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THE YOUTH MONOPOLY

ELLEN WOBIG

What price eternal life?



COMPLETE NOVEL

LIFE ETERNAL—IN A MYSTERY PACKAGE

Rodney Dorashi was a homeless, starving pauper, running from the dictator Korm, when Ormand Bey ushered him into Trysis. Rodney had never made out an application for youth and rejuvenation at the luxury resort, yet there he was—being offered immortality, a chance to join the select few who distributed the Anzee seeds, and the opportunity to avenge himself on Korm.

The only problem was that Rodney couldn't accept the invitation—not without knowing who—or what—was making the offer.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

THE YOUTH MONOPOLY

by

ELLEN WOBIG

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FOREWORD

IN MY TIME I've been the confidant of pagans and poets, politicians and profligates, patricians and paupers. Yes, even paupers. They must be amusing beggars, you understand, to be tolerated at Trysis. For a certain amount of wealth has always been needed to gain entrance here.

But there were some . . .

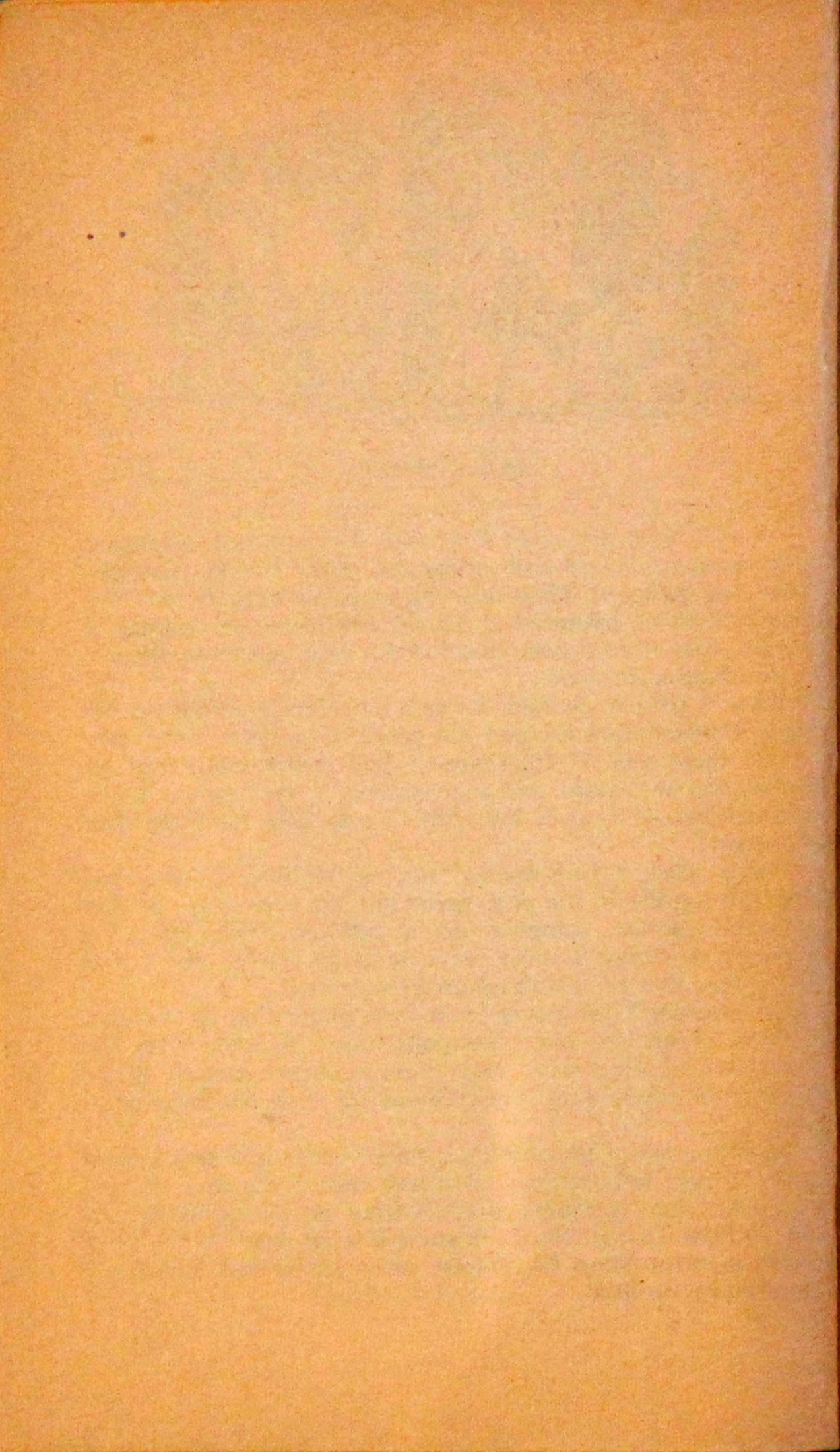
I was a pauper. Indeed, I was a homeless, starving pauper when Ormand Bey ushered me gently into Trysis, long ago.

But there was a difference. I had never made out an application for youth and rejuvenation at this resort. I was a hitchhiker who never intended to stay here for more than one night.

