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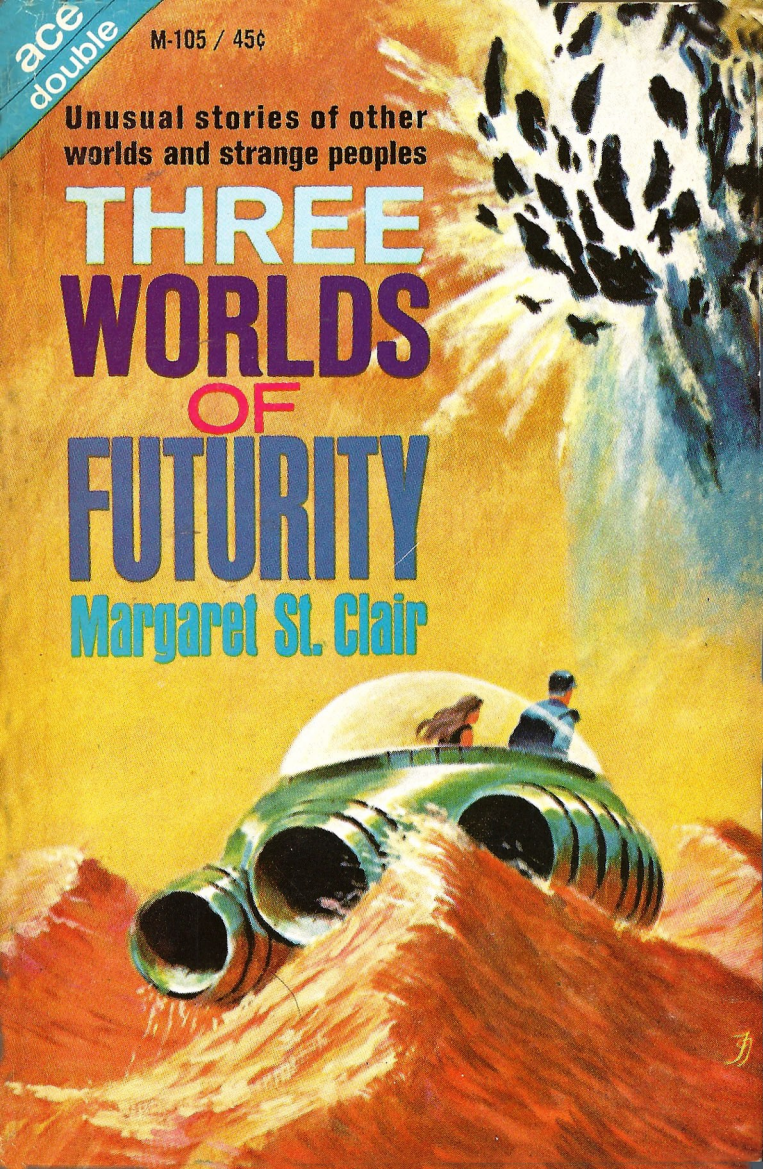
Margaret St. Clair



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THREE WORLDS OF FUTURITY

Margaret St. Clair

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THE EVERLASTING FOOD

"THE DECISION is difficult, I know," the surgeon said. Since he was a Venusian, his face was quite impassive, but there was sympathy in his voice. "Unfortunately, there is no one else whom we can ask. And we cannot wait much longer. You are her husband. You will have to decide."

Richard Dekker held his clasped hands before his eyes and stared at them. They were trembling. Part of his mind wondered irrelevantly why they wouldn't stop trembling when he was ordering them to. His lips were dry; he had to lick them twice before he could speak. "I thought . . . physicians were supposed to save life."

"Yes, Yes. But this is not a simple case, Pamir Dekker. You see, your wife is one of the Sanedrin."

Dekker made a noise in his throat.

"She is one of the Sanedrin," the surgeon repeated. "That means—well, you have been married to her for three years. You know a little of what it means. If we operate, she will lose the Seeing. A Sanedrin without the Seeing!"

For a moment the physician's mask of calm cracked, and Dekker saw abstractedly that there was consternation inside. "It is unthinkable. We must ask you to decide."

"Is it quite certain that the Seeing will go?" Dekker asked after a silence. "Isn't it possible that—that there might be some mistake?"

"I'm afraid not. As soon as she was brought here after the accident, we sent for the Pamia Ver. She is the best brain surgeon in the hemisphere today. She said—well, the prognosis is as I told you. It is impossible to intervene in the Pamia Dekker's skull without destroying the part of the brain tissue where the Seeing lies."

"She would not be affected other than that?"

"No, she would have all the ordinary human senses. Her eyes might be a little less sensitive to certain shades of red, that is all."

"And if she is not operated on?" Richard Dekker asked, still staring at his hands.

"She will die without regaining consciousness."

Dekker's mouth twitched. "How long have I?" he asked.

"A little more than an hour."

"Take me to my wife."

How could he decide? Richard Dekker thought as he looked down at Issa lying small and white in the hospital bed. They had taken away all the pillows, so that she lay quite flat on the hard mattress, and her slight body scarcely raised the coverlet. How could he decide? He loved her, he wanted her to live. He wanted her to live! She was his wife.

But she was one of the Sanedrin, too. Dekker had been married to her long enough to know, as the surgeon had said, a little of what that meant.

Once, the only time he and Issa had discussed it, she had tried to tell him what the Seeing was like. Faced by Dekker's profound, basic lack of comprehension, Issa had been forced back on telling him what it was not, rather than what it was. It was not sight, nor an extension of it, nor hearing, nor telepathy. It was something different from, and greater than, any of these. It was, simply, the Sanedrin Seeing. And Issa had ended, "I feel so sorry for you, Dick. Why, if I didn't have the Seeing, I wouldn't want to go on

living. How can you stand it? There would be nothing to go on living for."

Nothing to go on living for. How could he ask her to live without it? But he wanted her to live.

Blindly Dekker turned from the bed and made his way over to the window iris. Outside, there was a broad stretch of emerald lawn where dark-skinned Venusians walked about sedately and a patient or two took the air. Children ran about among them looking, in their bright clothing, as gay as butterflies. The prospect ended, as prospects on Venus always seemed to end, in a little jetty built out into the surging, foam-filled water of the turquoise sea.

While Dekker watched, a gentle rain began to fall from the rich clouds overhead. One patient was wheeled back into the hospital, but the others stayed out, smiling with pleasure, and the children ran about more gaily than before. They were like little flowers refreshed by the rain.

There was no help here. He must go back to his decision. If only Megan were here, it would not be so difficult. Issa's foster sister would surely know, much better than he, what was the right thing to do. She had a lifetime's experience of Issa; Dekker had known her only for three years. But they had not been able to locate Megan yet, and even when she was found she would be the width of the planet distant from Issa's hospital bed. It would take her many hours to come. Dekker must make his decision by himself.

Issa had not moved. She lay as still as death. Once she moaned and Dekker, though he knew she felt nothing, was stirred by a passionate pity. He wanted to gather her in his arms, to assure himself that she was still alive; he did not dare even to touch her hand.

Even at the first Dekker had found something incredible in Issa's love for him. It had been a wonder, something to be received with awe and gratitude. Now, looking down at her, so wan, so small, so remote, her ordinary dazzling fairness changed to a deathly white, he could not believe that the past had really occurred. Had Issa really lain night after night in his arms in love? Had she conceived by him, given him a child? Was he really the father of a son by one of the almost-mythical Sanedrin?

Half-Sanedrin or not, young Dick existed. Momentarily Dekker's face relaxed, thinking of the boy. And since he existed, didn't that change things? Didn't that make it a little less selfish to ask Issa to live?

There was a rap at the door. The surgeon entered. "Your decision, Pamir Dekker," he said formally.

"Operate. Save her," Dekker replied, almost absently.

The surgeon bowed. His face was completely inexpressive. It was impossible to say what he thought of the order. "Prepare the Pamia Dekker for surgery," he said to the nurse.

Issa was kept under narcotics after the operation for one hundred and twenty hours. During most of that time Dekker and Megan sat in the hospital waiting room together. They had little to say.

"Did I do the right thing?" Dekker asked suddenly when their vigil was half through.

Megan turned to him. She was a warm brown girl of unmixed terrestrial blood, though her foster parents had been Sanedrin. "I think so, Dick," she answered slowly. "What else could you do? Any Terrestrial would have done the same."

"But this is Venus. Would a Venusian? What if she hates me for it, Megan, after she's well?"

"She won't hate you, Dick, no matter what happens. She loves you too much."

"I'm afraid," Dekker answered. "I'm afraid."

Issa came down the low staircase smiling. She smiled a great deal nowadays. Her silver hair had been drawn to one side in a deep scroll to hide the scars of her accident, and her gown of silver tissue left her back and one alabaster shoulder bare. She was almost inhumanly beautiful. She looked as if she had been sculptured out of moonlight.

She came up to Dekker, still smiling, laid her white hands on his shoulders, and kissed him. He turned a little dizzy from the kiss. When he released her she stepped back and smiled at him again. It was kind of her to smile, Dekker thought, watching her with the frozen anxiety he had felt ever since he had taken her home from the hospital.

Or was her smile sincere? Was it possible that she was

really happy? She had never been more tender, more loving, than she was now. Was it possible that losing the Seeing had meant so little to her? The surgeon, at Dekker's request, had told Issa of her loss while she was still convalescent. She had nodded, saying, "I thought that was it," and had not thereafter mentioned it. And always she smiled.

But Dekker had come into the room once unexpectedly and found her sitting huddled in a chair with tears running down her cheeks, her face a mask of bleak misery. She had jumped up when she saw him and began chattering gaily. He might have thought that he had imagined what he had seen, except that her cheeks were wet.

And there were other things. Issa, before her accident, had loved the view from Neiriton, a low promontory near their home. Dekker himself had thought it pretty enough, but Issa had insisted that it was extraordinarily beautiful. Almost every evening they had sailed there so she might enjoy it. Now she never wanted to go.

As an experiment, Dekker said, "Shall we go out in one of the boats after dinner, Issa? We might sail over to Neiriton."

"Not tonight, Dick," Issa answered. "I'm a little tired. Some other time."

Dekker made no comment. After a moment Megan—she was on leave from her duties as field anthropologist in the Statira district—came in, murmuring apologies for her tardiness. They lay down on the dining couches. Issa pressed the button for dinner to begin.

They were halfway through the meal when Megan, leaning toward Issa solicitously, said, "You're eating nothing, Issa. Nothing at all. I've been watching you. Do try some of the soufflé. It's really very good. I gave the instructions for it to the robot myself."

"You worry about me too much, Megan," Issa answered lightly. "It's only that I'm not hungry tonight. I had such an enormous lunch, no one could expect me to eat."

That, Dekker knew, was a false statement. He had been with Issa at luncheon, and she had eaten nothing then, though she had played with her food and tried to make it seem that she enjoyed it. She ate less every day.

When the dessert came Issa got up from her couch—she

moved beautifully, like a dancer—and walked over to the row of window irises. Through them one could look out over the garden and the little private wharf. "It's going to rain," she said in the gratified tone in which Venusians always made such announcements. "But first we'll have an electrical storm. A really big one, I think."

Dekker felt a tiny quiver of uneasiness. Fond as he was of Venus—he had wangled an appointment as oceanographer with the government even before he met Issa—he thoroughly disliked its electrical storms. They were perfectly safe inside the house, of course. Like all structures on the planet, it was fitted with electrical diverters of high efficiency. But the uncontrolled, insensate, elemental fury of a bad Venusian electrical storm always disconcerted him. Terra had nothing like that violence. As if to confirm him in his uneasiness there came a remote crash of thunder. It was plainly many kilometers away, but startlingly loud.

Megan got up and went to stand beside Issa at the windows. Her tawny skin and soft green gown set her in sharp contrast to Issa's moon-blanched loveliness. For a moment they stood side by side. Then Issa turned away.

There was another peal of thunder, much more close. "This is going to be a bad storm," Megan said to Dekker. "I've lived on Venus all my life, but I never can get used to them. Listen to that!"

"They have their uses," Dekker answered perfunctorily. He was wondering why Issa hadn't wanted to visit Neiriton. "These storms fixate a lot of nitrogen."

"You sound more like an agronomist than an oceanographer," Megan answered, laughing. "Nitrogen fixation! It would take more than that to reconcile me—where's Issa gone?"

The hint of alarm in her voice alarmed Dekker. He looked up, startled. Issa was not in the room.

"She must have gone upstairs," Megan said quickly. "But I didn't hear her. I wonder if—"

A terrific thundercrash cut across her words. The room seemed to shake in a wave of white light. Megan whirled around to the windows. "She's gone outside!" she said in a startled voice.

Dekker started for the door at a run. Issa outside? She'd be killed, she'd be killed.

Megan hurried after him. She threw her arms around him and tried to hold him back. "Wait, Dick, wait!" she said urgently.

"She's trying to kill herself!"

"No, she isn't, Dick!" Megan was almost shrieking to be heard above the crashing of the thunder, but her voice held such conviction that for a moment Dekker paused and stared at her. "She knows what she's doing," Megan said more calmly. "Let her alone! She's one of the Sanedrin, Dick."

"Do you want her to be killed?"

"She won't be hurt. I've been watching her. I know her better than you do. It's for her sake. Wait, Dick."

Dekker started toward the door once more and then, haggard with indecision, halted. Megan took him by the wrists and drew him to the window irises. "Watch," she said imperatively.

Issa was walking with small light steps through the garden. Though the sky was alive with the crashing serpents of light she moved as surely as if she danced to inaudible music. Once the garden dissolved in a ghastly, stunning flood of white light. Dekker smelled the phosphorus-like reek of ozone. He was sure Issa had been struck. But she moved on into the storm unfalteringly.

She reached the end of the jetty and walked out on it. Numb with horror, uncomprehending, Dekker saw that her steps were quicker now. She was hurrying.

She came to the very end of the wharf and stood there for a moment, quiet, outlined against the boiling, foam-filled sea. Then her arms went up as if in exultation to the intolerable glory of the sky. To Dekker's incredulous eyes she seemed to wait, radiant and exalted, for the coming of some supernatural, well-nigh intolerable, delight.

Was she waiting, or summoning? Her upraised arms seemed to call, to invoke. And after a second the answer came.

The heavens cracked apart. Light boiled, dazzled, stunned, annihilated. The ground shook. The discharge was so vast that Dekker pressed his hands tightly over his already-closed eyes. It was like the end of the world.

When he could see again, everything was dark. The air

was filled with the steady hissing roar of torrential rain. The electrical storm was over. There was no sign of Issa anywhere.

Megan turned to face the door. "She'll be coming back now, I think," she said with some confidence. She gave Dekker, who was looking at her blankly, a reassuring nod.

The door opened softly and Issa came in. Dekker's first impression was that she was taller than she had been. She was drenched to the skin, sodden, but she was almost blazing with vitality. Her eyes were wide and exultant, her lips curved in an irrepressible smile.

Dekker stepped forward. Now that Issa was back, unharmed, he felt a complex emotion toward her that was tinged with hatred. "Why did you go out like that, Issa?" he demanded. "Were you trying to frighten me? You might have been killed!"

Issa looked at him levelly. She was still smiling, as if she could not resist the need to smile. "I'm sorry that I frightened you, Dick. But killed? Oh, no. I—" She halted, and then continued as if she had come to a decision: "—Dick, I'm never going to die."

Dekker heard Megan draw in her breath sharply. For a long moment he stared at his wife. "Do you—what do you mean?" he asked at last.

Issa made a gesture with one wrist. "That I'm immortal now."

"Issa, Issa, you're not well, you're not yourself. Go upstairs and rest, darling. I'll call a physician, get a nurse."

"No," Issa said.

For a moment she stood confronting him. Their eyes warred, and Dekker was defeated. It was then that doubt died out in him.

"Sit down, Megan and Dick," Issa said a little absently. She spoke as if their behavior, after all, did not much concern her. "I'll explain it as well as I can."

"When I learned that I had lost the Seeing, Dick, I wanted to die. I tried to hide it from you, because I loved you, but I think you knew anyway. It was hard to hide.

"Everything I had loved was changed, was altered. You weren't the same, neither was young Dick. I couldn't bear to see the things I loved when I had the Seeing, like

Neiriton. And the longer I was without the Seeing, the more I missed it. I didn't get used to it.

"Tonight I was nearly at the end of what I could endure. I still loved you, Dick, but love wasn't enough. I didn't see how I could go on living. And all the time"— Issa's exultant smile flashed out like light on a sword blade—"all the time I was falling heir to *this*.

"When the lightning began tonight, I understood. It was odd how suddenly I understood. I went out in the storm to be nourished by it. I'm sorry that I frightened you, Dick, but there was never any danger. The lightning"—once more Issa's smile flashed out—"the lightning is my new food."

Megan put out one hand to her foster-sister in protest and appeal. "Issa," she said very softly, "aren't you human any more?"

"Not in the way you mean," Issa replied.

After a moment's silence she continued, "Oh, I'm not quite invulnerable. Under certain circumstances, I suppose I could be killed. But I'll never know sickness again, nor weariness, nor the slow, imperceptible aging of the tissues that leads to natural, and inevitable, death. I'll never again have to get energy in the crude way that human beings do, from the dead flesh of animals, or by robbing plants of their stored-up food. And with these emancipations there goes something positive—I can't describe it—a continued, increasing delight—

"I don't suppose you can imagine it. I couldn't. But what does it matter, now, that I haven't got the Seeing? That was for human beings. Now I have *this*.

"When the Pamia Ver operated on my brain she did something more than she had intended to, something she would never have dared to attempt deliberately. With her knife she stimulated a portion of the brain which is absent in most human beings, and dormant even with the Sanedrin, the portion of the brain which controls a higher metabolic life. Slowly that brain center awoke in me, and my body changed. And tonight I learned that I had become someone who could, literally, feed on the energy of the storm, on the lightning's flash.

"I feel remote from you now, Dick and Megan, though

I used to love both of you. There is an isolation in being as I am now which is not lonely at all, but vast and joyous. I feel remote from everyone now, except perhaps young Dick. He is my child, and he is half Sanedrin.

"I'm sorry that I can't help you, Dick and Megan. Since I used to love you, I should be glad if I could give you the gift that the Pamia Ver's knife gave me. It is impossible. You are not Sanedrin. But for young Dick there is much hope. I mean to try what I can with him. If I can, I shall give him"— Issa hesitated—"immortal life."

Dekker sprang to his feet. Because, at the bottom of all his passionate emotion, he was afraid, his voice was harsh. "Be quiet, Issa. You're not to go near Dick, do you hear? You're not to look at him, you're not to touch him. I forbid you to!"

Issa inclined her head slowly, in what might have been submission and assent. Without another word she turned and walked toward the stair. They heard her sure, light steps as she went up.

Dekker turned to Megan, who had sunk back limply in her chair. "Is she insane?" he asked, a catch in his voice.

"Issa? Oh, no." Megan pressed her hands to her eyes and sighed deeply. "Get yourself a drink, Dick," she said. "You're shaking all over. Get one for me, too."

When the tumblers were half-empty, Megan said, "No, she's not insane, Dick. You don't really believe that yourself. I think everything she told us was true. There's a story that the first of the Sanedrin, Ischachshar, lived for nearly a thousand years, you know. He was finally killed by one of his jealous children. The story says that he 'fed on light'."

Dekker's hand shook so that the drink slopped in his glass. "It was horrible," he said, as if to himself, "horrible, to see her standing there, with her arms up as if she were so glad.

"Have I lost her, Megan? I thought, after the operation, that she might forgive me and love me again. I knew she was Sanedrin, but she was always human, before. I can't believe that this—this thing has happened to her."

"You know it has, Dick," Megan said.

There was a silence. "I'm jealous of her," Megan said at last.

"Jealous?" Dekker said violently. He put his glass down on the table with a crash, his over-strained nerves finding a momentary relief in action. "Jealous? Because she's not human any more, because she's a sort of monster that can feed on the raw energy of lightning? Be glad you're human, Megan! Don't talk like that."

"Oh . . . who wants to be a human being, Dick? Are we so enviable? Our lives are too short, they're too limited. We're the slaves of time, and however much we try to cheat, to fool ourselves, he has us on a heavy leash.

"We don't live long enough. The limitation of time lies at the heart of everything we undertake. I remember, when I was fifteen or so, how much I wanted to spend the next two or three years studying the flora of the Venusian salt marshes. There wasn't time enough. Since I wasn't intending to make botany my life work, I couldn't, as we say, 'afford the time' to study the halophytes.

"We're never free from that temporal pressure, even in little things. We don't even read the books we'd like to read or listen to the concerts we'd like to hear, because of that. And yet the world is so full, so rich, so varied, that a dozen lifetimes wouldn't be enough. How long would it take for us to understand and use and enjoy all that is rightfully ours? But we have only the one short life.

"And now Issa tells us that she's immortal. She won't even know sickness or age, which are a sort of death in themselves. Do you wonder that I'm jealous of her, Dick?"

"Do you mean that you'd like to live forever, Megan?" Dekker asked. He had stopped trembling.

"Yes. Wouldn't you? Answer honestly, Dick."

There was a silence. "Of course I would," Richard Dekker replied.

Dekker woke abruptly a little before daybreak. His heart was pounding. Even before his eyes were fully opened he felt beside him in the bed for young Dick and discovered that the boy was gone.

He knew then what had happened. He was already sick with foreknowledge when he went into Issa's room and found it empty. Some of her toilet things were missing, and when

he ran into the nursery he saw that young Dick's clothing and toys were gone.

Megan hurried into the nursery. She was still fastening the shoulder clasp on her thin green tunic, and her hair was rough with sleep. "I heard you," she said. "Is something wrong?"

"She's taken him," Dekker answered. "They've gone. But where? How?"

"The wharf," Megan said quickly. "She must have gone in one of the boats."

They went running toward the wharf through a light morning fog that left Megan's hair diademmed with drops of moisture. In the boathouse, when they reached it, the aquaglider and the cabin cruiser *Tryphe* were riding quietly at their moorings; but the quick little sailing sloop was gone.

"I've got to go after her," Dekker said. "I've got to find her and bring her back." He fell silent, wondering where, in all the expanse of foam that covered nine-tenths of Venus' surface, Issa could be.

"Do you have to go after her, Dick?" Megan asked slowly. "She's not a criminal. She loves young Dick. He's her own child."

"I can't lose him too," Dekker said almost desperately. "He's my child too. Haven't I any claim on him? And besides, Megan, Issa isn't—isn't human any more. You heard her say last night how remote she felt from us. She doesn't judge things the way we do. The boy's only half Sanedrin. I'm afraid that in trying to make him immortal she might—she might—" He choked over the words. Then, almost inaudibly, he continued, "cause his death."

Megan's tawny eyes grew wide. After a moment she nodded. "Yes," she said, "all right. I'll go with you, Dick, of course. You'll make much better speed if you have someone to relieve you at the piloting. But I wonder where she can have gone."

"Not very far, surely," Dekker answered, thinking aloud. "She'd have taken the *Tryphe* if the place where she is going were a long way off. But a wind-powered vessel is perfectly satisfactory for a short trip, and she always preferred handling sails to tinkering with a motor. She never

liked the *Tryphe* very well. No, she can't have gone far—unless she's planning to sail into one of the Westerly Currents and let herself be carried along. Some of the currents are extremely fast. She'd make quick progress if she did that."

Megan was frowning intently. "I don't think she did that, somehow. She's all alone, and if she's planning to—do what you said with young Dick, she'll need equipment and supplies." She frowned again, pressing on her cheek with one clenched hand. "Do you know where I believe she's gone? It isn't so far from here, either. To Hermeia, Dick."

"To Hermeia? Why should she go there? It's not a large city, not a metropolis."

"Yes, but it's the oldest of the Sanedrin cities, the first one they built when they became culture heroes for the rest of Venus. It's always been more Sanedrin than any other city, and more of them live there than anywhere else. I think Issa would turn to her own people for help."

Dekker chewed his lower lip. "I believe you're right," he said, deciding. "We'll go to Hermeia after her. We'd better get busy loading supplies."

It was broad day when the *Tryphe* left the little pier. As they shot out into the turquoise water, their wake breaking behind them into rich foam, Dekker felt his spirits rise. His anguish for Issa's loss—a loss that he knew now was irrevocable—was no less keen than it had been, but he was able to push it a little away from him. There was a chance, at least, that he would get young Dick back. Megan, standing beside him in the bow, smiled up at him reassuringly. "Don't worry," she said, raising her voice to be heard above the hiss of the water, "he'll be all right."

"I hope so. . . . Megan, when you lived with Issa's father and mother, what was it like?"

"Like? Oh, they were very good to me, very kind. I loved them. Most parents are not half so kind and good. But they were strange too, Dick, you can't imagine how strange. The Sanedrin strangeness! Why do you ask?"

"It's young Dick," Dekker replied haltingly. "I was thinking about him. He—I love him. I'm proud of him. He's a beautiful child. But he's odd sometimes, much odder than Issa herself ever was. Do you know what she was doing

before the accident? She was teaching him to read! He's not quite two, he can't speak plainly yet. But he can read simple sentences. I love him dearly, Megan. But I'm a little afraid of him."

"Sanedrin," Megan said comprehendingly, "Sanedrin!"

It was deep dusk when they reached Hermeia. The greenish lights were already coming on in the streets. They moored the *Tryphe* at the public wharf for small vessels and set out through the hilly town, Megan leading the way.

Dekker saw, as they walked briskly through the lower streets, what Megan had meant when she said that Hermeia was "more Sanedrin" than other cities. It was not that Hermeia was ancient, though the black basalt of its walls and buildings was eaten and pocked by time; what gave the city its particular flavor was the sense that time here was meaningless, that yesterday—and all the yesterdays before it—were coexistent with today.

The reflections of the street lights lay in oily greenish pools on the polished surface of the black stone steps as they went up. When they had gone high enough to see the harbor lying below them, Dekker asked, "Where are we going, Megan?"

"To see the Pamir Shan," Megan answered a little breathlessly. She laughed. "I never thought of trying to get a car," she confessed. "There never seem to be any for hire in Hermeia anyhow. Besides, it's only a little farther.

"The Pamir Shan is an old man, very old, a historian. He was a close friend of Issa's grandfather. I've known him ever since I was a little girl. I think, somehow, Issa may have gone to him."

The Pamir Shan's house, set in a small, moist garden, was quite dark, but Megan went to the door unhesitatingly. "He's not asleep," she explained to Dekker. "He doesn't need light for the Seeing." She rapped confidently on the door.

It was opened for them almost at once. The man who stood there was old, so old he had almost lost the typical Sanedrin fairness, but he was only a little stooped. He wore a long straight tunic of white byssa fiber and there were copper bracelets on both his arms. For a moment he peered at them uncertainly.

His face cleared. "I didn't recognize you at first, little Megan. You've changed. And that's Dick with you, Issa's husband, isn't it? Yes. Come in, come in. I'm glad to see you. I was rather expecting you."

He led them through the house to a study at the back. As he lit the triple lamp Dekker saw that the room, though spacious, was so filled with books, scrolls and tablets that the space available in it resembled a shallow cave scooped painstakingly from hard rock. Transparent cases of objects and artifacts were everywhere.

"Sit down, won't you?" the Pamir Shan said courteously. "And you'll excuse me if I do so, I trust. I find standing rather tiring, at my age."

"Has Issa been here, Shan-ya?" Megan demanded directly. She was sitting on the edge of her chair.

"Yes. Early this afternoon." The Pamir Shan put his fingertips together and regarded the digits with some dissatisfaction. "I must be getting old, older than I realize," he said, as if to himself. "How could I have failed to understand that something had happened to her? But I did fail, I thought only that she was looking remarkably well, though a little remote. I was surprised that she could look so well, so contented, when the Seeing was lost to her.

"She sat there, in that chair"—the Pamir Shan gestured "with her child on her lap, and we talked. We exchanged news of our kith. Then she said that she had heard that I had written a paper on Ischachshar, the first of the Sanedrin. She asked me to let her read it, and I got a copy from the shelf and gave it to her. I was a little flattered, I think.

"She read it, still with young Dick sitting on her lap. Once she laughed and said, 'you have made a mistake here, Shan-ya. I shall tell you about it some day.'

"When I asked her what she meant, she laughed again. She gave me back the paper, saying it was very well-written." There was a ghost of pride in Shan's voice. "We talked a little longer, and then Issa went away. After she left I found she had taken something with her. She had taken the key of Gwethyngrimm."

The phrase meant nothing to Dekker. He looked at Megan and was surprised to see that under her tan her skin was very

pale. "The Key?" she said, almost in a whisper. "She took the *Key?*"

"Yes. It was in that case." Shan indicated one of the crystal-topped boxes. Dekker could see that it was empty and the side was unlatched.

"I realized then what had happened and why she had taken it," the Pamir Shan went on. "She took Iwor with her too, but that doesn't matter. What is important is that she has taken the Key. It is dangerous. You must go after her."

"Is my son in danger?" Dekker demanded. There was a dreadful cold feeling around his heart.

The Pamir Shan's lean shoulders moved in a tiny shrug. "I fear he is," he answered somberly. "But what hinges on this is greater than the life of any child, however dear.

