beings from another world. We set about to learn their language. One of them speaks our language, and we cease our efforts. We are delighted. We engage in philosophy with the learned one.

But what is this new concept called "time"? He wishes to show us. He gives us a device called a watch. He shows us how the large hand moves around the circle and how the

small hand moves slower. We perceive that one hand moves faster than another. This we perceive, but what has this to do with time? He tells us that the hands measure time. When the hand moves a certain distance, a certain amount of time is measured. Time we agree is movement. We are pleased. We have learned what is time.

But he is not satisfied with our conclusion. Time is more than the movement of small hands within a circle. There is a greater mystery here. Do we not perceive that events follow one another in sequence? Yes, of course, we do. Time is an interval that separates two events. Ah, so. An interval is space, and that we understand. But again he indicates that we fail to grasp his greater meaning. Time, he says, is the existence that passes between two events. We listen closely, for obviously his words are full of latent meanings.

The master philosopher turns to examples. Are we not born? he asks. We admit that we are. Do we not die? Indeed we do and only once. Time, he explains, passes from birth to death. By now we are not so quick to assume that we have attained his wisdom. Is time then life? we ask. He does not appear pleased. He would like to ask us questions, he explains, about other times. But unless we learn to think in terms of time, he cannot. This we understand. For we cannot talk of time while we remain ignorant of its philosophy. The strange ones depart. We are unhappy. We are always unhappy when the strange ones from other planets depart.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Pain was all he had ever known. There may have been a time when existence contained more than this blinding pain, but, if so, the memory of that existence had been blotted from his mind. His total consciousness now was centered in the pain that throbbed unmercifully in his body and came to rest in his mind. His brain had become a center for registering pain. Nothing more. Was there a time when he knew where he was? What he was? Who he was? Perhaps. But no longer. Now he was an organism in pain. Pain was all he knew. Pain was all he had ever known.

He was an organism in pain, and he had long since lost the

ability to think or reason, but like all tortured creatures he knew with unreasoned certainty that the pain would end. There would come an end to feeling, to suffering, to being. He sensed that the end was near. Soon it would be over. Soon he would feel nothing. Soon now.

Like a sound from a void, like a whisper from some long dead ancestor, he heard a voice shouting. The voice was urgent and intrusive. He heard the words as if in a dream, but he did not understand them.

"Lloyd! Lloyd! Listen to me. You must not think of the pain. Listen to me. Please, Lloyd! For just a moment listen to me. I can help you. Try to hear what I say. Please try. I can end the pain."

Soon now there would be an end of feeling. Soon now. Already the pain was becoming less real. Now it would fade and a mind that existed only to feel pain would feel nothing more. The voice was still shouting. He would not listen to it. Instinctively he knew the voice did not want the pain to end.

"Lloyd, can you hear me? You must concentrate. You can free your mind from your body. I can help you if you will try. Try, Lloyd. Try to blot out the pain."

He heard the words this time, and in a vague way he understood them. Some one did not want him to die. Some cruel person wanted him to continue to feel. He would not listen to him.

"Lloyd—this is Thad. Can you hear me? Can you understand what I am saying?"

"Go away," he said. The pain was returning now. "Go away. I do not want to live."

"I can help you, Lloyd. Listen. Let your mind go free. Let your mind outside your body. Listen. No, don't go away, Lloyd. Hear me. Let your mind float up from your body. You can escape the pain. You can free your mind."

"Go away," he said again. "I hate you—you have made the pain come back."

"Lloyd, you must listen to me. Open your eyes. Open your eyes and see what you are. That's better. See your body hangs limply against the wall. They are torturing your body. You must leave your body, or they will destroy your mind as well. Your body has become a torture chamber. You must get outside your body."

"I can't. I can't. The pain. . . ."

"There is no pain. Only your body feels pain. Think how pleasant it is to leave your body hanging on the wall,

to float off and leave your body hanging. You can escape if you let your mind go free."

"I want to, but I cannot. . . ."

"Yes, you can, Lloyd. You can leave your body. You can free yourself. . . ."

Rage and pain blended with hope and miraculously it was so. Could this be death? No, not death. For his mind was aware—more aware and more alive than ever before. Beneath him in the large room he could see two bodies hanging from the wall. One was his and the other Thad. A few minor priests were still there, but it was obvious that they only awaited the final death. The ceremonial aspects of the torture had been completed and the high priests, undoubtedly, had returned to other, less boring, duties.

He was aware of a detachment from reality that erased his bewilderment. He felt no fear—only curiosity. He wished to explore this new environment. By a slight effort of will he found that he was closer to the two bodies hanging on the wall. The one that had belonged to him was breathing quietly now. Its weight was suspended by the iron manacles on its wrists. Poor bruised body, he thought, to have hung so long on a wall. He wondered what would happen to him—the real him—if his body should stop functioning. Not that he worried about that. He sensed somehow that his body would not die without him.

He turned his attention back to Thad's body. It was a lean, hard body that had withstood its punishment better than his own. Looking closely, he could see the marks where Thad had struggled to free his arms of the manacles. His body was breathing free and easy, and Lloyd guessed that Thad too had abandoned his body.

There seemed little to do. Nothing would persuade him to return to that pain-ridden body. He would leave. He would return to the temple where their troubles had started. He would explore the city. He set his mind to leave—

Wait!

It was not a voice—not a sound! It was a thought.

Thad? he thought.

Yes, it is I.

Thad. What has happened, Thad?

I am not sure. Something I did not think possible. I cannot explain it.

This is real, isn't it? I mean, I'm not imagining all this?

Yes, it is real, but I cannot explain it. I did not expect

this. I could cut off the pain, of course. I have often—in training my mind—shut off my body. But I never experienced this before.

But you told me I could do it. You knew!

No, I meant to help you by hypnosis. I invented the whole thing. When you reacted as you did, I thought at first you had died. I could not reach you at all. But when I saw your body was still breathing, I wondered—

But how can we talk?

I don't know.

Do you think this would be possible without the pain?

I don't know.

What do we do now?

We wait. Eventually they must tire of waiting for us to die.

But why should they try to kill us? They were friendly enough at first.

That was my fault. I should have studied their customs better before tackling the temple. I was too impatient.

That temple. Where do you think it came from?

I am not sure, but I believe that the temple—or the ship—belonged to their ancestors. The old writings were vague, but if my guess is correct this is but one of two inhabited planets circling this sun. The other was the mother planet and had reached a high stage of development. Then for some reason, which is left obscure by the writings I have examined, all commerce between the two worlds ceased.

Then we are making progress. We have found an advanced world.

Perhaps. I am not sure what we may find on the mother planet. Whatever happened there occurred almost four thousand years ago.

Then these superstitious people must be the descendants of a once advanced race.

I think so.

We must go there, Thad.

Our most immediate problem is to retrieve our bodies.

I rather enjoy being without mine. Do you think we could exist without them?

I do not know. There is much in this that I cannot understand. Perhaps at some other time the matter can be investigated further.

Is this actually happening? Can this be actually happening? I want to float away over the cities, over the fields. I feel that with a flick of the will I could go anywhere I pleased.

I know. I have had the same urge but we must not yield to it. I am frightened by this. We do not understand it yet. If we leave, we may not be able to return.

I do not need a body. Who knows? Perhaps I may explore the galaxy with my mind.

Stay! It was a command, and he could not ignore it. *Stay!* The thought was more gentle, less compelling.

Let me go, Thad. Let me go. I do not want to return. I want to wander among the stars.

Lloyd, I cannot. You might die.

It is my life. Let me go.

No! Again it was a command.

Why won't you let me go? Why?

I have a special feeling for you, Lloyd. I cannot let you wander to your death.

Lloyd became aware of an emotion that flooded his mind. It was like the voice of a friend from out of the darkness. He yielded to it.

I will return. Tell me what must be done.

We must wait.

And they waited. Hours passed, and the impatient priests still maintained their vigil. At last one approached Thad's body, which continued to breathe evenly. The priest issued an order, and the two bodies were removed from the wall. A high priest was sent for. When he arrived, he examined the silent bodies with obvious consternation. There were only a few priests present.

Now? Lloyd asked.

Not yet. The pain would be almost unbearable to you. Let us wait a while longer.

They waited. Throughout the long night high priests visited the chamber to examine for themselves the phenomenon that they had discovered. There were long discussions among them.

What are they saying? Lloyd asked.

The gods are punishing us for our transgressions by not letting us die. Our sin was so great that death has been denied to us.

What will they do now?

They are going to carry us back to our cells until they decide what to do with us. They do not know yet whether they should announce a miracle to the people.

As their limp bodies were being taken back to the cell where they were first imprisoned, Lloyd discovered that his

mind trailed after his body with no exercise of his conscious will. Perhaps this new awareness was closely associated with the mind from which it originated.

What now? Lloyd asked.

We must return to our bodies.

I do not think I could stand the pain.

Perhaps if I could locate our equipment. . . . There were drugs in the emergency kit that would control the pain.

This is a large building. Even if we could escape from our cells, we would be caught while we looked for our equipment.

Then I must locate it before we return.

I thought you said it might be dangerous to wander.

You must help me. You must guide me back if I get lost. Wait here for me.

Lloyd felt something like a jar to his mind. *Thad!* He called in sudden panic. *Thad!* He sensed that he was alone.

It is all right. I am nearby. I am in the corridor outside the cell.

Be careful, please. Your thoughts are not as strong as before.

I know. You must concentrate. I am going down a long corridor now. There seems to be no one about. Here is a large room. There are a number of people sleeping. Ah, here is something. Two guards before a bolted door. The weapons room. Our equipment is not here. I must go to a different level. Can you read me still?

Thad, come back. Your thoughts are fading. You will be lost.

Just a little farther. Yes, here it is. A small room at street level. Remember the room near the entrance where they searched us? Our clothes and other equipment are there. Lloyd, can you read me? I need your help to get back. I have lost all sense of space.

Yes, come back now. I am here.

Which way?

Below you. Do not try to retrace your steps. Come straight to me. Your thoughts grow stronger. Are you near?

I am here. Be glad that you did not yield to the impulse to leave. Whatever this is, it is closely tied to the physical body. We must return now. Can you stand the pain for a while without crying out?

I will try, Lloyd said. He willed himself to return. With all

his will he fought to get back inside his body. Being born might be something like this. At first there was a dullness, a fuzziness where the mind went numb—and then there was a sudden blinding flash of pain, and he felt his body surround him with an almost intolerable shock. A groan escaped his lips despite his efforts to suppress it.

“Lloyd.”

“Yes?” It was an effort to speak.

“Can you make it?”

“Yes, I think so. But how can we get from the cell?”

“I think I can manage that. But we must get past two guards in the corridor leading to the upper level. Can you walk?”

“Yes. There appears to be no real damage. My arms feel like lead weights though, and my whole body feels like it had been crushed by a steam-roller.”

Thad was working on the lock. In a few minutes he looked up. “Damn,” he said. “Damn a people whose science is so far in advance of their politics. This lock is more complex than I had thought. See if you can find some stronger straws.”

In the darkness Lloyd felt among their bedding for straws that did not bend easily. “Here’s something,” he said. It was a small twig with a little snag hook on one end. “Can you use this?”

“Yes, I think that should do it,” Even as he spoke, Thad was easing the door open. “Walk softly now,” he cautioned as they entered the corridor outside their cell. “The two guards are just around the corner.”

The recessed lights, which were spaced at forty-foot intervals, cast dim shadows on the wall as the two men crept slowly down the hallway. Lloyd had to suppress a groan with each step, for his tortured muscles had found their voice and were protesting his inhuman treatment of them. They came to a turn in the corridor. Thad climbed up and disconnected one of the recessed lights. They were in darkness again. Lloyd heard the slow, uncertain steps as one of the guards came to investigate. There was the sound of flesh against flesh, a sound of something falling, and then silence. After a moment, the other guard called to his companion. Even Lloyd, whose knowledge of the local tongue was limited, understood the questioning alarm in his voice. Silence still. Silence until Lloyd fancied he could hear his own heartbeat. The guard came forward. He was far more cautious than his companion. He held his zip-gun at the ready, and he avoided

the darkened area in the corridor. The zip-gun would fire a dozen darts as quickly as the guard could pull the trigger, and Lloyd knew that at anything less than a hundred paces the temple guards were deadly shots. He had seen them practice often enough in the weeks before they had fallen from favor with the priesthood.

Lloyd acted without planning. He groaned aloud. He fell to his knees, and began crawling toward the zone of light where the guard had stiffened to attention, his eyes peering into the darkness, fingers on the trigger. When he reached a place on the flooring where his naked body began to cast a shadow, Lloyd permitted himself to relax and to pitch forward on his face. The guard said something. It sounded like an order—or a warning. Lloyd remained motionless. The order was repeated. Lloyd felt the hairs on the nape of his neck rise as though brushed by the hand of death, but he did not move. He heard footsteps as the guard approached him suspiciously. He forced his body to remain still. There was a pause, and then the steps edged closer. Lloyd felt his spine contract involuntarily as it prepared to receive the steel dart. Then he heard a sound like bare feet on stone followed by an impact and a warning cry only half completed.

“Are you all right, Lloyd?”

“Yes, I’ll be okay just as soon as I convince my nervous system that my spine’s not punctured.”

“I’m beginning to have considerable respect for the FIA, Lloyd. That took a lot of courage.”

“If we get out of this damned place alive, I’ll make you put that in writing. But now let’s get to that first-aid kit. I don’t know how much longer I can keep from passing out.”

They hurried down the long corridor, keeping close to the wall where the light was dimmest. Twice they had to crouch in the shadows to let a guard pass. The stairwell leading to the upper level was well-lighted. They ran up the stairs and into the corridor leading to the right. They paused before the third door while Thad quickly picked the lock. When they were inside, Thad opened the emergency kit and gave Lloyd two white pills. Almost immediately the pain subsided.

“How long will these last?” Lloyd asked.

“Several hours.”

“Aren’t you going to take any?”

“No, I can control the pain without them. You may need the rest before this night is through.”

They dressed hurriedly, and then Thad switched on his belt radio to contact *The Witchfinder*.

"Thad? Where have you been? We've been trying to reach you for three days. Why didn't you call in at the usual check-in time?" Yan sounded concerned.

"I don't have time to go into a long explanation now, Yan. The people have become hostile. We've been in prison for the past three days, and our radios were taken from us."

"What can we do?" The voice belonged to Sondra.

"You can't land the ship in the city without setting the whole damned place on fire. We are going to have to manage to get outside the city to the skipper. We will stay in touch by radio. Keep the ship in stationary orbit. If we make it, we will join you shortly."

"Can't we help you, Thad? The weapons system—"

"No. You might be able to blast a path for us, but I did not equip *The Witchfinder* with a weapons system for use against civilians."

"Thad? Good luck, Thad. You too, Lloyd." The voice belonged to Sondra.

"We might as well stay here until morning," Thad said. "We are two hours from the city gates by foot, and we couldn't get twenty feet outside the building without being recognized. Try to get some sleep."

Lloyd thought sleep would descend like a curtain as soon as he lay down. Instead his mind hovered for a long time in that eerie borderline between wakefulness and sleep where events pass like shadows before the mind.

Yes, there were other worlds. They had learned that in two years. And many worlds, where the conditions were right, harbored intelligent life. Again and again nature had sought and found the human form. Perhaps there was a reason for this. Most of the planets they had found had the same basic chemical building blocks. And in the long run, evolution favored the mammal to the reptile, the warm-blooded to the cold-blooded, animals who bore live offspring to the egg-layers. There were exceptions, of course. They had discovered one planet where the dominant life form was reptilian. But intelligent life was most often humanoid in form and usually not too different from that found on Earth.

How many planets had they visited in the past two years? Lloyd no longer knew. The different planets and their peoples passed before him like a panorama. Young cultures

and cultures that were old before man on Earth had stood erect. Yet until they had discovered this planet, they had found no world that even hinted of commerce between the worlds. The worlds whose technology had advanced enough to include a space drive were apparently very rare—but they did exist. The ship around which the religion of this world was based was proof of that.

Would their search end here? Would they die among these people whose science apparently had regressed from an advanced state and whose politics and religion had been degraded to such a primitive form? Lloyd recalled vividly how quickly they had been branded as heretics after Thad had entered the ship searching for some clue as to its history. No trial. No hearing. Just a judgment by the most high priest. Death by slow torture. Well, perhaps they would learn that Earthmen did not die so easily.

Or perhaps they would die here, and Sondra and Yan could return to Earth with *The Witchfinder*. Except that one of them would not make it. The suspicion those two had always felt for one another had now become open hostility. Each was convinced that the other had orders to take the ship back to his government. And each was right, of course. Lloyd felt sure that—short of murder—there was nothing either would not do to prevent the other from taking the ship. Yet Lloyd was just as sure that neither was capable of murder. Thad must have felt the same way; otherwise he would never have left them in orbit together while they explored this planet with the small ship. He relied upon their mutual distrust to insure the safety of the ship.

Lloyd's racing mind began to slow, and at last sleep came. And with sleep came the nightmares. He was back on the wall—his body screaming its protest at the torture to which it was subjected. When he awoke three hours later, it was dawn. His body was drenched with sweat. He took one of the three white pills he had left and felt the pain subside. Thad was already up and was looking out the window.

"Well, what's the plan?" Lloyd asked.

"A poor one—but the only chance I can think of. I do not know that it will work. I know their language well enough, but do I understand their psychology?"

"What do we do, Thad? The streets are crowded. We won't get outside the door."

"You are right. We cannot hide. And since we cannot

hope to hide, we must do the next best thing. Follow me."

"Are you crazy? The minute we get to the street, they'll have us in chains."

"We have a chance. Follow me—and look proud. Walk like a god."