For a week I had roamed the countryside. I, who had lived all my life in the city, spent the last three days of that miserable period camping on a hill-top overlooking the highway, knowing I must leave soon or starve; but I was just as sure that I couldn't return to Metropolis.

Commander Korm never let anyone forget that *he* was dictator of sprawling, old Metropolis, once he took over. His word was absolute law, and those unlucky enough to be caught double-crossing him suffered for their presumptuousness.

An infraction of his quibbling rules was as bad as a violent crime. I had left my room without telling anyone where I was going, and a week's absence from my job without permission was enough for unpleasant disciplining. To harbor a transient, then leave his demise unreported, was a crime I might never outlive.



I

I PEERED cautiously through the weeds that grew waist-high along the highway. For the last hour I had patiently watched the huge vans rumbling past, all heading east toward Metropolis. To barge out there without reconnoitering, and stand up where the mobile patrol could easily pick me up, would have been stupid.

After making my way alone for eight years, I was an expert at gracefully avoiding the cold-eyed attention of Korm's bullies. I was friendless and penniless, but I was used to that. It was hunger that was driving me out of hiding.

My plan was to try for a ride toward the west. The river settlements were rumored to be a haven for fugitives who had made a simple misstep. That was my trouble. In a moment of unthinking charity, I had befriended a stranger

.....

I spotted another bubble car emerging from the morning mists. Sooner or later I must make my move or starve here along the edge of the road. By mid-morning there would be no more cars heading away from the city.

I stepped gingerly onto the edge of the pavement, aware that my unkempt appearance would repel anyone rich enough to travel. And if they reported me, Korm's men would have me in their clutches and back in Metropolis by noon.

One of the most glitteringly expensive cars on the market zoomed past me on the express lane without the suggestion of a pause. At that speed there was no chance of a pickup, but I distinctly saw the bald-headed driver lean forward and take a good long look at me. He would be able to describe me perfectly!

I shrugged resignedly. Why had I ever thought this might be different? No one ever managed to break away from Korm's terrorist regime without outside help. I was a fool to even think about it.

Well, standing here in the sun would only aggravate the burn on my thin city skin. With a deep sigh, I turned away. So much for wishful thinking and nebulous plans.

At that moment, the glittering car came hurtling back down the outer lane, in reverse, and almost ran over me. This man must drive with just one speed: fast. Ignoring the whine of unmeshed gears, he came abreast of me again, swung the door open so I could jump in, and took off.

I dropped my bag on the floor and leaned back. Whew! But this was not the moment to relax. The driver jammed the gears through every position on the panel until he found the one that protested the least. His experimenting must have torn out half of them and none would work well without a complete overhaul, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Just hang on," he remarked cheerfully. "As soon as I get us reprogrammed for the express lane, we can ignore this tedious mechanical bit."

I nodded my agreement and sat quietly watching him while he divided his attention between driving along the slow lane and jabbing the plastic programming strip with a stylus.

He was busy checking several sheets of maps as I ran my fingers admiringly along an ornamental strip of gleaming silver near my door. As I did so, an ash tray swung out conveniently near my fingertips. But try as I might, I could not work the combination that would return the thing to its base.

My fat driver glanced my way. "Don't pet a gadget," he explained in an amused tone of voice. "Jab it!" And suiting the action to his words, he jabbed the silver strip on his door smartly with his knuckles, and the offending silver tray disappeared back into the upholstery.

No doubt he was rich enough to treat this fine piece of equipment roughly, if he chose. I figured I had lived for a whole year on less than the price of the ruby buttons that marched down the front of his brocade tunic in winking array. The narrow jeweled collar that encircled his wide neck would have kept me in ease and modest comfort all the rest of my life.

Suddenly aware of my ragged fingernails, I hid my hands in the sleeves of my shabby coverall.

His glance slid over me. "Did you breakfast before you took off this morning?" he asked solicitously.

I shook my head and let it cover the fact that I hadn't eaten for many meals. Three days actually.

He depressed another silver bar on his door and a drawer opened out near my shins. Sandwiches and fruit filled half the space; bottles of bubbly drinks lay crosswise in the other section. Long yellow bananas, fat and golden, without a single dark bruise, made my mouth water.

I've tasted fruit. Back in Metropolis there were locally grown apples on the open market every summer for a few weeks. . . . But bananas! I'd never even managed a twisted black reject on my ration cards.

"Go ahead. Help yourself," he offered nonchalantly with a wave of his hand. His attention was still rooted to the plastic strip he was jabbing.

I nodded and unwrapped one sandwich with politely slow gestures. Then I don't know just what happened. I had intended to eat *one* sandwich, but I had wolfed down two and the third one was disappearing fast before I could stop myself. "This was your lunch?" I suggested apologetically.

"Not at all," he insisted decisively with a lifted hand that allowed no debate. "Antoine of the Plaza Inn always packs a hamper of goodies for me, in case I loiter along the way, but it is nothing but a fill-in. Go ahead and clean it up, if you like."

That stopped me for a second. I'd never heard of any service like that. I knew where the Inn was. It was too rich an establishment for me to have ever stepped foot inside their doors, but that they pampered their favorite guests with exotic fruits and extra lunches certainly had never crossed my mind.

Anyway, the bananas were even more delicious than I'd always imagined they'd be.