"The Key is very powerful. It is a secret of the Sanedrin. When Issa stole it, she stole what can change and control Venus' geodesic currents. Our planet is near the sun. The currents are strong. If the Key is misused—" The Pamir Shan hesitated. "Issa may cause movements in the crust."

Megan was biting the back of her hand. "I knew it was hallowed, Shan-ya," she said, "but not that it was so powerful."

"You are not Sanedrin," the old man said with the wraith of a smile. "We keep our secrets. —But the worst of it is that I dare not send one of us after it. I dare not! It is a bitter confession to make.

"We Sanedrin have been good for Venus, I think. We have loved it and served it; and even if we didn't originate on this planet—and my belief is that we did—we have deserved well of it. It's the fashion among Venusians nowadays to laugh at us a little, to regard us as a little quaint, a little obsolete. But it is kindly laughter. They feel to us as almost grown children do toward their parents. We do not mind. Good parents want their children to grow up.

"I mean, you see, that we Sanedrin have some reason to be proud of ourselves. We have served well, we have been selfless and disinterested. But we remain human beings, and hence imperfect. What Issa has would almost tempt an angel. I dare not send Sanedrin, capable of becoming as she is, after her.

"They would coerce her if she did not give her gift to

them willingly. And once they were immortal and fed on the everlasting food that Issa eats . . . power corrupts. Even Issa, for all the remoteness I felt in her, may be corrupted by it. There would be strife among us Sanedrin then, and fratricide, and in the end—great power corrupts greatly—a Sanedrin dynasty. It would be a shame beyond all shames if we, who have done so much for our planet, should finish by enslaving it to us."

The Pamir Shan's lower lip quivered. Dekker saw that humiliation and fear had reduced the old man, for all his urbanity, almost to tears. "You must go after her," Shan finished. "You must bring the Key of Gwethyngrimm back.

"And now, Dick, Issa's husband, will you go outside? I wish to speak to little Megan alone for a while."

Dekker, waiting alone among the heavy perfumes of the damp little garden, noticed how still the air had become. Not a leaf stirred. They seemed weighed down with the air's oppression and heaviness.

Megan came out from the house. As they started down toward the harbor together, Dekker asked, "What did he say to you?"

"He told me how to use the Key," Megan answered. "He told me how to find Gwethyngrimm."

When they got back to the *Tryphe* she was moving up and down slowly at her moorings on a sleek oily swell. A wind had begun to blow steadily from one direction, but its force was still so slight that the surface of the dark water was smooth as glass. Dekker thought it must be going to rain.

Megan led him into the cabin under the hanging lamp and got out the portfolio of charts. "I'll show you where Gwethyngrimm is," she said. "Shan-ya said it was all right to show you approximately."

"What is Gwethyngrimm? A city?"

"No, it's an island," Megan replied abstractedly. She was hunting for the right chart. "It's the place where the Sanedrin first appeared on Venus. None of their historians has ever been able to trace them back beyond that. —Here it is." She outlined a circle with her forefinger on the chart which,

like most Venusian maps, showed little but the blue of varying tints which indicated water.

Dekker looked at the area Megan had indicated. "There's no land there," he said doubtfully.

"Gwethyngrimm's there, though," Megan said. "Now, listen, Dick. This is the way we are to go. We are to sail due east from Hermeia until we hit the Westerly Currents. We are to let ourselves be borne along on them for twenty-six hours. Then—" Megan hesitated. "Shan-ya told me to bind your eyes and do the piloting. But I am allowed to tell you that we will pick up a current which will float us straight to Gwethyngrimm."

"A current from here to here?" Dekker said incredulously. He indicated a spot on the intricate looping of the Westerly Currents and then pointed at the area in which Megan had located Gwethyngrimm. "There's no such current. I'm an oceanographer. I know."

"You don't know everything," Megan answered. She began to fold up the chart. "If Shan-ya says there is a current which will carry us to the island, you can be certain that current exists." She put the book of maps back on the shelf. The up and down motion of the *Tryphe* was becoming more noticeable.

Dekker sighed. For a moment he pressed his hands wearily over his eyes. "Yes, all right," he said. "We've got to trust him. By the way, Megan, what is that Iwor he said Issa took with her?"

Megan smiled. "Iwor's a person, not a thing," she replied. "He's a young man, Shan-ya's grandson."

"A black sheep?" Dekker asked. Something in her tone made the question reasonable.

"No, not quite that. Jotor, Shan's son, had an affair with what Shan calls 'a worthless Earth girl' and Iwor was the result. He hasn't force of character enough to be much of anything, either good or bad. Shan-ya told me once he should never have been born, but he takes care of him and keeps him around to run errands for him. I suppose Issa thought he might be useful in the same way to her."

There was a rap at the cabin door. Dekker opened it. A man dressed in the dark blue tunic of Venusian officialdom was standing there.

"I'm the wharfinger," he said in introduction. He cleared his throat. "A storm warning is being issued to shipping. A tropical storm is approaching from the south-east. It is feared it will reach hurricane proportions. All small craft are urgently advised to stay in port for the next forty-eight hours. That is the warning. You have been warned." Dekker thought the man was reciting the contents of a bulletin verbatim.

"Thank you," Megan said. The wharfinger nodded and turned to go. They heard him scrambling up on the wharf again.

Megan and Dekker exchanged glances. "We can't wait," Dekker said almost apologetically. "Forty-eight hours is too long. We'll have to take our chances with the storm."

"I know, Dick. It's all right. I'm really not much afraid. Why don't you let me steer for a while? It's time you took a rest."

Though the wind steadily freshened as the night wore on, Dekker hoped against hope that the *Tryphe* might escape the worst of the storm. A little before dawn he realized that he was wrong. The sky, instead of showing the usual pearly luminescence which dawn brings to Venus' layers of perpetual high clouds, had taken on an ominous greenish tint. Discolored and livid, with streaks of sinister yellowish orange, the sky looked as if it had been bruised. Nearer the zenith heavy storm clouds were beginning to form.

Megan, who had been sleeping on the cabin settee, got up and stood beside Dekker. "I guess we're in for it," she said, picking up his unspoken comment. A rain flurry rattled sharply against the cabin's crystal hood. "Is everything tight?"

"As tight as I can make it. The *Tryphe's* really a pleasure craft."

"I know," Megan yawned and shivered. "I wish it would hurry up," she said. "I'll make us a hot drink. I hate waiting for something unpleasant to start." She busied herself with the galley stove.

Megan had not long to wait. By the time they were drinking scalding theobromine from thick mugs, the little *Tryphe* was pitching so it was difficult to stand. The trace

of the barograph had been going down steadily. Now it was almost vertical.

Dekker gulped down the drink and handed the empty mug to Megan. The rain was coming down in blinding horizontal sheets. Head forward, eyes narrowed, he tried unsuccessfully to peer through it. It drove against the cabin's hood with lunatic violence. He could see nothing; there was no visibility. The sky was gone, wiped out by an element that was neither water nor air. Even the waves, like hills moving, he perceived more by instinct than by sight.

The mere noise of the storm terrified. It seemed to beat on the brain physically. The intelligence was stupified, benumbed, by it. Indescribably loud, hungry, shockingly malevolent, it was the voice of a disembodied but implacable hate.

Megan was clutching the stanchion to stay upright. Her lips were white. Dekker knew what was in her mind. In a storm of this magnitude there was always the danger of a *changasa,* the unpredictable erratic monstrous single wave to which Venusians gave the name of "ship-wrecker". Since Venusian waters were kilometers deep, the *changasa* could attain, in theory, irresistible height and violence.

Dekker was fighting to keep the *Tryphe* on her course. As long as she could meet the waves bow on, she would be all right. Her motors were running steadily, and she was as buoyant as a cork. But if she got even a few degrees off . . . His wrists were beginning to ache.

The *Tryphe* was climbing up one glassy slope and down into the trough of the next undauntedly. Once she was too slow and the roaring green closed over her. She fought her way up through it gamely, staggering, like a boxer who won't quit. Dekker smiled faintly. He felt proud of the little craft.

His wrists and shoulders ached with weariness. As his fatigue increased he tried to force himself to greater attentiveness. But by now, though it was nearly ten in the morning, the world outside the *Tryphe* was enveloped in a maniacal twilight. If he could only see! If he could only see!

Once more the *Tryphe* lurched up too slowly on the swell of the wave. Dekker waited expectantly for her buoyancy to reassert itself, for her brave push up through the dark water.

The moment lengthened. The ship seemed to hesitate. And then, with a sick shudder, Dekker realized that he had let her get off course.

He wrenched wildly at the wheel. It was too late. The wave was on them even now.

It went right over them. They went down in a welter of crashing thready blackness, the *Tryphe* reeling far over on her side. Dekker was sure for an instant that she was going on over. Painfully she came upright once more. Dekker tugged frantically at the wheel. The *Tryphe* seemed to gasp, to jerk. She no longer responded to her helm.

Dekker knew instantly what had happened. The port turbo-jet had been stripped by the wave. The center jet and the star one were still functioning, but that left the *Tryphe* as badly balanced as a bird with only one wing.

His hand darted to switch off the star turbo. He was relieved to find the *Tryphe* handling normally once more. The difficulty was that the reduction of her power by two-thirds left her with very little way on with which to meet the storm.

The next wave hit them broadside. Again there came that thready, roaring blackness, like the beginning of unconsciousness. But cutting the two side turbos had added minutely to the ship's stability. She came upright a trifle more quickly. Dekker, his face dripping sweat, was able to get her back on course.

Megan had half-slid, half-climbed, to the sail locker. Now she stood beside it holding the huge byssa hoops of a sea anchor in her hand. Dekker grinned approval at her quick-wittedness, but shook his head sharply as she approached the cabin door. A sea anchor would help the *Tryphe* a great deal in her crippled state. But it was beyond the possible to rig the anchor now.

Nonetheless, the storm was abating. The sky was perceptibly lighter, the waves less high. The stunning noise was dying into the rush of an ordinary storm. Though Dekker knew it meant nothing more than that they were approaching the area of uneasy calm which lies at the dead center of a hurricane, he welcomed the respite. It would last for perhaps twenty minutes. In that time he could put the sea anchor out and might be able to repair the turbo-jet.

Abruptly the *Tryphe* emerged into an unnatural calm. The sky was leaden, the choppy wavelets black. The sudden cessation of noise and fury made it seem as if the ship had slid into an abnormal vacuum.

Turning the wheel over to Megan, Dekker went outside, He rigged the sea anchor so that the craft was headed the opposite direction from what she had been; when the storm began again the wind would come from a new quarter. Then, leaving Megan to rig another anchor from the stern—she had been handling sailing craft ever since she was five, and was quite as competent a seaman as he was—he went back into the cabin and plunged into the oily intricacies of the turbo-jets.

He found, as he had feared, that the port jet was beyond repair. The wave had twisted its stout metal vanes into a crushed mass. The *Tryphe* carried spare parts, but a new turbo would take hours to install. They would have to get through the second half of the storm with only the center jet.

He went back outside. Megan had rigged the stern anchor to her satisfaction and was now engaged in making a minute adjustment on the one from the bow.

He stood watching her for a moment, conscious of his more than physical fatigue. It was curious what a relief he felt in watching her—quick, graceful and intent—as she worked.

What made him look up? It was not that the sky darkened; it was already dark. Nor was it noise. The *changasa* is soundless. Perhaps a breath of air fanned his cheek, perhaps it was a warning from the enigmatic force we label instinct. Dekker looked up to see an Everest of water off the bow.

For the fraction of a second he could only stare at it, fear submerged in a gigantic awe. Then he threw himself on Megan and hurled her to the deck.

He clutched one of the cleats on the *Tryphe's* deck with each hand, groped with his toes for another cleat and found it. His hope was to pin Megan so firmly between his body and the deck, to glue his body so closely to hers, that even the *changasa* could not wash her overboard. It could be nothing but a hope.

There was a noise now, a very low roar. Dekker found

time to wonder, ironically, why the cosmos thought it necessary to use so much power to destroy two tiny sentient atoms like Megan and himself. It was absurd, like using a sledge hammer to crack nuts. And then came the wave.

It was indescribable. Dekker was only semi-conscious most of the time. He fought for breath and strangled endlessly. Under the tons of water his bones were bending like wax, his flesh felt like bruised sea kelp. Once there was a pain in his left arm, a pain remote and unimportant beside the terrible frustrated need for breath. But always something in his mind kept repeating tonelessly: hold on, *now hold on.*

The wave passed. Dekker drew his body feebly away from Megan and tried to sit up. When he moved salt water came from his mouth and nostrils in a great gush. He leaned on his right arm, head drooping, and vomited. His left arm was useless; he had apparently broken the radius and the ulna. He was too exhausted to have any emotion at being left alive.

He looked down at Megan. The wave had torn her tunic from her shoulders so that she was naked to the waist, and she did not seem to breathe. When he pulled her over so that she faced him he saw that the whole left side of her face, from temple to chin, was raw. Her shoulder was one great bruise.

The wind was beginning to spring up. In a time so short that seconds would measure it, the *Tryphe* would be entering the second half of the storm. Almost at the end of his strength, Dekker half pushed, half dragged Megan toward the cabin. He saw with passionate relief that she had begun to breathe. By the time he got her to the door she was cooperating feebly.

Once in the cabin, he got a hypodermic syringe from the aid chest and gave himself an injection of glucose. He followed it with antihistamine taken orally. As his head cleared he repeated the treatment on Megan—she was lying on the settee breathing in shuddering, painful gasps—and ended by plastering salve on her raw, oozing face. Then he turned to steering the *Tryphe* through the second half of the storm.

That time, as he remembered it afterward, was a nightmarish blackness shot through with bright white flashes

of pain. Periods of mental torpor seemed to alternate with feverish intellectual activity. Part of the time, when his arm hurt worst, he was simply light-headed. He remembered complaining petulantly to Someone that They were unreasonable in expecting him to steer the *Tryphe* through a storm like that when he had only one hand. Steer her somehow he did. The two sea anchors were a great help. Somehow the *Tryphe* got through the storm. He and Megan were going to live.

They lay for nearly twenty hours under the calm heavens, the ship drifting idly, and slept and rested. Dekker replaced the ruined turbo-jet, and when Megan was able she set his broken arm. The aid textbook open before her, his unbroken arm for a guide, she pulled and prodded and compared until the bone was back in place again. Throughout the process she was as calm and efficient as a hospital nurse. But when the arm was safely inside a splint, Megan burst into a flood of wild tears. Dekker was oddly pleased, though he could not have said why.

As soon as he was able, Dekker picked up the course and headed the *Tryphe* due east again. They had lost time, but not as much as they would have if they had waited out the storm in Hermeia at anchorage. On the second day they reached the Westerly Currents. For twenty-six hours the *Tryphe* was borne along on the swift, smooth-flowing blue water. Then Megan bound Dekker's eyes and took over the piloting. He had no idea where they were or how the ship was moving. On the fourth day they came to Gwethyngrimm.

It was not in the least as Dekker had expected it. In his mind there had been the picture of a city, an old city like Hermeia, set on a low green island in the water. He had thought they would find the physical traces of habitation—buildings, houses, wharves, docks—however deserted and ruinous. But Gwethyngrimm looked not only as if it had never been inhabited, it seemed that it could never have been habitable.

It was a vertical island, made of wild and jagged rock masses piled haphazardly one on top of another toward the heavens. There were fantastic aspiring towers and pinnacles, slendor Gothic spires, pointed minarets. The rocks were of

all colors, red and green and brown, orange and cinnebar, slaty blue. In the center of the island the jagged rock mass went up and up and up. Dekker followed it up with his eyes, from pinnacle to pinnacle, and found that its top was actually hidden from sight by a wisp of cloud.

They sailed around the island twice, hunting for a place to anchor, before they discovered a tiny, almost landlocked bay. On the smooth water inside, the little sailing sloop which Issa had taken was riding at her mooring.

Dekker took the *Tryphe* into the bay very carefully for fear of submerged rocks. He made her hawser fast to one of the jagged rock points that came almost to the water's edge. "The island must be volcanic," he said to Megan, who was standing beside him on the deck. "Volcanic, and then very much eroded. Didn't you say that this is the place where the Sanedrin seem to have originated on Venus? Here? I don't understand it. How could anybody, even Sanedrin, live here?"

"Yes, they began here," Megan answered. "How it was—" She shrugged. "Nobody knows. Nobody knows."

Dekker scrambled ashore and helped Megan out. For a moment he hesitated. In the waste of rock around them there was no sign of a path. Then he turned and began to lead the way up.

They climbed for perhaps a kilometer, with many backtrackings and retracings, when Issa appeared.

She seemed to come out of the rocks. Even in the full light of day her flesh was faintly luminous. And Dekker saw without surprise that her feet were not quite resting on the rock.

"I saw you coming," she began without preamble. "I am sorry that you suffered so much in the storm. But why have you come to vex me? Why could you not leave me in peace?"

Dekker stepped forward. His heart was pounding hard. "I want my son," he answered. "I want young Dick."

"I gave birth to him," Issa replied. "I love him too. Can you not understand—no, I see that you cannot. Very well then, I will show him to you. And then you must go. I will not be disturbed."

Without waiting for a reply she turned and began to

ascend. They followed toilsomely behind her, and now and then she stopped and waited for them to rest.

They came at last to a shallow platform, scarcely more than a ledge, of rock. Behind it was the round opening of a cave.

"He is inside," Issa said. "But"—she spread her shining arms out across the opening as if to bar them out—"you are not to touch him. Do you understand? If you touch him, he will certainly die. He is not to be touched."

She lowered her arms. Dekker and Megan went within.

For a moment Dekker could see nothing. The cave—it was round, like a bubble blown out of rock—was full of dim lights and shadows that flickered and moved. Then he made out, against the other side of the chamber, two bluish clots of luminescence. Conduits went from them to half-seen enigmatic apparatus, to switchboards and keys. And between the lights, lying on a pallet on the rock, was young Dick.

Dekker's mouth opened in horror. He heard Megan, beside him, cry out. For a moment he was unable to believe his eyes. Could this be young Dick? What had turned the happy, healthy child he remembered into this inert, pathetic, nearly fleshless huddle of bones?

He turned to Issa furiously. "What have you done to him?" he demanded, his voice breaking with anger and despair. "Have you killed him? Is he . . .dead?"

"Oh, no. This is necessary, Dick. There must be a period of katabolism before the anabolic phases can begin. He is not suffering; he knows nothing. And there is little danger. Only if he is moved or disturbed."

"But how can you run the risk?" Megan asked. Her face was pinched with distress. "How can you bear to see him look like that? Your own child?"

"How can I?" Issa laughed. "Come outside, Dick and Megan, and I shall try to show you."

As they went toward the entrance, something moved among the shadows at the back of the cave. Megan started. "What was that?" she demanded uneasily.

"That? Only Iwor," Issa answered. Her tone was indifferent. "He has been helping me. —Come outside, Megan and Dick."

She led them along the ledge for perhaps fifty paces and

then stopped. "Stand here," she directed. "No, you, Megan, farther over. So."

Megan shrank back a little, looking down at the rock before her feet. "You are using the Key, Issa?" she asked.

Dekker followed the direction of Megan's eyes. In the rock there was a shallow depression perhaps a meter wide, and at the center of the depression, a hole. A shaft of translucent metal came up out of the hole and seemed to run away again into unknown depths.

At the upper end of the metal shaft, resting on it and spanning the depression in the rock from side to side, was a shallow, salver-form basin of thick crystal. The basin was filled to the brim with some liquid, as transparent as water but much more alive, whose surface was puckered into a thousand tiny ripples and eddies and waves. They sparkled and shone in the light until the surface of the liquid seemed to laugh.

Against one side of the basin, floating on the liquid, was a heavy metal disk. Its surface was oddly channeled and undercut, and at one side a network of shining greenish lines had been set in. It must, Dekker thought, be the Key of Gwethyngrimm.

Issa stooped down and touched the surface of the disk. With the tips of her long fingers she turned it infinitesimally. It seemed to move with difficulty, as though the liquid in the basin resisted it. As the disk moved Dekker thought he felt the faintest flutter of vibration in the air.

"Yes, I am using the Key," Issa said, straightening up. "I have learned much about it, more than old Ischachshar ever knew. —But I brought you out here to show you why I do as I do with young Dick. Stand quietly, both of you, and think of nothing. That makes it easier for me."

She put her right hand on Dekker's forehead, the other on Megan's head. At the touch Dekker felt a warm electrical thrill ripple over his skin. Issa's fingers moved and shifted a little, as if she were studying, through the bones of his skull, the very contours of his brain. She halted and nodded. Then she pressed the heel of her hand down lightly toward his eyes.

It was as if some strange and powerful circuit had been closed. Dekker felt vast, alien energies stir in him. His heart

had begun to beat in mighty thrusts, like a giant's heart, and his limbs seemed to expand, to mingle with light, to grow glorious. Such joy flooded through him that his body could hardly contain it. He wanted to shout aloud in exultation, to raise his arms in delight to the heavens. And he saw with sudden lucidity that what was called life was only a qualified kind of dying—that he had been chained, until this moment, to a body that rotted and fell into decay even while it moved and breathed. He was alive now. He was an eagle, long caged, whose wings have at last been given to the air. He was free.

Issa took her hand away from his head. "The bone in your arm is knitted, Dick," she said. "And Megan, your shoulder and face have healed."

Dekker, still dazed with what he had experienced, looked toward the girl. The immense mottled bruise on her shoulder was gone. And the skin of her face was smooth and glowing. He began to fumble with the knots of the bandages that held the splint of his arm. But he knew before he undid them that the break had knitted, that the arm was sound and whole.

"What did you feel then, Megan?" Issa asked.

"I felt—" Megan halted. There were tears in her eyes. "I felt—" she began again, and then spread her hands in helplessness. "You know what I felt, Issa. You eat an everlasting food. Immortal Issa! Is it like that with you?"

"Yes, always. And now do you understand, Megan, why I take the risk that I do with young Dick, with my own dear child?"

"I understand," Megan replied slowly. "Whether it is wrong or not, I cannot blame you. No one who ever lived could do otherwise."

Issa nodded. For a moment she studied them. "I loved you both once," she said. "Dick was my husband, Megan my sister. Before you go, I should like to give a gift to you.

"I cannot give it to Megan. Her brain is different from yours, Dick. Did you not notice that I took my hand more quickly from her head than yours, just now? If I tried with her I should kill her or leave her an idiot. But I can do something for you.

"Not immortality. That is not possible. But I can give you

two hundred, or two hundred and fifty, or three hundred years. Years of life as you felt it just now. Two hundred years, and always with that same delight. Come, Dick, will you accept my gift?" She smiled at him and raised her hand again toward his head.

Dekker felt a honey-sweet blaze of anticipation run through his veins. He was almost faint with the burden of his longing and his delight. It would be his, all his—the time, the space, the years filled with radiant, more than human energies. All for him, all his, Issa's wonderful, incredible gift. His.

But a part of his brain was putting a question, a question he didn't want to hear and yet couldn't help hearing: *What about Megan?* Reluctantly Dekker turned and looked at her.

She was smiling at him. Her whole sweet brown face was alive with happiness at his good fortune. Only her eyes were shadowed and a little sad.

Somehow her look made Dekker remember how she had lain on the deck of the *Tryphe* after the *changasa* had passed. She had been so small as she lay there, so frail and broken. He had been dreadfully afraid she was never going to breathe again.

And at the recollection something strange awoke in Dekker, something limited and merely human and melancholy, something that made all Issa was offering him not too important, not too hard to reject.

There would always be regret, he knew. As long as he lived a part of him would ache with bitter, severed longing toward what Issa was offering him and what he was giving up. It was hard to surrender that star-like happiness and delight. But he could do it. He turned toward Issa, his mind closed to regret.

"I am grateful to you, Issa," he said formally. "But I must refuse the gift."

Issa looked at him blankly. For a moment her isolation and indifference were pierced. "But—you—why? Why not?"

"It's Megan," Dekker answered. "I can't take what you could give me, Issa, if she can't have it. She'd be alone."

"Does she mean so much to you, then?" Issa said incredulously. "For one woman, nothing but a human being,

you would give up three centuries of more than human life? Think well, Dick, of what you are doing. Is she everything to you? Do you love her so much?"

"I don't know about that," Dekker said awkwardly. He had turned a dull red. "But I couldn't take it without Megan. It wouldn't be fair."

Issa's face was illumined by a wonderful tenderness. "Bless you, then," she answered softly. "Bless you. I see I had forgotten the strength of human love."

"And now, before you go, come into the cave and see young Dick again. He will waken in a little while. Before he wakens, you must be gone."

She led them back into the cave, past Iwor, who was standing by the entrance. Dekker had a fleeting impression of a slack young man, dark-haired and eyed, whose face was molded in lines of childish petulance. Then he was looking once more at his son.

"Why—he's much better!" Megan cried. She looked unbelievingly at the child lying between the two pale clots of light. "What is happening? He is not half so thin as he was!"

"He is in the anabolic phase now," Issa said in explanation. "His body is building up again." She turned a switch and the blobs of light died away. "Your fears were foolish, you see. All is going well. All will be well.

"And now you must go. He will wake soon."

Megan hesitated. "Shan-ya sent us after you, Issa," she said. "He was afraid of two things. He was afraid that you would misuse the Key, that you would set up strains in the planet's crust. And he was afraid that you would use the Key to give immortality to others of the Sanedrin. He was greatly afraid of that.

"He told us to bring the Key back to him so that those two things should not happen. Shan-ya is old and wise, Issa. He was much afraid."

"Tell him this," Issa answered, "that I will bring the Key back to him in a little while. And he is not to be afraid. I promise that I will be careful, that the Key will not be misused. And I will never help anyone except my own son, Dick, to eat the everlasting food.

"Tell him that. The two things he fears will not happen.

Goodbye now, Dick and Megan. And—what is it Earth people say?—good luck."

Dekker and Megan started down through the maze of rock. They had gone seventy or eighty meters when the sound of a voice raised behind him made Dekker turn.

". . .But you promised, Issa," Iwor was saying petulantly. His voice was high and whining. "You promised, you know you did. You said that if I'd help you with Dick you'd make me immortal too."

"I promised nothing," Issa said with rather chilling indifference. "You have misunderstood."

"But you said—do you mean you won't give it to me, after all the trouble I've been to with Dick?" Iwor's voice was thick with self-pity. "After all I did for you? You lied to me!"

"I have not lied to you. You lied to yourself," Issa said remotely. "You were deceived because you wished to be deceived.

"Even if I could make you immortal—and I cannot—I would not do it. You are not worthy. Be quiet, Iwor. I dislike your voice."

Dekker watched for a moment. The episode seemed to be over. Iwor was leaning against the rock wall, his body stiff with sulkiness and discontent. But he appeared to have accepted Issa's dictum, though ill-humoredly. Once more Dekker and Megan started down.

They had got nearly half-way down the slope when Issa screamed. It was a beautiful, terrible sound, wild and inhuman, that might have come from a bird's throat. Dekker, his heart pounding in sudden fear, spun around.

Iwor was stooping over the basin where the Key floated, the Key that controlled Venus' geodesic currents, the Key to Gwethyngrimm. Every line of his body expressed triumphant spite. He put out one hand and wrenched strongly at the key.

Once more Issa screamed. From the rocks under Dekker's feet, seemingly originating in layers of instability many kilometers below, there came a low grating roar. As the noise drove toward the surface from those black grinding depths it grew louder and changed to a furious bellowing. And Gwethyngrimm shook.

Dekker threw his arms around Megan to help her keep

her feet. There was another shock and another and another one. The rock pinnacles around them were moving in a fantastic crashing dance. On the far side of the island Dekker saw that a cleft had opened and the sea was pouring in.

A wave of searing heat drove toward him. His hand went up instinctively to shield his face. The air near where Iwor was standing moved in blistered shifting waves. A ravenous heat was pouring out from the translucent metal column on which rested the basin and the Key.

Heat, and something much more than heat. Iwor had remained stooped above the basin, his hand stretched out. Now his body seemed to shrivel up and grow dim. As Dekker watched he slipped gently and weightlessly over on one side. His body lay for a moment against the rock. Then it fell atom by atom into nothingness.

Issa was hesitating on the ledge, almost wringing her hands. With a throb of anguish Dekker realized what was in her heart. Young Dick was still in the cave; it might yet be possible for her to save her son. She could certainly save herself. But unless the Key were turned back to a neutral position, unless the forces Iwor had wakened were hushed again into sleep, Venus would be shaken to the core. Her people would be scourged by earth shock and fire rains and tidal waves. There would be a horrible harvest of destruction and death. Every second increased the sure calamity. Issa's own immortal flesh must be sacrificed to turn the Key.

"Run!" Issa screamed down to them, her voice breaking on the note. "Run! I can't save Gwethyngrimm!" She gestured imperatively at them. And then, her white garments fluttering around her, she leapt toward the metal column. The last Dekker ever saw of Issa, the memory he had left to take with him, was of her stretching out her hand undauntedly through the consuming radiation to turn the Key.