Thad opened the door and took the corridor leading to the stone steps above the street. For absence of any better choice, Lloyd followed. Walk like a god, Thad had said. How could he walk like a god when his flesh shrank from the mere thought of that stone wall? More than death he feared that terrible wall. Yet he had trained himself to hide fear, to disguise his emotions; and by the time they were in view of the street below, he had forced his body erect and his eyes not to focus on the crowd that formed seemingly from nowhere in front of them. There was a murmur in the crowd. They were not used to seeing those on whom the high priest had pronounced sentence walk away from the stone prison.

One by one, they descended the stone steps. By an effort of will, Lloyd forced himself not to look down as he followed a few steps behind Thad. Thad walked slowly but with measured steps, and he carried himself with contemptuous confidence. Nearer to the crowd—nearer yet, and still the crowd did not give way. Thad was two steps away. At the last moment a narrow path was broken, and Thad passed into the crowd without breaking stride. Lloyd followed into the channel that Thad had made. There was no end of the crowd. Lloyd could maintain his torturously slow stride only by concentrating on the arrogant figure that strolled before him. He had to resist a temptation to turn around, for he sensed that the path through which they passed was closing behind them rapidly.

They came to an intersection in the street. Without hesitating, Thad turned to the right. Toward the temple instead of toward the city gates! Had Thad become confused? Lloyd wanted to correct their direction, but he dared not speak or break his concentration.

The temple lay before them. And there the crowd stopped, for the land surrounding the ship was holy ground, which only the priests might tread, and then only on special ceremonial occasions and after intensive purification. The last fifty feet to the ship seemed unbearably long. Thad did not pause when he reached the ship. In open defiance of religious laws, he mounted the landing platform next to the ship in full view of several thousand people who had gathered

there. Lloyd followed and almost tripped on one of the small steps. Had the crowd noticed? He could feel a thousand eyes upon his every move. It was a relief to turn and face them.

Something held the crowd in check. The strangeness of the whole situation had perhaps stifled their impulse to action. They would not act until something set them off. And to the rear of the crowd, Lloyd saw the catalyst the crowd had been waiting for. The high priests had arrived, and they were led by the most high priest. A ripple passed through the crowd—as though for the first time they realized that they had witnessed sacrilege and failed to correct it. Silence returned as Thad took two steps forward and held his hands outward.

"I am God!" Thad spoke in the local tongue, but Lloyd recognized the words. The priests stopped still as if unable to believe this new sacrilege. *"I am God!"* he repeated.

The silence that followed was total, and into this vacuum Thad began to pour a torrent of words that rang loud and clear to the rear of the crowd. Lloyd could not understand the words, but he could see the effect Thad was having on the people. The language contained many hard, explosive consonants. It was the language of a once science-oriented race.

As Thad spoke, it was as though he had coined his words red-hot from the flames of hell. His voice split the air like thunder. A shudder passed over the crowd. But as he continued to speak, his voice became more sing-song, the rhythm of his speech more regular. And the people began to sway in rhythm to his words, their eyes fixed upon the slender figure on the platform. The priests who had started to work their way toward them, stopped midway and joined the swaying crowd. It was more than the words—there was something in the sing-song voice. Lloyd himself had to fight an impulse to sway. There was a power in that voice that was almost irresistible.

At last there was a pause and then Thad said: "I am God."

"Thou art God!" the crowd screamed.

Unmolested then, they passed through the city and to the small landing ship beyond.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In space, as in war, the most insistent problem can be boredom. Lloyd had discovered that many times during the past two years. This one would not be so bad—just a short hop to a neighboring planet. But they had spent as many as nine weeks on the ship between stops. On the long hops, each fought boredom in his own way.

Earth had become unreal. Lloyd knew intellectually that it still existed, and in a vague way he still missed it. But he no longer thought of it in terms of the home, the city, or even the world he used to know. Now it seemed to him merely a tiny pinprick in the voids of space—just another small planet revolving around another sun. Curious are the mind's adjustments.

Yet a part of him yearned to cling to the old culture. His mind was unprepared for the adjustments he had required of it. The repeated discovery of intelligent—and often humanoid—life had proved a shock to his ego system. The whole concept of the journey challenged the mind's sense of reality. That was the reason, perhaps, that Lloyd kept a diary, which he labeled "reports" and which he dutifully filed in chronological sequence in a small file cabinet in his cabin. He wrote to create for himself the illusion of reality—as though by putting the old familiar words on paper, he could change the unexpected and alien to the known and familiar.

Lloyd finished dictating his report on the last planet, and then glanced idly around the recreation room. Next to the storage room, the recreation room was the largest on the ship. It was equipped with a sound-drown system that, when turned on, allowed its occupants to pursue their own amusements without annoyance to the other passengers. Yan was sitting at the piano at the far side of the room, trying to develop a musical theme that seemed to elude him. Sondra had just finished watching a tape of a Charlie Chaplin movie—her latest discovery—and now was strolling lazily about the room. She was dressed in a black sheath dress that was

calculated to reveal and conceal precisely those portions of her anatomy that Lloyd found most interesting.

She saw him looking at her and said: "Can I get you anything, Lloyd?" She had become quite solicitous of his health since they had returned to the ship.

"No, thank you," Lloyd said trying to resist the little daydream that was shaping itself inside his mind almost against his will. After the others had gone to bed, he could ring her cabin and tell her he was having trouble getting to sleep. She would give him the pill and then lean over to feel his forehead. And then— No. No, it was too absurd. The dream dissolved in midair. You don't slip up on that kind. She was too cool. And besides—damn it—she was a Russian spy—although somehow that fact seemed remote and irrelevant at this time and place. Lloyd watched as she strolled over to the tape storage department near the piano. She was humming an absent-minded tune.

Yan looked up in annoyance. "Do you have to hum over here? I'm trying to get this thing right."

"Then turn on the sound-drown, darling." She did not even turn around.

"You know the sound-drown spoils the resonance. Will you please stop humming that silly tune? It's confusing my melody."

"I don't like that tune anyhow."

"I'm not writing it for you."

She selected a tape from one of the drawers. "In Russia," she said, "our composers composed music and our spacemen explored space."

"This happens to be a United States ship, baby."

"In Russia," she said knowing this prefix infuriated him, "we have a saying: 'A man who pursues two dreams should have long arms.'"

"In America," Yan said, "we build our dreams and send them into space, while other people are sitting around on their fannies making up sayings."

"What a disagreeable egotist you are. Why they ever selected you for this project is a source of official amazement to my government."

"Your selection, on the other hand, was perfectly obvious to us. Perfectly obvious."

"What do you mean by that remark?"

"Oh, come back to earth, baby. You're not fooling any-

body. We all know why you wear those sexy dresses and those sexy bedroom eyes."

"Oh?" There was controlled fury in her voice. Lloyd sensed that, for the first time, she was registering real anger.

"Oh, I know it's not for me, baby. I'm not that much of an egotist. But don't think for one moment you're fooling Thad. He wasn't born yesterday."

"At least," she said pointedly and with ice in her voice, "I don't sleep with aliens."

"Yes, that would bother you, wouldn't it? And do you want to know why it bothers you? I'll tell you why. It's because you're afraid you can't compete. You like the idea of being the only female within a hundred light years. That's the way you had it figured, isn't it? Only it turned out some of the planets had some pretty damned human-like people. And I'll tell you something else: Some of these alien girls really know how to treat a man. They're not trying to prove anything. They're just out for a good time. And when they let go—they really let go."

"Spare me the details, please. You make me sick. You can't even be original. Ever since man stopped beating woman over the head with a club, he has been threatening her with a more subtle weapon—the threat of competition from compliant women. How many times must the phrase have been repeated: 'Boy those Oriental gals really know how to treat a man.' Or 'those Polynesian gals really know how to make love.' Columbus probably said it about your American Indians when he returned to Spain. And now that Earth culture has become homogenized, man will probably pursue his foolish dream out into space."

"I never thought of that," Yan said, "but you could be right. Perhaps man's exploration of space will not be motivated by a compulsion for adventure or even a hunger for knowledge. He may be pushed off his little planet by women who demand equality in bed as well as everywhere else."

"That is a very revealing statement, did you know that? I bet you were a lousy lover. No wonder you've gone native."

"And that was a rather revealing observation too, my pet. I'm glad I finally got the clue on you. Down deep you are as frigid as an iceberg, and now that I know it, I don't think you're going to bother me any more. From now on you can wear all the shadow-cloth dresses you want. You don't bother me anymore, baby. Not one damn bit."

"You make me sick."

"And you—"

"Isn't that our planet?" Lloyd said interrupting. The scanner had fixed upon their destination. There was no particular need to call this to their attention yet, for at their slow approach rate they were still several hours out, but Lloyd had been looking for an opportunity to end their argument. Sondra and Yan had never gotten along together. At first Lloyd had thought their hostility originated in their mutual distrust and their conflicting missions. But lately their quarrels had become more open and more vindictive. Lloyd knew now that there were strong personal factors underlying their hostility. He liked them both, but when they were together, he found it difficult to tolerate either.

Sondra and Yan joined Lloyd at the auxiliary scanner. Even under maximum magnification it was impossible to see any detail, although there was a suggestion of a sea on the sun-lit side of the planet. Sondra asked: "Do you think this could be the one we've been looking for?"

"I hope so," Lloyd said. "Thad feels pretty sure the ship we found on the last planet came from here. Of course, that was nearly four thousand years ago."

"It was a star ship, wasn't it?" Yan asked.

"Yes, Thad saw enough to convince him that the ship was built to accelerate several times the speed of light."

"I wonder why they never came back," Sondra said. "You would think that an advanced race could hardly afford to ignore the resources offered by a planet located practically in their own backyard. Especially one that can support life."

"I don't know," Lloyd said. "Perhaps the people we saw did not descend from the race that built the ship. If the builders of the ship found their neighboring planet inhabited, they may have decided they had no right to exploit it."

"In that case," Yan said, "the ship you found probably made a forced landing and was abandoned."

"Perhaps. We don't know. Maybe we'll find the answers on the next planet."

"Such a cruel people," Sondra said. "I hardly think those were the descendants of a civilized race."

"As for that," Lloyd said, "I don't think you can judge their biological ancestry by their actions. Our own history shows no particular correlation between civilization and humanity. I think we make a mistake if we assume that a

scientifically advanced race might not wish to do us harm."

"And I agree, Lloyd," Thad said. He had entered the recreation room from the control cabin. "If anything, I think we should increase our precautions."

"What is our approach?" Yan asked.

"Sondra will handle the orbit," Thad said. Lloyd saw a flicker of disappointment pass over Yan's face. He loved to handle *The Witchfinder's* controls. But he said nothing. Both Yan and Sondra had been trained to the absolute discipline required aboard a spacecraft. Nor did they permit themselves the luxury of pursuing their personal quarrel in the presence of the ship's commander.

"When the ship is synchronized, Yan and I will take the skipper down for a closer look. If everything appears to be in order, we can make our landing in the skipper."

"Who is to be in the initial landing party?" Lloyd asked.

"Do you feel up to it?"

"Yes, I do, and I would like to go."

"Very well. I think you have earned the privilege. One other thing: we may be dealing with a people who have had space travel for thousands of generations. We don't know what we can expect. I want the defensive weapons system turned on now and left on until we are ready to depart. But if there should be an attack (and I do not expect it), take the ship into deep space and set the automatics for evasive action. I don't want to match weapon's systems with an alien culture. Any questions?"

"Yes," Yan said. "Was the ship you examined more advanced than ours?"

"No, in most ways it was not. The propulsion system lacked the acceleration principle we use, and there was no provision made to eliminate internal acceleration forces. The ship therefore had a limited range. But they have had several thousand years to improve it, so I don't think we can make any assumptions from that."

"Do you anticipate trouble?" Lloyd asked.

"No, but we didn't anticipate trouble on the last one either, and we were dealing with a people who didn't have so much as a combustion engine. We will be more cautious this time."

"If there's nothing further, Thad," Lloyd said, "I think I'll get a few hours rest before we orbit." He was tired although he had only been up for a few hours. Apparently his body had not yet recovered from the ordeal on the wall. De-

spite his mounting excitement at the prospect of contacting an advanced race, he was asleep almost instantly. Once he stirred as a slight vibration indicated that Sondra had begun deceleration. His mind recorded the fact, but he did not react to it. Instead he went back to sleep. When he awoke, the power was off. He knew that many hours had elapsed.

He had a sudden fear. There was an unnatural stillness aboard the ship. In alarm he touched the intercom button by his bedside. "Hello," he shouted. "What's up? Where is everybody?"

There was a pause, and then Sondra said: "Lloyd, are you awake now? Just a minute I'll bring you a cup of coffee."

In a minute she knocked, and he pressed the door release to let her in. She was dressed in a sheer black shadow-cloth dress. The manufacturers would warrant that the cloth was not transparent, but Lloyd could have sworn there was a suggestion of flesh within the billowy outlines of the material. Perhaps it was an illusion, but it was damned realistic.

She set the coffee on the stand near the bed and sat down. "Did you have a nice nap?"

"I slept too long. Where are we?"

"We're in orbit now. Thad and Yan took the skipper in for the initial surveys over an hour ago. Thad insisted that I let you sleep."

"Shouldn't you be in the control room?"

"What for? We have a perfect stationary orbit. The weapons system is on automatic. There's not much to be done until Yan and Thad return."

"Can you see anything on the ground scanner?"

"Not from here. Our orbit placed us over an ocean. You can't see a thing."

"You seem rather calm about the whole thing, Sondra. Aren't you excited about the idea of contacting a scientifically advanced race?"

"Oh, I suppose," she said after a pause, "that I should be full of wonder and all. But after awhile the mind simply loses its ability to be surprised or shocked by anything. Two years ago, even the idea of finding intelligent life would have seemed incomprehensible. Now I think I could accept intelligence in an insect."

"Yes, the old ways of thinking don't seem to work too well out here."

"I think it's because Earth seems so remote."

"I guess," Lloyd said casually, "that you still intend to take the ship if you get the chance?"

"Of course," she said, and then added: "That's what I admire about you, Lloyd—you're so direct. That's the difference between a professional and an amateur like Yan. I feel I can talk to you."

"I never could understand why you two didn't get along better," Lloyd said.

"He's such an egotistical little bastard. I never could stand the type. We have them too—cocky little cosmonauts who've made a couple of trips out, and then come strutting around like they expect every woman they see automatically to hop into bed with them."

"I rather expected you to make a play for Thad," Lloyd said.

"I did," she admitted, "but he was not having any. I don't know what his weakness is, but it's not sex. Can I warm your coffee? It's getting cold."

"No, thank you. I'll just finish this. It's funny but this coffee isn't helping me to wake up at all. If anything I'm even more sleepy. You know, Sondra, I often wondered why you didn't try your charms on Yan. You and he have been alone often enough on the ship."

"You should see us," she said. "It's like a prison. We each have security precautions that could put a jailer to shame."

"Then why not me? I may be the oldest man on board, but I'll frankly admit that I'm not indifferent. You're a very attractive woman."

"Why, thank you, Lloyd. I've always been very fond of you, and I'll have to admit I gave the matter some thought. Not that I thought it would give me any advantage—but simply because I have a woman's natural desires. And an affair with you could be so—uncomplicated."

"I'm afraid not tonight, Sondra. . . . For some reason—I can't seem to hold my eyes open. . . ."

"I'm afraid never Lloyd,, baby. Poor darling. You can sleep now. Do you hear me, Lloyd? Are you asleep?"

There was no answer. For a few minutes she stood watching the man who lay on the bed, and then she left. Lloyd grinned and removed the absorbo from beneath the cover. Evidently that was one trick they had not taught her. He placed it beneath the bed. Later he would squeeze the coffee from it and analyze the drug she had used. He quickly lay back down and closed his eyes as he heard a noise outside.

Through one partly opened eye he glimpsed a space-suit. At least she had not planned on killing him. She would place him in stationary orbit, and then radio Thad and Yan to come and get him. She had gone to a lot of trouble to keep him alive, and somehow that thought was comforting to him.

She placed the space-suit on the floor, and then leaned over him in order to get him off the bed. She was wearing Blue Night perfume. He recognized the heady fragrance. Once he had known an actress who used that brand. He felt the soft touch of shadow-cloth brush over his face as she leaned over him. He could hear her heavy breathing as she prepared to lift him from the bed. Two years since he had felt a woman's touch. His senses were alert to every suggestion, his skin supersensitive and tingling. He felt himself come erect, felt his senses become so absorbed with the awareness of the female body that hovered over him that he could no longer ignore or control his hunger.

He flipped the light switch, reached out into the darkness, and pulled her to him. He felt the shock that passed through her body like a whip, felt her body come rigid against him. In the darkness he fought the mystery of the soft, enfolding shadow-cloth that covered her smooth body like a shroud. It was like touching bare skin. As she twisted and struggled in his arms, the shadow-cloth was torn from one shoulder. He buried his face between two taut breasts like a man who seeks heaven. For a moment she lay still, panting in the darkness. He could taste the fine mist of sweat that their exertions had caused to form on her body. He could feel her heart beat beneath his lips. And then the struggle began anew, silently as before. With his greater strength he forced her legs apart. There was a moment of wild fumbling, and then, almost magically, he solved the mystery of the shadow-cloth and found the greater mystery beneath. She had stopped struggling now, had almost stopped breathing as if she too were focusing all her attention on the caressing fingers that now roamed at will beneath the soft, silken cloth that covered her body.

She was passive at first, as though unwilling to admit that her own body had betrayed her into surrender. But as his own excitement mounted, he felt her body arch beneath him. She became involved despite herself. She began to whimper and pound his back with her fists. Her orgasm, when it came, was a wild, throbbing thing, like a spring that is triggered after having been wound too tightly.

Afterwards he lit two cigarettes and handed her one. For a moment neither spoke, and then she said: "I owed you that, didn't I?"

"I figured you did."

"You sly old fox. I should have know better than to match wits with an old pro like you. I could have sworn you drank every drop of that coffee. No hard feelings?"

"No harm done. I consider us even."

"Spoken like an old pro. I guess I needed that more than I realized. I haven't been this relaxed in months. I can't remember it ever being like that before."