"There, now we'll get going," exclaimed my friend, as he slid the plastic strips into the programmer slot and sat back with relief. We had been moving along the outer lane at posted speeds. But now the car shifted into the express lane.

"I thought they said the automatic express lanes didn't work anymore," I remarked with surprise.

He shrugged. "They're working!" Then in a sly tone, he added, "Could be the propaganda mills in Metropolis were out of news, the day they filled in with that bit, eh?"

I was not about to answer so obvious a gambit. He twiddled with the air-conditioning unit until he was satisfied, then turned to me. "We've been looking for you, Dorashi," he remarked perplexedly. "We searched for days . . ."

I cringed. Even though I'd suspected for several minutes that he was an officer of some elite corps, I couldn't con-

trol my muscles "I was sure . . . at first . . . I hoped . . . that you weren't . . . you weren't . . . the mobile patrol . . ." I babbled.

He looked nonplussed. "Oh, no! No no! I'm not one of Korm's minions," he protested. Then, derisively he added, "Why, I wouldn't let that loud-mouthed braggart even sit in my car."

"No?" I asked skeptically. No one living in Metropolis told Korm where he could sit.

He laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and changed the subject as though it were of no concern. "Didn't you help a little old man who was run over by a passing car?"

I nodded. "He's the one who told me to pick up whatever I wanted to keep, and leave town," I explained uncomfortably. I had been so sure no one knew I'd had a visitor when that little old guy was there. "Just a few hours before he breathed his last, he said he'd be all right, but that I'd better not wait around for Korm's patrols to find me there, so I left.

"This . . . this scrounging around out in the country has been pretty thin living," I said, holding still another banana.

With a comprehending smile, he turned to me. "That's it! Frechette assumed you had friends nearby whom you could visit—that *must* be it."

Folding his arms, he contemplatively murmured, "We certainly couldn't trace you to any neighbors or acquaintances . . . and we tried! We tried every technique we knew to find you."

With that problem solved to his satisfaction, he lighted a long monogrammed cigarette and, squinting his eyes through the smoke, he inquired more intimately, "How come you didn't take his wristwatch along with you? He'd slid it under his pillow. He had no further use for it." Then he added suggestively, as an afterthought, "Certainly you recognized it as an unusual bit of mechanism . . .?"

"I thought of doing just that," I admitted candidly. "Then I decided it would be a link that Korm's men might use to tie me in with the old man's death, when they found me. So I left it where it was."

"Korm certainly has that town regimented," he observed, with the nonchalant admiration of one diety commenting on the mischievous pranks of another.

"Regimented nothing!" I gasped unhappily. I had lived under that brutal system all my life. "It's pure terrorism!"

He laughed, vastly amused; then he murmured in a voice

like silk, "I can promise you absolute retribution, Dorashi. Just as much and as completely satisfying as you deem necessary. How about that?"

"Good!" I applauded unbelievably. If he were a spying accomplice of Korm's, it was too late to talk softly, anyway.

We were both silent for a few minutes as we watched the scenery streaming past us in a horizontal haze.

I was reliving, briefly, the gray regimented years that I had put in; the unrewarding work I had been so thankful to have; the dull evenings I had spent standing on a street corner, too poor to purchase amusement and too cautious to look for trouble. Korm's units patrolling the streets at regular intervals had glared at me with blood-chilling silence that intimidated me more than their occasional roughly barked orders to move along. It had been just such an evening, between patrols, that I'd seen that little old man run over by a passing speedster and had half-carried him to my nearby room. . . .

My companion stirred. "You were saying you left the watch where it was . . ." he prompted softly.

I nodded. "He kept holding it in his hand. As he grew weaker, he seemed to get some sort of satisfaction in listening to its tick.

"He dropped it at the last, and I slid it under his pillow. It wasn't even ticking by then." I inhaled a deep breath. "His watch was as small as yours is," I marveled. "I've never seen any others as small as that."

"There are very few," he agreed complacently. "I might have found you several days sooner by homing in on that miniature set, you know."

Were there radar devices that could pick up the tick of a watch? If so, how could he tell which watch was the one he was looking for? I looked at him quizzically, but he was already busy on another subject.

"Frechette had directed us to find you and interest you in our work at Trysis," he explained expansively. "He was tired of living before he left us, but the last words he sent to our recorder were about you."

I could feel goose bumps rise along my arms. There was something peculiar about this wealthy character. I knew the old man was killed by a car—I saw it happen. But his version of this same story was weird. By the time he added all his motives and reasons and variable factors, it wasn't the same story at all!

He was still explaining. "A dozen of us came from Trysis to claim his body and inter it properly. That was no problem. But finding you had us all running in circles!"

I shook my head.

This fellow had never set eyes on me until this last hour. If he thought I was a former acquaintance, he was mistaken. And if he planned to presume on one hour's companionship to work me into a nefarious scheme, he was even more mistaken.

"That's the best come-on I've heard for a long time," I scoffed coldly. "I didn't know where I was and I had no idea where I was going, until this morning when I stepped out onto the highway where you found me."

Apparently nothing fazed this broad creature.

He shrugged his shoulders and changed the direction of his probing. "My partner gave you a packet of seeds, didn't he? By themselves they are almost worthless." He grimaced to underrate their value. "But with the proper processing—which we do at Trysis—the grains are worth their weight in gold."