When perhaps two kilometers of boiling sea separated the *Tryphe* from the island, Dekker looked back. There was nothing left of the fantastic, sky-touching rocks of Gwethyngrimm except a lonely monolith. And even as he watched, it broke off and went crashing into the raging sea.

They fled then, fled for many days and nights through nightmare and insanity. The skies above them rained down ashes, the black sea steamed and seethed and sent up geyser jets. Dead fish floated belly up around their prow. The steaming air was foul with sulphur reek.

They fought their way at last through to clear skies and calm blue seas. When they had left the Westerly Currents and were sailing west again to Hermeia, Megan said, "You must not grieve so, Dick. The boy—young Dick—he felt nothing, I am sure. He died in his sleep." She laid her hand lightly on his to comfort him.

"As for Issa," Megan went on after a silence, "as for Issa—" For a moment her voice broke, and Dekker saw that her lips were trembling. But when she began to speak again her chin was high and her voice was filled with pride. "What Issa did was nobly done and well. We must not grieve for her. She died for others. She died as befitted one of the Sanedrin."

"I know," Dekker replied slowly. He looked out over the blank surface of the blue sea, thinking. How could Megan understand what he had lost? Issa had been his wife, his first love, but it was much more than that. She had been at the last to him like some regal star burning in the heavens—strange and remote in her immortality, but lovely, but bright. Her death had left a part of the sky darkened. Issa was gone.

But Megan was smiling up at him. Dekker bent over and kissed her soft warm mouth. He had Megan. They were together. And together, not too sadly, they would take up the burden of mortality again.

IDRIS' PIG

"Do YOU HAVE to talk so much, gesell?" Bill begged hollowly from his bunk. His face, which had turned pale at the Cyniscus' take-off two days before, was by now the pale curded green of a piece of bosula cheese, and his eyes were sunk. "It sounds as if you were trying to keep yourself from thinking about Darleen. I don't want to be ungrateful, but all that talk makes me feel worse."

George shook his head. "Before you can get over your attack of kenoalgia," he said remorselessly, "you'll have to realize what's causing it. There's nothing wrong with you physically, but being in open space for the first time in your life is giving your ego the worst beating it's ever had. The first spacemen, who weren't trained psychologists, couldn't believe that so much nausea and prostration could have mental causes. They attributed it to a marasmic action of cosmic rays on nervous tissue, and the first two expeditions to land on Luna mutinied rather than go through 'space scurvy' getting home again." He cleared his throat.

"Kenoalgia's a new disease," he went on, "because it's a response to a new situation for the human organism, being out of Earth's gravitational field. Psychologically, it's a

combination of repressed fear of falling, anxiety about bodily integrity, and the rejection response. The cure—say, do you smell something funny in here?"

Bill opened one eye and looked at him. "Uh-uh," he said.

"Something sort of fishy and rank? No? Well, as I was saying, the cure—"

"Get out," Bill said wanly. "Please get out. Go away and brood about Darleen. I don't care if you are my cousin and the *Cyniscus*' psychological officer, when you talk it makes me feel worse."

Looking hurt, George began to unwind his long legs from the rungs of his chair. "You're sure you don't notice that smell?" he asked solicitously. "It might be adding to your nausea."

"Don't smell a thing," Bill replied firmly. "You're imagining it. Oh, by the way, could you turn the projector on before you go? No. 9, Blue Disks, is my favorite. It seems to help my giddiness."

"Sure." George made the adjustments. A galaxy of blue and purple disks appeared on the wall opposite Bill's bunk. Motionless themselves, they blinked on and off in a succession of patterns that might, George conceded, be soothing to kenoalgia dizziness. "Anything else I can do for you?" he asked, lingering.

"Call the medical officer."

"No sense in that. Kenoalgia is purely—"

"Psychological. I know Get out."

When the door had closed, Bill, looking very sick and very, very resolute, got out of his bunk. He tottered over to the little brown box which stood on top of his Travelpak, and gave an anxious sniff. An expression of consternation came over his face. He sniffed again. Then he got a deodorant spray out of his bureauette and went over the box with meticulous care, stopping only when his sense of smell told him all was sweet once more. Gaunt and shaking in his long chicory-colored sleeping tunic, he crawled back at last into bed.

In the ship's lounge Mr. Farnsworth was talking to George. George had long ago divided all passengers into three groups: those who snooted you because you were one of the hired help; those who stood you drinks because you were,

after all, one of the officers; and those who kept leading the conversation around to psychoanalysis, hoping you'd do a little free work on them. Mr. Farnsworth belonged to the second group.

"Too bad I'm transshipping at Marsport," the older man said expansively as the barman brought their drinks. "This is a big time of year for the Martians. I hate to miss the festivals."

"Oh, is it?" George replied vaguely. He had accepted Farnsworth's offer of a drink merely because he hadn't known how to refuse it. What he really wanted was to get down to his cabin and (not think about Darleen—certainly not) and look up an article in the JOURNAL OF PSYCHOSOMATOLOGY on new treatments for space scurvy. He was a little worried about Bill.

"Yes. You know how the Martians are—a time for everything, and lots of festivals. Well, this is the time when they make business arrangements for all next year. Treaties, too, affairs of state, that sort of thing. And it winds up with a big celebration with pretty girls, perfume carts, soma fountains in the iters, all the fancy stuff you can think of. As I say, I hate to miss it, but I'm going starside. Transshipping in a sealed tube so I won't have to go through the octroi." He drank from his glass. "Have another drink."

"No, thank you, I—"

"Oh, a little more phlomis won't hurt you. Here, barman, two more of the same. . ."

Several drinks later Farnsworth said, "Say, Baker, could you do me a favor?"

"Well, I—" George started. Phlomis had a little dulled his innate caution, but he was still wary.

"Oh, it's nothing." Farnsworth drew a lucite disk from his pocket. "This is for a man that works at the Topaz Rhyoorg, just on the edge of the spaceport. You may know him—his name's Louey Varth. His sister Myrtle asked me to give this to him when I was on Mars, and like a gowk I promised, forgetting I wouldn't be off ship. It's a picture of her little girl."

George inspected the three-dimensional image of the spindly blonde child which was imbedded in the clear material. "Well, I suppose—"

The ship's announcing system began to blare excitedly.

"George Baker report at once in cabin 11B. George Baker report at once in cabin 11B. On the double!"

11B was Bill's cabin. George sprang to his feet, shoving the lucite disk absently into his pocket. "Got to go," he said. Mr. Farnsworth looked after him.

It did not need the medical officer's pursed lips to tell George that Bill was worse. Bill's pupils were dilated, his breathing shallow and rough. Crusts had formed on his lips. George felt a stab of guilt, mixed with surprise.

"The steward called me," the medical officer explained rather severely. "The patient's condition frightened him. In my opinion, he should be hospitalized—with your consent, of course. I've given him a sedative." The medical officer, Daniel, was a stiff little man with a great respect for professional etiquette. He changed his tunic three times daily when the *Cyniscus* was in space, and flirted warily with the lady passengers. He and George had always disliked each other.

"He had the classical syndrome for kenoalgia," George murmured defensively.

"Kenoalgia, certainly," Daniel snapped. "But he's also suffering from food poisoning of the gamma type."

"Want to talk to George," Bill panted, looking up anxiously. "*Got* to talk to George. Get out, doc. Got to talk to George." His forehead was wet.

Daniel took Bill's circulatory reading and frowned. "Five minutes," he warned. "No more." His stiff blue back expressing disapproval of George's mistaken diagnosis, he went out.

"Listen, George," Bill croaked weakly when the door had closed, "you got to deliver the pig."

"Pig?" George answered incredulously. "Now, now, don't worry. You'll be all right."

"I'm not delirious," Bill answered with a flare of spirit. "Just damned sick. The pig's over there, in that little brown box.

"I'm working on a private courier service—'speed and secrecy guaranteed'—between Terra and the planets, and that pig is what I have to deliver on this trip. If I don't deliver it, I'll be blacklisted. You've got to deliver it for me."

Still incredulous but obedient to Bill's pointing finger,

George got the box and opened it. He was greeted by a fishy smell and a feeble oink. Inside a small blue animal, some twenty centimeters long, regarded him comatosely.

"It's some kind of cult object," Bill explained. "One of those Martian cults." He stopped to retch. "You spray it with deodorant to keep it from smelling. But you don't have to feed it or anything."

"But—"

"Listen, if you deliver it you can have half my bonus, and then you can marry Darleen. You said she'd marry you if only you had more in the bank. You won't get into any trouble with the pig. It's not like it was valuable."

Daniel knocked on the door. "Two minutes more," he said warningly.

"You're to give it to a man with a black camellia in his buttonhole you'll meet at the north edge of the spaceport at 23 on Thursday, Martian time." Bill's words were coming more and more slowly: the sedative Daniel had given him seemed to be taking effect. "He's the cult's representative. You . . . go . . . up to him . . . and . . . and say, 'Perfumed Mars, planet of perfumes,' and he'll . . . he'll . . ."

Bill's eyelids fluttered and sank. George shook him gently without result. He was out like a light.

Daniel opened the door. "Ah, I see he's quieter now," he said, coming in. "I trust you agree he should be put in hospital."

"Oh, certainly," George replied. He had picked up the pig's carrying case and was holding it under one arm as he tried to think. "I quite agree with you."

Daniel relaxed a little. He called two stewards. Bill was loaded on a stretcher and carried out into the hall. As the stretcher rounded the door post one of the stewards stumbled and Bill got a jar that made the teeth click audibly in his head. His eyes opened. He was looking straight at George. "Pig," he said insistently, *"pig."* He groaned and then lapsed into unconsciousness again.

He'd have to deliver the pig now, George thought. Bill's last words had been like the injunction of a dying man, impossible to disobey. Besides, they were cousins, Bill's job depended on it, and there was the not inconsiderable matter of the bonus and Darleen. Professionally speaking, George

had noticed a lack of euphoria in himself lately. It must be caused by his frustrated feeling for the girl.

All the same, it was a mess. Mars was less than 42 hours away, and Bill might be unconscious until after they landed. In that case George would have to deliver the pig (at 23, to a man wearing a black camellia) without knowing the countersign. He hated messy things. It was a good thing the pig wasn't valuable.

He rooted around in Bill's baggage until he found the deodorant spray and then carried it and the pig to his own cabin. As he opened the door the polka-dotted purple zygodactyl he had bought the last time they touched at Venus opened one eye and stared evilly at him. "You'll be sorry!" it croaked, "you'll be sorry." It was the only thing George had ever been able to teach the bird to say; it had been funny at first, but George was beginning to be tired of it. "You'll be sorry," the zygodactyl went on, working itself up into a verbal frenzy, "you'll be sorry, you'll be sorry, you'll be sorry!"

George threw a book at it to make it shut up. Then he pulled out his bunk to its fullest extent, sat down on it, and looked at the pig.

His first impression, that it was alive, seemed to be correct. When he punched it with his finger it made a weak noise and even moved its mouth at him. But it was a sluggish, low-grade kind of life. The pig appeared to be basically a collection of fatty tissue surrounded with a pale blue skin. Considering its size it might have been an attractive, appealing little animal, but it wasn't. It had no personality.

It was beginning to smell. George gave it a good spraying and bent to put it in his foot locker. He hesitated. Bill had said it wasn't valuable, but there was something funny about Bill's food poisoning, when you considered it. Nobody else on the ship had been affected. You never could tell with religious things.

The cabin was poor in hiding places. In the end George loosened one of the plastitiles of the ceiling with a multitool and shoved the pig up in the space behind. It would get plenty of air there, at any rate. He anchored the tile in place again with a sliver of preemex.

He had other patients to see to. He couldn't spend all

day on Bill's pig. He took one last look at the ceiling and then went out. As he closed the door the zygodactyl croaked, "You'll be sorry!" at him.

In the forty-one and a third hours before the *Cyniscus* put in at Marsport, George's cabin was searched twice without the pig's apparently, being discovered. George made attempt after attempt to see Bill, but his cousin was always receiving sedation. It was not until the ship was almost in Mars' atmosphere that he was admitted to the hospital ward.

Bill, looking extremely wan, was lying on one pillow with a refrigerator pack on the back of his head. "Hi," he said.

"Hi. You look terrible. Say, what's the countersign?"

Bill frowned. "I don't know," he confessed. "I've tried and tried to think, but somehow I can't remember."

"Mental block, caused by anxiety," George barked professionally. "Don't worry about it. I'll get it out of you in no time under deep hypnosis."

The red-headed nurse who had been hovering in the background came up. "You'll have to go if you excite him," she said warningly.

Bill waved her aside with one thin hand. "It doesn't matter, though," he said. "Give the pig to the man with the black camellia. It's not valuable."

"My cabin's been searched twice."

"You're imagining it. Martian cults aren't important, the way religion is on Earth. You know how Martians are—extremely sane, realistic, unimaginative. Only a little lunatic fringe is interested in their cults. Nobody's trying to get the pig away from you." Bill had majored in Martian subjects at the University.

"Well, if it's so unimportant, why did they send it from Terra with a private courier?"

"Save time, I guess. You know how many complaints there've been about the slowness of the regular mail. I don't think the cult has more than six members all told. But don't you worry about that. You deliver the pig."

The nurse came up and took Bill's circulatory reading. She pursed her lips. "You'll have to go," she said to George.

The north side of the spaceport was near the drainage pits. As George approached it through the flickering shadows

of the Martian night there seemed to be echoes everywhere. He felt tense and keyed up. Of course Bill was right, and nobody was trying to get the pig. On the other hand, he had always found his cousin's judgment brash and overconfident. He shifted the pig's carrying case under his arm, a movement which added a taint of fish to the perfumed Martian breeze, and swallowed. His throat was dry.

The man with the black camellia was waiting about fifty meters further on, in the shadow of one of the triple cranes. George went up to him, his footfalls echoing hollowly on the rhodium-colored pave. He cleared his throat. "Perfumed Mars, planet of perfumes," he said.

"Huh?" the man said after a minute. He was a big man, of a typically somatotonic build, and he put a world of interrogation into the sound.

"Perfumed Mars, planet of perfumes," George repeated, beginning to grow warm around the ears.

"Run along, sonny," the man said indulgently. He turned his head to one side for a leisurely expectoration. George saw, in the skipping light of Phobos, that what he had thought was a black camellia was, in fact, one of the half-animal Dryland epiphytes which Martian geeksters liked to wear. "Run along," the somatotonic type repeated. "You got the wrong tzintz. Do I look like I'd be interested in sightseeing tours?"

His face hot, George beat a retreat. Of all the fool things to have to go up and say to a stranger! "Perfumed Mars, planet—" Bah! As far as he was concerned, Mars and the pig both stank.

A good deal farther on he encountered the second man. He was small, dark tzintz (Martian for "bozo") with a thin little goatee. George circled around him warily, making sure that he was really wearing a camellia and that it really was black, before he spoke.

"Perfumed Mars, planet of perfumes," he said.

"Rubbledyrubbledryrubbledlyrube," the stranger said, his head bent.

George paused. A suspicion was stirring in his mind. What the man had answered might have been Old Martian, of course, but surely the countersign would have been in

Terrese, like the sign itself. And anyhow, it hadn't sounded like a language at all, just mumbling.

"Perfumed Mars, planet of perfumes," he said for the fourth time that night.

"Rubbledlyrube," the thin dark tzintz answered, more briefly. He stuck out his hand.

George drew back. There was a fishy odor about this. It smelled as bad as the pig. "No you don't," he snapped. "I—"

The next thing he knew he was lying at the bottom of one of the drainage pits, a lump as big as a rhea egg on his head. From above someone was speaking to him.

"Be reasonable!" the voice said scoldingly. "How do you expect me to pull you up if you won't cooperate? Do be reasonable!"

Something brushed George lightly on the face. He sat up, rubbing the lump on his head and trying not to groan.

"That's better," the voice said encouragingly. "Now you're being reasonable. The next time I cast for you with the shari, take hold of the mesh and pull yourself up."

Once more there came a light touch on George's face. He looked up. A girl was leaning over the edge of the drainage pit, trailing her shari at him.

The shari is an invariable part of the costume of Martian women of every class. A long, strong, slender net, as richly ornamented as the means of its owner will allow, it is used to carry parcels, tie up the hair, transport young children, and as an emergency brassiere. A Martian woman would feel naked without it and, by Terrestrial standards, she very nearly would be. This was the first time George had ever been asked to climb up one. As it trailed over his face again he hooked his fingers in it and pulled himself upright.

"That's fine!" the girl cried. Even in the poor light he could see that she was a good looking girl—though not, of course, as pretty as Darleen. Darleen was like a picture, never a hair out of place. "You hold on, and I'll tie it around the winch."

Still holding the shari she got lightly to her feet and whirled off into the darkness. "Hook your fingers and toes in the mesh!" she called back. George obeyed. After a moment the shari began to move slowly upward. Obviously the girl

had tied its end to a hand winch and was pulling him up. He only hoped the shari wouldn't break.

He stepped out on the level just as the mesh of the shari gave an ominous creak. He was still disentangling himself from it when the girl came back. She was panting a little and her dark red hair was disarranged. "Tore my shari some," she observed ruefully, taking the net from George. She smoothed her hair with a skillful hand, settled the shari around her head so that it fell in a glinting golden cascade over her nape, and drew the shari's end through her girdle in front to form a garment which, if not exactly modest, was adequate.

Her toilet completed, she looked scrutinizingly at George. "My, he certainly hit you hard," she said. "Did he get away with the pig?"

George winced. The pig was something he didn't want to be reminded of. And anyhow, what did this girl know about it? "What pig?" he asked warily.

"Oh, be reasonable. You know very well what I mean. Idris' pig. You should have taken better care of it."

"Um."

"Well, you should. Say, what's your name?"

"George."

"Well, mine's Blixa. I was supposed to pick up the pig."

This was a little too much. "You're not wearing a black camellia," George pointed out rather acidly. "And you're certainly not a man."

"No, of course not," Blixa agreed, looking down at her slim round body with some complacency. "But there was a last minute change in our plans. The regular messenger couldn't come. They sent me instead. Try me. I know the countersign."

"Perfumed Mars, planet of perfumes," George said unwillingly.

"Perfumes that take captive or set free the heart," Blixa said briskly. "See. I know it. I was supposed to get the pig."

George looked at her thoughtfully. His head was aching so much that clear thought was difficult. And besides, the scent that Blixa wore (Martian women were always drenched in it) disturbed and oddly troubled him. All the same,

in the depths of his mind an alarm signal was going off. Blixa might be telling the truth, but there was about her, as palpably as her heady perfume, a positive aura of unreliability. He wouldn't have trusted her as far as he could throw a rhyoorg with one hand.

"Um," he said. They had been walking along slowly as they talked, and by now had come, through the scented Martian shadows, to the top of a little rise. Marsport at night, a glittering twinkling incredible pageant, lay spread out in front of them.

"Well, I was," Blixa said impatiently. "But only Pharol knows where the pig is now."

"Out there somewhere, I guess," George said, indicating the ten thousand dancing lights.

"No doubt," Blixa replied. "But it's too important to dismiss like that. Do you want to help me try to get it back?"

George hesitated. He had an overpowering hunch that a man who was associated with Blixa was heading for trouble. "You'll be sorry!" the zygodactyl had croaked at him. On the other hand, Bill's job depended on making safe delivery of the pig, and he had always been fond of Bill in an unsentimental masculine way. There was the matter of the bonus which would, he was almost sure, provide the final argument in persuading Darleen to marry him. And besides, some reliable person ought to keep an eye on this girl.

"All right," he said. "Nobody can steal my pig and get away with it."

"Fine!" Blixa exclaimed. "Then we'll go hunt a good clairvoyant to locate it for us."

"Clairvoyant?" George echoed incredulously. The idea was so foreign to the notion he had formed of Blixa's character he could not believe he had heard her aright.

"Certainly. How else are we to find the pig? I never can see why you Earth people admit that telepathy and clairvoyance and other sorts of ESP exist, and yet refuse to consult experts in them. It's not reasonable."

They were coming now to populous streets. Blixa's long graceful stride (not as feminine, though as Darleen's shorter one) made walking with her agreeable. Ahead of them a laughing girl dashed out of a doorway, her white thighs

flashing under her blue shari, and ran down the street. A young man ran after her, his sandals going slap slap slap. A perfume cart, rumbling past, drenched them both, and as the driver came abreast of George he raised the nozzle and showered him with the fragrant drops. Somebody was throwing aveen petals from a rooftop; somebody else was playing on a double anzidar. The music, thin and high and a little sad, floated out excitingly on the warm air. Against his better judgment, George found that he was rather enjoying himself.

"Will we be able to find a clairvoyant at this time of night?" he asked. Blixa's idea seemed far-fetched to him, but he had to admit there was a certain logic in what she had said.

"Oh, I think so. This is the Anagetalia, you see, and if anybody goes to bed, it isn't at night." She pointed down to the cross-iter, where a soma fountain was. Twenty or thirty people were clustered around it. A girl had plunged her arms up to the wrist in the gushing fluid: others were drinking from their cupped hands. Six or eight couples were moving expertly, if a little unsteadily, in the stamping, challenging maze of a Dryland dance. "—Turn this way."

"Um." George and the girl were moving into a poorer quarter now. The buildings, though they still had the typical air of Martian elegance (composed, George thought, of broad-leaved trees and good architecture) stood closer to each other and were made of poorer materials. He decided to put one of the questions that were in his mind. "Listen, Blixa, how did you know I had the pig?"

Blixa's green eyes (hazel?—no, green) laughed at him. "If you had smelled yourself before the perfume cart went by, you wouldn't need to ask," she said. "I don't think there's anything in the system that smells quite like Idris' pig. . . . Here we are. There are several clairvoyants here."

They knocked on three doors before they found anyone in. The woman who finally answered them had a haggard, rather handsome face, long dark hair, and deep-set, burning eyes. She too had been celebrating the Anagetalia, for there was a long rent in her gauzy mauve tunic and a wreath of aveen flowers sat crookedly on her head. She staggered a little as she showed George and Blixa into her consulting room.

Blixa put the case to her in the long-winded hypothetical Martian manner ("If it should happen that one found a certain object"), and the sibyl listened attentively. When Blixa had finished, the woman drew a deep breath. Though her face remained impassive, George felt that she was startled, almost alarmed, by what she had heard. She put a quick question to Blixa in Old Martian, and the girl nodded. Once more the woman drew a sharp breath.

She lay down on the long low couch set diagonally in the corner. From a recess she got out fetters of shining metal and slipped them over her hands. She gave one of the balls which terminated the chains to Blixa to hold, the other to George. Then she closed her eyes.

For a long time there was silence in the room. Outside in the street people laughed, sang, played on double and single anzidars. Doors slammed. Once someone screamed. The woman on the couch gave no sign.

George moved restlessly. Blixa quieted him with a severe glance. At last the clairvoyant spoke. "A man," she said, "a man with a shaved head. He has it. The two crowns." She writhed, opened her eyes. After a moment she sat up and yawned.

"Did I say anything?" she asked.

"Shaved head. Two crowns," Blixa answered briefly.

The woman's eyes grew round. After Blixa had paid her she went with them to the door and stood watching them as they went down the street.

"What did she mean?" George asked. Blixa was walking briskly along, headed apparently north.

"She told us who had the pig."

"So I gathered. But who?"

"The Plutonian ambassador."

"What!" The exclamation was jarred out of George; his idea of the present possessors of the pig had gone no higher than geeksters, or, perhaps, the agents of some rival cult. "Why?" he asked more calmly.

"This is the Anagetalia," Blixa replied. She looked down at the folds of her gold-spangled shari, frowned, and rearranged them so that they left a good deal more of her person explosed. "This is the time of year when we negotiate treaties and handle affairs of state. Mars is a poor

planet. If one should happen to have possession of a certain small blue animal it might, perhaps, be of advantage to him."

"But— Look here, I was told that there weren't more than six members altogether of the cult of the pig."

"The person who told you that was wrong. There are eight."

"Well, then, if the cult has so few members, how could having the pig be of advantage to anyone?"

There was a protracted silence. At last Blixa spoke. "It is because of the nature of my people," she said.

"Go on." They had been walking north all this time. George, whose feet were beginning to hurt, wondered briefly why Blixa did not call an abrotanon car. He decided that it was because all the drivers would be celebrating the Anagetalia too. "Go on," he repeated.

"We Martians are not like you," Blixa said slowly. "We Martians say always that we are more reasonable than Terrestrials, and so we are." For a moment pride shone in Blixa's voice. "We are far more reasonable. Sometimes we find it difficult to understand you at all, you do such childish and foolish things.

"But there is one thing about which we Martians are not reasonable in the least. It is as if all the foolishness and illogic and unreason and childishness of our natures, which in you Terrestrials is mixed in with everything you do, were concentrated in one place with us. We are not reasonable about our cults.

"They are not like your religions which enjoin, I have heard, ethical duties on their followers. We Martians"— again the note of pride in Blixa's voice—"do not need religion to tell us, for example, of the brotherhood of man. We are logical, except about our cults.

"They have but few professed members. Your friend was right about that. But everybody on Mars knows about them and, very quietly, believes in them. Even if they are illogical. Pluto was originally a Martian colony, and the ambassador knows how our minds work. That is why it would be of great advantage to someone to have the pig."

They had reached a stately quarter now. Nobly-framed buildings stood among big trees so crowded with blossoms that they were arboreal bouquets. Vines twisted among

their branches and dropped long starry racemes of flowers to the ground. The air was rich with the scent of them. "I don't know just how we're going to get the pig back from him," Blixa said thoughtfully. "But we'll have to try."

George slowed down and looked at her. "Why us?" he demanded practically. "If the pig means as much to Martian life as you say, it's clearly a matter for the government."

"Government?" Blixa echoed. She looked almost shocked. "Certainly not. Government is a logical activity. If I went to an official with this, he would laugh at me, and if I persisted there would be punishment. You don't understand. I should be making him ashamed."

Logical . . . reasonable. . . . George felt dizzy with the words. His head still hurt where he had been hit. On the other hand, Blixa did seem to know what she was talking about, and for the first time that evening she impressed him as being sincere.

"O.K," he said.

A few steps farther on Blixa indicated a large building with a broad flat roof. "This is the embassy," she said in a low voice. "I imagine they still have *it*, because it's so hard to get about in Marsport during the festival. Probably they'll try to get it to a Plutonian ship when people are off the streets. Once it's aboard, there won't be anything we can do."

They walked past the embassy slowly, George making deliberate effort to look casual and unconcerned. The street was still crowded with revellers. When he and Blixa reached the corner they turned and came back again. From an upper window of the embassy, very faint through the scent of the flowers, a trace of a familiar smell came to George. He would never have noticed it if he had not been expecting it, and even then he could not be sure. He looked enquiringly at Blixa, and she gave him a tiny nod.

Before he realized what she was doing, Blixa led him over to the soma font. "We'll have to drink and act like the others," she said in a low voice. "We'd be conspicuous, just hanging about." She slipped lithely through the crowd, George following her. From the double-spouted fountain she caught soma between her hands and held them up for George to drink. As he awkwardly sipped at the liquid, his

lips, unavoidably, brushed the soft flesh of her palms.

Laughing at his clumsiness, Blixa helped herself from the fountain and then held up her hands again for him to drink. It was good soma, though not especially strong; George could feel it warming him, relaxing his tension, washing away his headache and his fatigue. "Let's have some more," he said.

Blixa had turned back to the fountain for more soma when a tall blond Drylander who was standing beside her ran his hands possessively over her shoulders and whirled her off in the first steps of a complicated dance.

George began to frown. It was, of course, none of his business whom Blixa saw fit to dance with, but they were here on business. She ought to remember it. And besides, he could have danced himself if she had taken the trouble to show him how. When a little dark girl came up to him and said challengingly, "Dance with me, Earthman!" he accepted with alacrity.

"Is this one of the DruDehar dances?" he asked after they had moved a few steps. The DruDehar dances (Old Martian for "Golden Garden") were known all over the system as the Mating Cycle.

"Yes, they all are," the girl replied. "You Earthmen aren't very good at dancing, are you? Too stiff. When I come forward, you come forward too. Don't pull away from me! There, that's better. Much better. You're doing fine."

The dance ended with a wild swoop of anzidar strings. Smiling at him, the small dark girl stood on tiptoe and threw her arms around his neck. She kissed him several times, affectionately if muzzily. "For an Earthman," she said, "you're rather nice, I think." George was not altogether sorry when her grinning escort whirled the little dark girl away in another dance.

The crowd began to grow thin. Couples disappeared into doorways, around corners, under the shadows of trees. Blixa, flushed and smiling and redolent of perfume, came up and she and George drank more soma together. In a surprisingly short time there was no one left in the street but themselves and a man with wrinkled limbs and thin gray hair who snored happily as he lay upon the pave.

Blixa linked her fingers with George's and led him into

the shadow of the basalt statue of Chou Kleor. Chou Kleor was the greatest of the poets of Mars. His works, perhaps, were not much read nowadays, but every Martian schoolchild knew him as the writer who first spoke of "scented Mars". His statue was a monumental thing, and the shadow it cast was correspondingly large.

"We'll wait here," Blixa breathed. "If they happen to be watching from the embassy, they'll think we couldn't be paying any attention to them." She sat down on the turf and drew George down by her side.