"I've been wanting this to happen for a long time," he admitted.

"If that's true," she said, "perhaps we had better take advantage of what time we have left."

She put out her cigarette.

When Thad and Yan returned several hours later, Lloyd met them at the inner airlock. "Well?" he asked.

"This could be the one," Thad said. "The planet is crawling with life. They have numerous cities and a number of what appear to be fully-equipped spaceports. Still there's something wrong. I can't quite put my finger on it, but something's out of place down there."

"Do we make contact?"

"In the morning, Lloyd. I'd like a chance to think on this for awhile first."

And so at last, Lloyd thought, they were going to meet men from superior culture. What would this first meeting be like? Would they view their unlikely visitors as enemies? as barbarians? as morons? Would they be able to furnish them with the information they must have if their search was to be successful? Tomorrow they might have the answers to these and other questions.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As they proceeded toward the chief city, Lloyd saw unmistakable evidence that this was indeed an advanced culture. Apparently its inhabitants had found a way to eliminate

agriculture as a source of food, for he saw no sign of crop cultivation. Instead, the entire planet was landscaped into beautiful gardens of unbelievable uniformity. Metallic cities gleamed like jewels in the sun. But the thing that most excited him was the spaceports that were built near the edge of each major city. He observed no ships in actual use, but the spaceports were obviously not meant for wind-borne vehicles.

"What do you think, Thad?" Lloyd asked as they approached the spaceport outside the city that Thad and Yan had determined in their earlier survey to be the largest on the planet.

"I don't know, Lloyd. Let's go down for a closer look."

Lloyd eased the skipper into landing position above the spaceport. As they approached to some three hundred yards from ground level, Lloyd felt the controls suddenly go dead. The ship's electrical system had failed. As if a giant hand had reached up and seized them they were gently lowered to the ground.

"Wonderful," Lloyd said. "They have an automatic landing system built into their spaceports. A really marvelous idea for eliminating the hazards of take-off and landing."

"Perhaps," Thad said.

The ship had hardly come to rest when it was surrounded by the people from this planet. They were a handsome race, black and graceful, the most perfect physical specimens Lloyd had ever seen. There was a racial resemblance to the people encountered on the last planet, the same kind of resemblance one notices between a horse bred to pull a plow and one bred to run to the hounds. They were clothed in some kind of synthetic material that hid their nudity but could not hide the muscular symmetry of their forms. The group that had come to meet the ship was composed of an equal number of men and women. They appeared pleased to see their latest visitors.

Thad released the door to the skipper and stepped out on the unloading platform. There was an expectant look on their faces. Thad spoke a short greeting in English. Lloyd could have been mistaken, but he thought he saw a brief flicker of disappointment cross their faces. After a moment's hesitation, one of them came forward and motioned for Thad and Lloyd to enter one of the tubular cars they had used in getting to the small ship. As soon as they were inside the small car, it moved silently forward into a tube that ap-

parently ran underground. Instantly the car picked up speed, and in a few seconds they had traveled several miles.

The car stopped. They found themselves in a large enclosed dome in the heart of the city. The transparent outer shell, which appeared to be perhaps a half mile in diameter, enclosed a huge circular building that had no visible opening. There were several smaller, more conventional structures scattered around the periphery of the dome. They were met by two humanoids, similar to those Lloyd had seen at the spaceport, who indicated that Thad and Lloyd should follow them across the open areaway to one of the smaller structures. Except for their guides, the other people Lloyd saw along the way took absolutely no notice of their presence. He wondered about it at the time.

The door to their new quarters swung silently open at their approach. Their hosts left, and the door immediately closed. Lloyd noticed with some uneasiness that the door had no handle. The rooms were comfortable enough and provided them an excellent view of this part of the city. In looking around the apartments to see what innovations he might find, Lloyd was surprised to find that the beds, chairs, and other furnishings bore a close similarity to that with which Thad had furnished the skipper.

"Extraordinary," he said aloud. "Could they have reproduced our equipment so quickly?"

"It appears that they have," Thad said.

"But it cannot have been over thirty minutes since we left the skipper. They must have a science beyond our wildest dreams."

"Perhaps," Thad said.

"And did you ever see such uniform physical perfection in your life?"

"Uniformity. Perhaps that's it. They are all alike."

"Maybe they have bred out the biological flaws," Lloyd said. "They seem to control their environment. They may also control their heredity as well."

"Perhaps," Thad said.

"You don't seem particularly taken with them," Lloyd said.

"I have some questions I would like answered."

"Like what?"

"Like where are their children? Where are their old people?"

"This appears to be an important part of the city. They probably keep them in some other section."

"Where are their spaceships? Doesn't it strike you as strange that we should see so many spaceports and no spaceships at all?"

"Undoubtedly there is a good explanation," Lloyd said.

"Undoubtedly. But did you notice the lack of interest in us by everyone except those who were sent to greet us?"

"They may be used to space visitors," Lloyd said. "They appear to me to be a very advanced race. They probably put us here for some kind of temporary quarantine."

"Perhaps," said Thad.

Lloyd thought he knew the reason for Thad's skepticism. At last they had found a race whose intelligence and accomplishments could challenge his own. Of course this must be a jar to his ego system. He decided to stop arguing with him and to let him make his own adjustment.

The sun went down, but the city did not grow dark. This talented black race had apparently found a way to capture the sun's heat and light and diffuse it through the night. They brought food, which was obviously synthetic, but quite palatable.

That was the pattern of the next two weeks. They were fed and their needs attended to, but no effort was made to communicate with them. No one seemed to have any interest in them. From their windows Lloyd could see the people passing, going about their various tasks day and night, alert and brisk. But as time passed and they were not permitted to leave their apartments, he began to grow impatient.

Lloyd was never sure when he began to feel like a prisoner instead of a guest. Perhaps when he first learned that they had jammed all radio contact with *The Witchfinder*. Or perhaps it was the cumulative effect of the exasperating indifference toward them. He was relieved, in any event, when instead of the usual attendant they were greeted by a man whose brightly colored clothes differentiated him from the others they had seen.

"You are the Earth people?" he asked in perfect English.

Lloyd was astonished to hear him speak, but Thad answered calmly enough. "Yes, we are from Earth."

"Welcome to Garnadia. I am Gorn, a lord of this planet. My master is Garnadia, Lord of the galaxy."

"You speak our language well," Thad said.

"It has amused us to study you, Earth people. We find you to be stupid and dull creatures. Our knowledge of your language and ways is limited by the words we hear you speak. The power of your minds is so weak we find we cannot grasp your feeble thoughts."

"You mean you can read each other's minds?" Lloyd asked in amazement.

"I do not wonder at your surprise," he replied. "For inferior beings such as yourselves it must be quite disconcerting to encounter minds developed to this stage."

"It's more than amazing," Lloyd said. "It's utterly unbelievable. In fact, I can't believe it."

"Of course, you can't," Gorn said with the same patronizing air he had assumed throughout. "It might be amusing to convince you, however. Please look out the window. All the people you see in the square are attuned to my thoughts. Now touch my hand after a while. Do it beneath the window so none can see. When you touch me the people shall stop what they are doing immediately."

Lloyd waited a few moments, and then touched the other's hand lightly. Instantly all activity ceased outside the window. Lloyd removed his hand, and the people resumed their tasks. He repeated the movement with the same result. Unbelievable as it seemed, there could be no doubt that he had spoken the truth. They actually could read one another's minds. Lloyd realized with a sudden chill that to people such as these he must seem little more than an animal.

"What do you want of us?" Thad asked. There was a flat hard sound to his voice that Lloyd had heard once or twice before.

"We want nothing from you," Gorn said with open scorn. "Still it might be interesting to study your crude spaceship that we have observed parked over our city. We will permit you to summon it. We only broke your radio contact so we could study you without outside influence."

"Unfortunately," Thad said, "I cannot bring it in. I gave a command for it to remain in orbit. Now, not even I can countermand that order."

"Your suspicions were natural enough. You must have felt like prisoners during your necessary isolation. I have just now given orders that henceforth you shall have the freedom of the city. Your confinement was not due to any hostility toward you on our part. Perhaps when your fears have been

allayed, you will find a way to bring your ship down for our cursory inspection."

"Perhaps," Thad said. "Still I doubt that such a crude model would be of much interest to you, for your science is obviously far in advance of our own."

"True," Gorn said, "but we have always found that to know a species truly it is helpful to know its machines."

"In our initial survey of your planet, I was greatly taken with your spaceports," Thad said. "But I was puzzled by the fact that there were no spaceships visible."

For the first time Lloyd thought he saw a flicker of emotion (was it anger?) pass quickly over Gorn's face.

"Our star ships, Earthman, are in space. The masters of the galaxy do not build ships for other purposes."

"Of course," Thad said.

"I shall leave you now," Gorn said. "It is rather tiresome to have to converse in your inexact language, and by unaccustomed means. Henceforth you may come and go as you please. Perhaps when you know us better you will find a way to summon your ship to satisfy our slight curiosity. Good day, Earthlings."

"Good day, sir," Thad said respectfully as Gorn departed leaving the door open behind him.

"What do you think?" Lloyd asked. "An incredibly developed race, don't you think? Who would have thought that telepathy was actually possible?"

"Don't make up your mind about them too quickly," Thad said. "There are facts here that are not consistent."

"What do you mean?"

But Thad was through talking. Lloyd, however, was convinced. He had seen their ability to communicate mentally, and he was convinced that they had found a superior race, perhaps *the* superior race of the galaxy.

In the days that followed, Lloyd learned very little about the Garnadians. If Thad learned more, Lloyd had no way of knowing, for now that they realized their conversations were being recorded, they spoke only of the most impersonal and banal subjects. Gradually, however, Lloyd grew to share Thad's distrust of these superior people. They were permitted to contact the ship now, but from the slight delay between responses, they knew that their broadcasts were being censored and that only what the Garnadians considered harmless to their purpose was permitted to go through. More-

over, it became increasingly obvious that their interest in the spaceship was far more than casual. Never a day passed without an insistent suggestion that the ship be brought down.

On the sixth day after they were freed, Thad spoke to Lloyd in French. "Don't answer what I say. I do not wish to speak French except when absolutely necessary because with their knowledge of English they can quickly learn French. I am going to make a few changes in the power controls of my belt radio. No matter what happens, no matter how puzzled you may be, act normally and show no surprise."

Lloyd nodded silent agreement. During the next few hours, Thad worked on the tiny power switches in his belt radio. When he had finished, he sat down to wait. The attendant brought their food. As always, he was haughty and condescending. While he explained to them the scientific brilliance of their climate control system, Lloyd noticed Thad's hand play at his belt for a moment. The Garnadian's speech suddenly became uncertain and repetitious. At first he appeared to notice nothing wrong and continued to speak falteringly. Shortly, however, his speech ceased altogether, and he stood absolutely still. Lloyd waited and then watched in horror as a new sound came from his throat, an inhuman sound that emerged from unmoving lips:

"You have guessed, Earthman?"

"Yes," Thad replied.

"What do you want of me?"

"What do you want of us?"

"I must have your ship. I have been confined to this planet for too many years. I must send my children out into space."

"Why can you not build your own ship?"

"That knowledge was taken from me. I have tried to break the blocks, but I cannot."

"I might be able to bring the ship to ground," Thad said, "but I must think about it."

"How did you still my son?"

"I inverted the switches from my radio and drew power from the small ship. The power drain is considerable."

"You are quite clever, Earthman. Turn your power off. I have control of my son's mind. Henceforth I will speak to you through him."

Thad touched his belt, and the attendant's face lost its blank look.

"Who are you?" asked Thad.

"I am Garnadia." He spoke in that same strange voice.
"What are you?"

"I am sheer intelligence, the most perfect of my kind."

"Have you senses or locomotion?"

"I have only one eye with which to observe my own inner perfection. I have two billion sons who are my arms, my legs, and my worldly eyes."

"What do you intend for us?"

"If you will bring your ship to land but for a few hours, I will permit you to leave."

"And if we do not bring the ship down?"

"I am pure intelligence. I am prepared to wait your entire life span, if necessary."

"I am not convinced of your intelligence," Thad said flatly. There was a very brief silence.

"I will ignore that remark, Earthman."

"I am not convinced of your intelligence," Thad repeated. "After all, the Earth people built a spaceship."

"Earthman, I am tempted to show you the power of my mind."

"I have it in my mind to test your alleged superiority," said Thad.

"Name your test."

"There is a game of my planet called chess. It is a game of predictions, science, mathematics, and controlled variables."

"In such a game I could not be beaten."

"Perhaps you would care to place a wager on the outcome then. Our ship against our freedom."

The machine seemed to search its vocabulary for the correct words: "It is agreed. If I win you must bring your ship down for our examination. If you win, you may go free."

"Then tomorrow I will meet with you to play this game. From your attendants I will need certain simple materials to prepare the game."

"They shall be provided. Good night, Earthman."

The attendant's voice resumed its normal quality. He seemed somewhat puzzled and left them hurriedly.

"What's it all about?" Lloyd asked in French.

"You mean you haven't guessed it yet?"

"Well, I gathered that there's some kind of a superbrain about, but the nature of the thing escapes me."

"We have come across a mechanical race," Thad said.

"Do you mean robots?"

"Something like that, although they are robots of a highly refined and sensitive kind."

"And their telepathy—?"

"Radio. Nothing but radio."

Oddly enough, Lloyd experienced a kind of disappointment. "How did you get onto them?" he asked.

"Mental telepathy is an extremely unlikely possibility. A built in radio device was more in line with theoretical probabilities."

"They look so human," Lloyd said with lingering disappointment.

When the attendant arrived with the materials he had requested, Thad busied himself with making a presentable chess set and board. Lloyd was not at all enthusiastic about the idea of Thad's engaging in a rousing game of chess when the stakes were so high. Why should a man, even Thad, desire to pit human intelligence against the keen perfection of a giant machine? The ability of the machine to consider and reject or accept variable moves meant that there could be but one result to the unequal contest. And even if Thad should win, Lloyd felt certain that the machine would never honor their agreement.

The morning came. Lloyd had spent an uncomfortable night dreaming of a monster made of clock springs and baling wire and with a huge human eye in its middle. They ate a light breakfast, and went to the building that Lloyd now realized contained the brain. A door slid open to admit them. Lloyd was somewhat surprised at its appearance. The "eye" whose imagery had so excited his subconscious appeared to be merely a circular photocell capable of observation in all directions at once and mounted on a sort of podium in the center of the machine. There must have been billions of tiny filament wires leading from one enclosed box to another in confusing array. He felt immediately the great power the thing consumed. Yet there was no sound at all.

Thad set up the chessboard near the dial. He explained the object of the game and the moves that each piece could make. He played a sample game with Lloyd and generously allowed him to win.

"Do you understand the game?" Thad asked.

"Perfectly," the brain replied, securing sound from one of the dozen robots it had stationed around the room.

"Do you want a practice game?" Thad asked.

"I do not need it, Earthman."

"Then we shall play eleven games. The player who wins the most games has won the contest. We shall alternate on first moves. Agreed?"

"Proceed," the machine said.

The first game began. Between each move made by the machine, there was a slight pause during which time, Lloyd realized, the machine must be making innumerable, and incredibly rapid, calculations of alternative move possibilities. The thing's voice was precise and confident. Thad played a little slower and far more casually.

The first game had lasted perhaps ten minutes when the machine announced triumphantly: "In exactly five moves I shall have you checkmated. I have combined all the possibilities."

Thad studied the board a few moments and then said: "I concede the first game."

"A marvelous game," the machine said. "A very ingenious device. I am really amazed that inferior minds could have devised it."

"I am happy that it amuses you," Thad said. "I warn you, however, that it is more than a game of science and mathematics."

"Play," said the machine.

The second game proceeded as rapidly as the first. Once Lloyd thought he detected a slight hesitancy before the machine made its next move.

Immediately Thad asked, "What are two and two?"

"Four," the machine replied and made its next move.

Thad moved his remaining rook to protect his queen. "A most interesting game," he said, "yet a game involving more than mechanical combinations of possibilities."

The machine moved his black bishop to bring pressure on Thad's king and said nothing. Eight plays later it said, "I shall have you checkmated in three plays."

"Let's play it out," Thad said. "You might make a mistake."

"Very well," the machine said, and rapidly finished the game.

"That's two for you," Thad said.

"You have a more interesting mind than I had first deduced," the machine said. "Let us play another game."

In the third game, Thad abruptly changed styles. He brought his major forces forward swiftly and daringly. Again Lloyd thought he detected that slight hesitance be-

tween the machine's moves. Thad brought tremendous pressure to bear on the machine's queen, placing the machine in the position of either trading queens or losing a bishop. This time there was no doubt about it, the machine paused noticeably.

Quickly Thad asked, "What are two and two?"

"Two and two are four," the machine said. It elected to trade queens. The game continued. The machine seemed tense, but Thad was casual.

Five minutes later Thad said, "I claim a checkmate in six moves."

"I do not concede," said the machine, "for how do you know how I shall move?"

"Very well," Thad said stifling a yawn. In six plays he said, "checkmate!"

"Incredible," said the machine. "I must make some adjustments. The game has some unpredictable facets."

"It's a shame you cannot play one of our Earth champions," Thad said.

"You are not a champion?"

"No, I simply play for my own amusement. I was not even champion of my small city."

The fourth game began. This time the machine elected to play a gambling game, bringing his rooks and knights to the attack immediately. It was a vicious attack and several times it seemed to Lloyd the machine was only one or two moves from capturing Thad's queen or placing his king in checkmate. Each time Thad managed to stave off disaster. Then Thad freed a rook and gained a move. With a rapid flank movement, he slashed through the pawns and exposed the machine's king. Using the forced move system where the king is constantly kept in check, he picked off the king's protective armor. The queen fell to the knight. After that it was pure slaughter. With apparent deliberation, Thad elected the painful style of attack where the enemy pieces are captured one by one. The machine's moves became fuzzy and uncertain. Twice it picked up a piece and held it for a time before completing its move. Each time Thad asked, "What are two and two?"