Now we were getting somewhere. This smooth-talking swindler must have somehow learned that I had the old man's "magic seeds" and wanted them for himself—and he thought I was gullible enough to believe his story.

The old man *had* given me a number of seeds which he claimed were endowed with the secret essence that Ponce de Leon had searched for through the wilds of Florida. He had insisted that I take them with me; that they would bring me great good fortune. But I'd figured it to be just the ravings of a dying old man.

"I have lived a long, long time. You see only the trailing end of a lifetime of good fortune," he'd gasped. "I'm truly weary of it all. . . ."

He had nothing else to pass along to me, and as he'd felt so indebted for occupying my bed, I'd accepted them without argument. Later I slipped them into a plastic drinking straw and, twisting the ends, chucked the thing into one of my mismatched socks.

The whole bit was still hidden in my dripping duffle bag there on the floor.

My inquisitive host was sitting forward, still waiting for an answer.

"I've lived all my life along the river-bay slum section of metropolis," I retorted defiantly. "I'm not bragging about it,

but no one along there ever gave anything away for nothing, and I've noticed that no one else does either!"

The huge man gingerly moved his elegant red sandals out of the puddle where my soggy suitcase sat dripping its load of morning dew onto the floor of his car. Taking a deep breath, he tried again.

"Believe me, Dorashi," he purred in a tone of sweet reasonableness, "I have no designs on your packet of seeds. I have access to more of them than you can imagine; I was only trying to prove that Frechette intended to have you join our group—that's why he left them with you."

"The little old guy never mentioned any partners," I replied flatly. Then on second thought I asked, "Who did you say he was?"

"He was originally known as Sir Trysis Frechette. He used his second name, Morgan, and graciously allowed us to appropriate his given name when our venture became so successful. And I suppose I should have mentioned that I am Ormand Bey."

Ormand Bey spoke with an air of expectation, and now he turned to see that I did not recognize him at all. "You've never heard of me?" he asked with surprise.

"Never," I replied, feeling like a small clod; refusing to admit that I was defeated, I added, "I've never heard of Frechette or that Trysis thing you've been talking about either."

"Really? No wonder you aren't impressed!" He raised his expressive eyebrows to punctuate the shock to his ego. "I am *amazed* to know that there are eddies within the whirlpool of Metropolis where the name of my famous youth and rejuvenation center is not a household word!"

He brooded silently for several minutes. "You know, our reputation spread in ever widening circles like a stone dropped into a pool. . . . That is the origin of our trade mark." He smiled sardonically. "And it is incredible how many people find the vast amounts it costs to regain their lost youth!"

Finally, he shook his head and added, "But that there are people who have never heard of the House of Trysis at all? Deplorable!"

I was about to point out to him that there were vast numbers of people like myself, so busy fighting just to be sure of their next meal that they never raised their eyes to read his advertisements, much less considered his exotic youth and rejuvenation routines to be within our reach. I decided that it was too obvious to mention.

I had never met anyone like this Ormand Bey before in my life. I suppose "cosmopolitan" describes him best. He had an undefinable accent that suggested he might have spoken some other language as a child; some cultural center had polished his use of words so well, though, that there was no way I could tell where he came from.

I couldn't decide whether I liked him or not. He had gone out of his way to help me and even let me eat his lunch; but he had such a slanted point of view about a lot of things, he annoyed me. I'm sure I set his teeth on edge, too.

We crossed the Big River without even slowing down through the settlements. The barricades were open and no one was in sight as we approached the bridge, and although I apprehensively held my breath as we rumbled across the rickety spans, no one pursued us or ordered us to stop.

"Barricades are for little people," Ormand suggested, noticing my uneasiness. "Those who feel the need to be penned in. We're out."

This free interpretation of the law did nothing to soothe my anxiety. "What if you ever want to come back this way again?" I inquired quietly.

He turned that puzzled smile on me again. "Listen, Rodney," he remarked confidentially. "You are now outside Korm's domain, and the rules are much easier. The policing is much slacker, too. Each man figures out his own laws here. The air is free and we stand up and defend our right to breathe our share of it."

Contemplatively, he added, "I know they run a curfew on everybody in Metropolis and keep close tabs on them. If everybody could leave when they wanted to, there'd be no one left to victimize but themselves. It's quite a joke, but on the wrong people, of course."

I was unsure of his reasoning. A new idea is hard to assimilate the first time around, and I had no fund of experience to fall back on. Following all the laws and restrictions of my small world had been the only way I knew to get along.

This independence might work out fine for him, but I wasn't sure I could follow his lead. I began to think seriously of finding a smooth excuse to say goodbye to this character, so I could make my own way at the next town of any size.

Being alone did not scare me as much as getting involved in someone else's shady schemes, or something worse.

That last bit, the something worse, was a nebulous threat that my folks had always impressed on me.

True, my folks were gone long ago, but they had never been in trouble. And I knew I could still be safely at home in my snug room, there in Metropolis, and still have the security of my steady job, if I'd ignored the plight of that little old man bleeding in the street right in front of me. . . .

If I could only have been somewhere else at that moment, I wailed silently to myself. Down the street, home in bed, somewhere, anywhere I wouldn't have had to decide to help him.