"Have you any plan for getting the pig?" he asked softly.

"Yes. I imagine they'll just send one man with it, because the fewer people who know about a thing like this, the better it is. When he comes out I'll walk toward him and pretend to stumble. He'll come toward me and start to help me up. And then you hit him—hit him *hard*—and get the pig away from him."

It sounded O.K. George nodded. It occurred to him that he was going to a good deal of trouble to get his half of Bill's bonus and marry Darleen. If anything went wrong, he'd be in a nasty mess. He hoped Darleen would appreciate it. But Darleen—funny, he'd never thought of it before—Darleen wasn't what you'd call a very appreciative girl.

The city was utterly quiet now. Blixa yawned and in the most natural manner in the world rested her head for a moment against George's chest. He was still trying to decide whether he ought, in simple politeness, to put his arm around her, when she sat up alertly again. "I might go to sleep that way," she explained.

The sky was growing lighter; it could not be long until the first signs of day. George bit back a yawn, and then another one. Suddenly he leaned forward, transfixed. The embassy door was opening.

Blixa had leaped to her feet. As the door opened wider and a small dark man (the tzintz, George thought with a thrill of recognition, the tzintz who had knocked him out at the drainage pits) slipped out of it, she started across the pavement to him. She was wobbling a little, in a skillful simulation of drunkenness, and crooning softly as if to herself.

As she came abreast of the tzintz she stumbled and pitched forward on one knee. It was so well done that George, watching, was afraid she had really hurt herself. She tried to get up, grimaced. "My knee," she said plaintively, "my knee."

The tzintz hesitated. He was carrying in one hand a case that could be nothing but the pig's. Then he made up his mind. He walked toward Blixa, put his hand under her armpit, and began solicitously helping her to her feet.

George pounded up to him, his long legs putting out a very creditable burst of speed. He hit the tzintz on the point of the chin. He gave the pig's carrying case a mighty tug.

It was then that the flaw in Blixa's plan became apparent. The pig was chained to the tzintz's wrist.

The three began whirling about in an impromptu saraband. Blixa, popping up, was tugging at the tail of the tzintz's tunic. George, on the other end, was pulling for all he was worth on the carrying case. And the tzintz, in the middle, was uttering shrill cries.

This state of affairs could not continue. Window irises in the Embassy opened. Heads popped out. People began yelling at each other. Even the inebriated old man who had been sleeping on the pave was sitting up and looking around him bewilderedly.

Blixa abandoned her enterprise suddenly. Yelling "Run!" at George, she let go her hold on the tzintz so abruptly that George almost fell over backward. She shouted "Run!" once more in warning and then whirled around and darted off into the darkness of a side street.

George decided to follow her advice. He dropped the carrying case. He turned. He ran straight into the arms of two big Plutonians.

And after that, of course, it was only a matter of minutes until the police carts came.

It was hot in the jail. George had a black eye, two loose front teeth, and a fair hangover from the soma he had drunk. The jailer (George was the only prisoner at the moment) was morose and intractable. George surmised correctly that the man resented his incarceration because it

meant that the jailer wouldn't get enough sleep to let him celebrate the Anagetalia adequately.

Every time the jailer brought him food or came to see how he was doing, George asked to see a lawyer or somebody from the Terrestrial Embassy. The jailer only grunted and went away again. It occurred to George that for a Terrestrial to assault a Plutonian on Martian soil might constitute an interplanetary incident. Perhaps he was being held without bail.

The day passed slowly. George spent most of it pacing around his cell or sitting on his bunk and cursing Blixa mentally. Blast the girl; it was all her fault. From the moment he had seen her she had ordered him around, pushed him from one situation into the next, told him what to do. And this was the result. The *Cyniscus* was taking off for Terra day after tomorrow; if he wasn't there, he'd be blacklisted for the rest of his life. It was the kind of a mess he'd spent his existence up till now trying to avoid. Blast the girl. Maybe it wasn't entirely her fault. Blast her anyhow. If he ever saw her again, he'd give her a piece of his mind.

By the middle of his second day in clink George was down to his last fingernail. Late in the afternoon the jailer came to his cell and grunted that he had a visitor. Visions of liberty began to float through George's mind. He followed the man eagerly.

It was Blixa. After his first surprise George advanced to the grating with fire in his eye. He was going to tell her what he thought of her.

Blixa beat him to it. "Listen, gesell," she said in a cold voice, "why didn't you tell me you were pushing the groot?" Her level eyebrows had drawn together, and even her green shari looked indignant.

"Groot?" George repeated. He didn't know the word.

"Groot, meema, alaphronein," the girl answered impatiently. "I'd never had bothered with you if I'd known what kind of man you were."

George knew what alaphronein was. It would have been hard to find anyone on the Three Planets who did not. It was a highly dangerous drug, with a rotting effect on the nervous system, which reduced its victims to scabrous husks. It originated on Venus, was sent to Earth to be processed,

and Mars was the center of its illicit distribution. The Martian government had been making an all-out effort to suppress the traffic in it.

"I'm not pushing it," George said weakly. The accusation was so big it was difficult to deny.

"They found nearly a hundred grams of it on you."

"They *couldn't* have."

"They did, though. It was inside the image in a lucite disk you were carrying."

A great light dawned on George. Farnsworth! He had forgotten all about him. Hastily he told Blixa how he had got the disk and what he had been supposed to do with it.

As she listened the girl's face cleared. "My, I'm glad to hear that," she said when he had finished. "I couldn't bear to think I'd been mistaken in you like that. It wasn't reasonable.

"It's a mess, though. Farnsworth must be in open space by now, and it's hard to get people off a ship. Anyhow, it's just your word against his. And the government hates the alaphronein traffic so much I wouldn't be surprised if they hung you up by your thumbs or burned you alive in Ares Square. You have no idea the trouble I had getting in to see you."

"I'm darned glad you came," George said sincerely. He had forgotten all about how angry he was at her.

Blixa beamed for an instant and then grew sober again. "It's still a mess," she said ruefully. "They never give bail in drug cases. You'll have to escape."

Out of the corner of his eye George saw that the jailer, who had been hovering discreetly in the background, was coming closer to them. He gave Blixa a warning wink.

The girl raised her chin infinitesimally to show she had understood. "Do you know how much I've cried, thinking about you?" she went on, leaning forward intimately. Her voice was a tone or two higher than it usually was. "Why, my pillow's been sopping wet. My shari was all wet too. I know it wasn't reasonable to cry so much, like one of Vulcan's weeping dolls, but I couldn't help it. I cried and cried, until everything was all wet."

What the *devil*—? George felt a tickling sensation in his wrist. He looked down and perceived that Blixa, in a

series of tiny movements, was passing something no thicker than a hair through the grating to him. It was too small to set off the matter-detector built into the grating, being very nearly invisible. George clamped it against his hand with his thumb and began winding it around his wrist. A shade of relief passed over Blixa's face.

"Do you ever think about me, George?" she asked, leaning forward again. She was still speaking in that rather unnatural voice.

"You bet I do." George answered heartily. He was bewildered, but still game.

Blixa sighed. "I think about you so much at night," she said. "One always feels so alone at night, doesn't one? It's not so bad during the day, but at night one feels so alone."

The jailer came up. "Time to leave, lalania," he said courteously. ("Lalania"— Old Martian for "perfumedness"— was politely used in addressing ladies.)

Blixa got up to go. "I don't know when they'll let me see you again," she said. "Soon, I hope." She blew him a kiss, smiled and was gone.

George was taken back to his cell. He spent the rest of the day in concentrated thought.

By one o'clock that night he was ready to try his escape. He had constructed a reasonably realistic dummy in his bunk. It would, he thought, fool the night jailer when he made his infrequent rounds.

Much reflection had convinced George that the key words in what Blixa had said to him were "wet," "Vulcan's workshop," "one" and "at night". Also, she had said that she hoped to be seeing him soon. One o'clock, therefore, was the time, and water the means.

He had, consequently, put the long hair she had passed him through the grating into his drinking cup to soak. Incredibly, amazingly, as it took up water it had shortened and grown thick. It turned eventually into a largish egg, glossy pink, with a knob at the larger end. The surface had a most peculiar feel, something between plastic and living flesh, and it was faintly warm to the touch. The transformation was so surprising that George saw why Blixa had prepared him for it by the reference to Vulcan's workshop.

Vulcan's workshop, in Martian folklore, was an artificial planetoid at the far end of our galaxy on which an immortal artificer lived. Half divinity, half scientist, he was supposed to spend his days in the creation of objects of incredible workmanship. Martians called him master of life and half-life, and they ascribed any particular subtle and cunning device to him. Once or twice before George had run across things whose construction he had been hard put to it to understand; but this was the first time he had seriously wondered whether the legends might be right.

His cell was windowless, with walls of translucent brick. A little nervously, for he was not quite sure what it would do, George held the broad end of the egg against the lower course of brick and pressed the knob. Nothing happened. He bit his lip. Then, in a burst of sheer inspiration, he twisted the knob.

The egg quivered in his left hand. He held it steady. After a moment it began to bite into the brick. Dust showered down and lay in a glittering trail on the floor. Quietly and steadily the egg continued to eat, growing a little thicker. It reminded George of some blindly hungering animal.

In less than half an hour he had cut a circle in the outer wall large enough for him to get through. He reduced the egg to quiescence by twisting its knob in the other direction. Carefully he pulled the cut-out section of translucent brick into his cell and leaned it against the wall. Then he slid into the opening.

His cell was only on the second floor, and Martian gravity was less than Earth's. George hesitated all the same, deliberately relaxing his muscles, before he let go. It would be the height of irony to break an ankle at this stage.

He landed with a thump that took the breath out of him. Blixa detached herself from the shadows and glided up while he was still checking over his anatomy.

"Pharol be praised," she said in a low voice, "you did get the idea. I was afraid you might not. No broken bones?"

"I'm O.K."

"Hurry, then. I gassed the guard, but pretty soon he'll come to." Blixa set off at what was almost a run through the shadows. George hurried after her.

"Hadn't we better take an abrotanon car?" he asked when he had caught up.

Blixa shook her dark red curls. "We're safer on foot. As soon as they miss you, the alarm will go out, and they'll alert all the cars. Wait a minute, though."

She steered him under a light, untied the end of her shari, and with the cosmetics it contained began deftly making up his face. His black eye was hidden, his cheek bones heightened. She drew a frown between his eyes and added lines around his mouth. With tiny bits of plastic she even changed the set of his ears.

"That's better," she said, "but—" She rolled up his sleeves, unbuttoned his tunic, tied up its hanging tail. "And don't walk so straight. Slump, sort of. No, not like that. Relax more. Pretend you're drunk. —Say, have you got the egg?"

George handed it to her. She tied it up tightly in her shari. "It'll go down as it dries out," she explained. "I wouldn't want to lose it. It's a handy sort of thing."

The streets were so quiet and dark that George asked whether the Anagetalia was over and learned from Blixa that it had ended at twenty-four that night. "Everybody's at home," she said, "getting caught up on his sleep. Say, where are you going? Not that way!" They had come to Ares Avenue and George had turned to the left, thinking they were going to the spaceport. She tugged at his sleeve. "The embassy's to the right. What do you think I got you out of jail for? We've got to get the pig. You promised you'd help me get the pig."

"Oh," George said. It was all he could think of to say. Somehow he had forgotten all about that blasted, blasted pig.

Blixa looked at him slantingly and laughed. "I'd have got you out anyhow, George," she said. "You know I would. But the pig was the reason I had to hurry so much. I don't know how much longer it will be at the embassy. And it means a lot to Mars."

"Oh," George said again. Without his being aware of it, his face relaxed. "You know," he said after a pause, while they walked steadily along, "I have a feeling that somebody's following us."

Blixa nodded. "So do I," she confessed. "But I think it must be nerves. I keep looking around, and I never see anyone. Besides, who could it be? The police wouldn't follow us, they'd just arrest you. And nobody else would be following us."

The embassy was quiet, with no light showing in any of the window irises. The building itself, however, was subtly different from the way George remembered it, and he had to study it for a moment before he could be sure what the difference was. That faint uncertainty in the building's outline, those dim slanting golden lines, like a much attenuated aurora australis—what did they mean? "They've put a force field around it!" he announced suddenly.

Blixa nodded. "They installed it yesterday afternoon," she said.

"Well, then, we might as well go home. Down to the ship, I mean. We certainly can't get through a force field, pig or no pig."

"Who said anything about getting through a force field?" Blixa demanded. "Do be reasonable! Of course we can't. But there are other ways of handling it. Think! Where are the projectors? I mean, where's the field coming from?"

"Around the edge of the roof," George replied after a moment.

"That's right. The *top* of the building's clear." They had come to the statue of Chou Kleor. Blixa, standing first on one foot and then on the other, took off her sandals and tied them to her belt. "You'd better take off your shoes too," she said softly. "They might slip on the stone."

George eyed her speculatively. She had already taken hold of the statue and was pulling herself up by the folds of its basalt cloak. He removed his shoes and followed her.

They stood at last on the statue's burly shoulder, not more than half a meter below the level of the embassy roof. The roof itself, however, was an uncomfortable distance away. "How are we going to get over there?" George asked, studying the gap.

Blixa shook her head. The climb had winded her, and for the moment all she could do was to hold on to Chou Kleor's basalt ear and pant.

"Bolt anti," she whispered as her breath began to come

back. "Not much good, but best I could do. Government's cracked down on all anti sales since the geeksters began using them." She fumbled with the end of her shari and produced a flat, blunt object like an old-fashioned air automatic. She handed it to George.

He examined it distrustfully. He had always considered the bolt anti-grav the most unreliable of anti-gravitic devices. The anti-gravs in commercial use (most strictly supervised, since geeksters and raubsters had discovered their value in mass levitation of stolen goods) were perfectly safe. But the bolt anti-grav worked on a different principle. Its doughnut" discharge produced what non-material physicists called a reversed stasis of the object which it hit. The object in consequence became weightless. The difficulty was that there was no practical way of estimating in advance when the stasis would return to normal and the object acquire weight again. And, since stasis reversal was potentially harmful to living tissue, all bolt antis had built-in governors preventing their discharge too frequently. Too dangerous for a children's toy, too ineffective for genuine use, the bolt anti was the perfect example of ingrown gadgetry.

"How are you planning to use it?" George asked.

"I'm going to jump over to the roof," Blixa said. "*Just* as I jump I want you to doughnut me with the bolt. I don't weigh much anyhow, and I'm sure the stasis will stay twisted for that long. After I get on the roof there's a trap door and steps leading down. The pig is in a room on the second level; I ought to be able to smell it. They've got it guarded with a cerberus."

"How do you know all this?" George asked a little absently. His mind was still on the bolt anti.

"Oh . . . news gets around." Blixa's manner was vague. She leaned out from Chou Kleor's shoulder and braced herself. "Now when I say 'Shoot,' I want you to doughnut me."

George looked from Blixa to the bolt anti and back again. She didn't weigh much, it was true. But . . . He had a sudden mental picture of her jumping and falling short as the stasis untwisted again. A simple fall would be bad enough, but if she struck against the force field. . . ."I won't do it," he said determinedly.

"Won't do what? Doughnut me?"

"That's right. It's too dangerous."

"No, it isn't. Anyhow, I've got to get the pig."

"Give me the egg." Silently Blixa handed him the end of her shari and let him disentangle the object. "I'm going to try the jump," George went on. "Do you think you can doughnut me?"

"Of course. But it's a silly idea."

"Why? I've more muscle than you, and I'm used to greater gee, being from Earth. The main thing, though, is that I've had training in free jumps. If you've never jumped free, you can't imagine what it's like." George did not think it necessary to add that his training consisted of three jumps made one Sunday afternoon at a pastime park.

Blixa frowned but capitulated. "All right," she said. "Pharol grant it's reasonable." She adjusted the bolt's safety switch. "Now?" she asked.

George arranged his feet carefully. "Now!" he said.

The doughnut hit him amidships just as he jumped. It spread over him in a kind of shudder, a sensation like an intense interior tickling, not painful, but highly disagreeable. Then he was soaring over the roof in a long, long arc, so long that he had time to wonder whether he had miscalculated and was going right on over it. At the last moment he slanted down, touched, bounced ("equal and opposite reaction"), and then came down solidly and for good as the stasis reversed itself. He was darned glad he hadn't let Blixa try the jump.

He trotted back to the side where Blixa was. He motioned to her to throw him the bolt anti, and after a moment it came spinning over to him. Blixa had her faults, but she certainly was quick on the uptake.

He found the trap door and opened it. The last he saw of Blixa, she was leaning forward anxiously from Chou Kleor's shoulder, her hands pressed to her breast. He waved to her reassuringly, and then started down.

The stair was extremely steep and quite dark. George stole down it with his feet turned sideways. At the bottom he found he was in a tiny windowless room with many shelves, probably a janitor's closet. Sprayers, dusters, grinders and

sweepers cluttered the walls. George groped about until he found the door, and slipped out into the hall.

It was very nearly as dark as the closet had been. The only light came from fluor strips in the cornice. George tiptoed along, listening to snores (this level seemed to be used for sleeping), sniffing from time to time, and looking for the stairs. Martian buildings, even public ones, rarely had levitators or even lifts. The lesser gee made stairclimbing less onerous than on Terra, and Martians of both sexes insisted it wasn't reasonable to avoid exercise. Stairs were good for the legs. George, thinking of Blixa and the little dark girl he had danced with at the Anagetalia, grinned. This momentary inattention was no doubt the reason why he whanged into the tabouret.

It was a spindly thing, loaded with tinkly, jangly clinky objects, and George's collision with it produced a whole series of high-pitched crashes. Things bounced and rolled. The noise of frangible objects breaking seemed to spread out into the darkness like circular ripples in a pond. George, pressed against the wall, thought everyone in the embassy must be awake.

There was a stir in one of the rooms. A man's voice, thick with sleep, said rumblingly, "What was that?" After a moment a woman's fuzzy contralto answered, "Just the weetareete, dear. Go on back to sleep." Somebody turned over in bed. There was a tense silence—and then a gradual resumption of the noises of sleep.

Blessing the unknown woman, George detoured cautiously about the tabouret. The flank and back of his tunic were wet with sweat.

He found the stair, a broad low flight with a resilient surface, in the next moment. On the fifth tread a current of air brought an all too familiar odor to his nose. It was mixed with a more agreeable smell which was probably deodorant. Fortunately for George, the embassy people had underestimated the amount of deodorant needed to keep the pig inodorous.

By sniffing door after door on the second level, George located the room with the pig. It was closed with one of the usual simple-minded Martian locks, but somebody had

slipped a lucidux alarm disk over it. Tampering with the lock was going to be difficult.

George put his ear to the door panel and listened. Almost immediately he caught the gurgle and slither of a moving cerberus. He jerked his head back from the panel and swallowed. There were not many things he was really afraid of, but a cerberus was certainly one of them. He would almost rather have faced a cage full of cobras. Having the flesh sucked from one's bones by a cerberus' corrosive membranes was such a nasty way to pass out of the viewing plate.

Luckily the window irises in the hall were open and some light was coming in. George studied the door. He couldn't get in through the lock; how about taking off the hinges? No, the screw-heads had been soldered in. It looked as if he'd have to make an opening high up in the panel, higher than the cerberus could extrude, and figure on jumping over it. Brrrrr.

He got out the egg. It was a little longer and thinner than it had been, but it went dutifully to work on the panel when he turned its switch. In all too short a time there was a hole in the door big enough for him to get through.

George hesitated. Moist fetid air (the cerberus was a life-form from the deep Venusian swamps) was coming through the opening. Beneath the hole he could hear the humping noise the creature made as it tried to climb up for him. Then he jumped.

He landed well beyond the animal. The pig's carrying case was sitting on a table, surrounded by charged wires. One good grab, George decided, and the pig would be his again. The trouble was that the cerberus, in its uncanny, ameboid way, moved extremely fast. Before he could make the three steps to the table and pick up the pig, it would be glued to him.

George could feel his brain whizzing like a mechanical astrogator and star positioner. The cerberus had put out a pseudopod and was now about two centimeters distant from the toe of his boot. With no waste motion at all, George pulled out the bolt anti and doughnutted it.

The result surpassed his expectations. The cerberus shot

up in the air and hung there, rotating wildly, in a meter-thick, dull gray ball. Since it had nothing more substantial than air to push against, it was unable to move in any direction. The harder it tried, the more furiously it spun.

George dashed to the table and snatched up the pig. He got a shock from the wiring that almost made him drop the carrying case, but he hung on doggedly. He rushed back to the door, dodging around the still-suspended cerberus, and began struggling through the hole he had made.

He had got his torso and his right leg through when, the stasis reversing itself, the cerberus dropped to the floor with a mighty plop. George felt a cold sweat of apprehension break out on him. Almost immediately there was a stab of burning pain in the ankle of his left leg.

George held on to the door so hard he thought his fingers must be denting the panel, and kicked. He kicked for all he was worth. The sensation in his ankle, which was like that of a burn being held over a flame, was getting worse: George kicked like a maddened zebrule, his eyes bulging out and his heart knocking against his ribs.

On the fourth or fifth of his desperate lunges the cerberus came loose. It sailed across the room and landed against the far wall with a thud. And George shot out of the hole in the door like a cork out of a champagne bottle. He landed on the small dark tzintz, who had been on his way to get himself a snack out of the coolerator. And from then on things got rather mixed up.

George later had a dim recollection of banging the tzintz on the skull with the pig's carrying case, while the pig gave a feeble oink. More vividly in his mind was the gratifying period when he held the tzintz by the ears and whanged his head repeatedly against the hard, unyielding floor. "Steal my pig, will you," George had muttered grimly, "You little musteline! I'll teach you to steal my pig!" Thump, thump! Thump! "Ouch!" said the tzintz. "Oink, oink," went the pig. Thump, thump, *thump!*

George enjoyed this period immensely, and was sorry when it came to an end. But all things must pass. He left the semi-conscious tzintz recumbent on the floor, his head propped against the dado, and fled down the stair in three long leaps. Behind him the embassy was buzzing like an

overturned skep of bees. George estimated that he had about three seconds before they started shooting at him with stun guns. He halted for a flash by the front door to depress a switch that he hoped shut the force field off. If it didn't, he was going to die a hero's death. Then he shot out into the night.

Blixa was waiting for him: she always seemed to be waiting for him to escape from something or other. "Get it?" she demanded excitedly.

Too winded to reply, George waved the pig at her. The long roll of a stun gun trilled wickedly past his ear. Blixa winced and then pulled him into a crouch. "This way," she said, "hurry! And keep bent!" Doubled over, they pounded off into the darkness, headed, as far as George could judge, for the Grand Canal.

There were shouts behind them, and a salvo of stun gun shots. One of them came so close that it grazed Blixa's shoulder and set her to rubbing it to restore the circulation. There was, however, no concerted pursuit.

"Afraid to chase us," Blixa panted as they jogged along. "Martian citizen—interplanetary incident. And after all, it's our pig.

"Let's slow down. By now we're fairly safe—nobody after us except the police."

George slowed obligingly. He looked at her. Blixa was panting hard, and drops of perspiration sparkled on her round sides. How different she was from Darleen! Darleen's grooming was always so perfect he couldn't imagine how she'd look excited and warm. It was rather becoming to Blixa, he thought.

"Did you get hurt in the embassy?" Blixa asked. "You're walking with quite a limp."

"It's nothing," George replied modestly, recalling his thoughts. "The cerberus got after my ankle a bit."

"Oh, my!" Frowning, Blixa made him stop and roll up his trouser leg. She drew in her breath at the sight of the raw, bloody blotch the cerberus' digestive juices had left. Deftly she plastered the wound with unguent from a tiny jar and slapped a bandijeon on it. "There," she said, "that'll do until a doctor can look at it. Say, do you still feel like somebody's following us?"

George considered. They had reached the Grand Canal by now and were walking out slowly on one of its foot bridges. There was no noise anywhere except the quiet lapping of the dark, slow-flowing water. The streets were utterly empty. Marsport's gigantic heart had almost ceased to beat. It was the quietest hour of the twenty-four, the one time when the whole city slept.

"A little," he replied. "But I don't see anyone. It must be nervous imagination. We've had a good deal tonight to put us on edge."

"I suppose so," Blixa answered. "Pharol, but it's quiet!" She rested her elbows on the parapet and leaned over, looking down at the black water. "Give me the pig."

George handed the case to her. She opened it, saw that the pig was intact, and shut the case again. Then she dropped it deliberately into the water of the canal.

For a second George stood and stared at her. Then he jumped in after the pig.

There was a second almost simultaneous splash. Blixa had jumped in beside him. "You let that pig alone!" she said furiously. George grabbed at the case which, bobbing from the disturbance of the water, was beginning to move slowly downstream. Blixa slapped at his hands. "You let it alone!" she repeated. "What business is it of yours? It's my pig."

"I—"

"Well, it is. Let it alone." The case was moving gradually out of reach. George eyed it wistfully, and then turned to Blixa. He had always known she was unreliable, but he had never thought it would reach this pitch.

"What's the idea?" he said.

"About two kilos down the canal," Blixa said, "there's an island. Some friends of mine are waiting there, watching for the pig. When it comes past they'll wade out and get it. And then they'll make soup out of it. Pharol grant it won't disagree with them."

Blixa turned and began walking upstream, toward the flight of stairs that was built into the canal wall. The water was not much more than waist deep. Utterly befogged, George followed her.

She climbed the steps with George in the rear. She had a graceful, swaying walk, and in her thin, drenched shari

she looked nuder than nude. George found it hard to keep his mind on her hocus-pocus with the pig. None the less, he came to a decision.

"Listen, Blixa," he said when they were standing on dry land again beside a warehouse, "don't you think you owe me an explanation? You Martians talk a lot about reasonableness. Do you think it's reasonable to treat me like this?"

Blixa looked at him steadily. After a moment she nodded. "You're right," she said. "I'll explain it." Yet she hesitated and lowered her eyes as if she found it hard to begin.

"I'm a Martian patriot, George," she said at last. "You Earth people don't understand how Martians feel about Mars." Blixa was speaking slowly; and, for the first time since George had known her, she made on him an impression of deep and complete sincerity. "Because we don't drink toasts to our planet or sing songs about its green hills, because we never brag about how fine it is, you think we have no love for it. Sometimes, I know, you laugh at us because Mars is so poor and there is so much you have without thinking on your planet that we can never have. I have heard that your planet was far richer once, that before it came under a planet council much was wasted and washed away. That may be, but even so, Earth in our eyes is rich—rich!—and Mars—" Blixa threw out her hands in a gesture of resignation. "Well! We Martians do not wear our hearts upon our sleeves; and if Mars is poor, it may be we love our planet only the more dearly because of that.

"Once before I told you a little about the pig. Most Martians learn about its worship—its service—while they are children, and grow up without ever thinking about it again. That is a bad thing, for if they thought about it, it would disgust and sicken them. The worship of the pig—the worship of the pig—"

Blixa paused and clenched her hand. "I can't talk about it," she confessed, as if the confession were somehow disgraceful. "It makes me ashamed. Every thirty-one days, for example, we—no, I can't tell you. It is unreasonable, but I can't. The pig's worship, George, is like something invented by a feeble-minded child. A nasty, nasty child

with a feeble mind. A child who catches flies and swallows them. It makes me ashamed.

"Four of us—two inside the cult and two outside—decided to try to stop the service of the pig. The pig had been sent to Terra as a part of the ritual of the Great Year. When we heard it was coming back, it seemed like a good time. The cult messenger was detained on the island, and I was sent to get the pig in his stead. But the Plutonians got there first.

"Now the pig is on its way to the island. It should get there about dawn. When it does, there will be a ritual meal, with Daror partaking on behalf of the actual members of the cult, and Rhidion and Gleer on behalf of all the people of Mars. And that will be the end of the pig."

There was a short pause. George was trying to assimilate what he had heard. "They—will there be trouble about your having killed the pig?" he asked at last.

Blixa shrugged. "Possibly. On the other hand, many of our cults have as their central feature a ritual meal in which the cult object is eaten, symbolically, by its worshipers. It isn't far from that to actually eating the object's flesh. Gleer is a publicist who specializes in word-of-mouth rumors. He plans to circulate accounts of the meal which present it as a pious act, a necessary sacrifice for Mars' prosperity. People will hiss us for awhile, but—who knows?—we might end up as heroes of a sort."

"I should think so," George said. He was feeling somewhat impressed.

Blixa laughed. "The really heroic part," she confided, "will be eating that awful pig. I do wish it weren't necessary. It isn't really alive, you know—I'm sure it came from Vulcan's workshop originally—and only Pharol knows what it will taste like. I hope it won't poison them.

"Our work, of course, will only be beginning when the pig's out of the way. It's too bad there aren't more of us. We'll try to replace the pig's service with something better—a Pharol cult, perhaps, or something from Earth. Something that is—well!—not too unworthy of Mars."

Blixa's voice died away. George, regarding her faintly-smiling profile, felt that he was seeing her for the first time.

"In the canal?" a high voice said from around the corner of the warehouse.

"N-n-n-n-no." It was not stuttering, but a vibrato caused by an incessant trembling of the tongue and lips. "N-no-t u-un-t-til w-w-e ha-a-ve s-o-me f-f-un wi-th t-t-them."