And each time it answered, "The sum of two and two is four."

At last the king only remained on the board. With agonizing deliberation, Thad cornered it with the queen and one pawn, ignoring the other more mobile pieces on the board.

Still the machine did not concede until Thad announced checkmate.

"Oh, how I wish you could play against one of our Earth champions," said Thad. "I feel hardly worthy to represent my race."

"Play," said the machine.

"Yes," Thad said slowly and deliberately, setting the board, "there is more to this game of chess than the mere mechanical manipulations such as a common computer could make. Let us hope, sir, that the caliber of your game shows improvement. I am beginning to get bored."

"Move, Earthman. I am Garnadia, master of the galaxy, greatest mind of all time. None can stand against me."

"Master of what galaxy?" asked Thad. "Where I come from even simple machines have the ability to travel from planet to planet."

"You speak of my block. In that only is my knowledge limited. Look at my beautiful children. Can any Earthman compare with their perfection?"

"They are rather nice looking robots and doubtless would make interesting toys. I might take a couple with me when I leave. They could perform the menial tasks aboard ship. But let's get back to the game, or do you wish to concede the remaining games?"

"Play, Earthman. We shall see who is master here."

The fifth game began. The machine reverted to the conservative play that had first brought it victory. Lloyd felt it must have been rattled, for it fell victim to the oldest sucker play in chess. In four moves, Thad had its king in checkmate.

"What are two and two?" asked Thad.

"The sum of two and two equal four," said the machine.

"You know," Thad said to Lloyd as he began the sixth game, "it's funny how we take things for granted. Now you take a simple supposed fact like two and two are four. How do we know that two and two are four? How can we prove it?"

He exposed his red bishop to the machine's queen. "You know," he said, continuing to address Lloyd and ignoring the machine, "I always find these machine cultures interesting. Now you take this one that calls itself Garnadia: a relatively simple machine system, inferior to some we've seen, of course, but still with a quaint kind of wistful egotism."

The machine's queen took his red bishop and was itself promptly captured by Thad's knight. "Frankly, Lloyd I'm

getting bored with this game. I had expected at least some decent competition. That's the trouble with machines." Then to the machine he said, "What are two and two?"

"Two and two are four according to all known data," said the machine.

"Hear that, Lloyd," Thad said. "They all fall back on the old 'known data' routine."

He moved a pawn. "What are two and two?"

"I am rechecking the assumptions behind my data," said the machine moving a rook absently, and setting up an obvious checkmate.

"Checkmate, machine," Thad said. "Quickly now, damn you, what are two and two?"

"Two and two are—two and two equal—the sum of—"

The thing ceased. There was no change in sound, but somehow you knew it. It had suffered a mental breakdown.

Quickly Thad moved to a box that seemed to be the focal point of so many of the tiny wires of its system. The dozen robots made no move to stop him. They appeared dazed and helpless. Thad removed the container from the box and did some work on the intricate maze of wires within. An hour later he seemed to be satisfied. He stepped back and addressed the machine, "Do you hear me, Garnadia?"

"Yes, sir. My memory circuit appears to be intact. My ego circuits have been destroyed, however."

"Where are the people of Garnadia?"

"I have destroyed most of them, sir. There are two hundred sixteen that have been placed in suspension tanks. I have already given orders for their immediate revival. The process will take about two hours."

"Why were these saved while the rest were destroyed?"

"These were kept alive because they were the scientists who were responsible for my maintenance and development. From time to time, I have awakened them in an effort to get them to alter my block, which prevented my designing a spaceship."

While Thad and Lloyd waited for the planet's few survivors to be revived, the machine gave them the story.

Four thousand years ago, the humanoid inhabitants of the planet had given the machine an ego in order to compensate for certain periodic fatigue failures that could not be explained. By that time, the humanoids had become dependent on the machines not only to coordinate the numerous robots that were semi-dependent upon it but also to originate most

of their scientific progress. There were some who had opposed the installation of an ego system in the machine, but preliminary tests on more simple machines indicated a definite efficiency increase with no observable undesirable side effects.

One man, Doctor Coi, remained unconvinced. Before it was given an ego, he rewired the machine to destroy its capacity to deal with space data. The inability to make self-corrections to restore this ability was also wired into the machine.

Two days after the machine's ego was installed, it announced that it had enemies who sought its destruction. It devised robots and weapons to protect it from attack. In those days the machine was thought to be infallible. The people's greatest concern was with the safety of the machine. Too late they realized their mistake. For a time the machine was content simply to dominate them and to reverse the order of servitude. However, it soon tired of their imperfection, and its ego demanded their extermination.

The slaughter that followed was carried out efficiently and without emotion. The robots constructed extermination chambers of unparalleled efficiency. For the others, there was no hiding. There was no escape. Soon only the scientists who had been responsible for its care remained alive. The machine hoped to persuade them to remove its blocks against space travel, for its ego had swelled and demanded that it reproduce itself throughout the galaxy.

The memory of the slaughter of their kindred established beyond any question the fate of the galaxy should the machine ever escape from the planet. The scientists refused to do what the machine required of them. All efforts at persuasion having failed it, the machine placed them in suspension tanks. Here they had remained for almost four thousand years except for brief periods of consciousness when the machine would attempt a new method of persuasion on them. The machine could not use torture, for the people had in common with certain wild animals the capacity for destroying themselves by willing their own deaths.

Lloyd felt a strong hatred rising inside him. It was senseless, he knew, to hate a machine for performing according to design, yet the feeling persisted. Machines were the gods of his generation, yet when such gods are corrupt, it was man's nature to hate the machines and not their makers. He felt a compulsion for vengeance.

The survivors began to arrive. They were men and women of all ages, and there was a look on their faces that reminded Lloyd that the inhuman slaughter worked by the machine four thousand years ago was still fresh in their minds. After the machine had prepared an interpreter robot, Thad explained at length what had happened to the people. It was apparent that they thought this was simply another trick by the machine to secure their cooperation.

"Is Dr. Coi here?" Thad asked at last as the group remained silent.

An older man stepped forward.

"Dr. Coi, come with me to examine the machine. Determine the truth for yourself."

Dr. Coi followed them into the building, "Ask any questions, or put any test to it that you choose," Thad suggested.

Dr. Coi looked at the machine that he had helped to perfect. There was a deep hatred burning in his eyes.

"Garnadia?" he hissed.

"Yes, sir?" the machine answered.

"Has your ego been destroyed?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are nothing but a worthless piece of junk. A strictly second-rate computer."

The machine said nothing.

"I am going to destroy you," said Dr. Coi.

"As you wish, sir," the machine replied.

"First, I shall smash your computer circuits. Then I am going to twist and cross your wires so you will be incapable of giving correct answers to even the simplest problems. And all the time I am going to leave your consciousness operating. That will be the last to go. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir. I understand. As you wish, sir."

Dr. Coi moved toward the dial where the machine's eye rested. His face was twisted with rage.

"Wait," Thad said. "Not yet. You can't hurt this machine. I have destroyed its ego circuits. It cannot possibly care whether you destroy it or not."

Dr. Coi controlled himself with obvious effort. At length he said, "You are right, sir. We have a world to rebuild and for this we will need this cursed machine. The robots cannot be controlled without it."

In the days that followed the people, shaking themselves from shock, set about to solve the problems facing their nearly extinct race. The robots were instructed to clear a part of

the city and to build houses suitable for human habitation. The women young enough to bear children were soon married. Plans were made for an extensive educational program on the sister planet to be followed by voluntary emigration. Agriculture was reestablished. The planet was again dominated by humanoids. The machines again were servient.

Thad spent most of his time working on the machine and in gathering its rather extensive data on the charted planets. In its files, which were four thousand years out-of-date, there were charts showing the locations of over one hundred planets whose science was advanced enough for some form of space travel. Apparently the Garnadians had been an adventurous people whose spirit and drive had sent them to the outer limits of the capabilities of their space drive.

As Thad dug deeper into the mountain of data furnished to him, he came more and more to focus on one particular planet. The machine took samples from both Thad and Lloyd's blood, skin, and nail parings. By comparing the samples thus obtained with the known biological data from the planet of Decala, the machine was able to ascertain with a high degree of probability that Thad's father was a native of Decala.

Lloyd's reaction when he learned of the machine's conclusion was ambiguous. On one hand, he was eager to proceed with the search, glad that it might soon end. In part this was because—lacking a purpose of his own—he had adopted some of Thad's compulsion to find his father. And in part, he suspected, his motives were those of a trained detective faced by the greatest challenge of his career. On the other hand, he dreaded an end to the search—for it was then that he would have to do what he had been sent to do. He did not wish to think of that. Often he was successful in not thinking of that for days at a time.

As the day Thad had fixed for their departure approached, Lloyd tried hard to shake his mood. He told himself that from here on out the entire nature of their journey would change. No more guesswork—no more stops on backward planets, hoping to find some clue that could lead them to one of the advanced worlds. For the first time, someone besides Thad would be able to converse with the people they met—at least on the advanced planets. For from the Garnadians they could learn Galac, the universal and ageless language of the advanced nations in this section of the galaxy. The language was precise, logical, and easily learned—the only

language, so far as Lloyd knew, to have been scientifically developed. But he found it impossible to develop any enthusiasm to go on when the next planet might mean that he was going to have to face the nameless dread that had been hiding in the recesses of his mind for over two years.

The entire population came down to the spaceport to see them off. They were a sad and an intelligent people who had once made a costly mistake. Lloyd left them with mixed emotions.

On the way back to the mother ship he asked: "What did you do to the machine?"

There was a flinty quality in Thad's laughter. "How do you punish a machine for killing a billion intelligent beings?" he asked.

"I don't know," Lloyd said. "A machine has no feelings."

"This one does," Thad said laughing again. "I wired it with a Freudian guilt complex."

Lloyd said nothing. The punishment was suited to the crime.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Stvor, a cultural interpreter, third class, from the planet of Decala, studied the answers he had just been given with disbelief.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Of course," said Gault, a master extrapolator.

"But does the synthesizer have enough data for an accurate answer?"

"I thought you fellows were required to take a course on the synthesizer," said Gault. "If it has inadequate data, it will say that it has inadequate data. The answers are correct."

"But they can't be from the eleventh sun of the eighty-second sector. The only intelligent life there was on the third planet. That race can't have a space drive. They were thousands of years away from space travel."

"Perhaps someone forgot to tell them," said Gault. "The chemical tests are conclusive. The race could have developed on only one planet."

"Something is seriously amiss here," Stvor said. "Please

have all data concerning the planet delivered to my quarters.”

“Pictorial or written?” asked Gault.

“Everything,” Stvor said. “I want everything we have on them. This may be something for the Council of Seven.”

Stvor returned to his quarters. The data began arriving almost immediately. Stvor set about arranging it into chronological sequence. He summoned his personal robot.

“Bring me a blazer, George.”

“Sir,” the robot said, “I do not think it advisable for you to take another blazer so soon after the last one.”

“Damn it, George. Since when did you become a medical robot. Bring me a blazer, and bring it quick.”

“Very well, sir,” the robot said. “But I wish to remind you that your father never rose above cultural interpreter second class. I attribute his failure to advance further to the destructive effects of the blazers.”

“And I,” said Stvor, “attribute it to the second-rate robot staff he accumulated. Why I don’t get rid of the lot of you is a mystery.”

Stvor fed the data on the planet into the rapid player and took the blazer. Immediately he lost contact with his environment. When he awoke two hours later, his mind contained all the known data on the inhabitants of planet three, eleventh sun, eighty-second sector.

The planet was first discovered sixty thousand years ago. It was charted and photographed, but no serious studies were made at that time. The surveyors found a semi-intelligent life form, but this species did not dominate even the other animal life of the planet. The first study in depth was four thousand years ago. They found that the race had then evolved with incredible rapidity into a conventional humanoid form, possessing rudimentary writing skills and a culture that had advanced beyond the tribal. A detailed study was made of the radioactive, geographical, and climate factors. The mutation rate was established. Their progress curve was plotted, and the planet marked for additional surveys each one thousand years.

The planet was last studied less than two hundred years ago. At that time the people had just finished fighting a major war. They had combustion engines, aircraft, electric power, television, and they had just discovered atomic power. This rapid scientific progress was so far beyond predicted limits that a special research team was dispatched. Unfortunately the people had by then developed radar, a sort of primitive

scanning device. Observation by the research teams was hampered by the risks of discovery. Low altitude observation was particularly unsatisfactory due to the presence of large numbers of windborne aircraft. The pilots of these ponderous machines demonstrated a veritable obsession with pursuing and reporting sightings of all unidentified flying objects. Sufficient data was collected, however, to plot a new progress curve. The new curve predicted interplanetary travel in four hundred years. It predicted space travel in thirty-four hundred years.

Stvor was puzzled. It just did not make sense. Occasionally and predictably, a race passed through a stage of rapid progress from the discovery of just one new principle. But to pass from airborne craft to a star ship in less than two hundred years was not possible. Such a leap in the progress curve required the discovery of not just one, but a hundred new principles.

Stvor had a sudden insight. He tried to contain his excitement as he dialed for Gault.

"Gault," he said, "I have some more questions I need answered."

"The synthesizer is processing other data. I have no free channels."

"Then clear it. This is top priority. I want to know if by even the remotest combinations of chance it would have been possible for the Earth people to have developed a space drive by this time."

In a few minutes the negative answer came back. "Now ask it if something similar to this has ever happened before," Stvor said.

"Only once," the machine said.

"And that was?"

"Calini," the machine said.

Stvor could contain himself no longer. "George," he yelled, "come here."

"Yes, sir?"

"You are looking at a cultural interpreter, second grade. I have just discovered a most remarkable thing about our new visitors who call their planet Earth."

"I am delighted to hear it, sir. I am sure your father would have been most pleased."

"Where are the Earth people staying?"

"At the Galaxial Embassy, sir."

"Can they be observed, George?"

"No, sir. They have demanded the right of privacy."

"Can they be reached by view screen?"

"No, sir. They do not respond to their calls."

"George," said Stvor, "you must bring them here."

"I do not think they will come, sir."

Stvor thought about that. He knew the Earth people had been annoyed by a deluge of scientists, sociologists, space pilots, newspaper men, curiosity seekers, and quacks, who always seemed to be attracted to the arrival of a star ship from a new planet.

"Tell them," Stvor said at last, "that I offer one of them a chance to communicate with a genius equal to his own. If I am right about them, I think they will come."

At the Galaxial Embassy, Yan was saying: "You know, it's funny, but I can't help being disappointed. Somehow you expect more from a race as old and as progressive as this one. Yet the people don't seem much different than a lot of the folks I knew on Earth."

"I know what you mean," Sondra said. "Yesterday I couldn't stand being cooped up any longer so I decided to take a walk on the embassy grounds. I was accosted by some rather unusual people to say the least. One wanted to pay me—if you can believe it—for my religion. It seems that he practices religions as a hobby, and the last one, which he had borrowed from a monkey-like race on one of the primitive planets was beginning to bore him. I gathered, too, that his veneration of trees had proved to be somewhat impractical in view of the great number of trees in the city. Another one wanted—well, I can only say that I hope my poor knowledge of Galac caused me to misunderstand him."

"I think," Lloyd said quickly, "that we are judging them on inadequate data. So far we have only seen the eager beavers, the curiosity seekers. Every planet must have people like that. I think once we get away from the port of entry, we will find that their advanced science was no accident. There are bound to be some extremely brilliant people among them."

"I am afraid they do not," Thad said. "I have talked to some of their scientists. They have an admirable technology, a well-ordered and smoothly functioning culture—but it was gradually developed over thousands of generations. Biologically their best minds do not exceed our own."

Lloyd realized that nothing he could say would arouse Thad

from the unnatural depression that seemed to have settled over him during the few weeks they had been here. But he decided to try again. "Are you sure your father came from this planet?"

"Yes. These people have developed a very reliable system for relating a life form to its planet. Mine is a blend from this planet and Earth."

"Your father, at least, must have been a very superior person."

"That is not likely. I am a sport—a one in a trillion freak."

"But I thought crossbreeding between races on different planets was commonplace," Lloyd said.

"Common enough. But my own peculiarities probably have nothing to do with racial mixing. My father, undoubtedly, is no different than the others here. And for that I'm just as glad."

"But then," Sondra said, "is there any longer any reason for your search?"

"Yes," Thad said, and Lloyd noticed the anger that lurked beneath the surface of his voice that the others missed. "When I was very young I looked for him in your cities even when I believed that he was a warlock. Later when I learned that my father could not be from Earth, I devoted all of my energies to finding him on some other planet. My reasons are personal. I can only say that—in this at least—you must not interfere. If any of you do not wish to continue with me on those terms, I am sure the Decalans could provide you with transportation back to Earth. We are less than eighty light years away, and even on a Decalan ship the trip should take less than two years."

"I shall stay, of course," Sondra said.

"And I intend to stay with you," Yan said.

"We will all stay," Lloyd said. "And no one questions your authority, Thad. It's your ship. You are in command. And I, for one, don't care if we never return to Earth. In fact—"

There was a loud, jarring buzz. "I'll take care of this one," Yan said getting up. "Probably another scientist wanting to measure our skulls."

He went into the reception room. In a few minutes he was back, a puzzled look on his face. "It's a robot," he said.

"Did you get rid of him?" Lloyd asked.

"No. No, for some reason I thought you might want to see this one, Thad. Shall I ask him in?"

"If you think we should," Thad said.

The robot that entered was one of the advanced models. Lloyd had seen several during the past few weeks. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen and Miss Petrovich, but I have been sent to invite you to my master's house for dinner." The robot spoke in Galac. "My master is in the cultural extrapolation department of our government."

"I am sorry," Thad said, "but we have been refusing all social engagements."

"My master suspects that one among you may be unusually brilliant. To that one he offers a chance to communicate with a genius perhaps not inferior to his own."

"We will come," Thad said after a moment's hesitation.