Maybe I could get away by myself and make a break in this miserable run of luck. Just offer a graceful farewell to this Ormand Bey, thank him for the favor of the long ride he'd given me and get going again.

Ormand glanced questioningly at me several times while I brooded silently.

"Want to tell me about it?" he suggested, but I shook my head and hid my hands tensely in my coveralls again.

We drove along at high speed for many silent miles. Gradually the signs and suburbs indicated that we were approaching a huge city.

"This city was headquarters for many defense units of the federal government, way back in the twentieth century," he observed tentatively, with the easy familiarity of one who might have actually seen it all.

I nodded my head. My folks had patiently repeated all the stories they'd ever known about the times before the holocaust, when all this land from sea to sea was one nation, and those who didn't wear three-cornered hats wore fur caps with animal tails hanging down their backs.

"Hey, look!" I exclaimed, suddenly alert. We had just passed a huge flashing sign, a spinning wheel with TRYSIS written across it. "I've seen those neon signs in Metropolis. I guess I'm just too stupid to add two and two." I laughed.

"We've traveled a long ways today," I continued, indicating the crowds of people rushing in and out of a shopping plaza. "How much farther do you expect to go?"

"All the way to Trysis by night, with any luck," he replied cordially. "Why don't you ride along, and if you don't care for the place, we can easily take you on to the next town tomorrow. . . ."

I didn't know where that Trysis place was, but *this* was

as far as I was going. He didn't have to know all my reasons, of course.

"Will there be room for me at Trysis?" I asked uncertainly. "I wouldn't want to crowd anyone out of their bed, just so I could have a place to stay."

"There are more than fifteen buildings spread out on three hundred hectares at Trysis," replied Ormand expansively. "My apartment alone has ten rooms, so I'm sure we can find a place for you."

His obvious generosity repelled me. I was determined to break away and find a new existence for myself; as my stomach was empty again, I decided I'd better get on with my plans at once.

Before I could suggest a stopping-off place, Ormand leaned forward as though he could read my mind, and insisted on buying some lunch for both of us. This was good enough. I figured a couple synthetic-burgers from a handy drive-in would not put me too deeply in his debt, and I would simply not ride any farther.

It was only after we had made our way through the center of town and paused at a sprawling edifice, old and solid and built to last through the ages, that I realized he had no intention of munching a plebian sandwich. We drove through an arched entrance and an attendant took charge of the car. Another flunky, dripping gold braid on his uniform, escorted us to an elevator which carried us swiftly to the penthouse restaurant, a world reknowned and unbelievably exclusive club.

We stopped in a lounge where Ormand had an attendant spray his slightly travel-worn clothes while he showered. This gave me a chance to scrub my hands and comb my hair. No amount of renewing would help my coveralls, but my shoes had been polished to within an inch of their long life when I put them on again.

Refreshed, we sauntered down a carpeted corridor and turned in at a deep archway. This was my first introduction to lavish living—lavish as I had never even dreamed of it.

The headwaiter rushed up to Ormand, inquired solicitously about his health, and although the bar looked completely filled with diners, assured him that there was plenty of room for him to dine there if he wished. He need only indicate his pleasure.

Unimpressed, Ormand took his time, glanced indifferently around the room and decided a balcony table would suit him best. A look of pained surprise crossed the maitre d's face,

but he recovered his aplomb as Ormand stared at him and ordered, "The *whole* balcony, Maurice. I don't want to be botherd with intruders flitting by as we lunch."

I'm sure no one had noticed I was standing there until Ormand linked his arm with mine and thereby forced the bowing waiters and busboys to step aside for both of us.

Three waiters, the *maitre d'*, and two aides all escorted us to a nearby elevator and whisked us up to the privacy of the cleared balcony. Ormand waved away the huge folders of menus that the aides were about to offer us and suggested instead that they bring me a roast pheasant and mix him a salad.

Within an hour's time I must have eaten three complete dinners while Ormand picked fastidiously at his salad. Occasionally, as though it had just occurred to him, he would suggest this or that delicacy and within a few minutes another bowing waiter would appear at my left elbow and serve me another savory tidbit.

He seemed more interested in telling me about the fascinating people who had visited Trysis than in eating his food. At first I was too hungry to add much to his conversation beyond an occasional nod, but one of his favorite stories about a royal duchess caught my attention, finally.

This lady, well past her first youth, had wanted to marry the wealthy ruler of a neighboring province, so she spent three weeks at Trysis with the usual results. However, she charmed her hosts into letting her stay for two more periods, so that when she left for home she was fifteen years younger than when she had arrived.

"News travels." Ormand laughed. "And we soon learned that the gay young duchess made a charming picture as she walked down the aisle of the cathedral. But alas! Her royal husband was just too close to doddering old age to interest her newly recharged spirits, and she led a miserably dull life as the royal Queen Sharmean."

I agreed that it was a good joke and wondered idly where I had heard the name of Queen Sharmean before.

"Our organization wasn't set up as well then, and irregularities did occur," commented Ormand blandly. "Now, we wouldn't think of letting anyone stay for more than one session at Trysis; and there is a minimum interval of four years between sessions.