George's heart gave a lunge. He'd heard a voice like that once before, when one of the *Cyniscus'* passengers had turned out to be a glassy-eyed homicidal maniac. He whirled around.

The men who held the sliver guns looked more like badly-stuffed, half-rotting burlap bags than human beings. The hands on the guns were black with scabs and scaling flesh; they looked like burned and blistered rubber gloves. The hands alone would have identified the men to half the inhabitants of the Martian planet as last-stage alaphronein addicts.

"You see," the one who could still talk normally said, "you birded Louey about the groot. Poor Louey! He's got very little groot left. And you birded us. Can't have that. Louey sent us to correct you. Have some fun."

"T-t-the la-ad-y," the shorter addict said. "En-j-joy using the g-gu-n. O-on h-er." He coughed, and spat something thick and blackish on the pavement.

George felt an apprehension that physically sickened him. The dart from a sliver gun is instantly fatal to human beings in a few spots; but over most of the body area, puncture with it produces a horrible tetany. In the agonized tonic spasm victims not infrequently snap their spines or fracture their own jaws. He and Blixa would wind up dead in the canal; but before that, Louey's men (Louey must be the person to whom Farnsworth had told George to deliver the alaphronein) would enjoy themselves. Would enjoy themselves with their sliver guns. And Blixa's smooth, soft skin. . . .

George pushed the nausea and the fear deep down inside himself and got ready to jump.

Blixa touched him lightly on the arm. "Wait," she breathed. She stepped forward, pulling the shari from her head.

"Care-*full*" the taller addict warned, waving his gun. He was wearing a hard, bright, happy grin.

"Andor djar," Blixa said. She raised one hand and swept the red curls back from her forehead.

"D-d-dai?" the shorter addict asked.

"Andor," Blixa replied. George, peering at her obliquely, saw that on her forehead shone, in pale blue fire, the interwined symbols of the full and crescent moon.

There was a moment of intolerable tension. George realized that he was so keyed up that the smallest unexpected noise would have sent him charging into the two sliver guns. Then the taller of Louey's emissaries put down his hand. "Pardon, lalania," he said to Blixa. "—Come along, Mnint."

B-b-u-ut L-l-lou-ey s-sa—"

"Bird Louey! He's got hardly any groot. Let's go have fun with *him*." A glance of understanding passed between the two. Then they slouched away.

Blixa leaned back against the wall of the warehouse. She was looking quite white. "Pharol," she said weakly, "but I was afraid! I hope I never have to do that again."

George put out an arm to steady her. He was feeling a little shaky himself. "What did you tell them?" he asked after a moment.

"Why, that I—here comes an abrotanon car! We'd better hide!"

She whirled about, but the driver of the car had already seen them. The car circled returned, and hovered. Its passenger peered intently down at them through the lucitrans bubble that formed the underside of the car. Then the port opened, the stair shot out, and the passenger hopped down.

"Is that you, George?" he said. "I thought I recognized the top of your head. Yes, it is. Where the devil have you been? They let me out of the hospital last night, and I've been looking for you ever since. I've been worried sick. Did you deliver the pig?"

George looked at his cousin Bill for a moment before answering. "Not exactly," he said at last.

"Not exactly? What do you mean by that?"

George indicated Blixa, who was standing beside him. "This lady took charge of it," he answered.

Bill regarded Blixa dubiously for a moment. Then his

face cleared. "Why, that's perfectly all right," he said happily. "She's the Idris of the cult—I recognize the marks on her forehead. Legally, she can sign anything. Why didn't you tell me you knew her? It would have saved a lot of trouble."

George said nothing. Bill produced a receipt book from an inner tunic pocket and extended it and a brush toward Blixa. "If you don't mind signing here, lalania," he murmured. "An acknowledgement of the delivery of the pig. . . ."

"Not at all." Blixa took the brush from him and drew her name quickly in the proper place. She handed the book back to him.

Bill examined the receipt carefully before he thrust the book back in his pocket. He gave a satisfied nod. "That's fine," he said, "just fine. Thanks a lot for helping out, George. Don't forget, I'll give you half my bonus when it comes. You've really earned it by delivering the pig. And then you can marry Darleen."

He slapped George on the shoulder, nodded with more formal politeness to Blixa, and hopped into the abrotanon car. It drove away.

There was a silence. Bill's last words, "marry Darleen," seemed to be floating in the air. Blixa looked at George and George, alternately, looked at her and then down at the ground. What was the matter with him? Why wasn't he happy, now that he could marry Darleen?

"Who's Darleen?" Blixa asked at last in a colorless voice.

"I. . .Girl I know on earth," George mumbled.

There was an even longer silence. It was still quiet beside the canal, but all around came the thousand noises of a great city waking to life. The polar mail went arching through the sky with a long scream of rockets. George kept looking down at the ground.

"Was that why you helped me get the pig?" Blixa said finally. Her voice was even more impersonal than it had been. "So you could have enough money to marry this Darleen?"

". . .I. . .I. . .guess so."

"Are you quite sure?" Blixa asked. Her voice was as toneless as ever, but something in it made George look up

quickly. Blixa's eyes were still fixed on him, but she had begun to smile. "Are you quite sure?" she said again.

Something in the words ran down George's spine like a drizzle of melted honey. It reached the base of his vertebral column and stayed there, circling in a warm, sweet flood. For a moment he looked at Blixa unbelievingly. Then he advanced on her with the determination of a male rhyoorg in spring.

Blixa gave a slight scream. "Be reasonable!" she said. "Ooooh, oooh! Not here, George! It's too public! Be *reasonable!*"

THE RAGES

I

MORNING

THE SOFT CLAMOR of the day gong filled the room. Mara opened her gray eyes and smiled at him. She was, as always, beautiful; Harvey looked at her without either tenderness or desire before he reached across automatically and kissed her. Then he got up. They had lain side by side for nearly a thousand nights and, except for a handful of times in the first years of their marriage, nothing had ever happened. Love was beautiful, wholesome, lovely, a wonderful experience. So they both thought. But somehow . . . And then, love might have rumpled the bed.

The notes of the day gong began to die away. The room grew lighter as the solar installations under the dome were turned on one by one. Harvey felt a brief curiosity as to what the weather in the undomed areas, the real, actual weather outside, might be. He dismissed the thought as meaningless. It didn't matter what the "real" weather was. Man made his climate nowadays.

"You'd better get up, dear," he said to Mara. They were both smiling. "You'll be late to work."

"Yes, dear."

In his own bathroom, Harvey began his daily bathing and taking care of himself. He cleaned his toe and fingernails, brushed his teeth, gargled, swabbed out his nostrils and his ears. He stepped on the scales and saw that he had gained two grams since yesterday. Then he turned on the vapor bath and stood for five minutes or so while a soft pink cleansing rain beat against him soothingly. He finished by turning a cloud of pine-scented cologne on himself.

When he stepped out of the bath, he was already dry. He went to the medicine locker and opened it. This was the moment he had been dreading, the moment that would remind him of how short he was of euph pills.

He had plenty, of course, of the other tablets. He and Mara, like everyone else, took a good many tablets every day. There were pills for odor, pills for hairlessness, pills—in her case—to repress the less esthetic phases of the feminine sexual cycle entirely. There were pills to alter the metabolism so that sweating was no longer a physiological necessity. Green, pink, brown, and white. And of course there were the ordinary pills, for euphoria, that everyone took all the time. They were turquoise blue.

He swallowed his other pills and stood hesitating with his hand on the cap of the euph pill bottle. He had been afraid to count, yesterday. But he might as well know. He pulled out the cap and tipped the turquoise blue little darlings out into his hand. There were only three. Three. It was worse than he had thought. It was six days more until his next ration period, the end of the month.

Why did the authorities ration them? Everyone said—it was repeated at one from all sides, daily—that they were perfectly harmless. They made you feel good, relaxed you, made you think life was worth living. And they were the only things that helped in combatting the "rages". If you felt a rage coming on, you took a euph, and you probably didn't have it. And yet the pills were rationed strictly, one pill a day for each adult, every twenty-eight days, and if you ran out before then, you did without. Why?

It was one of his faults, that he was always asking questions. He must try to correct it. Pepole didn't like you if you went around questioning.

And he was too aggressive. That was harder to eliminate in oneself than a tendency to ask too many questions. For a moment he wondered whether his aggressiveness had anything to do with his proneness to the "rages". No, he didn't think so. Lots of people had rages—everybody had them now and then; there were "rage-covers" all over the populous parts of town—and they weren't all aggressive people by any means. No, the rages weren't his fault.

It wasn't the rages, of course, that one feared at bottom. The sensation of blacking-out, of helplessness, of misery and confusion, was bad enough. But it was what the rages led to—the final thing, the— He wasn't going to think of it. Mental hygiene required that one have only pleasant thoughts.

He stood staring down at the blue euph pills in his hand, his shoulders hunched. He wanted one of them badly; he felt a trembling desire for it. But his dilemma remained. Three pills, six days. Six days, three pills. What was he to do?

At last he dropped the pills back in the bottle. He capped it, sighing. No euph pill today, one tomorrow. None the next. And so on, until the end of the month. He'd have to stand it. He'd have to make it do.

The coral-colored bell box on the wall chimed softly. That meant that Mara was ready and waiting for him. He pressed a stud in answer and got a fresh coverall from the clothes locker. As he slid his legs into the pleasantly warm, translucent fabric, he wondered whether he dared try the number Killinan had given him. He'd called it in his last ration period and got ten extra euph pills from it. But the character of the transaction—the veiled anonymous voice, the waiting on the corner at noon, the deft way in which money and pills had changed hands—had made him feel apprehensive and guilty for days. Killinan was too different, too queer. Harvey didn't want to be like him. He'd make his euph pill ration do.

Mara was waiting for him in the foyer of the apartment. Her platinum hair was dressed in long plaits, and she was wearing a transparent tunic of ruch turquoise blue euplast. For a moment the color filled Harvey with a profound

pleasure. He could not imagine why. Then he understood. The tunic was the exact shade of euphoria pills.

Mara smiled at him. He took her hand and squeezed it. Today was the monthly anniversary of the day on which they had been married. He must remember to send her some flowers.

They left the apartment and started down to the breakfast hall, still hand in hand. Mara chattered constantly in her light, gay voice. He listened to her, he held her hand, without any particular emotion. But when she withdrew her hand from his for a moment to rearrange her hair, he clutched after it almost in panic. He drew a deep breath of relief when he was once more holding her hand.

They left the elevator and entered the breakfast hall. It was a big, airy, many-windowed room, finished in a soothing gray. At this hour it was almost full. Harvey and his wife sat down in their accustomed places. Harvey spoke their orders into a robot waiter's receptive ear.

They waited. Mara kept on talking. Harvey felt a sudden chill breath of apprehension If breakfast was late . . . He had found again and again that trivial frustrations—meals delayed, papers mislaid in his office, having to wait for transportation—would touch off rages in him.

He looked up at the ceiling wondering, for the dozenth time, why no "rage-covers" had been installed in the big room. It was short-sighted of the management not to have them in a room where so many people congregated. Somebody had had a rage only the other morning here, and all the spectators had been able to do was to throw a length of cloth from one of the tables over him. It was most offensive to be exposed to seeing anyone in rage.

He was beginning to tremble. He felt the first horrid knife-edge of uncontrol touch him. With a wild effort he drew away from it. Breakfast was coming, breakfast would soon be here. He'd hold on to that thought. He couldn't expose Mara to anything as unpleasant as seeing him in rage.

The waiter stopped by them with a load of dishes. He put puree of egg in front of Harvey, cereal cream before Mara. He poured theo for both of them.

Harvey raised the steaming cup to his lips with gratitude.

Maybe things were going to be all right. Breakfast had come, and he hadn't offended Mara. He hadn't—and it might be an omen for the whole day—he hadn't had a rage.

II

KILLINAN

HARVEY ALWAYS walked to work. This morning, as he strode along briskly, he found that he was feeling pretty good. As good as if he'd had a euph pill? No, of course not, but it wasn't much of an effort for him to look happy and keep smiling. It didn't make him feel, as it sometimes did, that his eyes were aching and the muscles of his face were locked.

He reached his building—he worked in the photographic reduction division of an enterprise that specialized in outsize diffraction gratings—and turned in. As he entered the main office James, his immediate superior, raised his head and nodded and smiled at him. Harvey found his face crinkling in automatic response, but when he turned away he felt that his forehead had contracted savagely.

He made himself relax. What was the matter with him, anyway? James was an excellent boss, very fair-minded, and if his smiles seemed a little tight, the comments on Harvey's work sarcastic rather than witty, it was only because Harvey was oversensitive. James was a wonderful person, really. (But was he, Harvey, wonderful? Now, none of that.)

He entered his office. He looked over the stack of papers that had been delivered by the tele-chute, and then began to scan the latest reduction of the forty-five inch grating everyone in the enterprise was working on. He tried it under higher and higher mag. At last he relaxed with a grunt. It was perfect; he didn't think James himself could find anything wrong with it. He scrawled his initials and OK on the edge of the slide.

He examined two more gratings, smaller ones, clipped a sheet of instructions and comments to the prints, and hesitated. Then he opened his inro case and took a green

and a white pill. His fingers went involuntarily to the space of euphs before he realized its emptiness. He sighed.

A little after ten James came in. "I wanted to tell you that the latest blow-up for the twenty-seven incher shows some raggedness on the left," he said. He was not looking at Harvey. "Better see if you can get it out."

Harvey had already checked the slide, but he nodded agreeably. "That wasn't what I came in to speak to you about primarily, though," James went on. Now he looked at Harvey; there seemed to be a special tightness and dryness in the quality of his smile. "I just had a call for you from a Hostel," he said.

A Hostel. The word seemed to burn through Harvey's mind and yet, for the moment, to be without meaning. A Hostel. A Hostel. A Hostel was where you went when you had too many rages—when, one time, the cover didn't lift afterwards, when it was hopeless. You went there. You stayed there. You never came out. A Hostel.

"A call from a Hostel? For me?" he asked. He hoped his face, his voice, were calm.

"Yes. It seems a man named Killinan, who went there recently, had written your name in the Whom to Notify. They want you to come in and discuss his case with them. I imagine it's a matter of disposal of property or some such question.

"The doctor who spoke to me was quite urgent. I didn't know whether you'd want to visit the place or not. Going to a Hostel is such a hairy"—James laughed, as if apologizing for the mild obscenity— "such a hairy idea. But as I say, he was urgent. If you want to go, I'll let you have the rest of the day off."

Harvey opened his mouth to say no. James was looking at him directly and strangely. If he said, "No, I'm not interested," how would it seem? That he was afraid? That he had some personal reason for disliking a visit to a Hostel?

"Oh, I'll go, of course," he said heartily. "Killinan was a friend of mine. Not a very close friend, of course. He was rather a queer duck. But still . . ."

"Yes, I thought you'd feel that way," James said, relaxing. "The Hostel's out in the Greenways, beyond 78th. As I said, you can have the rest of the day off."

He left the office. When he was safely gone, Harvey covered his face with his hands. He wanted to whimper and cry. A visit to a Hostel? Today? When he was feeling so—when everything he saw would remind him of— How could he stand it? It seemed a gratuitous piece of cruelty on the part of Fate to confront him with just what he feared.

He'd have to stand it. James was expecting it of him. Besides—Harvey took his hands from his face and blinked as an idea came to him—besides, a Hostel might be just the place to get extra euph pills. It stood to reason that they'd use a great many of them. And where there was a plentiful supply . . .

He began to straighten up his desk before leaving. Suddenly he was whistling. Too bad about Killinan. (Why *Killinan*? With his supply of tablets, his relaxed attitude generally, he had been the last person Harvey would have thought of in connection with a really serious rage. But then, he'd always been a queer duck.) It was the right thing to do, for Harvey to go to see him and see if he could help.

The Hostel, as James had said, was out in the Greenways. It was a small, white, unalarming-looking building with low wings, framed in dark-leaved shrubbery, with the lawn before it dotted with pink flowers. Harvey put the money for his fare in the box of the robot pilot of the copt and walked up the path to the building's front door.

The door swung open in front of him. He stepped into a hall filled with a glimmer of pale green coruscating light. Fluor panels, he thought, though he had never seen them of just that color before. He went over to the desk, pressed a stud, and waited.

After a moment a nurse, dressed in a heavy coverall of opaque green, appeared. "My name's Harvey," he told her pleasantly. "I was asked to call in connection with a man named Killinan."

"Oh, yes." She smiled. "What we were hoping was that you'd consent to have a little talk with him—with Mr. Killinan, I mean. We'd take a recording of it, and doctor thought that by studying it he might be able to get a little light on his case. Although"— for a moment her smile slipped, to be pinned in place again more brightly than

ever—"it's pretty difficult to find anything that *does* help, as doctor says. But we try."

Harvey made a noncommittal noise. He hoped his face did not show how shocking the nurse's suggestion seemed to him.

"After your interview with Mr. Killinan," the nurse went on, "doctor was hoping you'd give him your impressions of the patient when he was well, and so on. There's also the question of what to do with some property. Of course, interviews with—with disturbed persons aren't very *pleasant.* But as I say, we hoped you'd try."

Harvey licked his lips and swallowed. "Of course," he said. "I'd be glad to. Of course."

"Oh, that's good. I'll have to prepare Mr. Killinan. He's—pretty disturbed. But it won't take long."

She came out from behind the desk and went down a corridor. Harvey followed her with his eyes. There was a half-open door some twenty feet down the corridor. He was curious about it.

When the nurse was out of sight he walked softly and quickly down the hall to the door. He opened it a little farther. He looked inside.

He saw a small square office with a desk. Medical books and journals and boxes of micro-films. Beyond the office another door, also open. He caught a glimpse of many bottles and jars. The far room seemed to be a dispensary.

He craned his neck and stared. His heart was beating with sudden hope. Because if it was a dispensary—in one of those bottles there might be— Did he not, around the edge of the door, catch a glimpse of the unmistakable turquoise blue of euphoria pills?

He drew a shuddering breath. They wouldn't count the pills in a bottle like that, would they? A great big jar? If he were to slip in quietly . . .he could take a handful, a whole handful. . . enough for months and months. For months.

He heard footsteps. His eyes moved. On the balls of his feet he ran back to the desk in the reception hall. He was standing at ease, with his hands clasped carelessly behind his back, when the nurse reappeared.

"He's ready now," she said, smiling. "This way."

She led him along the corridor, past the half-open door—steady—and up a ramp. They turned. The walls here sparkled with faint blue. She pushed a button. A panel opened in the apparently solid wall.

"Mr. Killinan's in there," she said. "You don't need to worry about disturbing him. He's had sedation. Ask him questions. Get him to express himself. As I told you, your conversation is going on tape."

Harvey nodded. He felt so full of sudden, sharp resentment at what he was being asked to stand that he feared his face would give him away. He kept his eyes down.

Killinan was standing beside a small round table. He was clothed from neck to ankle in an opaque white coverall. For a moment Harvey was puzzled, seeing no sign of disturbance in his attitude or bearing. Then he noticed the peculiar liveliness of his face.

It was a face that had fractured into fifty pieces. Each piece had become autonomous. Muscles twitched, tissue quivered, an eyebrow raised, a pad of fat sagged or jumped. The outline, the bony structure, were still Killinan's. But the central organization, the controlling government, had gone.

"Hello, Bob, I mean Bill," Killinan said. His voice was unsteady but loud. "They told me you wanted to talk to me. Won't you sit down?"

"All right." Harvey's knees felt soft. He was glad to seat himself in one of the room's two straight chairs.

Killinan had not looked at him when he addressed him. Still looking off to one side, he giggled. The he seated himself on the floor.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Abel?" he asked.

"I—uh—why, they said you had something to say to *me.*"

"Oh, I have." Killinan leaned forward and regarded his toes intimately. "I doubt you'd be interested in hearing it, though."

"I am. Very much interested. Anything you want to say."

"Then you're different from the waitresses in this establishment. The stewards are the worst. Always sick."

Harvey felt a wave of panic. He chewed on his lips.

"Please tell me," he said at last. "You know I'm interested in you."

"Huh. Well, I guess maybe you are. Listen, Bob, It's about the dogs."

"Here?" Harvey ventured cautiously.

"No, of course not. What a fool you are! But they're coming back."

His wavering voice spoke the last words so vividly that Harvey looked behind him, expecting the nurse to be entering the room. There was no one, of course. The wall remained an unbroken fluor panel of soft blue.

"Don't you understand?" Killinan said. He looked up from his feet momentarily, his eyes fixed a little to the right of Harvey's head. *"The dogs are coming back."*

"What dogs are those?" asked Harvey. "Tell me all about it." He was conscious, as he spoke, of the insincerity of what he was saying; he gave a choking cough.

"What dogs? Oh, the ones we drove out of civilization. Long ago." Killinan put his hands to his head. "It hurts. It does hurt," he said plaintively. "It hurts all the time, Harry. But nobody pays any attention to me here."

"I'm sure they're trying to help you," Harvey replied. He shifted in his seat. "You were telling me about the dogs . . ."

"The—yes. They're like mastiffs, you know, Harry. Big red dogs with smooth short hair. We drove them out a long time ago, and everything in the world has been put up to keep them back. But the barriers are not strong enough. They'll get through. Ohhhh, yes. Through."

"What—what makes them dangerous? The dogs, I mean."

"It's because they have such keen scent," Killinan answered. "They can smell anything. And they can hear noises we can't hear. That's why we're afraid of them." He began to cry. After a moment he crawled over to the table and sat down under it.

"What's the matter?" Harvey asked. He drew a deep breath. "Nothing's going to hurt you. Come on out from under that."

There was no answer. Killinan kept on weeping. There was a discreet tap on the wall panel. The nurse in the green coverall came in.

"There's no use going on with it," she said, looking down at her patient. "Once he starts crying, he'll go on like that for days. I'm sorry, Mr. Harvey. It can't have been very pleasant for you." Her expression was depressed, but when she saw that Harvey was watching her, she smiled.

"Now, if you don't mind, doctor would like to talk to you," she continued. "This way."

She led him back along the corridor, and it was as he had scarcely dared to hope—she took him to the office from which the dispensary opened. There was no one in the room. "Dr. Frazier will be here in a minute," she said as she left.

Harvey felt dizzy with rapture. He wasn't, after all, quick enough. Before he could do more than go to the door of the dispensary, there was a rustle in the hall. Dr. Frazier came in.

He was a small dark man whose smile showed a mouthful of white teeth. "How do you do, Mr. Harvey?" he said. "I see you're admiring our dispensary. Won't you sit down?"

Harvey obeyed. For a moment his disappointment made him quite sick. Fortunately, the doctor was speaking to him.

"How long have you known Killinan, Mr. Harvey?" he asked. "Is he a close friend of yours?"

"No . . .more of an acquaintance. I haven't known him for more than a couple of years." This was quite true.

The doctor put down the paper he had been looking at, and sighed. "I listened to your talk with him," he said. "There was nothing new. That stuff about the dogs was what he's been telling us all along. We'd hoped . . . It's too bad you don't know him very well."

"Yes. I don't think he had any intimate friends. Do you mean there's not much chance for him?"

"I'm afraid not. You see, once a man's had a—a really final rage, there are structural brain changes. We don't know yet what causes them, or how to neutralize them. Surgery has been absolutely useless, and psychotherapy only a little less so. The psychotherapy was what we hoped you could help us with. But . . ." He picked up a pencil and sighed again. Then he smiled.

Harvey decided to venture. "What causes the rages, anyway?" he asked.

"The cause of the rages?" The doctor looked down. "Well, it's a little hard to say. Plenty of research is being done on the problem. But when we consider that all other forms of mental illness except that one sort have been eliminated—well, we don't need to let our ignorance, which is only temporary, distress us too much, do we?" He looked up pleasantly.

"No, I suppose not. . . . Of course, I'm only a layman. But wouldn't it—I understand euphoria pills are a specific for the rages—wouldn't it be a good idea if the ration of euphoria pills were increased?"

Dr. Frazier smiled winningly. "Perhaps."

"Then—well, why isn't it?"

Dr. Frazier held up a hand in warning. "Now, now!" he said playfully. "I'm only an MD, not a politico. I don't have anything to do with the policies of the medical division of government. You mustn't ask me a thing like that."

"Oh."

"No, I don't have anything to do with it," Dr. Frazier repeated. His grin was almost fierce. "If I did . . .but I mustn't discuss that. Do you have any idea what your friend Killinan would like done with his property?"

"Ah—he said once that he was interested in research projects."

"That might be a good way out of it."

They discussed Killinan's assets a little longer, Harvey simulating an interest he did not feel. Then Dr. Frazier rose from his desk and held out his hand.

"Goodbye, Mr. Harvey," he said. "I enjoyed meeting you. I'm sorry we can't be more hopeful about your friend."

". . .Yes. Goodbye."

Harvey went out.

III

NOON

He decided to walk back to town. He was feeling miserable; perhaps the exercise would help. But by now he was almost certain he had a rage coming on—the interview at the Hostel had been as bad as anything could have, for him—

and when a rage gave warning so long in advance, it was almost certain to be serious. Oh, God. He was frightened. What was to become of him?

Suddenly he remembered. He could call the number Killinan (Killinan—better not think about *him*) had given him. The guilt and apprehension he had felt about it last time didn't seem to matter. He had to have the pills.

He got to a call box, at the edge of the Greenways, and rang. The buzzing went on for a long, long time. At last the operator said, smiling brightly, that the subscriber had moved out and not requested another number. There wasn't anybody at that number any more.

Harvey nodded. He managed to leave the call box and walk on in the right direction. There wasn't, really, any help for it.

At last he looked up. He had reached a part of town where there were covers. Overhead he saw their soft, weightless, choking bulk. And the rage was coming on. He felt its red, rushing fury touch his edges. For a moment longer he resisted, trembling. Killinan, hiding under the table. . . and the structural changes. . . . But the rage was imperative. Whatever happened, he couldn't help it. Almost with relief he gave himself up to it.

He became aware of himself much later. The cover had lifted. He was lying on the rubberoid. No one was looking at him.

Cautiously he felt over his body. No, he was all right. He hadn't bitten his tongue, he hadn't even bruised or scratched himself. But oh, it had been a bad rage. The fury, the screaming. He was lucky it hadn't been final. Perhaps next time, or the next. . . .

All the same, he felt better. He was safe, at least, for a day or two. And he had three euph pills left at home. One tomorrow, none the next, one the day after. And so on. And then it would be the end of the month, and another euph ration coming up. (But what about the end of the next ration period? Would it be the same thing all over again? Oh, hair on it! The end of the next period was a long way off.)

He got to his feet. His knees were shaky, and his body felt empty and weak. A rage always left one feeling like

that. Besides, he was probably hungry. It must be nearly noon. He'd get something to eat.

Ahead of him on the walk a big three-dimension image of a blonde girl began to cavort and prance. She was wearing almost nothing—advertising images used a high degree of nudity—and as she bounced she sang something in a husky voice about love. What was she advertising? Pills, probably. Yes, it was a combined sleeping, deodorant and diuretic tablet. Nobody on the street was paying any attention to her.

Harvey walked up to her and through her with the long, inelastic step of post-rage. He thought, if they want me to look at her—me and everyone else around here—she ought to be pouring out a stream of bright blue pills from a bottle. A big bottle of bright blue euph pills. —He must remember to send Mara some flowers.

He walked on. A man with a nem beside him went by. Harvey looked away, disliking the weary patience on the man's face. It wasn't Harvey's fault if people insisted on being anti-social and offensive. He didn't want to feel sorry for the man. He forced himself to concentrate on his own need for something to eat.

There was an eating place in the next block, with a vacant store on either side. Since menus and food preparation were pretty much standard everywhere, it didn't matter whether he ate here or somewhere else, and he liked the looks of the shop well enough. There wasn't quite so much glass, so many mirrors, as in some, and the fluor panels were a restful shade of deep green. He went in.

The shop was full of talking, smiling people. He was disagreeably conscious of his own stiff, inelastic face—another sign of post-rage. But nobody was looking at him. He walked on, toward the back, and finally found an empty booth. He seated himself on a deep, soft bench.

His weight made the slot in the table open. A menu plate shot up. He examined it.

He decided on pulverized chicken ("creamier, smoother, blander"), bran muffins for bulk, and a double glass of comminuted vegetable juice. He took the stylus and punched the menu card in the appropriate spots.

The lighting in the booth was subdued and restful.

Harvey closed his eyes for a moment. Then he settled back against the seat with a sigh. An unexpected pressure against his upper leg made him look down. His thigh was resting against a small, hard cylinder.

It was about the shape of, the size . . . He picked it up, his heart beating. And it was. It was.

After so many false hopes, so many disappointed expectations, after the Hostel, the doctor, the rage, he was holding an unopened bottle of euph pills, a whole month's ration, between his hands.

Blue, blue and wonderful. There were twenty-eight pills in the bottle. Somebody hadn't even cared enough about his ration to open it.