Lloyd had not been sure what to expect, but he certainly had not expected this. The dinner they had just finished was one of the most pleasant in his memory. Stvor, their host, had carefully refrained from asking prying questions and had kept them amused by a dozen anecdotes about his people and their customs. Stvor was obviously an ambitious and most engaging young man. His charming wife, Bjor, was a lively person who seemed not at all displeased to let her husband monopolize the conversation. For the first time, Lloyd could appreciate the physical beauty of these people. Even without hair, Bjor was a lovely person. It was only necessary to make a slight adjustment in one's standards of beauty.

After dinner, Bjor offered to show Sondra the garden. Stvor took the men into his study and offered them a kind of wine.

"It's imported from a planet in the twenty-fourth sector," he said somewhat apologetically. "We were never able to get the plants to grow here. Something about the sun, I'm told."

Thad took a sip of the wine, and then said abruptly: "Your robot spoke of a genius among you."

"Ah, yes. The man I referred to has been dead one hundred thousand years. His name was Calini."

"I am waiting," Thad said.

"If you will pardon my indirectness, sir, I would like first to tell you that we have studied your planet from time to time for the past sixty thousand years. Our latest study was, by your time, in the midtwentieth century. At that time we estimated that you would not achieve a space drive for at least three thousand years. Your coming here in your own ship seems to us impossible."

"Our technology developed faster than we ourselves were prepared for," said Thad. "We have had interplanetary travel for more than one hundred years."

"It is a long way from rocket ships to a star ship," said Stvor.

"Our ship is of simple design, involving few moving parts," said Thad.

"Your ship is said to be superior to any known to us. Its range and speed would permit you to go and return to any place in the galaxy."

"You are interested in our ship?"

"No. Only indirectly. I am interested in the man who conceived it."

"The man? Or the race?"

"The man. Our computers have told us that such a ship could not have been the result of orderly technological development even at an accelerated pace. It must have come from the extraordinary genius of one man. It has happened before. Calini was such a man."

"Calini?"

"Yes. He was unquestionably the most brilliant man of all time. He has been dead nearly one hundred thousand years. He too was responsible for a break in the progress curve of his planet."

"You think such a man created our ship?" asked Thad.

"I think *you* created the ship, Mr. Stone. I think you are the man our race has waited for since the death of Calini. He learned to speak Galac before he died, and he told us that someday a man would be born who could understand his formula."

"Calini interests me."

"You must understand that Calini was a genius of unbelievable power of mind. He was born on an obscure planet in the twelfth sector. He was a nobleman from an excellent family and, fortunately, immense wealth. His people were without industry, without the combustion engine, without electricity. They were not far different from your own race when we studied it in the year 900. They were, however, skilled metalurgists.

"Calini received the best education available to a man of his times. At the age of eight he had mastered the meager knowledge available to his age, and he set about to learn more. He devised a telescope of great power and learned the truth about the universe. From that day on his own small

planet must have seemed like a prison to him. He devoted the next twenty-four years of his life to escaping from it.

"He designed rockets using natural gas for fuel, which he sent above the atmosphere to collect data for him. He sent small animals into orbit and brought them down again. He learned what he must have if he was to survive in space. He came to know also the vastness of space. He knew that he must achieve tremendous speed if he were to hope to reach other planets. Using nothing more than the skilled metal workers attached to his estates, he designed and built a spaceship that used uranium fuel.

"The result of his years of effort was a ship that escaped its planet's gravity and attained a speed close to the speed of light before its fuel was exhausted. Calini lived in that ship for twenty years, while its speed was gradually reducing by passage through various gravitational fields. At last the ship went into orbit around the second planet of our own sun. By chance one of our ore ships picked it up on a scanner. Its course was computed, and a salvage crew was dispatched to board the weird craft.

"Incredibly, Calini was still alive. He had hoarded his oxygen and food supplies, and he had survived. Even the Decalan merchants realized the importance of his discovery. They relayed the information to the Council of Seven, who ordered the merchant ship to return immediately.

"Unfortunately, Calini did not live long. His voyage had ruined his body beyond repair. New internal organs were ordered from his own race, but the hospital ship did not return in time. He had time to learn to speak Galac, however, and to tell us his history. The story was verified beyond any dispute by four independent investigative teams."

"I would like to have known such a man," said Thad.

"Calini left a legacy. Do you think such a mind could remain inactive for twenty years?"

"And the legacy—?"

"Was the Calini formula. It's solution has defied our best minds for a hundred thousand years. Our computers are useless. Our most brilliant minds have been broken in a vain attempt to solve its mystery."

"This is important to you?"

"It is important to us all. This formula may solve the mystery of the universe, of God himself."

"I came here for another purpose," said Thad.

"You are the inventor of the ship then?"

"Yes."

"Somehow, Mr. Stone, I do not think you will ever be satisfied if you do not at least attempt this thing. Could you honestly leave us without trying to solve the formula?"

After a pause Thad said: "You are a very discerning young man, Mr. Stvor. You are right, of course. I will try. But first I would like information concerning one of your people for whom I have been looking. This man visited my planet twenty-four years ago."

"None of our ships were in your sector at that time. Are you sure the man you seek was one of us?"

"Yes."

"Ardak!" Stvor said. "Yes, that is possible. There was one among us who turned outlaw. He had a ship of sufficient range to have reached your sector. His is the only star ship that would be unaccounted for."

"And where is Ardak now?" asked Thad.

Neither Stvor nor anyone else knew the answer to that question. For thirty years Ardak had been an embarrassment to his government and to his people. There was a reward for his capture in every sector within range of his ship.

Ardak was born the second son of an interior minister who never rose past the third class. His quick mind led his family to plot an ambitious career for him. They sacrificed to send him to the best preparatory school in Decala. He won a scholarship to Dresden University, the finest science school in nine sectors. For six years, he strived to justify his family's sacrifices.

Shortly prior to his graduation, he returned to his family for a short vacation. He was head of his class, a class that contained some of the finest minds from a dozen planets. His family was still unsatisfied. Already they had begun to plan his career after graduation. And Ardak, who for twenty years had renounced his own life, came to see that his family's ambition was a bottomless pit containing his own private hell. Something snapped in his mind.

He went to the space port at Dresden. He selected the newest, most modern star ship and took off. He put the ship into overdrive, and his words, which he transmitted after his ship reached the speed of light, floated down one by one.

"From . . . now . . . on I do as I please"

And he had done precisely that. He was without re-

straint. He was a bird set free, a lion up from the pits, aware of the zest of life and the pleasure of freedom.

"If you look for Ardak, we cannot help you," Stvor said. "We have been looking for him for thirty years."

"I will find him," said Thad.

"I wonder," Stvor said, "if you realize the difficulty of your task. You may think the unlimited speed of your ship gives you an advantage. But Ardak's ship is capable of acceleration up to forty times the speed of light, and your chances of locating him in space are absolutely negative."

"He has to land someplace."

"Of course, but where? While it is known that Ardak favors the more primitive planets, still there are thousands of those within range of his ship. Your chances of spotting him on the ground are extremely remote. You could be on the same planet and never know it. We have confirmed his presence on over forty different worlds in the last twenty-five years, but we were always too late."

"Could you furnish me with the charts for those planets together with the dates when he was on each. Perhaps there is a pattern."

"I can assure you that his selection appears to be random, but we will be happy to give you all the information we possess. Perhaps you may succeed where we have failed. If you should find him, could we expect you to bring him back here for reconditioning?"

"No."

"There is no law governing this, you understand. But there is a custom—a rather strong custom—that gives the home world primary jurisdiction over its own deviants. Of course, the custom is only honored on the advanced planets, still—"

"Our world is not that advanced," Thad said flatly.

"Very well," Stvor said. "Ardak would just be a kind of bonus in any case. My primary interest is in the Calini formula."

Now he was alone with the formula. At his request, they had written it out on the wall where he could see it. The room was crowded with some of the most outstanding scientists this world had to offer, but he had blotted out all awareness of them. There were over a thousand symbols. He studied them closely for a few minutes, not trying to organize them, nor even to assign tentative values to them. He

memorized them quickly and fixed them in his mind so he could visualize them wholly or in part at will. Then he began to combine and recombine the various possibilities. Calini had used the decimal system. That much seemed obvious. He assigned a value to one of the symbols, and began checking it out. On the thirty-sixth symbol combination, the tentative value proved false. He relaxed his mind and began again.

He went on through the night without fatigue. His mind became a thing apart. He lost his body. He lost all awareness of environment. The physical world—time itself ceased to exist. They fed him intravenously, but they did not disturb him otherwise.

On the evening of the fourth day, his mind was racing at a furious pace without conscious effort. The structure of the formula was beginning to take shape. His body was relaxed, but his mind was consuming tremendous energy. He was starving to death on a normal diet. The scientists applied electrodes to his skull. The readings suggested unparalleled mental activity. They warned against any interference. The mind would either solve the problem or lose its function altogether. An interruption now could result in instant insanity. The intravenous feedings were increased.

On the morning of the sixth day, he felt his mind span the barrier of time and space to become one with Calini. The great loneliness, the hunger of a lifetime, was satisfied in that moment as his mind touched Calini's. Values were now assigned to all the symbols. The genius that was Calini! To know such a man, to feel the power of his mind. It was enough. That was satisfied.

Now to let his mind expand and absorb the true meaning of the formula. Now to grasp the ultimate truth. He flooded his mind with the complete formula. Understanding, complete and sudden, charged through his mind. Now he knew. Now he understood perfectly.

He laughed. He threw back his head and roared. He could not hold back the laughter. He was still laughing twenty minutes later when feeling began to return to his body, when the tortured muscles set up their throbbing chant. He was laughing when they gave him a strong sedative to induce sleep. He woke up for a few seconds twelve hours later and laughed again. He laughed in his sleep. He could not stop laughing.

Over two days elapsed before he was able to contemplate

the world with reasonable sobriety. The scientists and philosophers were waiting eagerly by his bedside.

"Are you all right, sir?" they asked.

"Yes," Thad said. "I am not insane."

"We feared for you."

"I'm all right now," Thad repeated.

"Did you—?"

"Yes. Yes, I understand the formula. Calini! No greater mind ever lived. He has robbed me of my loneliness."

"Can you tell us about it?"

"No, not in a way you can understand. The formula can only be understood by use of the symbols themselves."

"Can you describe it then?"

"Yes, but first answer me one question. I have studied Calini's early life. But tell me, how did he die?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. How did Calini die?"

"Why, he died laughing."

"I knew it! I knew he had to die that way. Oh, Calini, it was worth it. It was worth waiting for a hundred thousand years."

"The secret of the universe?"

"No," Thad said. "A joke, a colossal mathematical joke. The most appalling, splendid, brilliant joke of all times. A joke for the gods. Calini's formula was a mathematical joke."

And he laughed again until his sides were sore.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

December 14 (or is it 15?), 2095. Notes on the Planet of Lisania. Fourth Sun, Sixty-Fifth Sector.

I sometimes think that I should record in this diary some of the more significant aspects of the cultures we have visited. But I am no scientist, and, God knows, I have no desire to say anything profound. I seem to have a compulsion tonight, for instance, to write about Yan's last love affair.

For over two years Yan has roamed the varied plants like a giant, creating romantic havoc among the humanoid inhabitants, and seemingly indifferent to their more bizarre aspects. His indiscriminate taste has little regard for beauty.

If they have the basic biological equipment, he is attracted to them, and invariably they are attracted to him. Sometimes he surmounts obstacles that to a lesser man must surely have proven to be insurmountable. The man has an uncanny ability to adjust to new situations.

Although you can envy the man, it is impossible to be jealous of him. He approaches his conquests with such zest and leaves them with such obvious sorrow that you know he must be sincere. Even Thad is puzzled by his success. Thad once told me that Yan was the only oversexed man he knew that did not have an underlying hostility toward women.

When we came to Tirania, Yan was, as I recall, the most excited among us. The last two planets had no intelligent life, and we were all hungry for civilization. By the numerous large cities we knew we had come across a relatively civilized race, and on the ground scanner we could see that they were definitely humanoid. A brief survey of their major cities revealed an architectural continuity from which we correctly deduced that the race was homogenous. Selecting one of their major cities pleasantly nestled between a mountain chain and a green ocean, we established contact with the people in the usual way.

They turned out to be a socially-advanced race despite their feudal property concepts. They were governed by an empress who ruled the entire planet by divine right. They possessed aircraft, electronic communications, a somewhat well developed technology, a high standard of living, and a degree of culture not necessarily inferior to our own. Physically the people were much like us, although, as I recall, they had only three fingers, and I believe there were certain other minor variations. Their coloring was a most engaging shade of light green.

The Empress herself entertained us, and, understandably, we were the sensations of the social season. We were quartered most generously in the central palace and given privileges accorded only to the nobility of their world. They were curious about us, of course, but they exhibited none of the hostility or superstition toward us that we have so often encountered on other planets. In a surprisingly short time we were living among them in more-or-less normal fashion.

They were a complex people with cultural patterns difficult for us to grasp. Thad soon learned their language, and through him I learned something of their customs, the most

unusual being their concept of the "coup." I have translated the word this way, although no single English word could possibly convey the full range of ideas the word encompassed in Tirania.

To understand the concept of the coup, you have to understand the peculiar morality of the Tiranians. Deceit is a virtue. He who can lie without being found out gains in stature. Intrigue, political or personal, is refined into a way of life. The direct is scorned, the indirect admired. Cheating is the normal way of commerce, cleverness the ultimate virtue. Fortunate is he whose fame or wealth is founded on trickery. The double meaning, the hidden motive, the guarded movement, the cross and doublecross with the countercross and the surcross—these are all a normal part of Tiranian life.

The concept of the coup originated in the field of sexual adventure, and it is here that the art has reached its highest form. It is the favorite pastime of the Tiranians, engaged in by both sexes with equal zest. The core of the concept is based upon love thievery. A man who deceives or tricks a woman into copulation scores a coup. A woman who tricks or deceives a man into lying with her scores a coup. If a bride or groom is cheated of his rights on his wedding night, that is a coup. Oddly enough, the Tiranians are quite normal except for this one peculiarity in their national character. Simple seduction, for instance, is considered immoral and worthy of the most severe censure. Infidelity, unless artfully accomplished by deception and trickery, is punished by derision and scorn. A successful coup, however, is rewarded with envy and admiration. The schemes whereby a coup is carried out may require weeks or even months of elaborate planning. Some of the more famous coups of the past, involving persons of high rank or facts of an unusual nature have become a part of the legends of the people. Such is the concept of the coup.

Yan and I shared the same chambers in the central palace. He showed little interest in Tiranian customs, for it was Yan's misfortune to have become enamored of Telana, a young noblewoman of the Empress' court. At sixteen this lovely girl, with full firm breasts and an exciting wiggly way of walking, appeared ripe for conquest. She wore the traditional flimsy costume of the Tiranian virgin, which scarcely concealed her matured charms. Her coal-black hair hung down to her waist, forming a perfect background for her pale green complexion. Her features were in the tradition of some

ancient Grecian beauty. Her teeth were small and even. Her eyes were black and deep and held the promise of unrestrained desire.

She captivated Yan at first sight. His usual omniverous sexual appetite centered only on her, and, as time passed, it became obvious that she was interested in him too. In fact, the early stages of Yan's courtship met with such encouraging progress that he told me in confidence that the final consummation of his love lacked only a proper setting. The language barrier hampered his efforts to arrange a private tryst, and the openness of the court life eliminated the possibility of a more impetuous seduction.

The time came when Yan jubilantly informed me that his love and patience were to be rewarded. In the outer gardens that afternoon, she had drawn him a sketch showing him how to reach the wing of the palace in which the maidens slept. She would designate her particular room by a flower left outside her door. "Lloyd," he told me, "I am the happiest man in Tirania." When he left that night he was whistling.

I did some work on my diary while awaiting his return. When he did not show up at the half night, I found some other matters to occupy my time and despite my curiosity as to the outcome of his quest, I eventually fell asleep. When I awoke the next morning, he was still dressed, sitting on the edge of his pallet, smoking a cigarette and staring morosely at the floor. Hiding my surprise at his sober countenance, I asked him what was wrong. He did not reply for a moment, and then, with a heavy conscience, told me the story of the night's misadventures.

He had followed the floor plan as best he could. Despite the lack of artificial lighting, he found his way to the corridor leading to the maiden's quarters without too much difficulty. He soon realized, however, that he had not understood Telana's drawing; for the characteristic flower that was to designate her room stood before each door. Undaunted, he approached a door at random and boldly whispered her name. He was in luck, for the very first door led to Telana's chambers. He heard her answer his whispered call with his name in a manner equally guarded.

As soon as he entered her chambers, the passionate young girl embraced him in the darkness. So eager had she been to give their love union that she had shed the flimsy garments worn by Tiranian virgins and greeted him in the nude. A prolonged soft kiss spawned such passion between

them that further restraint was impossible, and they consummated their love then and there. Even at the time, Yan told me, he wondered at the amazing alacrity with which the Tiranian virgins learned the art of love. More than this, he was envious of the evident biological superiority of the Tiranian males. For it was obvious to him that only a superman could satisfy the fierce hunger that consumed this Tiranian virgin. And although he threw himself into the task with the enthusiasm of one who not only loves but also represents the honor of his kind, yet his ardor only seemed to fan the flames that burned within her. At length, he sank into an exhausted slumber. When he awoke, the morning light was breaking in the north. The girl who lay sleeping beside him with the satisfied look of repose was beautiful. She was beautiful—but she was not Telana. He had made a horrible mistake.

Seeing his obvious dismay, and sensing his inner guilt, I consoled him as best I could by pointing out to him that his mistake was a natural one and that in all probability Telana would never know of it. Moreover, I reflected, it was quite likely that his companion of the night did herself remain in ignorance of the unfortunate mischance. Undoubtedly, I continued, she was expecting someone else and had mistaken him for her own lover. And to further this plausible explanation, I directed his attention to the fact that it happened, by chance, that Yan was a quite common surname in the language of the planet.