"Sharmean visited us shortly after we left Xochimilco in Mexico. Frechette was working on the plans for the setup we have now, but it took a great deal of time to perfect it."

As another waiter brought me another toothsome morsel I shook my head. Enough is enough.

Ormand lifted his salad plate with meticulous care and set it to one side before the watchful waiter could move it for him, then leaned forward and murmured confidentially, "It just so happens that you are the first person who has ever seen any Anzee seeds, or has had access to any, before they are formally declared a member of our team, Rodney We have always been very careful to keep track of every seed."

It sounded as though he were accusing me of something, so I snorted a defiant, "Do you think I stole those seeds?"

"But no!" he protested. "I am saying how fortunate that Frechette met you in time to offer them to you. I think you will make an excellent addition to our team."

I subsided, a little ashamed of my outburst. Certainly no one else in this sophisticated restaurant would be guilty of so childish a protest.

He waited silently for me to feel the full affront of my blunder, then continued right where he had left off.

"You understand, our organization at Trysis is quite elaborate, and I thought I might mention a few details as I think of them, that much less to concern us later. For instance, our clients never see these seeds. They never know when they are consuming our specialty, or eating their regular diets."

"Well, wouldn't little pills be simpler?" I suggested from the depths of my ignorance.

"Simpler?" Ormand tried the word on the end of his tongue, then shook his head judiciously, as though he had actually given my idea some consideration.

"We could never feed them anything so crass. You must remember that the people we cater to are those with huge fortunes at their disposal. They are a class used to a certain amount of drama served up with their routines. They spend their time following the sun, chasing rainbows, and wasting long hours in devious games and schemes, while they gossip and eat, nibble and diet, or dress and parade."

He looked around for an ash tray, then flicked his cigarette ashes across the tablecloth with disdain.

"So, we package the whole deal in one bit, keep it rare by allowing only a few to partake at a time, and charge them an enormous amount for their three weeks at Trysis where the rituals are more exotic, the diets more rigid, the rules more drastic, and the results more positive!"

I laughed. "That's quite a pitch for Trysis, if you should ever need it."

Ormand nodded in agreement. "As long as three weeks' visit will slough off five years from the age of every client, I doubt we will have to work very hard to persuade customers to come."

Suddenly I understood what he had been talking about all morning. Ormand had finally bridged the gap between my indifference and this exotic concept of rejuvenation, and I understood it as a personal thing.

"You mean they really are five years younger than when they arrive at your resort?" I asked skeptically.

"They really are!" he replied crisply. "And if you think that isn't important to a lot of actors . . ."

"At that rate," I interrupted excitedly, intent on my own line of thought, "you could stay one age almost indefinitely, couldn't you?" The idea was just dawning on me.

"But of course," agreed Ormand nonchalantly, with a shrug. "Why not? How old do you think I am?"

"You look about thirty-six or thirty-seven," I replied truthfully, without giving it a thought. Then, as I reconsidered, I became bogged down in chaos. Could this man sitting across from me have been alive and enjoying his meals like this—years before my grandfather was born?

"Wait. You said something about knowing that little old man, Frenchette. You said he was building Trysis when Sharmean—the only Sharmean I ever heard of lived a century ago. . . . Was that the—the same queen?" I asked, incoherent with shock.

Ormand nodded calmly. "It certainly was."

In all my simple life I had never been caught in such a maelstrom. Apprehensively I stared at him and whispered hoarsely, "How could that be?"

"It's very simple," he assured me in a quiet tone of voice that suggested that I was out of line, not he! "I am over eight hundred years old!"

I blinked. I tried to visualize what a man that old would look like, how unpleasantly shriveled and feeble he could get in that length of time. I glanced at Ormand's fingers as he brushed a speck of ash out of his way. There is a point where the impossible becomes sheer absurdity; Ormand was big and broad, but his hands were as hard and firm as mine. I could insist that I was five hundred years old, but I was actually only twenty. This was a joke.

"Yeah!" I jeered. "Well, where were you when Columbus discovered America?"

My relief was short-lived, however.

My host calmly flicked the ashes from his cigarette and smiled serenely. "I suppose you think I should have been at the court of the Castilian Isabella when that second-rate Genoese beggar returned from his wild-goose chase. I'm sure none of her court ever expected to see him return with his leaky caravels."

I shook my head, bewildered by this cool rejoinder to my flip remark. I had not expected this strange man to take my question seriously.

I glanced over the railing. Below me the huge circular bar continued to revolve. The beautifully dressed couples lounged negligently along its perimeter in gossiping groups, tossing dice and sipping their drinks. In a benumbed sort of way, I wondered if any of them dreamed that my companion on the balcony was eight hundred years old. . . .

The rumor that Ormand Bey of Trysis was dining here must have seeped through the crowd. As I watched, many raised their heads and searched the balcony in our direction as they circled into view. A few gestured upward, and several bold ones waved. One clown stood up unsteadily, raised his arms in mock acclaim, salaamed, and fell flat on his face, while his hilarious companions shrieked with merriment.

Ormand paid no attention beyond a sneering grimace.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Some nonentity." He shrugged; the subject was obviously beneath his notice. Then he added most offhandedly, "An international playboy who vacationed at Trysis a few seasons ago." He was annoyed that my attention had wandered from his all-consuming passion to the antics of these midday revellers.