He wasn't going to wait any longer. If Mr.—Munro, said the label on the bottle—hadn't wanted his ration, Harvey did. Finders keepers. He broke the seal, uncapped the bottle, and shook out two pills. With a luxurious sense of delaying, he dropped one back in the bottle. He'd take it a little later. He swallowed the other. Then he sat holding the bottle in both hands, in expectant happiness.

Almost immediately the euph pill took hold. His spirits rose, the tension left his thighs. What had he been so unhappy about? Why, life was wonderful. —And he had twenty-seven more pills.

He started to drop the bottle in his pocket, smiling. A voice above him spoke politely but warningly. "Excuse me, but I think you've got my euph pills."

Harvey was horribly startled. He felt the happiness, the security, draining away from him; with anguish, he tried to detain them. Maybe the man was lying, and they weren't his pills at all. "What's your name?" he said.

"Munro. You know, there's no use pretending you haven't got them. I can see them in your hand."

Guilt betrayed him. Or was it a compliancy from the euphoria pill he had taken? Slowly, without looking at Munro, he unclosed his hand. The other man took the bottle of pills from him.

There was a soft plop as the slit in the table opened. Harvey's lunch slid over the surface to him. He looked at it for a moment and then averted his eyes. How could he ever have thought he wanted to eat?

He wouldn't have a rage, anyhow. It was too soon after the last one.

Munro was frowning down at him. "Are you sick?" he asked. "I'm sorry. But you know, they *are* my pills. I see you opened them."

"Yes. Please go away."

"Oh. . . ." Munro sat down at the table. When the menu plate popped out, he punched with the stylus for a cup of theo. "I guess you needed the pills," he said slowly. "I never use my ration. Anyhow."

Harvey drew in his breath. Was the man hinting something? Because if he was, Harvey had money. He raised his head. For the first time he looked carefully at Munro, the man whose ration was still unopened at the end of the month.

He saw a tall, lightly-framed man dressed in the pale gray belted tunic and separate breeks that were almost the uniform of the middle-level executive. Munro had a lean, tight face with frown lines between the eyes. Frown lines meant nothing, of course; many people frowned even while they smiled. But it was a face with more—what was the word? Character? Difference?—than Harvey was accustomed to see in the faces around him. Perhaps the distinctive quality of the face lay in the eyes, which were exceedingly sharp, though friendly. They were certainly not the eyes of a man who could be bribed.

Harvey said, "I don't see how you can get along without euphs." He hesitated, thinking of the reason, the real imperative reason, why one had to have them, and then went on, "For one thing, without them it's so difficult to be pleasant all the time."

Munro smiled. "Yes," he said slowly, "it certainly is. Look here, though, why don't you eat your lunch? Some of it, anyway. You're looking faint and a little sick. Food might be just the thing. Try the vegetable juice." He pushed the glass toward the younger man.

Harvey picked it up obediently and set it to his lips. It didn't taste bad, and after the first sip he realized that he was still hungry in spite of the shock he had had. He broke a muffin in half and began to chew. Its taste was not unpleasant. But the thought of the bland, creamy chicken revolted him.

Munro's theo, meantime, had come. He was drinking it in little gulps, looking at Harvey slantingly from time to time. He was an odd person, certainly, but now that Harvey was beginning to get over his pain at losing the euphoria pills, he found Munro's company comforting.

Harvey pushed the empty vegetable juice glass aside. "Look here," he began, and then stopped. The words stuck in his throat. He couldn't bring himself to ask Munro to *give* him some of his pills. You don't ask a man with a million dollars in his wallet to give you a couple of thousand, even if he takes his wealth casually. "Look here," Harvey repeated, and gulped. Munro was looking at him. He had to finish the sentence somehow. "Why do you think the euph pills are so stricly rationed?" he said. "Even if you don't use your ration yourself, you know that most people would be glad to have more."

He waited, in a prickle of discomfort, for the answer. He didn't know why he had asked, anyway, unless he had been hinting. It wasn't likely that Munro would have any answer. Harvey should have said something else. He ought to stop asking questions so much.

"Oh . . ." Munro turned his cup around in its saucer reflectively. "Did you know they were having hearings in Washington right now about increasing the ration? Fact. I've heard some inside stuff."

Harvey relaxed. Like everybody else, he supposed, he got a particular pleasure out of hearing the real dope, the straight goods, the inside stuff. And Munro had the air of one who knew what he was talking about.

"No, I didn't," he replied. "That's very interesting."

"Yes. I have a friend—let's call him Frank—who's in the pharmaceutics division of the Department of Public Health. It seems there's been so much pressure from the pharmaceutical lobby to increase the ration that they finally decided to have hearings held. They're not public hearings, of course."

"No, naturally." Most things weren't public any more. "I don't suppose there's much doubt about how the hearings will go."

"You wouldn't think so. In the last quarter century pharmaceutical manufacture has become just about the biggest

kind of big business there is. People don't realize it yet, but the pharm lobby is the most powerful in Washington. What people like that want, they generally get. You know how it is.

"On the other hand, Frank says there's a surprisingly large amount of opposition. So the pharms may not have it all their own way."

Harvey licked his lips. "From whom?" he asked. "Who's opposing it?"

"Well, a few doctors and psychologists. Older people, I guess, though Frank didn't say. But most of the opposition is coming from the Business Planning Division of the Department of Commerce.

"You see, euph pills are quite expensive to make. Expensive of manhours and productive facilities, I mean. If they increased the ration, it would mean building a whole bunch of new factories, and re-allocating raw materials. The business planning people object that the economy of the country couldn't stand it. The only way it could be done would be by cutting the invader menace production drastically."

"I haven't heard much about the invader menace lately," Harvey said. "I had the impression the danger had died down.

Munro shrugged. "Nobody has heard much about it. Maybe the menace really is less—a man I know in Defense says there haven't been any new evidences. On the other hand, the government may just be keeping it dark. You never can tell."

"Yes. . . . So there isn't too good a chance of getting more euph pills."

"It looks that way. Of course it isn't settled yet. But, Mr.—I didn't get your name—"

"Harvey."

"But Mr. Harvey, are you sure it's really euphoria pills you want?"

Harvey looked at him in amazement. "Of course it is. What else is it, anyway?"

"Why, you want the way the pills make you feel. You want to be able to be pleasant to people, you want to be relaxed and without disagreeable tension, you want to feel that life's worth while. More than anything else, you

want not to be in danger from the rages. If you could get those things without taking euph tablets, you'd be satisfied, wouldn't you?"

"I guess so. But it's such an unusual idea. . . . How could it be possible?"

Munro leaned back. As his weight shifted, the slot in the table opened and the menu plate popped out. Rather absently he punched with the stylus for another cup of theo. "I know a girl . . ." he said with seeming irrelevancy.

Harvey stiffened. He'd heard of women—"dirty" women—to whom some men resorted. But he wouldn't debase the relationship between him and Mara, their beautiful relationship, by thinking of such a thing.

Munro was looking at him with a touch of amusement. "I know what's in your mind," he observed. "But you're wrong. Jane works for a living like anybody else—she's a draftsman in an engineering office—and the big incidents in calling on her are having her give you theo and cake and listening to her play her guitar. (A guitar's an old-fashioned musical instrument.) But a lot of people do call on her. I'm afraid there's rather a cult of Jane."

An explanation occurred to Harvey. "Is she very beautiful?" he asked.

"Jane? No, not at all. Though she's not really bad looking. But the thing about Jane is—well, there's something very special about Jane.

"For one thing, she gets cross sometimes. I don't mean rages, I mean a little snappish and cross. It's nice, because she doesn't try to argue herself out of it and conceal it, the way most people do. And when she's pleasant it really means something. It's genuine. She's pleasant all the way down.

"It's restful to be with her. You can tell her you don't like somebody and she won't scold you or tell you that the person is really wonderful, and it's all your fault. Sometimes she'll say she doesn't like somebody herself. And she doesn't smile all the time. You don't know how tired you get of people always smiling until you're with her.

"I'd like you to meet her. I think you'd find her interesting. And I think she'd like you."

Harvey opened his mouth to say, "No, thank you," politely. He had no intention of telling Munro so, of course,

but he thought that Jane sounded about as unpleasing as it was possible for a girl to be. Such neglect of the feelings of others was anti-social, offensive. And about Munro himself there hung such an aura of the ambiguous (What was he up to? Why was he doing this?) that Harvey would have refused to make the visit he suggested for that reason alone.

Munro's theo came through the slot. As the older man reached forward for the cup, Harvey saw the outline of the euph pill bottle in the pocket of his tunic. Quite without reflection Harvey said, "Yes, I think I'd enjoy meeting her."

What he had said surprised him; it did not appear to surprise Munro. "Good," he answered. "How about tonight? It's one of the nights she keeps open house. Here's her address."

He wrote on a slip of paper and passed it across the table to Harvey. "Will you be there?" the latter asked as he accepted it.

"Mm—hmm. How about us meeting on the corner of Park and Evans about eight? We could go on to her place from there."

Once more Harvey thought of refusing, and once more the thought of the bottle of euphoria tablets prevented him. "All right," he said.

"Good. I've got to go now. But I'll see you tonight."

IV

THE LABORATORY

IT WAS ONE-THIRTY; the afternoon stretched out before Harvey like a high, barren plateau. He couldn't go back to the office, he was too upset. And besides, James had given him the whole day off. He would be none too pleased if Harvey showed up now.

But what was he to do? He stood hesitating on the rubberoid outside the food shop. A man—the same man? —with a nem went by. Harvey averted his eyes and tried to go on thinking. He might go back to the apartment and rest, but Mara wasn't there and the idea of resting wasn't attractive. He might go to an entertainment. Or—

What about calling on somebody? Who? Most of the people he liked would be at work at this hour. But after the ambiguity he had sensed in Munro he felt a thirst for the society of someone stable and reliable. Wasn't there—?

Yes, and it would be just the thing. A couple of months or so ago he and Mara had met a Dr. Burgess at a party. Burgess, a pleasant man in middle middle age, had spoken of having known Harvey's father, and had seemed to like Harvey himself. He wasn't, he had said, in practice any longer (Harvey had sensed a reticence, an embarrassment, there), but he'd be delighted to have Harvey call on him at any time.

Harvey himself had felt a rather tepid liking for Burgess, tinged with disapproval for the way in which the man was letting himself go physically. One expected a physician, above all people, to keep himself in good shape. But today Burgess' bulk seemed like reassuring stolidity. Burgess himself had seemed really friendly. Besides (Harvey felt a touch of disgust at the way the will o' the wisp still beckoned), besides, a physician, even one who was no longer in practice, might possibly have some . . . pills.

He went to a call box. After a minute the voice of the robot response said, "Dr. Burgess is out and will return at two fifteen. Dr. Burgess is out and will return at two fifteen. Dr. Bur—"

It wasn't long to wait, Harvey looked around for a way to pass the time before calling again. There was a vid box on the corner. Harvey walked over to it and dropped a coin in the slot. It was almost time for the two o'clock news.

The screen began to glow. The announcer, brilliant in a photogenic aquamarine chamiss, smiled ingratiatingly. He began to talk.

News, these days, except for the perennial floods in the Mississippi valley, was mostly personal and domestic. And besides, none of the real stuff, the inside facts, would ever be presented over the air. Harvey listened incuriously until the announcer, with a sudden grimace, said, "Flash! The Department of Defense has just reported new evidences of invader activity. Erosion of three of the gigantic new air-pipe installations near Wichita has been confirmed. Inform-

ed sources state that the administration is drafting an emergency bill to be presented to congress within the next few days."

He smiled and cleared his throat. "Well, folks, we can be sure that our government won't take this new provocation lying down. Yessir, if the invaders think they avoid us by hiding out in a new dimension, they'll find out they have another thing coming. We may not like to fight, but . . ." His grin grew fierce. "And now, in exactly ten seconds, it will be fifteen minutes after two."

Harvey switched him off. He didn't want to hear about the invaders, though he didn't doubt the menace was real enough. He went back to the call box.

Burgess was in, would be glad to see him. Harvey broke the call, feeling a twitch of some minor emotion because the doctor looked so tired. He plugged for a copt at the corner near the vid box, and when it came fed it the coordinates of Burgess' address.

During the short ride he sat with his hands pressed over his eyes. Perhaps he should have gone to the apartment to rest, after all. But he hated the place when Mara wasn't there. He was sure he'd enjoy talking to Burgess.

The copt hov and landed on signal. Rather to Harvey's surprise, the address proved to be the second floor of a produce warehouse in the wholesale market district. A pedal staircase led up to it.

Harvey walked up, wondering. He'd expected a separate domicile out in the Greenways, if anything. Activity in the wholesale district began long before the solar installations were turned on. Burgess must keep odd hours.

Burgess met him at the head of the stair. He looked more tired and careworn than he had in the viewer. "Hello," he said. "I'm glad to see you." He hesitated. "I should have told you when you called, but I've been rather busy. The fact is, I received notification this morning that a nem would be attached to me for a few days. I don't know what's delaying the thing. I've been expecting it for hours. I'd be glad to have you stay, but . . . do you want to associate with a man who's been listed for re-education with the department of Mental Health? I mean, some people are shy about it." He smiled.

Harvey's impulse was to excuse himself politely and get out. As Burgess remarked, people stayed away from a man who had a nem. It wasn't exactly guilt by association, but. . . One didn't want to be conspicuous and queer.

"Well, I—" He swallowed. Burgess looked not only tired, but lonely and depressed. Perhaps he wasn't all he should have been, but Harvey in this moment was conscious of the lacks and faults in himself. "Oh, I don't mind," he said. "Lots of people have nems."

"Good! Come on in." Burgess opened the door of his apartment. Harvey stepped into a long, low room illuminated from a series of skylights. There was almost no furniture. Around the walls were cages of animals.

"I've been getting rid of a lot of things," Burgess said. "Nems go away much sooner if they don't find anything out of the ordinary in the places they're attached to. The trouble is that I've got only a small reducer, and everything has to be torn up into small pieces before I can dispose of it. I don't want to blow out a fuse in the reducer. I was putting the experimental animals out of the way with nembutal when you came."

"What will you do with them?" Harvey asked. "I should think a nem would be just as suspicious of a lot of dead experimental animals as it would of live ones." He was conscious, as he spoke, that his voice was not quite normal. He hoped Burgess wouldn't notice. He couldn't help being made a little nervous by Burgess' calm avowal of activities which, if not quite forbidden, were certainly unusual ones.

"Oh, I'll put them in the reducer one at a time. They're small subjects, you see, white rats and guinea pigs. Do you mind if I get on with the euthanasia? I've got about ten rats to go."

"Certainly not. Uh—could I help?"

Burgess rubbed his nose. "That's nice of you. Yes, you can. Do you see that stack of papers on the floor? Experimental notes. Crumple them up one at a time and put them in the reducer. Tear the heavy cardboard binders into four."

"All right." Harvey began crumpling and disposing obediently. After a second he asked, "What were the experiments about? I mean, if you don't mind telling me."

"No, not at all. It's a little hard to synopsize, though. I was trying quite a lot of things. One of the most interesting was the long-time effect of euph pills."

Harvey gave an uncontrollable shiver. Burgess wasn't looking at him. "Well, go on," he said.

"My results have been indefinite. One of the things that annoys me about the nem visitation is breaking off the tests just when I had them well under way." He turned around from the cages, a syringe in one hand, and looked at Harvey. "I wonder . . . it's rather a lot to ask of a guest, I know. But then, you didn't impress me as being too conventional."

Harvey felt himself flushing with anger. "Well?" he said.

"Would you mind climbing up through the skylight and putting this cage on the roof? I can put food and water in it for three or four days, and the nems are not so intelligent that one of them would think of looking in such an unlikely place for evidence. They're rather low-quality robots, really."

"You mean you want me to put the cage up there, with the animals so you can pick up the experiment after the nem has gone?"

"That's about it. I'm too old and out of condition to do it myself."

Harvey opened his mouth to refuse indignantly. But Burgess was looking at him, smiling faintly, as if he anticipated such an answer only too well. "I'll be glad to," he said.

"That's really very nice of you." Burgess sounded pleased. "Here's a chair," he went on. "You open the skylight with this pole. Draw yourself up over the edge. Be careful not to break any of the glass. That might make the nem suspicious. I'll hand the cage up to you after you're outside."

Harvey had been obeying the instructions as Burgess gave them. He stood on the chair, caught hold of the frame of the skylight, and hoisted. He drew himself up over the edge of the opening, with some difficulty. Burgess, below, was standing on the chair on tip-toe, holding the cage out to him.

Harvey leaned down and caught the wires of the cage with his finger tips. For a moment he thought he was

going to drop it. It was a good thing he had such long arms.

The rats in the cage were giving a faint, frightened squeaking. Harvey thought, "If the nem came in now . . ." But there was no knock at the door. He shifted his weight and crawled out on the roof, the cage in one hand.

He stood up. The roof was quite flat, yielding a little under his feet. From the slight elevation he could see the roofs of other warehouses and, a long way off, the atmospheric haze and taller buildings that marked the concentration of population of the city.

He had expected something—a wide view, cleaner air, a freer prospect. But there wasn't much to see, really. It was disappointing.

Harvey sighed. He looked about for a suitable place to put the cage. He decided on the shadow of one of the ventilators. The water in the rats' dish had been spilled while he was getting up with the cage. He called the information down to Burgess, and the older man handed him up a flask. Then he clambered down.

"I expect the rats will be all right," he said when he was once more within the long room. "You know, you never did tell me about your experiments with the euphoria pills."

"Oh. Well, the rats I gave the pills to at first behaved about as one would suppose. They fought less than those in the control cages, and they ate more. There seemed to be a little less mating activity among them, but it wasn't significant. But after they'd had the pills for quite a while, eight months or so, an interesting thing happened. I'd been going to feed them—I had the cage open and the food pan out—when I dropped the box of food pellets. The stuff bounced all over the floor. I swept it up. When I got back to the cage with more food, the rats were whirling around in circles. Like dancing mice.

"I didn't know what had happened. I tried the same thing with the control cage, and while the rats in it got excited and squeaked and bit each other when they had to wait to be fed, they didn't whirl about. I tried all sorts of combinations, and in the end I decided that whenever the euph-fed rats were subjected to a frustration, they displayed the whirling phenomena. I dissected one of them,

but I couldn't find any structural changes. Now I'm wishing I'd started out with more rats."

"What do you think causes it?" Harvey asked. He had returned to his job of destroying papers in the reducer.

"The whirling?—I also wish I were a better biologist. My training was primarily medical. I suppose there *are* changes in the rats which are too subtle for me to detect."

"But everybody says that euphoria pills are perfectly harmless!"

"I know. I didn't say they weren't. I just said that rats fed on them tended to whirl about." Burgess came over to the reducer and began putting in the bodies of the lab animals, one at a time. The reducer flared up and gave a deep humming as each was consumed.

"Then you wouldn't be in favor of increasing the ration of euphoria pills?"

"Increasing it? I didn't know the question had come up."

"It has, though." Harvey related the conversation he had had with Munro. At the end, Burgess whistled.

"Well, if all that's keeping them from increasing the ration is the invader menace, I imagine it'll be increased," he said.

"What do you mean by that? I heard there had been new evidences when I was listening to the vid just before I came here."

"Evidences. . . . It's my opinion that the invader menace has been greatly exaggerated, if it exists at all. Did you ever see an invader? Did you ever know anyone who had? Did you ever, even, see a picture of any damage an invader had done? And yet we've been hearing about the invader menace for some fifteen years."

"You mean somebody's lying?"

"Or is deceiving himself."

"I certainly hope you're right." Harvey brought one of the empty cages over to the reducer and began breaking it up preparatory to consuming it. "It would be. . .splendid . . .if the ration were increased."

"You'd like the ration increased, wouldn't you?" Burgess commented. "Do you mind telling me why?"

"Oh. . .well. . ." Suddenly, it was all coming out. His fears, his difficulty in getting along with people, his search for extra pills. He tried to stop himself from talking, and

couldn't. A part of him listened, appalled, while the rest of him found wild relief in the outpouring. "That's why I'd like more pills," he finished. "Because I'm afraid I'll have—I'll have a *final* rage."

"Um. Yes. How about us having a little tea, I mean theo? You look pretty tired to me. From what you say, you've had a hard day. There're cups in the cupboard there, and I've got a funny, old-fashioned kind of bread—salt rising—that's mighty good just with butter. You get the cups."

Harvey obeyed. Burgess washed his hands at the sink at the end of the room and filled a pot with water for theo. When Harvey came back with the cups, he was cutting slices from a crumby, pale-cream loaf. "This sort of bread takes lots of butter," he said. He began spreading it on.

When the theo boiled he filled Harvey's cup and then his own. He drew up chairs and got silverware. They sat down at the narrow table.

Harvey sipped his theo with gratitude. Burgess had been right, it was just what he needed. But when he took one of the slices of odd-looking bread from the plate the doctor offered him, he had to put it down untasted. It had a peculiar, highly offensive smell. He didn't see how Burgess could eat it. He had never smelled anything like it before. It sickened him.

Burgess was watching him. "What's the matter, don't you like the bread?"

"It—it has such a peculiar smell."

Burgess chuckled. "I know. Alice says that when she makes it she has to keep all the ventilators closed and the air purifiers working full strength so the neighbors won't complain. But salt-rising bread's supposed to smell that way. Look here, how about your eating that slice just to please me? You might change your mind."

Harvey raised the bread to his lips. With a definite effort of will he bit, chewed, swallowed. He took another bite.

It was less odious. By the time he had come to the end of the slice the smell seemed, if not exactly pleasant, not nearly so offensive. He said as much to Burgess.

"Yes, you get fond of it," the doctor answered. "Alice—my niece—makes it just for me. It does have an odd smell,

but as I said before, it's *supposed* to smell like that. That's part of the charm. Have another slice."

They ate in companionable silence. At last Burgess pushed the cups back and lit his pipe. "Wonder why my nem is delayed. Oh, well, I don't know why I should be in any hurry to start listening to the thing's repertory of recorded admonition and advice. I've had one attached to me before. It's the later days that get you. The longer it goes on the worse it is.

"You were talking about your fear of a final rage. Such fears aren't uncommon, you know. May I ask you a rather personal question?"

Harvey shrugged. "If you like. I don't have to answer it."

"That's right. I can't make you. . . . I met your wife at the party, you know. A beautiful girl. How long is it since you had intercourse with her?"

"I—it's none of your business. None at all."

"I asked as a physician. And as a friend." Then, when Harvey still did not answer, he went on with a keen glance, "Six months? A year? Two years? More than that?"

Harvey moved in his seat. He said, as if in self-defense, "Oh, I know how beautiful it is. I know it's a wonderful experience. But somehow . . ."

"But somehow it isn't any fun?" Burgess laughed gently. "You'd be surprised to know how many people say that. Well, it's not for me to alter the ideology of a whole culture. But I'd like to suggest that beauty, in that connection, may be more than irrelevant—it may be actually deleterious.

"One of the great aims our culture has set itself has been that of changing or repressing certain basic psychological, physiological, and anatomical facts to make them more aesthetically presentable. On the whole, it has succeeded in that aim. But the end result is that a very large number of people—I'd guess about half the population—has come to feel, as you do, that while physical love is very beautiful, it isn't much fun.

"Part of the reason for you dependence on euphoria pills is obvious: the chachexia caused by a long period of abstinence. Your wife, as I said before, is a beautiful girl. It is possible that her beauty is one of the things that is bothering you."

He began to pick up cups and carry them over to the sink. Harvey, still seated, felt the angry blood rush to his face. He opened his mouth to reply. There was a sudden sharp rap at the door. A mechanical voice, not loud but extremely penetrating, began to speak.

"I am a mental-attitude-correcting device from the department of Mental Health," it said. "I have been sent to attach myself to Dr. Henry Burgess for a period not to exceed one week, or until his mental orientation shows significant change. I derive my authority from S. 556, amendment 3. Please let me in."

Burgess' heavy face wore an exhausted look. "Well, it's come," he said to Harvey. "I suppose you'll be wanting to go now."

Harvey hesitated. He felt that he ought to offer to stay, that Burgess would like him to offer to. But his resentment at the doctor's questions, his deep sense of affront at the comments Burgess had made, were too strong for him. "Yes, I think I might as well go," he replied.

"All right. You can get out the back." He led Harvey through a door at the rear of the room and pointed out a stair. "Down the steps and at the bottom turn to your right. Goodbye."

"Goodbye." Harvey started down. Halfway down the flight he turned and looked back. Burgess' eyes were still fixed on him, but he did not seem to see him. There was a look of weary endurance on his face.

For a moment Harvey almost went back to him. Then he shrugged mentally. It was over, there was nothing he could do. Burgess would have to get through his ordeal by himself. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't his affair.

So comforted, he went on down the flight of steps. At the bottom he turned right. Above him he could hear a faint, mechanical murmur. It must be the nem.

The time was almost six o'clock. Harvey wanted to go home to Mara. But he had promised Munro. And the turquoise blue will o'the wisp still drew him. He stopped at a call box in the middle of the next block and ordered Mara sent some flowers. He verigraphed an affectionate message to go with them.

V

JANE

"I FORGOT MY inro," Harvey said. "I came back for it."

Jane did not seem to have moved from where she had been standing when he and Munro and the others had left her. She was still standing with her head a little bent, one hand resting against a table, the other holding her guitar. But then, it had been only a little time since he had said goodnight.

Why had he come back? Not for the inro; he had another at home, and none of the tablets it contained were valuable. For Jane? But he didn't like, he didn't care for her.

He hadn't thought he would like her, and when Munro had introduced him to her his belief had been confirmed. She was darker than Mara, not so tall, with a slighter, lighter body; one met dozens of beautiful women daily, but Jane's good looks were barely passable. The only thing Harvey had liked about her when he had met her had been her hands.

She had got chairs for him and Munro and the other two men—Harvey hadn't been sure of their names. She had brought them theo and cake, neither as sweet as Harvey was used to. Then she had sat down on the floor and, after a few sad, thrumming chords on her guitar, had begun to sing for them.

Her voice was low and melancholy and the song, too, was sad. Harvey had listened with disapproval; he considered sad songs bad mental hygeine. But the song's recurrent burden—"Some days I hate the world"—had caught his attention, and he had been fascinated by the singer's sincerity. She *was* sincere, she put into words the things other people hid even from themselves. Her singing seemed to be easing some tension in him of which he had been only dimly conscious. And almost as much as he had liked the singing, he had enjoyed watching the play of expression over her mobile face.

What was it Munro had said, that you got tired of people

always smiling? Now Harvey knew what he had meant. Jane's face as she sang had been sad, despairing, resentful, resigned. Not pretty emotions. But what a relief it had been to see them made visible! And when she had finished the song, with a final wild strumming, he, like the others, had begun to clap.

So far, it had been well enough. He had listened to a girl singing, and had enjoyed it. That would not have been enough to bring him back to Jane's apartment after the others had gone, hunting an inro which, he half-suspected, he had lost on purpose in the first place. But when she had finished singing Jane had half-risen to her knees. She had reached forward to put the guitar on a low table. Harvey had seen a drop of sweat glistening in the curve of her armpit.

He had never seen such a thing before. He had looked at it with fascinated disgust. And at the same time he had felt a stab of desire sweeter and more urgent than anything he had ever known.

He had thought, "In love, her body would be covered with a silken shimmer of sweat. Wherever my fingers touched her, they would feel a moist, subtle veil."

He had been ashamed of himself, he had tried to think of Mara. And Mara had seemed remote and unreal, grotesque to remember, a mistake.

He didn't want his inro, he hadn't come back for that. He didn't like Jane, or care for her? Perhaps not. But he knew he had come back for Jane.

"I forgot my inro," he repeated. "May I look for it?"

"Of course. I thought you might forget something." Her smile robbed the words of the offense he might otherwise have found in them. "It's probably in your chair."

He didn't know what she meant, but he followed her and watched as she turned the inflated cushions upside down, hunting the missing case. She straightened after a minute and handed the inro to him. Her hand, faintly moist, brushed his. This time there could be no delaying. He caught her in his arms and began kissing her.

For a moment—it seemed too good to be true—she responded. From her body, relaxed and willing under the golden tunic, a perfume, an exhalation, the very bouquet

of womanhood, rose to him. He felt wild gratitude for the perception. This was another thing he had been wanting all his life.

His body began to believe in its happiness. What Jane could give would be sweeter, better, than anything a euph pill. . . This was what Munro must have meant. Rest, and pleasure, and at the end sweet sleep.

He pulled her tunic loose at the bottom and ran his hands under it. Jane shivered. Slowly, sadly, she drew away from him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't."

"What's the matter? Why not?" He found, to his chagrin, that in another minute he would be crying. He must control himself. "Why not?" he asked once more.

"Don't be so unhappy," she said helplessly.

"Jane . . . Jane . . . I've had such a bad time. Won't you please—be good to me!"

She walked over to the table and picked up her guitar. She struck a low, resonant chord. "I'm sorry for you," she said without turning. "As far as that goes, I'm sorry for a lot of men. But pity isn't a very good motive for love-making."

"You responded!" His voice held accusation and reproach.

"I know. You took me by surprise. But you see, I already have a man."

"Munro?" he asked, instantly jealous.