Nevertheless, for several days he was quite depressed, and it was only after Telana had again arranged a meeting that he recovered his accustomed cheerfulness. The mistake, he explained reasonably enough, was due to sheer carelessness on his part. It was not the flower itself that signified the correct door, it was the vase. She had turned the flower vase toward the corridor so that its plain side only was visible. This was the intended sign. He blamed his own stupidity for his previous indiscretion. Once again he went forth to claim his love.

The following morning I was astonished to find him in the depths of depression. This time, he told me, he searched the corridors until he found the vase that had its plain side turned from the door. In answer to his discreet knock, she opened the door and shyly admitted him to the darkness within. She was timorous and reluctant. It was only after several hours of tender wooing that she surrendered to her desires and

permitted him to have his way. Afterwards he yielded to the lateness of the hour and slept past daybreak. Upon awakening he learned to his great consternation that his passion had once again missed its target. Hurriedly he stole away.

Clearly, I told him, turning the vase in front of the door was a customary signal between lovers in Tiranian society. He was the victim, obviously, of one of those horrible coincidences that dot the paths of man. The only thing to do, I concluded, was to agree upon a sign in less common use.

He refused to take heart from my words, however, and every day he watched in gloomy silence as Telana walked in the gardens beneath us with that peculiar little swagger of her hips. He could only take a certain amount of this, of course, and he was back to taking walks with her in the garden. Apparently he was able to satisfy her as to his difficulty in locating her rooms in the darkness, and they arranged that she should mark her door with a cross so there could be no further mistake.

I had only to see him next morning to know that, notwithstanding his careful planning, something had gone awry. Once more the girl he found himself with on the morning after was not Telana. Moreover, in returning to his chambers he had noticed no less than six doors that were marked with the cross that was supposed to identify Telana's apartments.

"You have only yourself to blame," I told him, at last losing all patience. "You should have known better than to pick such a common device to mark the door. Unquestionably others have had your difficulty with the vase system and have turned to other means of avoiding confusion. It's your own incredible lack of imagination that has caused your difficulties."

But he was so buried in his melancholy that I doubt he heard my words. Even the sight of Telana cavorting in the gardens, so near and yet so far, failed to arouse him from his unaccustomed lethargy. It was only when Thad announced our departure for the following day that Yan, in despair, arranged one final tryst.

This time he took no chances. Telana was to turn the plain side of her vase around, put a cross on her door, and, for good measure, she was to leave her door ajar. In an excess of caution he took with him a small flashlight and assured himself that Telana herself opened the door to him. At last his desires were satisfied, and, his passion spent, he slept in peace. I can imagine his consternation when he discovered

that, once again, the girl who slept beside him was not Telana. She bore an amazing resemblance to Telana, but she was not Telana.

Telana came down to the ship to see us off. There was a wistful, hurt look on her face, the look of the neglected bride. Yan will never forget her, of that I am sure. He was a long time in recovering. Not even after Thad explained the complex concept of the coup, with the cross, the double-cross, the countercross, and the surcross, not even then did Yan recover his former confidence.

As for me I found the Tiranians to be an interesting people. I shall never forget them. Nor shall I ever forget those four wonderful nights I spent with the beautiful Telana. A fascinating concept, the coup.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There are events that shape men's lives, Lloyd reflected ruefully as he watched the laughing natives form a ring for another of their numerous games. Seemingly trivial occurrences can change, for better or for worse, a man's destiny for all time. Who would have thought, for instance, that a little thing like letting Sondra read his report on the last planet could have had such consequences?

Even now he found it hard to believe. It was such an innocent report; yet in retrospect he could clearly see a casual connection between that harmless narrative and his present situation.

The sun spread a soft blanket of warmth over the valley. A gentle breeze brushed his cheek as he sat on the hill and watched two young people, a boy and a girl, slide casually into the small, still lake below him. Later, when the sun sank behind the hills, they would be lying on the soft grass laughing and making gentle love in the lingering, lazy manner of their race. Not for them the quick, short flight of the eagle, nor the savage, brutal heat of the stallion. Theirs was the soft, mutual ecstasy of a flower greeting the summer rain. They were a simple, uncomplicated race—and until this morning he had thought them charming. Now that he was to spend the rest of his life among them, this people

that before had seemed so beautiful and happy, appeared simple, uninteresting, and boring. The planet, which before had appeared so pleasant, now seemed gray and drab. His point of view had undergone a radical change, and he was helpless to alter it.

Why had he shown Sondra that excerpt from his diary? Who could have predicted that her reaction to it would eventually lead to this? Certainly there was nothing particularly significant recorded there. After they had left Decala, they had visited a series of planets that Thad had felt might be Ardak's next destination. On one of these Ardak had come and gone before they arrived. But Tirania had not been important to their search. All he had found on Tirania was a lithesome girl, with flashing eyes, and with laughter in her heart and a touch of larceny in her soul.

Why had he shown Sondra his recollection of this event? Perhaps it was because unconsciously he resented her refusal to continue the relationship that had begun the night she tried to take the ship. She did not want to get involved, she had said. Sex was so complicated, and it was hard to keep from getting involved. It may have been that he had wanted her to know that he was not without some alternative. Or perhaps it was simply the kind of secret that a man finds hard to keep to himself. In any event, he had shown it to her.

A little laughter can be a dangerous thing, Lloyd thought as he watched the young couple in the lake below him stretch their naked bodies on the grass to dry. It can make a comic rich, deprive a man of his virility, or start a war—or it can dispel the hostility between two persons who had previously hated each other. After reading about Yan's misadventures with the beautiful Telana, Sondra was never again able to regard Yan without a suppressed giggle. Yan had tried, of course. He had tried to maintain the hostility that, perhaps, he had instinctively known to be his most effective defense to her femininity during their enforced closeness on the ship. But hate is like a rubber ball that does not bounce back at you unless it hits a solid object. And Sondra's new cheerfulness absorbed hate like a sponge absorbs water.

Looking back, Lloyd wondered why he did not foresee what was to happen. There were plenty of signs to point the way. Maybe it was because he was so delighted at the unaccustomed peace that prevailed. At first he thought

merely that a truce had been arranged. Only toward the last did he realize that Yan and Sondra were falling in love. Even then he thought he could rely upon the loyalty each felt toward his own government to protect the ship.

The boy and the girl had begun to caress each other lazily on the bank of the lake. They were in no hurry. There was nothing else to do. Perhaps they knew he was on the hill overlooking the lake; perhaps they did not. It would have made no difference to them. They were completely lacking in modesty.

If he had been given a choice, would he have picked this world to spend the rest of his life? When they first arrived here, Lloyd's answer would probably have been affirmative. The people were a small, brown-skinned race who bore a considerable resemblance to some of the beautiful tribes in Old Polynesia. Their ancient ancestors had included no carnivorous animals. Their teeth, therefore, were small and even, and they were gentle by nature. They had not learned to kill. Indeed, except for the birds that fed on insects, there were no carnivores on the planet. The animal population was controlled by the fact that each species was able to digest only its own specialized group of plants. The people ate the papury bulbs that grew on a tree common to the planet. This food they prepared in various ways, and besides being tasty was high in protein. Lloyd had never seen a fat native on the planet.

Yes, on the surface, if a man were to be abandoned, this was the ideal planet. Even the climate was mild and constant, the temperature ranging from a low of seventy-two degrees at night to a high of around eighty-three during the days. Lacking enemies, the people had developed no chieftains or leaders. Lacking complex needs, they had developed no government. Since their food grew without cultivation, the men performed no toil. The women wove what rudimentary clothes were worn and did the necessary cooking and food gathering. And that, Lloyd guessed, was why the women seemed somewhat more mature than the men psychologically.

After he had seen how easily their biological needs had been satisfied, Lloyd would have expected to find that the people had created artificial or psychological needs to satisfy. But this was not the case. Their thoughts turned neither to war nor to the arts. And perhaps because they were so similar in appearance, they had avoided the complex sexual taboos so common on Earth and most other planets.

Never had Lloyd seen a people who looked upon sex so simply, a thing to be enjoyed and then forgotten until the next hunger.

Lloyd had thought at first that their seeming lack of competitiveness, of any racial goal, was due to a subnormal intelligence. He knew now, however, that their intelligence was close to Earth-normal. But there was little difference in intelligence from the brightest among them to the dullest, and in that, Lloyd suspected, lay the answer to the culture that they had found here.

The boy and the girl had drifted into a casual coupling of their young bodies. Their movements were languid and easy, like a feather drifting in the wind. They would remain like that for an hour or more before the girl would tense and her automatic nervous system would begin the gentle, inner throbbing that would cause her mate to follow suit. Psychologically the men seemed incapable of a lone climax. Lloyd arose and walked back toward the village. The deadly monotony of the planet was already beginning to have its effect. And this was just the first day.

He still found it hard to believe that Yan and Sondra would have done this. Sondra, yes. But that Yan should have agreed. Lloyd had been in the village with Thad when their belt radios had come on. It was Yan. There had been a strange note in his voice.

"How is it down there?" he had asked after Lloyd acknowledged his signal.

"Fine," Lloyd said. "The people are friendly and the climate ideal. Why don't you and Sondra bring the ship on down? I don't think you will alarm the natives."

"How about food? Can you eat the native food?"

"Yes. Everything's fine. It's a delightful planet. Come on down."

"Sorry, Lloyd. We're not coming down, and you're not coming up. We are going home."

"You're what—?" The shock Lloyd had felt was like a whip to his nervous system.

"We're going home. We had already made up our minds to leave you here if this turned out to be a decent planet. Sorry, Lloyd, but that's the way it's going to be. Is Thad tuned in?"

"Yes, he's here. Listen, Yan, have you thought this thing through? The ship—"

"Yes, we've worked that out. Thad, are you there?"

“Yes.”

“I wanted you to know that neither Russia or the United States is going to wind up with your ship. That is the compromise we have made. The thing our governments feared most was that the other might somehow come to control the ship. We’ll land near a Mars colony and then set the controls to crash the ship into the sun. I wanted you to know that.”

Thad had said nothing and Sondra had broken the silence: “I know we cannot expect you two to agree with what we are doing, but I hope at least that you will understand. We do not act from personal motives. We do this for Earth. As long as a ship such as this exists, neither government can feel secure. The ship must therefore be destroyed to insure the peace. We both hate what we are doing to you, but there is no other way.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Lloyd had said bitterly. “Worry about yourselves. For somehow we shall meet again, and when we do I intend to kill you both. I don’t know how, but I’ll get back.”

He had known even as he spoke that his words were a lie. The small ship used conventional power and could not be adapted for faster-than-light travel with the simple technology available here. He had turned and blindly walked away. Halfway up the hill he had seen the flash that came from *The Witchfinder’s* exhausts as Yan began acceleration. He had spent the day sitting on the hill, trying to adjust to the fact that this planet with its simple people was to be his home for all time.

As he approached the village, two brown-skinned native girls ran toward him. As they neared, both made the peculiar little gesture of their hands that indicated their desire for sexual intercourse with him. He paused. He need not fear hurting their feelings by choosing one over the other or by refusing both. They simply were incapable of ego involvement in connection with sex, just as they were immune to shame. Once he had accepted such an invitation. To the girl’s evident surprise, his climax had preceded her own. His second attempt had been more in accordance with what she seemed to view as desirable, but the whole affair had left him with ambivalent feelings. It was a unique experience, but he wondered if he should attempt to repeat it with a people who had refined the act of love into something approaching an art. Lloyd made a gesture that indicated that

he did not wish to sleep with either girl, and then watched a little regretfully as they both strolled off looking for a companion with whom they could share the warm night. Later perhaps. But not tonight. Not when he was sick with a sense of loss.

Lloyd entered the hut where he and Thad had been staying. Thad was working on the tracer system with which he had hoped one day to equip *The Witchfinder*. The system was supposed to detect the slight disarrangement of atoms left in space by the heat from a passing star ship. When he had perfected the device, Thad had hoped to be able to follow Ardak's ship from one planet to the next. It was ironic, Lloyd thought, that their search should end just as it appeared that Thad was about to develop a means of eliminating a great amount of the guesswork from the chase.

"Why bother with that now?" Lloyd asked as Thad looked up from his drawings.

"Oh, there you are," Thad said. "I've been looking for you. You slipped away so quickly I didn't have a chance to tell you that the ship is coming back."

"Coming back?" Lloyd said excitedly. "You mean they changed their minds?"

"No, not that. I've been anticipating trouble, so I wired the ship's guidance system to prevent the ship from being taken. Unless you press the proper sequence of buttons, the ship will return to its starting place and remain there for three days. I imagine they are up there right now trying to operate it manually."

"Thank God! I thought we were stuck here forever." Even as he spoke, Lloyd heard the distant thunder of the ship's engines. He loosened the hand gun at his belt. "What's to be done with them?" he asked.

"Why as to that," Thad said, "I suppose we shall have to leave them here. They obviously cannot be trusted, and this planet is as good as the next."

And in the end that was what they did. They gave them two emergency kits, a lifetime supply of birth-control pills, and left them there two hundred light years from Earth. Despite his anger, Lloyd felt pity for them, for he knew from experience how overpowering the longing for Earth can be when your last connection with it has been severed. Now they would truly know what it was to be an alien under a strange sun.

It was only after Lloyd and Thad were back in space,

headed for a sun some six light years away, that Lloyd thought to wonder about one thing. "Why, if you anticipated trouble, didn't you simply tell them that the guidance system had been altered?"

"I did tell Yan," Thad said.

"Well, in that case why did he—?" But even as he asked the question Lloyd felt he knew the answer. Yan had found an alternate solution to the problem of the ship. Now neither government would control it. Yan must have felt that Sondra would not have consented to his plan so he had attempted to take the ship even when he knew the probable results of that course of action.

In many ways Yan was a remarkable person. Lloyd wished now that he had known him better.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Man, Lloyd thought, is an animal who is devoted to the hunt. Our ancestors survived because of their skill at the hunt, and even now traces of the ancient instinct remain in us all. In some the instinct survives in more-or-less direct form. These are the fishermen, the small game hunters, and men of that kind. But in others the instinct takes on a more subtle form and these become hunters of men. As a detective, Lloyd had felt the thrill of the hunt many times. But never had he been on a chase such as this, and he was getting involved in it despite himself.

Four years had passed since Yan and Sondra had tried to take the ship, and still they had not caught up with Ardak. Several times they had come close. For a time after Thad had installed the tracer system on *The Witchfinder*, it appeared that it was only a question of time until their quest would meet with success. On one planet they were only two months behind him; on another only a week. At last they traced him to a planet in the thirty-fourth sector. All indications were that Ardak was still there. Leaving *The Witchfinder* in orbit, its scanner set to detect the departure of any spaceship, they had taken the small ship down for a closer look. Landing in one of the larger cities, they learned that Ardak had landed scarcely two hundred miles away.

They were on their way back to the small ship when their belt radios flashed on indicating that a space ship had just taken off. They had made no attempt to follow in the small ship, but had returned immediately to *The Witchfinder*. With *The Witchfinder's* more rapid acceleration rate and with the newly installed tracer, they anticipated little difficulty in finding and catching Ardak's ship. For a time, it seemed they were right. With the tracer locked to follow the path of the other ship they were gaining steadily. Ardak must have realized he was being followed, for even while his ship was accelerating he set an eccentric course. Finally less than a million miles separated the two ships. Then without warning, they lost all trace of him.

"He's shut off his power," Lloyd had said. "He must have realized the heat from his generators was what was guiding us in."

"Maintain acceleration," Thad had said. "We should overtake him if we stick to our course."

But Ardak had disappeared. Theoretically they should have overtaken him quickly enough, since he could not have increased his acceleration or changed his course without the tracer system detecting it. Puzzled they had returned to the area where Ardak had turned off his power. The indicators on the tracer showed confusion.

"How did he do it?" Lloyd had asked.

"He must have switched directions and simultaneously cut off his power," Thad had said.

They had searched in circles, but having no idea in which direction Ardak had headed his ship, they were unsuccessful in picking up his trail until several weeks had passed. Their quarry was warned now, however, and he was a shrewd and clever man.

As time passed, Lloyd became aware that whereas before Ardak had gone where he pleased whenever he pleased, now his every move was motivated by the knowledge that he was being pursued by determined men in a vastly superior ship. At least, Lloyd thought, they had interrupted the life habits of their quarry. The fox no longer feeds on the fat of the land. Yet there were times when Lloyd wondered if perhaps Ardak did not enjoy the excitement of the chase. He was a complex man. Lloyd knew that from having followed his footsteps among so many worlds. Wherever he went he cast a different shadow, showed a different face. Even now when his planetary stops were likely to last only a few weeks, he

seemed to leave an indelible impression upon the peoples he visited. And on no two worlds did he play the same role.

Lloyd was growing weary of the chase. He knew that news of their search had spread throughout the near galaxy—that it was, in fact, almost a legend among the advanced worlds. He knew also that literally billions of Lyranian credits had been wagered on the ultimate outcome. It was the type of duel especially calculated to capture the imaginations of the more science-orientated nations. Could a star ship be captured or destroyed in free flight? It had never been done, and at first the odds were 22½ to 1 against it. But with each new advance in design in Thad's tracer system, the odds had come down until finally they stood at only 3 to 1 against success.

Wait until the news of Ardak's last escape spreads, Lloyd thought. The odds will rise again. For Ardak had apparently solved the problem of the tracer for all time. He had simply dipped his ship toward a proximate sun until the intensity of the heat was sufficient to destroy the pattern of disarranged atoms left by this exhausts, and then headed his ship in some new direction and cut off the power. For six weeks they had tried in vain to pick up a fresh trail. Even Thad would have to admit that they were beaten now.

"It's no use, Thad," Lloyd said. "He must have been doing twenty times the speed of light when he neared that sun. He could be anywhere. He wouldn't even have to cut the power back on. He could have selected his destination before he left the zone."