He glanced around and summoned the *maître d'*, who must have been waiting for this signal to present the check. I watched, fascinated, as he scrawled *Ormand Bey of Trysis* across the page without even turning it over to look at the total. Such indifference to the astronomical amount of our luncheon check was certainly exhilarating.

"That's a real good trick." I laughed. I could feel my spirits rising, now that the inner man was fed. "I should join your group just to learn a handy trick like that one."

Ormand glanced up at me, surprised. "You can learn legerdemain of greater scope than that small bit," he assured

me dryly. "And if you pay attention, you should easily become a master magician in a short while."

I smiled eagerly as I stood up, and he nodded his head. With no more than this ambiguous agreement between us, we made our way out of the restaurant and continued our journey.

After all, what could any city offer me that would match the exciting mystery that was Trysis.

A different car, sleek and dry, awaited our pleasure at the door. An obsequious steward presented the keys to Ormand, pointed out the added luxuries of this model, assured him that all the luggage had been carefully transferred, and wished him a pleasant journey as he held the door open for him, while I slid in on the other side.

As we turned south along the edge of the Colorado Fiasco, that bleak space covering sections of four states, Ormand suggested that we watch a few films. "The scenery is so monotonous along here, I hate to spend time looking at it. And these films are quite interesting if you haven't seen them before."

One film was an uncensored documentary of more than a hundred years before, when the Ten Years' Famine of 2121 had quartered the population of the whole world. This reminded him of our conversation at lunch.

"We were in Montreal during the Ten Years' Famine," he remarked casually. "It was probably the only spot on the globe where the food equalled the rationing. . . ."

"Afterward Frechette picked us up on his yacht and we sailed south toward the Bahamas. The political uprisings, which brought the government of Americanada crashing down to anarchy and chaos, did not touch us."

I knew about the uprisings. "My Dad used to tell me stories about the revolts," I remarked. "His grandfather almost didn't live through them. . . ."

"There were a lot of lurid stories about the insurrections," agreed Ormand, dismissing them with a wave of his hand as difficulties overcome long ago.

"Now that we're settled, out here in the southwest, we've had room to build Trysis and we've made the place so self-sufficient, we don't need to depend on outside interests at all; we'll probably stay right here for quite a while longer."

II

HE GLANCED at the computer. "I could offer you some more films, but we're almost to the turnoff. Try to bear the scenery for a short ways more."

But my mind was not on the scenery. "What if I don't fit into any niche among your group?" I worried out loud.

Ormand shrugged. "How can you tell, if you don't try it?"

"The more I hear about Trysis, the more interesting it sounds," I admitted. "I just don't know what I could do, how I could be useful."

"Don't worry. We'll work out something," Ormand assured me blandly. As he spoke, the car turned off the highway for the first time that day, and followed a narrow road for a considerable distance.

"Our helicopter port is there on your right." He pointed to a group of low buildings surrounded by concrete runways.

The small square buildings sitting amid the desert cactus might have been built by ancient Indians, so elementary and lonely did they appear. Our car slowed automatically as we swept around a sharp S-curve and followed the hair-pin turns around high sandstone cliffs, but accelerated again as we passed through a high gateway.

A natural flat pocket of country opened before us, and I could see where cunning gardeners had planted groves of trees and shrubs and had carefully nurtured a blanket of green grass that covered the whole area.

"Anyone could drive along the highway and never suspect this spot was hidden here," I exclaimed as I craned my neck to catch a last glimpse of the gate as it disappeared behind another stand of trees. It was cool and dim here under the trees, especially after the long ride through blinding hot desert.

I must admit the chill suspicion passed through my mind that here was the right place to pitch a lifeless body out of the car for the scavenging buzzards, and let my fat driver make off with whatever he had been scheming for all day. He'd have to hunt pretty hard to find those seeds, though.

But he was still extolling the beauties of his creation. "We chose this spot because of its natural isolation," he admitted mildly. "Trysis looks its best when the late afternoon shadows fall across the lawns; it is the ideal time for you to get your first impression of the place."

As he spoke, he turned the car into a circular drive that looped around a huge park of velvety lawn and lush shrubbery.

The long shadows did indeed enhance the serene beauty of the greensward. There were fountains with rainbows in their misty depths, mansions with stately pillared porticos and, sprawling at the apex of the drive, a palace, no less! We swept past the huge building as we followed the roadway and slowed to a stop at a side entrance.

"This . . . Trysis . . . This is Trysis?" I felt dazed. I had not really believed it existed, except in Ormand's imagination. I laughed with embarrassment. "I guess I never expected anything like this!"

"Most people are quite impressed with their first look at the place," remarked the proud owner, rubbing his fingers across his head wearily. "If you would like to inspect the outlying sections tomorrow, by helicopter, it could be arranged, I'm sure. There's much more of the same beyond that line of trees." I glanced in the direction he waved, and through a long esplanade, I noticed a hazy line of sheep grazing on a distant expanse of velvety lawn.

We got out of the car slowly, and I realized, from the stiffness of my muscles, that I had spent a long day riding across the country. I was bone tired and followed my host without a word as we left the car at the curb and entered the nearest passageway, where a waiting elevator carried us swiftly to the top floor.