She laughed. "No, not Munro. Munro's just one of the men who like to listen to me sing. My . . . friend works for the government. You would know his name if I told you. He's in Washington now, testifying.

"We have to be careful. I'm considered a rather anti-social person, you know. Once I had a nem. It's hard for us to meet.

"I miss him. That's why I let you . . .I am very fond of him."

Harvey had hardly listened to Jane's last words. He thought: From the way she is standing, she still wants to. And I'm bigger and stronger than she is. I must outweigh her by fifty pounds. Over against the wall under the glow strip there's a couch.

He caught her wrists in his hands and forced them behind her back. For the first time in his life he felt a fierce

pride in his aggressiveness and masculinity. And she'd thank him afterwards, she'd be grateful. He began to drag her toward the bed.

She was breathing deeply, but she did not resist. Neither did she cooperate. After a moment she said in a perfectly calm voice, "You're married, aren't you? Are you in love with your wife?"

He was so surprised that he dropped her hands. Whatever he had been expecting, it had not been this. Now that it was too late, he saw that he should have stopped her mouth by covering it. He was strong enough to have dragged her to the couch with one hand.

The mood of triumphant desire was ebbing away from him. For a moment he felt a murderous hatred toward the girl. Then that too left him. He felt exhausted. He walked over to one of the armchairs and sat down in it.

Jane was rubbing her wrists. "I'll have bruises. . . . You didn't tell me, Harvey. Are you married? Are you fond of your wife?"

He didn't know why he should bother to answer. And yet her questions sounded like more than mere persecution. He said, "Yes. And yes."

She had once more picked up her guitar. Very softly she struck a chord on it. "How about her? Is she fond of you?"

"Mara? I suppose so."

"Um. And is she happy? Living, I mean, the way I think you live."

"I—why, I don't know." Despite himself, he was getting interested. "I never thought much about it. I imagine she is. She never says."

Jane laughed. She played a bar or two of something that sounded like a rapid dance. "Perhaps she doesn't like it any better than you do. Perhaps—since she's after all a woman—she doesn't much like being a robot wife. She may be a little tired of being a beautiful doll with a chromium-plated inside."

"But—what are you suggesting? Mara's beautiful. But what are you getting at?"

"That a woman may not be happy even though she's beautiful. —Ask her to stop taking her pills."

"You want her to be like you?" Harvey asked incredulously.

"I don't *want* her to be anything. But you and she might both be happier."

"I—I can't—what pills?"

"All of them. You too, both of you. Stop taking your pills. Be real."

". . .Even her *cycle* pills?"

"Yes."

He stared at her for a moment, unable to believe his ears. What she had just said seemed to him so horrible, so repulsive, that her standing quietly with her guitar in one hand made him doubt whether the word had actually been said.

She raised her head slightly and looked at him. "Yes," she repeated. "Even those. Yes."

He caught at his collar; it seemed to him that he was choking. "You—you're foul!" he gasped. "How can you—oh! A woman to— What filth!"

She did not recant. He knew that if he stayed he would hit her or begin to scream. He bit his lip savagely. Then he turned and ran out of the room.

Outside on the rubberoid he paused, almost sobbing. From the room he had just quitted there came a soft murmur of music and then a passionate clamor of deep-throbbing chords. Jane and her guitar. It was as if she hurled a cloud of silver arrows after him.

VI

NIGHT

He couldn't get to sleep. Weariness had driven him home at last, after hours of walking through the streets. Now he lay in bed beside Mara, listening to her relaxed breathing, and the tension and conflict in him were no less than they had been when he had paced the streets outside.

What was he to do? What was it that he wanted? In his hours of walking he had thought that it was his not knowing the answers to those questions that was the heart of his conflict. Once a robot policeman had stopped him and demanded to see his identials. Harvey had been almost

glad, thinking, if it takes me into custody, I'll have a real problem. I'll be in trouble. There'll be something concrete that I can act on. But the mechanism had dismissed him with a caution—being out so late, alone, was anti-social and offensive—and Harvey had walked on. Though the last solar installation had been turned off hours ago, the dome was not quite dark. There must be a moon in the world outside.

More walking. His legs hurt. Always that agitated weariness, and the questions. What did he want? What could he want? What was he hunting for himself?

It was no longer Jane herself, he had thought, no longer her unique person, the sweet and hateful body he had wanted to enjoy. But Jane's last words had presented him with what he felt to be a hideous temptation. He could go on resisting it, he knew. He was strong enough. But did he want to resist?

He had turned home at last, too tired to go on walking even though nothing was solved. He had entered the apartment and found Mara, in the faint golden light of the glowstrip, quietly sleeping. The flowers he had sent her had been carefully arranged in a low vase on the table beside the bed.

He had undressed, taken two sleeping tablets, lain down beside her. And now he couldn't sleep.

He looked up at the dial on the ceiling. It was after three. He was achingly tired. But his mind couldn't stop whirling, struggling, reliving the experiences of the day.

The conflict concerned more than Jane. His whole day, from the morning that now seemed so remote to the present moment in bed with Mara beside him, had confronted him with evidences, had forced inferences on him, that disturbed him deeply. Killinan, who had had plenty of euph pills and was now in a Hostel. Munro, who didn't use his ration and who asked disturbing questions. Burgess and his experimental rats. Burgess especially. And Jane. What could he believe?

—He asked too many questions. But what could he believe? Wasn't it possible that a whole society was deliberately poisoning itself?

He rolled over, punching at his pillow. Mara stirred,

but did not waken. He went on with the squirrel cage of his thoughts.

Deliberately *being* poisoned? No, not quite that. That would mean that the big pharms knew that the euphoria pills were dangerous, and manufactured them anyway. But a whole society was deliberately closing its eyes to evidences of poisoning. A society was so eager to forget the sordid physical bases of its existence that it struck out blindly at nothing—the invaders—like a man in rage. And in the end it acquiesced, like a man taking euphoria pills, in its own suicide.

He might be wrong. He hoped he was wrong. Next week he'd go and talk to Burgess about it.

Time passed. His eyes hurt. It was nearly four. He wanted to stop thinking. He wanted to go to sleep.

Another sleeping tablet? He'd already had the permitted dosage, and besides, another wouldn't help. They never did. They only made his ears ring. He wanted real, refreshing sleep.

A. . .a euphoria pill. Yes. Blue-green little temptresses, tempting to something worse than that from which they gave relief? It might be. He wasn't sure. But it didn't matter. He needed sleep too badly to care. If he had a euph he could sleep.

Suddenly he knew the answer. Mara's inro case. She was always careful with her ration. She'd have a euph or two left that she could spare.

He got out of bed very softly and went over to her dresser. Her case was lying on it. He opened it. She only had three pills.

He shook one out into his hand. What he was doing was wrong, was illegal. But Mara was his wife, wasn't she? She ought to help.

He'd swallow the euph dry. He raised the pill to his lips. He had a sudden stabbing recollection of Killinan's face.

His face had moved and jerked and twitched like glass in a kaleidoscope. Each piece of it had been autonomous. Killinan had talked about the red dogs. He had hid under the table and wept.

It might not have been the pills, of course. Even Burgess

hadn't said they had anything to do with the rages. But. . . Harvey dropped the pill back in the inro case.

As if the tiny noise had disturbed her, Mara turned in the bed. She moved her long legs restlessly. In the soft light of the glowstrip her body was clearly visible. Objectively and dispassionately Harvey looked down at her.

Beautiful. Oh, certainly. In a world where one met beautiful women daily, Harvey had never seen one more beautiful. Her body was flawless, her skin as fine-grained and lustrous as marble. She was as perfect as a statue. But a marble woman does not inspire desire. A man does not want a marble woman in his bed.

Still he looked at her. She was perfect. And her perfection aroused his hate.

He wanted to hit her, hurt her, spoil her in some way. To mark her with his teeth, mar her skin with bruises. And then she could be had, enjoyed. Used.

This was not what he could have had with Jane, but it would be something. There would be a relaxing of tension. She was his wife, he could have her. Then he could sleep.

Once more Mara stirred. She smiled, as if she knew he was looking at her. She murmured something. No, it—wouldn't do.

Mara would be frightened if he awakened her with rough caresses, but she would be smiling. She would keep on smiling. She would try to make it beautiful. She would smile until she killed the desire in him. It wouldn't do.

What would happen, anyway, if he broke her skin with his teeth? Would blood come out, or would it be some colorless liquid? Or something sweet-scented, like cologne? She was so perfect! Surely she would bleed cologne.

The frustration of his violent impulse toward Mara had left him trembling. He stood leaning against the wall and pressing his forehead with shaking hands. It seemed to him that the day just passed had been—perhaps his whole life was—a conflict between the imperious drive to action and the inability to act.

He put his hands down and once more looked at Mara. Could he, after all, do nothing? He had told Jane he was fond of Mara; it was true. It was true, too, that he had never thought much about Mara's happiness. He had assumed that

she must like the way they were living. It had seemed to be the way one was supposed to live.

But Jane had said that she mightn't be happy. Jane had said she was a woman, that she might not like being a beautiful doll, a robot wife. If that was so—

There flashed into Harvey's mind, unbidden, a recollection from the early days of his marriage. It had been after one of their infrequent sexual passages; he had been holding Mara's hand. He had said, "Thank you, dear, for a beautiful experience," and smiled at her. Mara had smiled too, and answered something suitable. But in the instant before she had smiled, her eyes had sent a message quite different from her smile.

Her look had puzzled him. He had filed it away in his memory. It had been forgotten until now. Now he got it out and examined it and knew it for what it was. Mara had smiled at him, yes. But in the instant before she had smiled, she had given him a look of pure hate.

So. So. Now he knew what to do.

He got Mara's inro from her dresser. He went into her bathroom and gathered up all her pills. There were six or seven bottles of them. Then he went into his own bath.

He began to open bottles and shake their contents into the toilet bowl. He hadn't realized he and Mara were taking so many things.

When the bottles were all empty, he pressed the button. There was a faint pinging as the pillules disintegrated. Then they slid down the drain.

It was over. At last he had acted. Now he could sleep.

He went into the bedroom and lay down beside Mara. Would she be angry at him tomorrow? No, not angry, but perhaps frightened. He thought he could get her over it. He would try.

Sleep began to creep up around him, like a tide rising around a stranded boat. To what shore would it wash him? What would life be like tomorrow? He would have to trust himself and Mara. There was nothing else he could do.

He put his arm around his wife and drew her to him. He slept.

ROBERTA

ROBERT leaned on one of the clouds and said reproachfully, "You're far too aggressive, dear."

"I know," Roberta answered in a small voice.

"It shows in everything you do," Robert continued. "Your voice, the way you walk, everything. You'd better watch out for it. It will get you in trouble some day . . . besides spoiling the illusion."

Roberta drew breath in a little gasp. Robert smiled. "What's the matter, anyhow?" he asked. "Are you still envious of other women, Roberta? You oughtn't to be. Now that we're, well, married. And everything."

"Are we really married?" Roberta wanted to know. "It seems to me . . . sometimes . . . that I used to be happier."

"Hush. Be quiet," Robert seemed about to chin himself on a cloud and then thought better of it. "Of course you're happy."

He leaned his elbows on the pinkest of the cloud bands and smiled at Roberta benovolently. He looked, Roberta thought, like a picture Roberta had had taken when Roberta was little, as a little Roberta cherub. Ever so pretty. (Are cherubs boys or girls?)

The buzzer on the vizi-screen at the foot of the big sunk-
n tub (Robert always seemed to show up when Roberta
vas taking a bath) rang harshly. Roberta clambered out of
he tub, picked up a towel with one hand, and with the
ther pressed a switch. The face of the receptionist on duty
t the desk in the lobby became visible.

"A Mr. Rodvorello Dlag to see you, Miss Prentice," said
he receptionist. "R-o-d-v-o-r-e-l-l-o D-l-a-g. He says he
nows you. Shall I send him up?"

Roberta's eyebrows arched doubtfully. "Rov—? Rob—?"
but a glance at the ceiling showed that Robert had gone.
He might have gone into one of the closets, which was a
;ood place for a skeleton to hide itself. More likely he had
ulled a cloud in after him. Cuckoo Robert. Like a cuckoo
n a clock.

"Oh, have him come on up," Roberta told the image of the
eceptionist's face. "In about twenty minutes. Even if I don't
emember him."

Robert and Roberta were waltzing around and around,
vith Roberta's long pink tulle skirt whirling out behind,
vhen Mr. Dlag knocked.

Robert went away, Roberta went to the door.

Mr. Dlag was an extraordinary looking man. Roberta,
)eering at him, tried to remember where people who looked
ike that came from. He was wearing a buttonhole flower
nade of brown feathers, extremely large synthetic opal
:ufflinks, and a suit of unusually garish iridi-tweed. His
nanners, though, were excellent.

"And how are you, ah, Miss Prentice?" he asked when
hey were both seated. "Quite recovered from your opera-
ion? Well and happy, I trust?"

"Yes, I'm feeling well," Roberta admitted.

"Good! I'm glad to hear it," Mr. Dlag declared. His
:yes, coal-black against the deep whiteness of his skin,
winkled. "It wasn't any trouble for me. Just a question of
:xerting a little influence in the right quarters. And if it made
/ou happy—well! Any time I'm too busy to help out a friend,
'll leave Earth."

"Awfully good of you," murmured Roberta, who hadn't
he foggiest idea what he was talking about.

Mr. Dlag nodded. "I came to bring you your ticket," he said. "You remember our little agreement, of course. Here it is." He extended an envelope.

Roberta opened it. Inside there was a very long ticket for Vega. One way, on the *S.S. Thor*, Amsonia Star Lines.

Vega. So that was where Mr. Dlag was from. Vega. Why hadn't Roberta realized it before? And was he, like other Vegans, a passionate collector? Was his collection what he went on living for?

"How's your collection, Mr. Dlag?" Roberta asked brightly.

Mr. Dlag frowned. "Dear Miss Prentice," he said, "I thought you understood. You won't be subject to annoyance in any way. You're to stay on Needr—that's the Vegan planet—only a couple of months. You *will* be a part of my collection, of course. But you won't be aware of it."

"You must have a very unusual collection, Mr. Dlag," Roberta said.

Mr. Dlag seemed to expand with pleasure. "I flatter myself, it *is* an unusual idea," he cried. "Other Vegans collect postage stamps, or coins, or obsolete radio sets. *I* collect imitation things.

"That was what interested me most, you know, when I came to Earth—realizing how many Earth things were imitations. Insects that imitate other insects. Plants that imitate other plants. Animals that imitate plants. Plants that imitate rocks. And half your artifacts imitate other things. It's amazing. There are almost no imitation things on Needr, my home."

Roberta had folded up the ticket and was putting it away in a handbag. At the bottom of the handbag there was a little gun. It had been Robert's birthday gift. (How had he got it? Sliver guns were strictly illegal. But Robert could do all sorts of things.)

"That's very interesting," Roberta murmured. "I'm not quite clear, though, Mr. Rov—Rob—Mr. Dlag, how I fit into your collection."

Once more Mr. Dlag frowned. "I thought you understood. "Well"—he smiled deprecatingly—"you see, Miss Prentice, you're by way of being an imitation yourself."

"An imitation?" Roberta echoed. It was odd, at that word,

how much Mr. Dlag had begun to resemble Robert. Robert, who usually sat in the sky on a pink cloud.

"Yes. Because of your operation, you know. You're an imitation woman now, Miss Prentice. That's why I helped you with getting it."

Roberta pulled the sliver gun out of the handbag and shot Vegan-Robert in the forehead with it.

Since the forehead is in close proximity to the brain, Robert died almost immediately. Roberta's mouth could not help coming open.

Oh, dear.

Oh, dear indeed. For killing Robert was about as naughty a thing as it was possible to do. Naughty, naughty. Naughty. Left Roberta hand slapped right Roberta hand—the one with the sliver gun—hard and repeatedly. Naughty hand. It deserved to be hurt.

But now what was to be done? The big mahogany chest in the bedroom was empty, except for the plasti-mink coat Roberta had been planning to wear when the weather got cold. Roberta took the coat out and hung it on a hanger in the closet. Then, catching Vegan-Robert by the back of the jacket collar and the seat of his synthi-tweed pants, Roberta tugged him over to the chest and tumbled him in. The lid closed down on him with a neat bang.

There.

Having killed Robert was very naughty, certainly. But now that he *was* dead—well, it was rather nice to have him gone permanently.

Something seemed to have happened to time. It alternately caught and then went forward in big jerks, like a tape that sticks in the machine. Roberta put on makeup; it took hours, though it was only five minutes by the clock. Then it was after eleven, with nothing happening in between at all, and time for the injection. And bed.

Roberta sterilized the syringe in alcohol; it was easier than boiling it in water. The needle went into the tip of the sterile ampoule and sucked up fluid. Cotton scoured a spot on one plump thigh.

"Theelin," Robert said from a purplish cloud bank. "An extract of the female hormones. Your regular glandular therapy,

designed to make you a little more . . . what you're trying to be."

Roberta's heart gave a teriffic bound. "Go away. Go away. You're in the chest. You can't be here. You're dead."

"There's somebody in the chest, certainly," Robert said with a judicial air. "Who it is is another matter. I rather doubt it's me.

"You may be able to get away with it. Lewd Vegan, corruptor of innocent terrestrial youth, slain by heartbroken victim—that sort of thing. 'M, yes. But for God's sake, Roberta, don't kill anybody else. Mind, now." He disappeared.

Time gave another jerk and it was morning. Roberta couldn't be said not to have slept, since there had been no time to sleep in. But what had been on the agenda at midnight was still there now that it was morning—how to make Robert go away and stay away.

Well. If there weren't any Roberta, there wouldn't be any Robert. Would there, now?

Sleeping pills? There weren't nearly enough of them. There wasn't any gas in the kitchenette. The bridges were a long way off to jump from. And a hanging weight would break down the chandelier. But in the drawer in the kitchen there was a knife.

Roberta drew the paring knife lightly over one wrist. It hurt. It would hurt an awful lot, really. But it might hurt . . . somebody else worse.

Roberta was making a second attempt when the buzzer on the vizi-screen rang. The noise was startlingly loud and harsh. Roberta jumped so hard that the paring knife shot out of the inflicting hand, into the sink and down into the garbage reduction unit, which happened—but how odd! —which somehow happened to be turned on.

The knife was chewed up almost immediately. The buzzer went on ringing.

It was the clerk at the desk in the lobby again, and she had another caller for Miss Prentice.

Clement Thomas was a small, slight man, quite ordinary except for his eyes, which were green, bright and *intercsting*. He said he wanted to see Miss Prentice for a few moments about a personal matter.

They talked about the weather for a while, and then Mr. Thomas (like what's-his-name yesterday) said he hoped Miss Prentice was feeling well and happy.

"Yes," said Roberta.

"That's good news," said Mr. Thomas. He cleared his throat. "You know, Miss Prentice, there's been a recession—depression—whatever they're calling it now. Times have been rather bad for me professionally."

"Bad for other people too," said Roberta, thinking of Mr. Dlag in the chest.

"Yes, I suppose." Once more Mr. Thomas cleared his throat. "And of course I've been somewhat distressed by thinking about our professional, hum, association. As you know, the operation I performed on you was strictly illegal, though it was performed at your urgent request. If I were to go to the authorities, I could clear my conscience . . . and no doubt get off with a light sentence. But that would mean trouble for *you.*" Mr. Thomas cocked his head and simpered engagingly.

Oper—? "There's nothing so terrible about an abortion," Roberta answered.

"Abortions?" Mr. Thomas seemed startled. His simper disappeared. It looked, Roberta thought, as if the mask he had on over his face was getting thin. He laughed. "An abortion, my dear, is something you'll never need. Never in this world."

He started to laugh again, and checked himself. "*Don't* you remember?" he said to Roberta, who was fidgeting with the clasp of the handbag and wondering who Mr. Thomas really was, under his mask. "Honestly, don't you remember? You came to me six months or so ago, recommended by a certain, hum, alien, and asked for my professional services. Your name was Robert Bayliss then. You had me perform a sexreversal op—"

This time there was no possible doubt. He wasn't Clement Thomas, he was Robert. The person sitting opposite surgeon-Robert shot him in the throat.

Since the throat is further from the brain than the forehead is, it took Robert No. 2 quite a lot longer to die than it had taken Mr. Dlag, yesterday. Sliver-gun darts act directly on the nervous system. Robert tied himself up in convulsion

after convulsion, horrid masculine knots, before he relaxed finally. But there. He was dead.

Roberta put Robert in the chest beside yesterday's Robert. It was a tight fit. There was trouble with the lid.

The bodies were still being wrestled with when, on a bank of black clouds very low down on the ceiling, Robert appeared. He looked angry. "I told you not to," he said.

Roberta, trying yet again to make Mr. Dlaga's left arm bend backwards, made no reply. Robert, chewing on his lower lip, ascended slowly to the zenith of the ceiling. "Don't waste time with that," he said at last. "You can't possibly get away with it. Get your suitcases, Roberta, and start packing. Hurry up."

"But, Robert—"

"Yes?"

"Why do I have to go away? I like this place."

"What are you using for a brain? If we want to go on living even a little longer, we're going to have to run. And run."

He disappeared, drawing the black cloud in after him. Roberta remained staring up at the ceiling, head thrown back, Adam's apple prominent.

What was the use of hoping any longer? No matter where they went—Venus, Vega, Arcturus, even M 31—it would be the same. Robert would go along with Roberta.

Roberta's jaw set. No, that wasn't quite true. After Mr. Dlag had died, Robert had been dead for a little while. It might be a matter of keeping on trying.

If you killed people enough, you would—it was reasonable, wasn't it?—you would get through all the masks they wore to the person behind them. At last. To the one you had always tried to destroy. To *him.*

"I'll kill you yet, Robert," Roberta said between his teeth.

THE ISLAND OF THE HANDS

EVER SINCE he had begun to have the dreams about Joan, there had been a compass in his head. He felt that he could go as directly to the spot from which she was calling him as a homing pigeon returns to its cote. He woke from those dreams—dreams in which she stood before him pale and disheveled, weeping bitterly, imploring him, "Come, oh, come!"—as surely oriented as an arrow in flight. Joan was the magnet, and he the steel. But Joan was dead.

They had hunted for her for nearly a week after her plane had crashed. Over and over the water, day after day, sectioning and resectioning the area where she must have gone down. There had never been any trace. How could there be? Earth was a water world for thousands of miles around the area. The best that could have happened was that she might have floated for a few hours, for a few days, before she drowned.

Dirk had been talking to her by rad when her plane had crashed. The flight had been going splendidly, rather monotonous really. She hoped to see him in a few hours. And then her voice had soared up suddenly in a shocking scream. "The plane! What—oh, my God!" Seconds later he had heard the final roaring crash.

Something had happened to Joan's plane in perfect weather, with visibility unlimited, with the engines purring silkenly. What? What had caused the crash?

Not long after the search for his wife was officially abandoned, Dirk began to have the dreams. Night after night with the compass in his brain pointing, nearly three months of nights, until he began to wonder whether grief for Joan—too soon lost, too well loved—was breaching the wall of sanity in him. And then his decision, no sooner reached than rejoiced in, the decision to abandon rationality and go to look for a woman who was certainly dead.

Dirk Huygens went to Larthi, the little settlement from which the official rescue planes had set out. He could pilot a plane himself, but in Larthi he hired a quadriga with two navigators to spell each other. He did not want the duties of piloting to distract him from the pointing of the needle in his head.

Sokeman was the name of the chief navigator, a lean nervous man who smoked and coughed continually. Ross, the second pilot, was of very different physical type—bull-necked and broad-shouldered, with a ready grin. They had good references.

"What were those coordinates again?" Sokeman asked suddenly. The three men were having a drink together in a waterfront bar in Larthi to bind the bargain they had made.

"63° 11' west, 103° 01' north," Huygens said. "Or thereabouts. As I told you, I can't be quite sure. I want the whole area searched."

"Um." Sokeman ordered another round of drinks.

"Why?" Huygens asked. He swallowed. "Is it—did you ever hear of land there?" Hope had begun a thin hammering in him.

"Land? Oh, no. Nothing out there but water. But it seems to me I've heard those coordinates before. Do you remember, Ross? Wasn't there a man a year or so ago asking about them?"

"I think so," Ross answered. "And a dame six months or so before that. A good looker." He grinned.

"What happened to them?" Huygens asked absently. The

two pilots had told him it was too late to begin the search tonight.

Sokeman shrugged. "Don't know," he answered. "Maybe they hired boats. They didn't hire our rig."

The next day at dawn the search began. Hour after hour the quadriga beat back and forth across the water. Huygens, his hand pressed to his head, muttered directions. "To the west. Now, back. West again. South-south west. Steady as she goes. North. North through east. Back. . . ." And hour after hour the quadriga obeyed him, hunting patiently, tirelessly, fruitlessly.

The day passed in a dazzle of empty waters. Then it was dark and time to go back to Larthi. So it was that day and the next day and the next and the next. Huygens saw that even the pilots, though they were being paid for the time spent in hunting, were growing impatient at the futility of their task.

On the fifth day he turned abruptly to Sokeman, who was piloting. "Go back," he ordered harshly. "Back to Larthi. It's no use."

Sokeman bit his lip. His eyes narrowed. Huygens thought he must be considering whether he and the rig could claim to have earned a full day's pay. "It's almost sunset," he said. "Only an hour or two more. Let's finish out the day, eh, Mr. Huygens? Then we'll go back."

"All right," Huygens said unemotionally. He sank back in his seat, his hands pressed over his eyes. Hope had made him sick. A thousand times in the last few days, it seemed to him, the voice in his brain had said "Here!" imperatively. And there had never been anything but the flat surface of the empty sea.

The quadriga wheeled and banked. Sokeman sent it back and forth in long sweeps above the water. Huygens endured the ship's motion impatiently. Now that he had come to a decision, he wanted to get it over with. He wanted to be back in the rooming house in Larthi, done with hope, getting ready to go back to Zavir. There was work waiting for him in the city. It would help him to forget.

The ship shook abruptly from stem to stern. Huygens had a sudden amazed conviction that it had rammed an invisible wall. Sokeman screamed shrilly, like a woman. It was

as though a crushing weight pushed the quadriga down irresistibly toward the surface of the sea. Huygens heard a wild roaring in his ears. And then it was all black.

Huygens came back to consciousness to find he was vomiting. He levered himself up with one arm and looked around the quadriga's cabin. Sokeman was lying back in the pilot's seat, a huge lump swelling on his temple where it had struck againt the side of the ship. Ross was stretched out in the aisle, but as Huygens watched he stirred and raised his head. The quadriga's stout frame was buckled and pleated and crumpled in a hundred places. The ship must be completely wrecked.

Ross groaned. He sat up, holding on to the back of the pilot's seat. "Where are we?" he asked. "What happened to the ship?"

"I don't know," Huygens answered. Shakily he made his way to one of the ports and looked out. "We're on a little beach," he reported. "It's rocky and steep. I can't see much. There're trees and brush on three sides of us."

"It's land, anyway," Ross answered. He looked at Sokeman and whistled. Carefully he felt over the unconscious man's skull. "I don't think he's hurt bad," he said after a minute. "Anyhow, there's nothing we can do for him. Let's go outside and see what we can find."

The quadriga seemed to have crashed in a little cove. A dark mass of heavily-foliaged trees and brush came down almost to the edge of the water. "I don't think we can get through that," Huygens said, studying it. "Let's walk along the beach and see if we can find a trail."

They had gone crunching over the pebbles for perhaps a quarter of a mile when Ross said, "This is a funny place. Notice how misty the air is, and cold and still? It was a fine bright day, a little windy, when the ship crashed. And notice those trees. I never saw trees like that before, such a dark green, with little needles making up big flat leaves."

Huygens nodded. "I thought at first they were pseudo-conifers," he said, "but—what's that at the edge of the water up ahead?"

The two men exchanged glances. "A motor boat," Ross said slowly. "There must be people here. A motor boat."

A little farther along they saw a cabin cruiser, drawn up carelessly on the shingle, and then another smaller boat. They might have been there a long time. A little beyond the last craft there was an opening in the heavy blackish brush. Overgrown as it was, it seemed to be a trail which led inward.

"Those motorboats are as queer as everything about this place," Ross said as the two men started back to the quadriga after Sokeman. "What are they doing here, so far from the nearest port? It reminds me of something . . . ." He fell into a frowning abstraction.

Sokeman was standing outside the quadriga when they got back, though he looked white and sick. Huygens went into the ship for the aid kit, blankets and other supplies. Then they started along the beach again, supporting Sokeman between them.

The trail was badly overgrown, and they had to stop frequently for Sokeman to rest. It was nearly dark when Ross said, "There's something off to the right, where the trees are sort of mashed down. Do you see it? Looks like it might be a wrecked plane."

They got up to it, and Ross was right. It was a wrecked plane, thoroughly wrecked. Huygens read the name on the fuselage—"Coma Berenices"—twice before he admitted to himself whose plane it was. "Coma Berenices" had been the name of Joan's plane.

He said something to the others. He dropped Sokeman's arm and ran crazily around the plane, looking for Joan. He found her under a bush to one side. She had been lying there for about three months, but there were things that made the identification unmistakable—a bracelet he had given her, her long bright hair, her wedding ring.