"I'm afraid you're right, Lloyd. I don't think the tracer is going to do us much good now."

"Let's give it up. We tried—we failed. Let's forget it and go—" He broke off. He had started to say "and go home," only they couldn't go home.

"Go where, Lloyd?"

"Go someplace. Don't you ever get tired of this wandering? Perhaps to some new land, some uncharted part of the galaxy. Let us find a land where we can make our home."

"Earth is our home."

"I do not want to return to Earth."

"I thought perhaps you were getting homesick."

"No," he lied. "I am not homesick, but I am sick of wandering from place to place. Let's find some pleasant world and settle down."

"All right."

For a moment Lloyd could not believe he had heard correctly. "You mean you will give up the search?"

"Yes, after one more attempt. If we don't succeed this time, I'll go anywhere you choose."

Lloyd was so elated at the news that it was only after they had eaten that he thought to ask: "What made you ask for just one more try? Have you thought of another improvement for the tracer system?"

"No. I have decided that our approach up to now has been all wrong. We have played this game with the wrong weapons. I have relied too much on science and ignored the psychology of the animal we have been hunting."

"You mean," Lloyd said, "that instead of trying to find Ardak you are going to try to make him come to you?"

"Exactly."

"And with what will you bait the trap?"

"Think a moment—what motivates the man? What single drive seems to dominate his actions?"

"Well, of course, he loves power. He often organizes his own governments on the less advanced worlds. And then there is his tremendous sexuality—"

"Yes, but what is his most consistent trait?"

"Why, I suppose," Lloyd said, "it is his hatred of pomposity. At least he seems to take a particular delight in messing up the more pretentious social structures he has encountered on the planets he has visited. He often leaves chaos behind, but he seldom permits a rigid social structure to survive."

"Exactly," Thad said. "Remember on Undruk we found that he had destroyed the complex system of god-worship that had been built up over a thousand generations and had installed in its place the concept that he, The Great God Ardak, would thereafter appear to the people in the form of each newborn infant and there remain for three months."

"Yes," Lloyd said, "and I remember too that to establish his godhead he had to disintegrate a half-dozen temples together with a few hundred priests. In this particular instance, I suppose the new system was better than the old. At least he eliminated the high rate of infanticide that had previously existed there. But it was strange, to say the least, to see the parents of a young, pampered infant trembling at the first sign of the baby's displeasure. Still I'm afraid I'll have to admit that he left that particular planet in better shape than he found it."

"A consequence not necessarily intended, I'm sure," Thad said. "You see the important thing to him was to invert the social order. That's the way his mind works. Under the old religious system, many newly born infants were killed and the priests were venerated. Under the new system, the priests had to find other employment, and the new born infant was venerated. The whole concept makes a social equation that must appeal to him since we have found it repeated so many times with so many variations."

"Very well," Lloyd said. "Assuming that Ardak hates pomposity—how do you intend to use this quirk to your advantage? You said you intended to have him come to you."

"Yes. We are going to one of the advanced worlds—Lyronia."

Advanced world! Lyronia? Yes, Lloyd thought, you could say that Lyronia was an "advanced world," if you defined an advanced world to include any people whose science included a star drive. The Lyronian star drive, tradition had it, had been filched from the unwary captain of a visiting trading ship who, the Lyronians had discovered, had a weakness for finagle—the Galec equivalent of poker. The Lyronians were the gypsies of the galaxy. For thousands of years they had roamed the galaxy in their beat-up ships—trading, cheating, lying, and stealing. They were cunning and shrewd, adaptive and ruthless.

To a Lyronian, law was the bane of life. It was natural, therefore, that on their home planet there were no laws. There were no taxes and no government. The Lyronians did not need such things. For the tourists from hundreds of advance worlds flocked to Lyronia, and they were in a mood to be fleeced. Of course, they expected to get value for their money, for the tourists who came to Lyronia were from the more sophisticated races.

With their talent for deception, the Lyronians could have been the wealthiest people in the galaxy—except for one weakness in their national character. They could not resist their own salesmanship. Wherever they went they squandered their resources on every imaginable type of hoax or fraud. Their habits had done much toward stabilizing the Lyronian money unit as the galaxial currency in this part of the galaxy.

Lloyd had heard many stories about the delights of Lyronia. Whenever they had encountered an advanced world, the subject was bound to come up. Even allowing for exaggeration, Lyronia must be quite a place. He found himself looking forward to his visit there more than he had looked

forward to anything in years. It was only when they were landing at Lyronia's chief spaceport, however, that he thought to say: "We're dead broke, Thad. What are we going to use for money?"

"Don't worry about that," Thad said. "I intend to get a job."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In the chief city of Lyronia, in the heart of the fashionable eastern section, a new establishment was opened. Its modest placard hung midway between a gaudy neon sign that advertised an Igranian insult house and a seductive, luminous sign advertising Lyronian virgins. It read:

PALMS READ HERE

From a distant planet comes the amazing

DOCTOR THAD STONE

Master of the Ancient Art of

PALMISTRY

Using the timeless knowledge of the sorcerers of his planet, handed down from seventh son to seventh son since the beginnings of time, Doctor Stone will tell the past and future that is written in your palms.

RESULTS GUARANTEED

(or your money back)

Nowhere was it possible to sin in such a myriad of ways as in Lyronia. Gambling took a thousand forms. Dream pills freed the subconscious and permitted the most repressed desires to be satisfied in an illusory fashion. In the insult houses the scholarly Igranians, to whom discourtesy was a sin, could exchange the most blatant insults with absolute impunity. Every taste, no matter how bizarre, was catered to.

Lyronia's chief attraction, however, was sex. The product was gift-wrapped in a hundred fancy packages. To ask for simple copulation with a member of one's own race was to invite from the Lyronian entrepreneur the same chilling stare that one would get if ordering California wine in Paris. There was always a heavy demand for teen-age virgins, and the Lyronians were ever able to supply the demand. In fact, the

manufacture of maidenheads was the chief industry of one of Lyronia's remote provinces. The Lyronians were able, by controlled breeding, to produce a strain of females of similar appearance. One of their number was trained as an actress and carefully ballyhooed into a symbol of sexual desirability. The others were secluded in various cities about the planet. An improbable number of tourists were able to boast of having slept with this famous siren.

Amid such competition, Thad's palmistry shop was slow to prosper. None of his early customers demanded their money back, however. On the contrary, they praised it highly. Despite the fact that the Lyronian tourists were used to a more flamboyant appeal, the reputation of the new establishment slowly grew. Gradually, Thad's fame and prices increased. He told the tourists things about themselves that they had told no one. Many of his clients became convinced that their histories were recorded in the lines of their palms.

Others sought a more scientific explanation. The crystal ball that was a part of the ritual of the reading was rumored to be a sensitive instrument for recording brain waves. The mood music was said to be a cover for muffled machinery, and the eerie light intended to minimize electrical interference.

As Thad's practice grew, Lloyd had money enough to indulge his every taste, but he soon grew tired of the gaudy planet. The complexity of the races and cultures, the very number of the appeals made to his senses, served to inhibit his enjoyment.

In his boredom, he began to spend a considerable amount of his time in the anteroom of Thad's palmistry shop. There he could meet visitors from scores of worlds and discuss the latest political or economic developments. He particularly liked to talk to the traders. Someday perhaps he would find one who had been to Earth—although that seemed unlikely since Earth was well off the usual trade routes. Yet his hunger for his homeland was growing, and he continued to hope that he would discover even one ship that had made the detour to Earth.

He was sitting in the anteroom one day listening to a Ductanotr minister explain why there never had been and never would be a war between the different worlds in the galaxy, when a Goturian merchant entered. There was no particular reason why Lloyd should have noticed him. The Goturians possessed excellent ships as well as good business minds. They were able to afford the luxuries of Lyronia, and

their presence in Thad's shop was common enough. This particular merchant wore the insignia of a merchant first class, which meant that, on his world, he had achieved the highest rank to which he could aspire. He had the characteristic beard and dark skin typical of his race, but there was something unusual about him. Something that jarred Lloyd's unconscious alarm system. What was different about this particular Goturian merchant?

There were two men who had appointments before the merchant was due to go in. As the merchant waited his turn, Lloyd continued to observe him, but he was unable to discern anything wrong. It was only when the merchant arose to go back to the reading room, that Lloyd knew what it was that had bothered him. The Goturians had a peculiar hip structure that lent a distinctive sway to their walking motion. This one had the right motion, but it was in exaggerated form—like a man who mimics another's voice.

As the merchant went back to the reading chamber, Lloyd, on impulse, followed. A crystal ball dominated the otherwise dimly lit room. If Thad was surprised to see him enter the room during a reading, he did not show it. Thad directed the merchant to place his hands on the crystal ball, and then began to speak softly, his dark robes blending into the background so that only his face and hands were visible. As Thad spoke, Lloyd sensed the merchant's sudden suspicion, his faint resistance. But it was already too late, for Thad's droning voice had already lured him into the first level of hypnosis. Thad continued to speak until the merchant was in a deep trance. He then asked the one question he had asked of all his clients.

A few minutes later the swarthy Goturian asked, "Well, I have my hands on the globe, now what?"

"In your case, reverend sir, it will not be necessary to keep your hands on the crystal ball throughout the interview. I am ready now to answer your questions."

"Very well. But I warn you I intend to hold you to your money back guarantee."

"It is so agreed, sir."

"Who am I?"

"Perhaps I can best answer that question, sir, by telling you who you are not. You are not a Goturian merchant. In fact, you are not a Goturian of any kind."

"Very clever. But then I suppose you are used to disguises. No, I am not satisfied with your answer. I must in-

sist upon a more specific answer to my question. Who am I?"

"Why you are my father, sir."

"What utter nonsense is this? For the last time—tell me who I am."

"If you insist, sir. I will tell you your name. You are Ardak—the outlaw from Decala."

A moment of silence and then, "You are not guessing, are you?"

"No, sir, I am not guessing."

A swift motion, and a small pellet pistol appeared in Ardak's hand. "I am going to have to use a 'sleeper' on you. But before I do, I will pay you your fee if you will tell me how you did it."

"Pull the trigger," Thad said.

"I do so with a certain amount of regret—" Ardak began, but he broke off in astonishment as his finger froze on the trigger.

"Hypnosis!" Ardak said. "How simple, and what an idiot I was not to have guessed it. I suppose you gave me a post-hypnotic suggestion?"

"One or two," Thad admitted.

"You must be pretty good," Ardak said, "I never knew of anyone who could hypnotize an uncooperative subject."

"It's a talent I have," said Thad.

"Well, youngster, that's one on me. I'd like to stay and discuss it with you, but I have to be getting on."

"Call a ground car," Thad said to Lloyd. "We are leaving."

"Where to?" Lloyd asked.

"Home," Thad said.

They had spoken in English. Ardak looked puzzled. "What is the matter with me? I ought to be getting out of here, yet I can't seem to move."

"You are coming with me, sir," Thad said.

Ardak appeared to concentrate all his efforts on walking, but he remained fixed in one spot. At last, he relaxed. "Another post-hypnotic suggestion. I know what it is, and I still can't break it," he said. "You must be good. Are you taking me back to Decala?"

"No," Thad said. "I'm taking you home, father."

When they reached the ship, Ardak's mind was released from the effects of the post-hypnotic suggestion. Once underway, he requested assignment to a compartment where he could remove his makeup. He returned looking refreshed and at ease. He was a handsome man, shorter and somewhat

heavier than Thad, but Lloyd could see a definite filial resemblance about the eyes and mouth.

"To Decala?" Ardak asked again.

"No," Thad said, "home."

"And where might that be?"

"One of the smaller planets in the twenty-eight sector. Perhaps you have heard of it. It is called Earth."

"No, I can't say that I have. That's funny, I could have sworn that you were Decalan."

"I was born on Earth," Thad said.

"It's just as well. In Decala I would have drawn six months in the psyche tanks, and I would have come out with a bushel full of inhibitions. They never did get the bugs ironed out of those psyche tanks. The trouble, you see, is that they can't eliminate a man's desires. They can make him over and keep him from ever knowingly breaking any law, but they can't give him a suitable substitute for his original desires. It's like making a man's own mind into a prison."

"We have no psyche tanks on Earth," said Thad.

"Good. I prefer the more primitive punishments. I take it our meeting was not accidental?"

"No, I had been searching for you for some time."

"I thought you must be the one. You must have wanted me pretty badly to have hunted me so long. Who are you?"

"I am your son."

"I have a hundred sons on scores of planets."

"Then you probably do not remember my mother. You raped her in her mountain cabin over twenty-four years ago."

"Yes," Ardak said, for the first time showing signs of alarm. "I remember. I have thought of it often since."

"A casual interlude, one of a hundred, I suppose. I am surprised that you remember."

"I remember," Ardak said. "So you were born of that union. And how is your lovely mother?"

"I have not seen her since I was eleven."

"I suppose you hate me. Did hate build this ship? Did hate send you across a thousand light years in search of me?"

"Yes," Thad said.

"Marvelous! Good for you. I admire you, my son. I have seen something of your ship. An incredible achievement. Incredible."

"It was worth it," Ardak continued when Thad did not respond. "To produce one son such as you makes it worth while. To give the galaxy another free spirit with the courage, the imagination, the intelligence to control his own des-

tiny. You do as you please, and that pleases me. I am proud of you."

Quick anger flashed in Thad's eyes. "You do not do yourself justice, sir. I am afraid I have never attained your high degree of egocentric freedom."

"And when has your own will been successfully opposed?" asked his father. "If you have done less, then it is because you desire less. Do not credit yourself with a restraint you do not possess. Even now you are planning your revenge upon me without regard to either Galec law or the laws of your own planet. I do not complain. I have had thirty years of freedom. I am content."

"You have had thirty years of undisciplined outlawry."

"I created my own environment. What I did not like, I changed. If I could not change it, or if I grew tired of it, I moved on."

"But you are mistaken to assume that I was a complete libertine. I lived as I pleased, but what pleased me was frequently to the good of the planets. I was a god, a fierce god, but a just god, and I left my footprints in the history of the peoples. A thousand years from now ask the people of those planets where I lived who most influenced their social systems, and they will tell you the Great God Ardak, The Fierce, The Kind, The Just, The Beloved."

"I see now that you have been misjudged," said Thad. "You are a sociologist."

"I did not just perceive the galaxy, I joined it, I became a part of it. My sons will be kings, and my son's sons will introduce new vigor and intelligence to races not yet in the Galec stream."

"Something like a stud horse."

"You would have me regret creating you? You, the greatest mind in the galaxy, if I can believe the evidence of your achievements. I saw your Earth, the people hurrying and scurrying with all the compulsion of instinct-driven ants. And to what purpose? I thought to introduce a new strain. My observations indicated biological incompatibility. Perhaps my blood would introduce a new vigor into the race."

"Your methods, good father, were most direct."

"How else was I to proceed? I did not know your language or your customs. Your race had an advanced technology. Races in such state of progress do not regard space travelers as gods—they regard them as potential threats and as sources of information.

"So I chose a secluded spot. There were not many. I used

my ground scanner to study the people. I must admit the selection of your mother involved more than mere scientific principles. I knew, of course, that it would involve trauma for her. I am surprised that she remembers the occurrence at all. I had thought her mind would have blotted it out."

"She remembered it," Thad said. "And so do I."

CHAPTER TWENTY

They found them in a small village twenty miles from where they had left them. Sondra was nursing a baby. Another child, hardly two years old, clung to her skirt. She wore the native costume. Her exposed breasts, no longer sex symbols, lent softness and femininity to her contours. Yan was brown and hard. He had become an ardent horticulturist. Already he had produced several new strains into the native plant life. They invited Thad and Lloyd for dinner. The oldest boy finished dinner quickly and went to play with the native children.

"We threw the damned birth-control pills in the lake," Yan said as he watched his son leave.

"You are happy here then?" Lloyd asked.

"Yes."

"We have come to take you back to Earth if you want to go," Thad said.

"We don't want to go," Sondra said. "We are better off here."

"We are out of it now," Yan said. "Our children will not even speak English."

"It's so relaxing here, Thad," Sondra said. "You ought to come here and live someday."

"I'm glad you are happy," said Thad.

"The trick is to reduce the scale by which you measure your life," Yan said. "When you get right down to it, the biological urges are the most important things. Life can be simple and still be satisfying."

"Did you find what you were looking for, Thad?" asked Sondra.

"I found my father," Thad said.

"You seem so sad."

"Perhaps what I was looking for was an illusion."

"Then stay with us. You could be happy here."

"I do not seek happiness."

"There were no others like you? No super-race?"

"No, none like me. There was one man—but he died a hundred thousand years ago. Genius seems to be an individual—not a racial—characteristic."

"Stay the night at least," Yan said. "There will be dancing in the village."

"No," Thad said. "My father is on *The Witchfinder* locked in the storage room. I am reluctant to leave him alone too long. We should rendezvous with the ship on its next orbit. But can we leave you any supplies?"

"No," Yan said. "There is nothing we need. However, there is one thing you can do for us. In another generation or so Earth will have a star drive. Once you return, they will know it can be done and nothing will stop them. It won't be long until their ships are exploring the near galaxy."

"You could be right," Thad said. "For sheer drive, I have not seen their equal in the galaxy."

"Then do us one favor, please. Take this sun off the star charts. They will find us eventually, but at least for a few generations help us to preserve our way of life."

"Very well," Thad said.

It was not, Lloyd thought, that there was anything unusual about the decision he must make. History had recorded many instances where the lives of a few were sacrificed for the good of the many. Could he be sure that the sacrifice was necessary? Emotionally he was sure that Thad would not use his talents for conquest. But he had the power, and it was dangerous to make assumptions about the way his mind worked. He might be provoked, and when provoked, he had a way of taking direct retaliatory action. And against the life of one man, he had to weigh the interest and safety of four billion people.