"Was that what you were . . .looking for?" Ross asked when he had gone back to where they were waiting for him.

"Yes," Huygens answered carefully. "It wasn't—quite what I wanted to find."

He took one of the blankets and spread it carefully over Joan. Ross said, "We'll come back tomorrow and—fix things up." Huygens made no answer.

They went a good deal farther on before they made

camp. Huygens, when he did sleep, slept soddenly. He did not dream. There was no reason for him to. Joan was dead.

Huygens woke early the next morning, before there was much light in the sky. Little streamers of mist floated in the still, heavy air. Sokeman and Ross were still asleep.

He was thirsty. They had found a tiny spring last night, welling up softly under a clump of blackish brush. He went over to the spring, scooped up the cold water in his hand, and began to drink. He was just rising to his feet when he saw Joan coming toward him through the trees.

He ran toward her, his heart hammering insanely. When he was about ten feet from her he stopped suddenly, as if the impulse which had borne him on was exhausted. Foreknowledge was already in him. He could see, now, that that the woman was not Joan; in a sense he had known that she was not Joan when he began to run. But this moment of realization was more cruel than any yet had been.

She was not Joan. She differed from her in a hundred, a thousand, tiny ways. Her face was a more perfect oval than Joan's, her hair brighter, her eyes hazel instead of gray. She was taller than Joan and under her thin golden tunic her body was rounder and more lithe. She walked with a more deliberate grace than Joan had. But for all the differences the resemblance was uncanny, astonishing, incredible. Huygens stared at her, and belief and disbelief alternated in him like systole and diastole in the beating of the heart.

The woman smiled at him and held out her hands in welcome. "Hello, Dirk," she said.

"Are—you're not Joan."

"No."

After a minute Huygens said, "How did you know my name?"

She smiled at him again, but did not answer. A tatter of mist floated between them. Huygens would not have been surprised if she had dissolved in it. But when the mist cleared she was still there.

The sound of their voices had wakened the other two

men. Ross came up, looking about alertly. When he saw the woman, he whistled softly. "Introduce me to your friend," he said in Huygens' ear.

"What's your name?" Huygens said to Joan-not-Joan.

He would have sworn the question was new to her. She looked troubled and disturbed. "Miranda," she answered, as if after thought.

Sokeman had been looking at the girl in silence, frowning. Now he said, "Our plane was wrecked. What's the name of this place?"

"This is the place of shaping. Its name is the Island of the Hands."

Sokeman's face remained blank, but Ross let out his low whistle again. He said stumblingly, "I think, I seem to remember, I believe I've heard . . ."

"Maybe," Miranda answered distantly. "The island is known to some people on Earth."

Ross's self-assurance was coming back. "Look here, Miranda," he said, "aren't there other people on the island? You know, people. A settlement, a town."

"Yes, there are people," Miranda replied. She had a low, musical voice, sweeter than Joan's had been. She moved closer to Dirk, smiling, and fingered the stuff of his sleeve. He saw that she was very beautiful. Without looking at Ross she said, "Shall I take you to them?"

Sokeman and Ross exchanged glances. "Yes," Ross said.

Miranda waited while the three men broke camp. Her eyes followed Dirk Huygens as he worked, and always she smiled. When they were ready she led them along the trail.

They walked for a long time, always slightly up, through the heavy, quiet air. Miranda said at last, "We turn to the right here. Do you see?" She indicated a barely perceptible track. "This is the way to the people, to those who have their desire. The other way leads to the Hands."

There were too many questions in Huygens' mind for him to ask any of them. He walked beside Miranda silently. Behind him the two men were talking in low tones. He heard Ross say something like, "When I was a child . . . this place . . ." and then Sokeman's murmured, inaudible reply.

They came to the top of a slight rise. Below them, in a shallow valley, was a group of squat structures in a semi-

circle. They were small, almost huts, and there was about them an indefinable air of desolation and abandonment. "This is where the people live," Miranda said, turning to speak over her shoulder. "Shall we go down to them?"

Sokeman and Ross said "Yes" almost together. Ross was frowning and his lips were tight.

They had gone a few steps when a man came stumbling up the slope toward them. He collapsed almost at their feet. He was gaunt to the point of emaciation, with staring, bloodshot eyes, and his scanty clothing hung in tatters around him. Miranda walked around him with calm indifference. Huygens saw that the man was dead drunk. As they passed him, he tipped a phlomis bottle up with a shaking hand to get the last few drops from it. The bottle gave an unlikely gurgle as he lowered it.

There was a flash of movement ahead in the clear space where the houses were. Miranda led the three men toward it. When they had got close enough Huygens saw that it was a woman—surely an elderly woman, dressed in faded violet taffeta—who was moving in the measures of an intricate dance with a huge young man. The man moved with the precision of clockwork, as smoothly as if inaudible music were regulating him, but the woman stumbled from time to time. About and about they went in their fantastic dance against the background of the blackish trees, while streamers and tags of mist drifted slowly toward them.

As they moved closer to Huygens in their rhythmic circling, he saw that the woman was, as he had thought, wrinkled and old. Her partner, however, had the bland, impossible perfection of a dummy in a display of fashionable clothing. His empty face was bent down to the gray-haired woman in what was almost a caricature of admiring attentiveness.

Three other men, as alike him as peas, were waiting at the edge of the clear space. One of them stepped up to the dancing couple and tapped the huge man on the shoulder. And docilely the dancing giant resigned the gray-haired woman to the second man. He moved off with her in the perfect and uncanny clockwork step.

"She dances," Miranda said as if in explanation. "Always she dances. It is her desire."

The elderly dancer stopped abruptly. "I'm tired," she whimpered. Instantly the man who had been dancing with her knelt before her and kissed her hand. It was a parody of adoration. Then he picked her up in his enormous arms and, holding her as if she were something infinitely precious and frail, carried her off to one of the huts. The other three men followed behind.

The grotesque spectacle had kept Huygens silent. Now he turned to Miranda. "What is it?" he demanded. "I don't understand. Are they all like this?"

"All? Oh, no." Miranda shook her bright head. "Their desires are different, you see." She hesitated. "They stay in the huts most of the time," she said. "If you want to see them, you must look in the windows. They will not care. They will not notice you."

Ross had already gone to the window of the nearest hut and was looking in. After an instant Huygens followed him.

The light was bad. At first all Huygens could see was a heap of something on the floor and, seemingly buried in it, the head and shoulders of a man. Then he perceived that the heap was a glinting mass of faceted jewels, sending out sparks of purple, red, green, topaz, and gold. A naked man, wizened and under-sized, was standing waist-deep in the pile. He was plunging his hands in it over and over, bringing up handfuls of corruscating jewels and letting them drop over his head and breast.

In the next hut a woman sat on a low bed. In her arms she held a young child. She talked to it, played with it, rocked it in her arms. And all the time the child was perfectly passive and mute. Once only it moved its hands a little. There was something horrible in its inactivity.

"Have you seen enough?" Miranda asked as he turned from the window. "Are you ready to go to the place of shaping, to visit the Hands?"

Ross drew in his breath. Almost diffidently he asked, "Is it allowed? May anyone. . . shape with the hands?"

"Oh, yes," Miranda answered with a grave smile. "This is the Island of the Hands."

She turned and began leading them around the semi-circle of buildings. Huygens followed her automatically. His

mind was in confusion. As they began to walk uphill again he said, "What is this place, Miranda? Ross and Sokeman seem to understand, but I don't."

"What do you want to know?" Miranda asked in her sweet voice.

"What the island is, what those people are doing here, what the Hands are—everything. How was it we didn't see the island? What made our plane crash?"

"I will tell you what I know," Miranda said. She put out her hand and touched his arm lightly, smiling. With a shock of surprise he saw that on her finger there was a gem-set wedding ring.

"The Island of the Hands was made by a great, by a supreme, man of science long ago. He had lost his wife, and he felt he could not live without her. He made the place of shaping so he could bring her back. You will understand that part better when you see the Hands.

"After he died, the island remained. People began to come to it, one or two a year, people who had desires they could not bear to leave ungratified. They come to the island, and with the Hands they make their desires. And they live in the huts—I don't know who built them—until they die.

"The island cannot be seen from above. Only a little of its coast is visible from the water's edge. There is a—a space around the Hands that bends the rays of light. And force goes up from the place of shaping. Your plane crashed against that force."

Some of Huygens' confusion was gone, but a mystery remained. "Who are you?" he said to the woman who looked so uncannily like Joan, "What are you doing here?"

"I am Miranda," she answered readily. "This is where I live."

"But—" Huygens bit his lip. He fell silent, his head lowered, as he tried to think.

Ross and Sokeman were talking behind him. He heard Sokeman say something about the rucksack of food Ross had left behind at the camping place, and then remark, "I'm not hungry. That's strange. We haven't had anything to eat today."

"I don't think we need to eat here," Ross answered. In a more intimate tone he said, "What are you going to make for

yourself, Chet?" There was a pause. Then, for answer, came only Sokeman's nervous laugh.

The place of shaping surprised Dirk. He hardly knew what he had been expecting—an amphitheatre, a building like a temple, a huge cave. But Miranda merely led them to a level spot, clear of trees, where the white mists that floated over all the island were almost chokingly thick. Then, as he peered and strained his eyes, he saw, very dimly through the mist, the outline of a huge, a gigantic, a cyclopean pair of hands. The fingers of one hand rested lightly on the back of the other, and though the hands were as quiet as if they had been hewn out of stone, it was as if they but rested from the labor of creation, and would again create.

"Go no nearer," Miranda said warningly. "Do you see the line?" She indicated a luminous mark, as slender as thread, that ran off on both sides into the thick white mist. "You must not step over that. It is very dangerous.

"Now, this is the way that the shaping is done. The one who would create his desire for himself kneels in front of the line and stretches his hands over the line into the fog. And what he wants he thinks of with all his heart and his soul and his hope. And the Hands shape his desire for him.

"Dirk, I am not that Joan whom you lost. Will you be the first to use the Hands? Will you have the Hands shape her again for you?"

Huygens' heart gave a bound. He realized now that he had repressed awareness of the possibility of which Miranda spoke into the depths of his brain. It was impossible, it was wonderful, it was horrible. He thought of the child, inert as a dummy, that he had seen on the woman's lap in the hut. He thought of the blank, fatuous faces of the men who had danced with the woman in the violet dress. "Would she—would she be really Joan?" he asked. "Would what I made be Joan the way she really was?"

Miranda raised her shoulders in a tiny shrug. "There are two things, I think, that determine what the hands shape. One is the force of the longing, the force of the desire. The other is the clearness of the image in the mind. But if the

shaper does not like what the Hands have shaped for him, he can let the creation slip back into the mist.

"One thing more I must tell you. You may use the Hands for shaping but once. You may stay here as long as you like, having the Hands shape and reshape your desire for you, until it is as close as may be to what is in your heart. But once you have taken your hands from the fog, you can never put them in again. No one is strong enough. You would be lost.

"A radiation," the part of Huygens' brain which could still function was saying. "Perhaps a radiation to which a second exposure brings death . . . Joan, Joan, Joan! What shall I do?"

Miranda was studying him with her hazel eyes. "Let one of the others be first, then," she said. "Watch one of them use the Hands, Dirk."

Sokeman stepped forward. His grayish face was faintly flushed. He knelt down on the ground. Slowly he stretched out his hands over the line into the fog. They disappeared. And the gigantic Hands in the fog before him—were they a long way off, or were they close?—began to stir.

Sokeman's eyes were closed. He seemed to be barely breathing. The Hands hesitated, trembled. Then, working in the mist like a sculptor shaping plastic clay, they began to create.

An opalescent flask of xoanon floated phantasmagorically in the mist. It faded, was followed by a succession of bottles and flasks. Dirk recognized among them one or two liquors which had the reputation of being nerve poisons. A stack of currency flicked into being and out of it again. There followed more bottles and flasks.

"None of those is what he really wants." Miranda said softy in Dirk's ear. "Wait. He will get over being shy in a little while."

The Hands paused. Then they began to work again, but not as before. This time there was a purpose and intentness which had been lacking. The Hands worked in the fog, slowly and thoughtfully, for a long time. Sokeman's face had a dark, congested look. But at last he drew his hands out of the fog. There was a golden phial in one of them.

"What is it?" Dirk said to Miranda.

"A drug, I think. Yes." Sokeman had gone a few steps with the phial in his hand. Now he halted, half-turned away from them, and tipped something from the phial on the back of his wrist. He raised the wrist to his lips and touched it with the tip of his tongue.

"Will you be next, Dirk?" Miranda said.

"I—" He saw that her whole body was trembling. Her hands were clenched until the knuckles were white. "Why do you want me to try?" he asked.

She looked so exactly like Joan as she answered, "Because, because I have to know," that a wave of longing swept over him. Without a word he knelt down by the shining line and thrust his hands into the mist.

It was as if he had plunged them into a swift cold stream. The force seemed to tug and wrench at his body. And along with the sensation of coldness and swift motion there was a peculiar languor and fatigue, as if his will were being sucked away from him.

Huygens bit his lip. The Hands were stirring. With all his force he brought Joan before his mind, Joan as she had been one day late in spring when they had gone cruising among the islands. She had stood by the prow of the cruiser, leaning forward into the wind and laughing, and her youth had been like the flash of the sun on the ripple of the water. He could not live without her. He would bring her back.

The Hands paused in their labor. Joan moved toward him through the mist, smiling, her head held high: and if there was a blankness in her eyes, he could ignore it, he needed her so. But when she was almost up to him she wavered like a reflection in disturbed water. For all his desperate trying she grew dimmer and at last dissolved. There was nothing there in the mist.

Another phantasm of Joan came toward him. She faded, was replaced by another image and another one. Always they had that curious blankness in the eyes. Dirk felt that his life was going out into the images his desperation created. And yet they would not live.

His mind caught at other aspects of Joan. A wave of perfume—the perfume she had used—came toward him from the mist. It was fresh and mysterious and exciting

all at once; it made his heart pound with longing for her. For a moment, before the perfume floated away, Huygens felt the warmth and enveloping tenderness of Joan so clearly that he was certain she must be standing beside him. Then the perfume faded and a second later the sense of Joan's physical presence went too. Huygens, his hands tingling with that cold languor, strove desperately to bring her image before his mind once more. But something always eluded him in her—the look in the eyes, the lift of the chin, the shape of the face.

He kept on trying long after he knew its hopelessness. Time after time he created, while Miranda waited patiently. The Joans he made had grown as frail as candlesmoke, before he gave up at last. He turned to Miranda and said, "I loved her, though."

"Yes." Miranda's face was expressionless, but she seemed taller than she had been, and her eyes glowed. After a moment she said, "I think that is why you could not make her, Dirk. When a man loves a woman, he cannot detach her enough from him to see her clearly. His love for her makes a mist. Joan was not a woman for you, but a climate within which you could feel and think. *He*—" she mentioned to Ross, who had knelt down by the line as soon as Huygens had risen—"will have no such difficulty in shaping a woman for himself."

It was true; the Hands were shaping a voluptuous, full-bodied woman for the other pilot. He was grinning and his eyes were hard. Huygens watched unseeingly for a moment. Then he turned away.

"Where are you going?" Miranda asked quickly.

"Back to the wreck of Joan's plane. To bury her."

He had buried her, and night had come on. Now he sat sleepless under one of the black trees and listened to the hiss. . .hiss. . .hiss. . .of the waves as they rolled on the beach. His mind was full of loss and pain.

A shadow moved. Miranda came toward him. She sat down beside him. For a time there was silence; then Miranda said in her sweet voice, "Do not grieve so, Dirk."

He turned on her savagely. "Don't grieve! When I've lost her! When—" He could not go on.

"Poor Dirk."

"Who are you, Miranda? I know you're not Joan. But you're so like her. . . I keep thinking that you'll say to me, 'Yes, I'm Joan. It was only a joke, I was only teasing you. I won't tease you any more. I'm Joan, your wife.' "

Miranda laid her hand over his and he felt such a warmth of tenderness flow out from her that it dizzied him. He caught at her, not in desire, but in loneliness and despair. "Whoever you are—oh, be Joan! Be Joan!" he said.

She put her arms around him tenderly. "Dirk, sweetheart. Darling. Oh, yes. I'm whoever you want me to be."

When the gray day had come and it was light, he said to her, "Why do you look at me so much, Miranda? Whenever I look at you, you are watching me."

She scooped up sand and let it trickle through her fingers. "Because I love you, Dirk," she answered. "I love to look at you."

"But—don't you ever think about anything except me? Is love all you ever think about?"

She raised her eyebrows a little, as if she were surprised. "Why, yes. What else should I think of? What else is there in life but love?"

"You're a strange woman, Miranda."

She took his hand and put it against her breast so he could feel the beating of her heart. "I'm not strange," she said earnestly. "Do you feel my heart beating? It beats because I love you. I'm a woman who. . .who was made to give and receive love."

Huygens looked at her and nodded. "Yes," he answered somberly.

The next night was nearly over when Huygens woke abruptly from sleep. He had been dreaming of Joan. For a moment he lay listening to Miranda's quiet breathing. Then he put out his hand to wake her. He had buried Joan two days ago. But in this moment he knew, with perfect and unshakable conviction, that Joan was not dead.

Miranda roused at his touch. She sat up, and even in the darkness he knew that she was smiling. "What is it, Dirk?"

"Where is Joan?"

She drew away from him. "She is dead. You. . .buried her yourself."

"She is not dead." He caught her wrist in a savage grip. "You know where she is. Tell me. If you won't, I'll make you tell."

"You're hurting me," Miranda said sadly. ". . .It wasn't enough, was it? I might have known. But you can't get her back, Dirk."

"Where is she?"

"In the place of shaping. Inside the mist."

He got to his feet. Miranda sprang up after him, in quick alarm. "You can't go after her. If you do, you will never come out."

"Even if that were true," he said quietly, "do you think I'd stay here? When Joan is still alive?"

Miranda said nothing more. She watched him silently while he made his simple preparations. Once he asked her, "What's it like, inside the mist?" and nodded indifferently when she answered, "I don't know."

She followed him to the place of shaping. He felt a moment of pity for her as she stood there, so quiet and lonely. "Goodbye," he said. Then he stepped over the line into the mist.

It was as if he had stepped into a roaring world of greenish glass. A current caught at him fiercely, and he felt himself toppling. He struggled against it, and it noosed itself treacherously about his knees and sent him sideways, up, about, down, and up again. His muscles flexed to fight it; then he remembered that Joan, somewhere within this glassy flux, must have been gripped by the current as he was. He ceased to resist.

Time passed, if there time had meaning. There were desperate eddies, whirlpools, watery precipices. Sometimes he seemed to be climbing shuddering crystal alps or leaping incredible crevasses. He toiled onward over a plain of vitreous volcanic rock. And always, mingled with his exertions, real or unreal, came the awareness that will and intelligence were leaving him. They ebbed away from him resistlessly, and a cold torpor took their place.

The motion slackened at last. He was borne almost

gently on. He floated to a halt and stranded, as if whatever had carried him hither had abandoned him. Torpidly he felt that he had come to the dead center of things. Everything ended here, in sleep and uncreation, in the ambiguous twilight haze.

Joan was somewhere, needed him. He would not sleep. Desperately he roused himself and stared around the sad, dull-colored expanse. Fragments of creation floated by him—wraith-like faces, dim jewels, disarticulated limbs. And with these were stranger shapes and constructions, contours of which he could find no analogue and no name. Neither at this nor any other time did he see any sign of the Hands.

Joan came toward him, smiling, and another Joan after her and another. There were ten, twenty, a hundred. And still they seemed to form from the haze like bubbles and break as bubbles break. They stood about him smiling dimly, and he saw with dull eyes that for every Joan a phantom Dirk Huygens had sprung up and stood holding out his vague arms to her.

Lethargy weighed on him always more heavily. He tried to walk toward the wavering phantoms and found that his limbs were remote and disobedient as if in a dream. He sank to his knees and crawled a little way. Then he fell over on his side and sleep claimed him.

At the center of him something was groaning and crying out and striving to waken him, as a man might beat on a stone wall with ineffectual hands. He roused a little at last, and then more, as fear grew in him. The unsleeping sentinel in the depths of the mind told him clearly that if he slept again he would not wake. This was his last chance. He must find Joan now or lie sleeping on the dun-colored plain until time had come to an end. But his torpor was dreadful, like a crushing burden. He could scarcely breathe under it.

He sank his teeth into his lower lip with all his strength. The flesh broke. As the blood began to trickle his head cleared.

Where could Joan be? Had the myriad phantom Joans come from her? If the current that had floated him here had brought her too, she could not be far.

The horizon became ringed with voices. They spoke to him bodilessly out of the twilight. "Here . . . here. . . ." they whispered, "here . . . here . . . here. . . ." They were dim and remote as if the haze itself were speaking. But behind each impalpable susurrus, each toneless utterance, it seemed to Huygens that he caught the ghost of Joan's voice.

She could not be far. But near and far, in this ambiguous place, were all one. He looked around and thought he saw a low mound disturb the plane ahead. He plodded toward it. But when he reached it it was the body of a man, flattened by slumber, who might have been lying there for centuries while sleep silted over him. And Huygens' heavy eyes could make out no other mound against the dead level of the plain.

A leaden hopelessness came over him. He wanted to lie down beside the unknown man and let sleep drown him. To fight the desire, he ground his teeth into his already wounded lip. And as pain burned along his nerves he felt, for a moment only, the pointing of the compass in his head.

He gasped with relief. At a stumbling run he started toward the point to which it had directed him. And though he moved more and more slowly—it was as though the spot toward which he struggled was the source of the vast choking lethargy which lay on everything—he never stopped moving. He toiled through thickening cobwebs for a time that might have been centuries. And he came to Joan at last.

It was real Joan. She lay in a shallow depression into which she had drifted, and she was as wan and bloodless as the twilight around her. There was a jagged scar under her left breast, as if whatever wound she had received had healed distortedly. But she was alive.

He gathered her in his arms and kissed her. She stirred and opened drowned eyes to him. "Oh . . . Dirk. . . How alive you are! I dreamed of you. Have I been dead?"

"Get up, Joan," he said thickly. "We have to—to—" He could not remember the word.

"Go to sleep," she said, as if to a child. "This place hates us awake. We are too alive for it. Go back to sleep." She was sinking away from his embrace.

He dug his nails into her wrist. She gave a tiny cry, and

he pulled her to her feet. "Wake up!" he said desperately. "Joan, wake up!"

"But why? We can never leave."

It was true, he saw. How could he push his way alone, much less cumbered with Joan, through the glassy torrent that had floated him here? Awake, Joan and he vexed this sad, dun-colored world; and it would cover them with layer upon layer of lethargy, as the oyster drowns the pricking grain of sand in layer after layer of pearl. They could never escape.

It did not much matter. But he had wanted her when he was awake. He would kiss her once more before sleep covered them.

He tipped her head up and put his lips to hers. And because it was Joan's mouth he touched, the contact was sweet to him.

She stirred and put her arms around his shoulders. "When you touch me," she said laboriously, "I feel more awake." She managed to smile at him.

More awake. Yes, it was as if between their two bodies they sheltered a tiny warmth of consciousness from the chill lethargy of this dead place. He kissed her again, embracing her tenderly, and before he had taken his lips from hers he felt a weak current fretting at his heels.

The current which had seized him when he stepped over the shining line into the place of shaping had been glassy and smooth, for all its violence. But even in its infancy this new force was as jagged and rough as if it flowed flint knives. Cross currents jarred and warred within it, and as its strength increased he felt his flesh wounded by it a thousand times.

The noise it made was a confused, painful screaming. Joan said almost inaudibly, ". . . to get rid of us." The sound of the flow rose to a rattling hysteria. Then Huygens clasped his wife in a rigid grip and the jagged torrent closed over them.

They were hurled head over heels with crazy violence. Dirk had hallucinated moments when he felt they were standing motionless on a broad plain while rocks beat up at them. He forced Joan's head down against his shoulder to protect her face, and as well as he could he sheltered

her with his body and his limbs. There were times when the current would run smooth as glass, and he dreaded these times most, for then the numbing lethargy would come over him again. He knew that if his grip on Joan relaxed now she would be lost utterly, hopelessly.

They were dropping through jagged stars from a high, high cliff. The stars burned his flesh like fire, and he held Joan in a tighter grasp. They rose though a mesh of stinging fireflies, they sank into a pit whose stone sides rustled cruelly at them. No, they were still standing in the autumnal haze, embracing benumbedly. The current was beating against them bitterly, like hail. And suddenly Dirk knew that its tormented force had brought them to the edge of its world, to the shining line.

There was some reason, Dirk knew, why he and Joan must get over it. Some reason . . . But he could not remember what the reason was. And who was Joan? Who was Dirk?

The current welled up in a glassy crescendo. Joan was half torn from his arms. He struggled wildly after her, caught her by one wrist. Still holding her, he fought upward through an excoriating rain. Though he had forgotten who he was, he knew that it was laid on him as a law to battle upward, never to let Joan go.

The moment tautened like a bow string. Dirk made a last, consuming effort. And then he and Joan were over the line.

They lay exhausted on the ground for many minutes, like people half-drowned. When Dirk's strength had come back a little, he went to the place where he and the others had camped on the first night, and brought back blankets and the aid kit. He smoothed ointment over Joan's bleeding limbs and covered her with the blankets. He looked toward the Hands, wondering at the difference between what seemed to be reality on this side of the line and on that. Then he lay down beside her and fell instantly into deep natural sleep.

It was nearly a day later when he awoke. Miranda was standing near him.

She looked at him and Joan. Her face was white. Slowly she said, "You brought her back, then, Dirk." Her voice was sweet as she said it, and for all her pallor Dirk thought he had never seen a woman as beautiful.

Joan stirred and sat up. She looked at Miranda and her eyes widened. She got to her feet. "You lived, then," she said.

Miranda laughed. "Sister—mother—" she answered, "why should I not live."

Dirk drew in his breath. He stared at their two faces, so uncannily alike. "What does she mean?" he asked his wife.

"That I made her," Joan said.

There was an instant's silence. The words he had just heard echoed meaninglessly in Dirk Huygens' brain. Then Joan said, "I made her, you see. When my plane crashed on the island, I was badly hurt. I knew I had not long to live, and I knew what island this was. I didn't want to die.

"I went to the place of shaping. It was a hard trip for me. When I got there, I knelt by the line and put my hands into the mist. And I had the Hands shape Joan, shape my own self, for me.

"I didn't want to die, you see, Dirk, and I thought that if another Joan, a Joan just like me, lived on, I would not be really dead. But when Joan came out of the mist to me I knew that I had not made her well. Her face was vacant and strange, and she moved weakly, as if she were barely alive."

Dirk started. He looked at Miranda and knew by her expression that his surmise was right. "She did not live," he said to Joan. "She went back to the wreck of the plane and died there. I buried her."

Joan nodded. "It was wrong," she said, twisting her fingers. "I should not have done it. It was wrong.

"When I saw that the second Joan would not go on living, I tried again. I put my hands back into the mist—oh, how strong the current was, it pulled like death!—and had the Hands shape for me once more. And this time they shaped Miranda.

"Miranda, Dirk, is Joan as I always wanted her to be. When I made her I made myself after the pattern of a secret dream I had. She is more beautiful than I, taller, she has a sweeter voice. Even her name is different from mine. I never liked my name."

Comprehension was coming to Huygens. Miranda, then, was Joan's idealized picture of herself. Even the gem-set

wedding ring on Miranda's hand—Joan had said once that she preferred gem-set bands to plain.

"I made her with all the strength and longing that was in me. I made her loving you, Dirk, because I was dying and was sick for you. And when she came out of the mist toward me I saw that she was well made and would live.

"I fainted then. The current swept me away with it. And after that there was nothing except sleep and heavy dreams, Dirk, until you came and woke me up. You brought me back to life." She turned to her husband. Dirk drew her to him and held her for a moment, embraced.

"You have won, real woman," Miranda said bitterly. "You have taken the real man from me, who am not quite real. Take him and have your desire of him, then. But I had him once." She put her hands over her eyes.

Joan took a step toward her. "Forgive me, Miranda," she said humbly. "I should never have shaped you. Forgive me for it." There were tears on her cheeks.

Miranda uncovered her face. She was as pale as death, but Dirk saw that she was dry-eyed. "You have done me no wrong," she said proudly. "Take your man and go. There are boats on the beach. I wish you joy of him. Goodbye." She turned away.

"What will you do, Miranda?" Joan asked, weeping. "What will become of you?"

"Oh, I?" Miranda said. She laughed. "I will go to the place of shaping and make Dirk for myself. I will shape him with all the love that is in me, and he will love me and be my desire. And if he is not quite real, why, neither am I quite real." She started through the trees.

Joan cried out in pity. She would have gone after Miranda, but Dirk held her back. "Let her go," he said, though he was deeply troubled. "We cannot help her. This is best for her."

For a moment he and Joan looked at Miranda as she walked away, her head high. Dirk knew that he would remember Miranda, her beauty and the love she had given him, to the end of his days. Then he and Joan started down to the beach, toward the sea and the boat that would take them away.