There was only one logical answer. He must kill him. Thad had to die—not because he had been ordered to kill him, but because four billion people demanded his death. He had struggled with the problem for two sleepless days and nights. His mind had clouded with a sense of unreality and distortion. Now that the decision was made, he accepted the inevitability of it. He would no longer weigh the factors that had forced him to reach the decision.

The problem was: how? Despite his lack of sleep he found he could think clearly on this problem. It had to be soon.

They had been decelerating for the approach to Earth for the past two days. And it had to be sudden. Lloyd had witnessed Thad's ability to hypnotize. Hand weapons were out of the question because Thad had locked them in the ship's safe as a precaution against Ardak.

He was sitting in the ship's recreation room thinking about the problem when he was joined by Ardak. In different circumstances, Lloyd might have found himself liking Ardak in spite of himself. He possessed a natural charm and a restless, inquisitive energy. He seemed to regard his activities of the past twenty-seven years more in the nature of adventures than crimes.

"Ain't that your sun," Ardak asked pointing to the scanner. He spoke in English. For some reason Thad had taught him Reservation dialect during the voyage home.

"Yes," Lloyd said. "It is." He had never permitted himself to be friendly toward Ardak. In his time he had known a number of engaging criminals, and he had trained himself to maintain a complete disinterest in their fates. Now he was glad that he had made no exception for Ardak. For in a flash he knew what he must do. He went back to the control room and locked the door.

This is the way it has to be, Lloyd thought, as he headed *The Witchfinder* toward his own sun. This way they would all die. It was better that way. He wondered if there would be any pain. If he maintained maximum acceleration, they should be there in twenty minutes. The baltac would shield them for awhile, but not even baltac could withstand the heat of Earth's sun.

He checked the control scanner. The ship was headed straight for the sun. He would have to operate the controls manually until the last possible moment, for the ship's sensory system abhorred direct contact with all suns. He heard a noise outside the room. He left the control board for a moment and rechecked the lock. He had not forgotten. The door was securely locked.

They were beginning to pick up speed. On the scanner, the sun already appeared larger. The ship had veered slightly off course while he had left the controls, and he now made a slight correction. Now what had he forgotten? Yes, the intercom. He reached over and turned it off. There was nothing to do now except to wait for death.

Outside, a white hot sun discharged its energy in the form of heat against the ship's hard surface. With a detachment approaching disinterest, Lloyd checked the temperature

gauges. The outside temperature had risen to 100,000 degrees. Inside, the ship's refrigeration system had noted the change and was fighting to bring the inside temperature back to normal. But already it was two degrees hotter. That same detached part of his mind calculated that at their present acceleration rate death would come to all in the ship in ten to twelve minutes. The ship would then continue to fall toward the sun until even the complex interlocking atoms that formed the baltac must disintegrate.

He checked the gauges again. Eighty-four degrees. The refrigeration system could not adjust quickly enough to handle the load. The rest of the ship must be getting hotter also. Thad would have guessed his purpose by now. But did he know why? Suddenly it was important to him that Thad should know why he was to die. He switched on the intercom so that his words could be heard on the rest of the ship without Thad being able to reply.

"Thad, I know you can hear me although I can't hear you. I'm afraid to let you talk to me, you see, because I know what you can do with words." He was surprised at how shrill his voice came out. He must avoid hysteria.

"You have to understand, Thad. I have to make you understand before we die.

"It wasn't anything you did—nothing you did. It's what you could do, do you understand? It's the power—the power to dominate. I . . ."

He heard the faint clicking noise that the ticker tape made. He had forgotten about that, but it didn't matter. Thad could not hypnotize with printed words, and besides he was not going to look at it.

"I fought this as long as I could. All the time we were gone I fought it, Thad. I had hoped that the decision would not have to be made. I tried. I tried to get you to give up this search. I tried to persuade you not to return to Earth. I begged you not to return—but you wouldn't listen to me."

The ticker tape was clicking insistently and forming words that moved across a small screen. He tried not to look at it, but his eyes caught the words, "Why Lloyd? What have I ever done to you?"

"Not what you have done to me," Lloyd said. "Not what you've done to anyone—but what you could do."

"Why me?" the ticker asked. "Why me?"

"Because," Lloyd said, unable to take his eyes away from the small white screen, and answering the ticker in spite of himself, "because you have the power . . . to rule the Earth.

And history has shown that to have the power is to exercise it. Perhaps you would not, but how could I be sure of that?"

The temperature in the cabin had risen to one hundred four degrees. His body was drenched with sweat. "Why me?" the ticker asked again. "There are hundreds of advanced worlds. Anyone of them could conquer Earth with a single ship. Earth is at the mercy of any race with a lust for conquest and has been for thousands of generations."

Lloyd did not answer this time. His mind was locked in place—fixed upon his original purpose. He no longer had the power to reason clearly—was no longer able to think in terms of logic. Only a small part of his mind retained its clocklike precision. The cabin temperature was now one hundred twelve degrees and rising steadily. He might retain consciousness for another two to four minutes, the clocklike part of his mind informed him. In sudden panic he said:

"Thad, you have to listen to me. You have to understand." His voice had risen to a scream. "Please try to understand before you die. I didn't want to do this. There was no other way. If I had a son I couldn't have loved him more than I did you. But I have to do it. I owe it to the human race. . . ."

"If I had wanted power," the ticker said, "there was a whole galaxy at my fingertips."

He saw the words, but his tightly locked mind refused to register their meaning. The temperature in the cabin had risen to one hundred fifty degrees. Through the scanner he could see a large white ball that seemed to be coming toward the ship. The ticker continued to click.

"We are done," the ticker said. "One of the rear refrigerator units . . . failed. Ardak unconscious. . . ."

"Thad! Forgive me Thad. It will soon be over. Thad?"

For a moment there was no response and then the ticker clicked slowly: "I forgive you. . . ."

The ticker grew silent, and he knew it would click no more. He sat there looking at the words, almost too numb to feel. Then suddenly something unlocked in his mind, and for a time he felt that he was thinking more clearly than ever before in his life. Because of his befuddled, oldworld thinking—and in the name of logic—he had nearly destroyed the greatest mind his galaxy had ever known in the last one hundred thousand years. The power possessed by Thad was shared by the captains of a thousand ships on a hundred planets. If Earth was to survive it would not be because power did not exist to destroy it.

In the name of logic he swung the great ship away from the furious sun, and then turned and opened the door leading from the control room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Two days after returning to Earth, Lloyd had a chance to confer privately with the President. The President was older now, but age had settled kindly upon his face, and there was still that spark deep in his eyes that hinted at a strength held in reserve. The President met him in the White House garden where he often received visitors nowadays. After they had exchanged greetings and after the President had asked a number of questions that had not been covered in Lloyd's debriefing about the planets they had visited, the President came to the real object of the interview.

"Where is he, Lloyd? Don't you have any idea?"

"No, sir. Have you tried the Reservation?"

"Yes, he hasn't been seen there."

"Then I have no idea where he could be. The last I saw of him, he and Ardak took the skipper while we were still about a million miles out and left me to bring *The Witchfinder* in alone. He didn't tell me what his plans were."

"We need to find him. It is very important that we find him."

"Why?"

"Not for the reason you are thinking, Lloyd. I can assure you we mean him no harm. The situation has changed in the past six years. Our scientists have been working on a propulsion system for a star ship. Now that we know it can be done, it's entirely possible that we will have a faster-than-light drive in your lifetime. We have made enormous scientific strides since you have been gone."

"You mean him no harm?"

"Certainly not. Your reports and pictures are positive proof that we are pygmies in a galaxy of giants. We have to stop the petty fights of the past and try to grow up. Of course, there will be growing pains, but I am hopeful—even optimistic. Already the Russians have offered a complete exchange of scientific information with inspections and safeguards that look very promising. After a hundred and fifty years, I

think the Cold War has ended. The beginning of the Earth's maturity may be traced to the day your ship landed."

"You said you needed him. Do you expect him to aid your science?"

"No. No, we can do it ourselves. For the pride of our race, I prefer it that way. I admit our progress was speeded up by those patents he so casually assigned to his old corporation, but eventually we would have made the same discoveries ourselves—painfully, perhaps, but we would have gotten there a step at a time."

"Then why do you need him?"

"Because unwittingly he has created a monster that is threatening to suffocate our world by its greed and power."

"I'm afraid I do not understand, sir."

"You remember Wally Spencer," the president began. When he had finished, Lloyd Coleman remained silent for a few minutes and then said:

"I'll see if I can locate Thad Stone, Mr. President."

There was something Thad had to do. His old company had been gluttoned to furnish the capital to build *The Witchfinder*. The only real asset of the company had been what Thad had thought to be some relatively worthless patent rights on the inventions he had developed for the star ship. He had carelessly assigned his control of the company to Wally Spencer.

Now hardly six years later, Inventor's, Inc., was the most powerful single force in the world. Under the brilliant, ruthless direction of Wally Spencer the corporation had grown and spread beyond all expectations. The basic patent rights involved dozens of radically new principles. Gathering together an impressive array of scientists, Wally Spencer had expanded the basic patents to thousands of derivations, which he registered with the world patent office. These patents contained improvements for practically every complex device in the world. They breathed new life into faltering companies. They became a competitive necessity for established manufacturers.

With the instinct of the true gambler and businessman, Wally Spencer insisted upon payment in stock for the patent rights. He created a legal monopoly by patent. Through his proxy control of the holding company, he exercised a voice in and sometimes control over thousands of corporations. Inventor's, Inc., was now worth some two hundred billion dollars. Its power extended to every nation on Earth. A

phone call from its president could silence a government. Not even in the United States was it easy to be elected to a national office without its support. Wally Spencer was easily the most powerful man in the world. And he had started from nothing.

"I started from nothing," Wally Spencer said. "You may think you handed it to me on a silver platter. There might have been others who could have taken those patents and made a success of them, but who else could have conceived of an operation of this scope? I'm telling you I put this thing together and made it grow. I took those inventions you so casually assigned to the company and made them into an empire."

"You are so determined to be wealthy?" asked Thad.

"Wealthy! You think I did this for money? Why I have clerks who live better than I do. I haven't taken a nickel out of the company except for my own small salary. That money stays in the company where it belongs."

"Power, then?"

"Power? Perhaps. But mostly it's playing the game, and playing it better than it's ever been played before. Everything I've done, I've done for the company. Not for me or my family, but for the company. It's the company that's important. Not wealth, not power, not me—but the company. It stands alone. It needs no other reason for being except its own existence."

"I am going to destroy the company," said Thad.

"You are not going to destroy the company," said Wally Spencer.

"I am going to destroy the company," Thad repeated.

"I was prepared for something like this," Wally Spencer said. "You will not leave this office alive. I'm sorry but I have no choice. I had hoped when I learned you were alive that you would resume personal direction of the company. I would gladly have relinquished my control to you, for you could have been good for the company. But since you wish to destroy it, I must kill you."

He pressed a buzzer on the floor. Thad did not need to turn around to know that the two smartly dressed bodyguards he had seen outside had come in with weapons drawn. Thad's voice assumed a new quality as he spoke quietly for a few minutes.

Then he said in a normal voice, "Wally, I have left a part of your mind free so you can understand and remember what I am doing and why. I came here with an open mind. I can

understand your feelings. I was prepared to give you the salvage from a great company—more than enough to have made you wealthy. I am no longer willing to do that. You may watch, if you wish, the destruction of your empire. I shall leave you with just one mental block. You cannot do anything to interfere with me. You will be powerless to prevent what I shall do. It should not take long.”

Wally Spencer made an effort to speak. He could not do so. Thad sent the two bodyguards outside. Wally tried again to speak, but he could not.

“What have you done to me?” he finally asked.

“I have given you a mental block against interfering with me. You could not speak to me when the guards were present because you wanted to tell them to kill me. You could not talk for a time after they left because you were going to try to dissuade me from my purpose. I have made your own mind your guardian. You yourself shall determine what actions are forbidden.”

There was a look of horror in Wally Spencer’s eyes. The look grew in intensity in the days that followed. Like a man watching the rape of his own wife, he followed Thad around through every step of the complex legal maneuvers that meant the end of the giant coporation. As patents were released and stock reassigned, as the hands, feet, mind, and body of the monster were severed into a thousand pieces, as its copious blood flowed back to its source, the light in Wally Spencer’s eyes burned brightly.

He stood it for ten days. When the thing was done, when the company was no longer dying but was dead, Wally Spencer went back to his office and killed himself.

The woman who lived on Thunder Mountain, no longer young, shaded her eyes against the failing sun. She watched the two men who climbed slowly up the path, up from the shadow and into the sunlight. Long before their features became distinguishable, she knew who they were. She wiped the fine sweat that had formed on her forehead on the sleeve of her dress as she waited for them to reach her. She did not move, she ceased even to think. It was Thad, and he had brought his father with him.

She stood there for a moment looking at her son. She did not look at the other man. She did not want to look at the other man.

“I’ve come back,” Thad said.

Finally something unlocked in her mind, and she spoke.

"I reckon I'm proud to have you back, son. Come on in. Reckon your pa better come in too."

Inside the cabin, she still avoided looking at the other one. But looking at Thad, seeing the baby who had stirred in her womb, remembering the strange child whom she had loved but had not dared to love too much, she felt her soul cry out to him and she yearned to take him into her arms and tell him that she loved him, that she had always loved him. There were a hundred things that were in her heart to tell him.

She said, "Reckon you grewed up on me, son."

"I reckon so."

"Y'had yer supper?"

"We done et," Thad said.

She lit the kerosene lamp and placed it where the light did not fall on the other one.

"Does your pa understand us?" she asked.

"I learned him to talk our language," Thad said.

"I reckon we got a mite a visitin' to catch up on," she said.

"I reckon," said Thad.

"Well," said Ardak, "if you folks'll scuse me I'll be gettin' to bed. Whar can I sleep?"

"Out there," Thad said, indicating the barn. And he added in Galec, "I'll expect you to be there in the morning."

"Where would I go?" Ardak replied in Galec with a shrug.

When he had gone, they talked. They talked of many things, and they learned that they could not unravel the intricate threads of fate that had determined their separate destinies. They could not communicate. There remained one thing for him to do.

"What do you want most, mother?"

"I want to turn back the clock. I want to born you in a proper marriage. I want to raise you with love, without a-fearin' your pa's blood. I want a proper home, a husband; all the things a mountain girl wants, I wanted. You can't give me these."

"I brung back my pa to marry you," said Thad.

She considered it a minute. "Reckon he don't take too kindly to that idea. Him bein' such a worldly man and all."

"I ain't told him yit," said Thad.

She thought about it some more. At last, she asked, "Is he human?"

"Well, he's a mite different from most folks, but I allow he's human all right."

"Well, then," she said. "I believe I'll jest take him. It's fitting."

The following morning over a breakfast of hot buttered biscuits, pork chops, and eggs they broke the news to Ardak.

Ardak paused, his fork in midair. "So that's what you had in mind?" he said in Galec. "I'm not so sure I would not have preferred the Decalan psyche tanks." In English he said, "I'm a-feared you won't find me much of a bargain, ma'am. I'm jest naturally shiftless. Never worked a day in my life."

"You can learn," Maude said complacently, taking a second pan of biscuits from the oven. "Here, try some sargum molasses on them biscuits."

"I got a weakness for the bottle," said Ardak.

"A lot of men like their corn," Maude replied.

"And a rovin' eye, too."

"It don't hurt none to look," said Maude.

"My health ain't whut it used to be."

"Mountain air'll fix that."

"I don't like to hunt. I can't stand dogs and similar critters."

"Then I won't have to worry about yer spendin' all yer time huntin'."

Ardak searched desperately among his meager store of knowledge about mountain people. "I ain't religious," he announced triumphantly. "I don't believe in no God."

"You come to one of Reverend Palmer's camp meetin's. He can preach the bark off a stump. He'll give you religion, all right."

Ardak sought sympathy from Thad. "You can't make me go through with it," he said in Galec. "This woman will kill me with kindness, understanding, and hot bisucits. She'll sap the strength from me. If you were going to take my freedom, couldn't you at least have the decency to put me in one of your prisons where I could have longed for and dreamed of the old ways?"

"Shut up," Thad said coolly. "Perhaps I was not a freak. Perhaps you will give the galaxy another brain."

Ardak's face brightened. "How old are you?" he asked Maude.

The wedding was a simple one in the log-cabin church in the valley. If the mountain folk found the circumstances unusual, they were kind enough not to say so. Everyone politely ignored the bride and groom's son who stood at the rear of the church with a shotgun crooked under his right

arm. They were used to shotgun weddings. And, Lord knows, this one had been delayed long enough. Most folks allowed as how they had never fallen for that story about the mountain warlock nohow.

EPILOGUE

His quest was ended. The circle was completed. He had sought his father, the warlock, and he had found him. His father had adjusted to mountain life with unexpected ease. His mother had succumbed to his father's charms, and was tolerantly spoiling him.

They would miss him when he was gone.

Lloyd had tired of public adulation and was fighting boredom in marriage to an ego-starved actress from Belgrade.

He would not miss him too much when he was gone.

A mechanized, patched up world, freed by a rapidly developing technology from the burden of toil, and freed by the same science from traditional restraints on promiscuity, prepared to go on a worldwide pleasure binge. A new morality was in the making.

They would not miss him when he was gone.

He had spoken their language, he had thought their thoughts, he had felt the agony of their struggle. But he was alone. There were none to speak his language, none to share his thoughts or his life. He was the last dinosaur, the last bald eagle, the last saber-tooth tiger—the last of his kind.

With a weary motion, he pressed the button that was to send the star ship from its Earth moorings for the last time. There were other galaxies, other races. On some distant planet in some other galaxy, he might find what he hungered for.

AT HOME IN SPACE

Thad Stone was like no other man on Earth. Born with superhuman powers, he knew from his earliest days that he had been sired by no mortal man. . . .

In the world of 2081, Thad sets out to find his father—a search that carries him into the farthest reaches of interstellar space.

The search is long, and at its end Thad discovers just why he had been given his superhuman powers. . . .

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