"How would it be if you stay here tonight," suggested Ormand. "And later you can settle down and pick out quarters that suit you."

A sense of dreamlike unreality enveloped me as I followed him through the penthouse apartment. A tour of the mood rooms—dim library for solitude, gleaming game room for fun and dancing, elegant salon for entertaining, cozy bar for friendly conversation, formal dining room for formal dinners, and a wide balcony that had been converted to a terrace for lesser meals—was followed by an inspection of the bedroom wing.

We were returning to the octagon-shaped hall where the elevator was, when Ormand remembered another fea-

ture. "There is a series of balconies around the perimeter of the place—sort of an outer promenade, like the deck of a ship," he explained, and seemed on the point of insisting that we inspect them when the elevator door clicked. "Ah, Fasial here will be glad to show you the balconies, if you like. . . ."

A tall slim sophisticate stepped out of the elevator carrying a small blue plate; he placed it carefully on a side table before he approached us with a welcoming smile and outstretched arms.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed one bit of byplay. Ormand raised an eyebrow questioningly, and the newcomer gave him the slightest of nods. I paid no attention.

This Fasial, seemingly a carefree character very near my own age, immediately set about helping me feel at home. With an engaging smile, he waved at the tray and explained, "Your possessions spilled out of the car as we reached for your bag. The clothes can be replaced, if you like; but this—" He indicated the twisted straw on the blue tray. "I wouldn't have presumed to touch it, but there was no other way to bring it to you."

I took it for granted that his concern about the straw was simply an over-polite gesture of welcome. The multi-colored trifle had apparently not been tampered with; the same crooked half-knot was bent just as I'd left it. There was no reason to pick it up to inspect it closer, so I left it on the tray.

"You need not have made a special trip with it," I replied graciously. One must make the gestures of an agreeable guest. "It seems like an age since dawn, but I remember thinking this morning that my bag would not last another day. It was soaked with dew and worn out with hard wear."

At this moment Ormand took a few thoughtful paces toward the elevator door and asked, "Shall I tell the girls we are dining here with Dorashi tonight?"

Fasial shook his head and grimaced derisively. "You have no choice, old friend. They've already made their plans. They'll be here."

Ormand nodded. "See you at dinner, then," he said, and disappeared within the elevator.

Fasial turned blithely to me. "Well, Rod, it's just my luck not to have found you yesterday, hey? We could have had a ball all the way home!"

His enthusiasm was so infectious that I could only laugh

and agree. And what he said was true. In just this few minutes I was sure the trip with him would have been a ball. He was most solicitous about my long trip and how I had fared; although Ormand had not mentioned our journey, Fasial delved into such searching details of the route we'd traveled, I gradually became aware that he was waiting for some cue.

Finally, two huge dusky creatures appeared silently from the other end of the hall. They reminded me of a pair of genies who had just emerged from a magic lamp. "Here come Ballantine and Leviticus, your personal servants," Fasial explained casually; he added as an afterthought, "There is still time to take a bath before dinner, if you like."

I still felt cleaner than usual for regular weekdays, after my shower in the club lounge at noon, but I had no chance to object to their ready-made plans; with the two genies padding along behind us, I was introduced to the ritual of the bath with soaps, hot towels, lotions, barbers and masseurs. Fasial brought in a large selection of clothing for my approval, and when I insisted on the simplest outfit he showed me, he helped me dress.

When everyone finally left, I wandered back through my suite of rooms. The jeweled tunic seemed to sparkle with every move I made. The tight trousers were flattering, I had to agree, and the soft sandals were unbelievably comfortable. But I felt very conspicuous and thought of it as borrowed frippery; I could think of no way to refuse to wear it without seeming boorish, however. At any rate, my old rags had somehow disappeared by the time I was ready to dress, so I had to borrow something.

I was still standing in front of the long mirror trying to conceal a lace-edged kerchief in my sleeve without making a telltale bulge when the elevator door clicked and Ormand appeared, his huge figure arrayed in evening attire that eclipsed mine completely.

Blandly ignoring my changed appearance, he nodded toward the balcony. "I thought you might like to dine on the terrace," he suggested. The swaying strings of colored lights under the striped awning looked very festive, indeed.

At that moment Fasial reappeared, having made a quick change to black velvet and rubies. He carried several menus with him and handed one to me. The thick vellum folder was at least two feet long and had an elaborate crest with three lions crouching on a brilliant shield. As I admired the

detailed engraving, Ormand opened his folder, snorted, and handed it to his partner with a disgusted glare.

I glanced absently at the menu, but it was all done in a foreign language and this terrified me. I had already undergone too many new experiences in one day. I was too confused to even notice that the unfamiliar language was written with a strange alphabet. I resorted to the only ruse I could think of. I returned the folder to Ormand without another glance. "Order whatever you prefer," I remarked wearily. "And I will take the same. . . ."

The quick-witted Fiasal took one look and shrugged. "These aren't today's menus!" he exclaimed lightly. "Sometimes I swear they throw the whole mess into the air and offer us the first couple they can grab. Here, I'll take them back. Give the kitchen crew a piece of your mind, will you, Ormand? They're getting more careless every day."

I had no idea what was wrong with them. Menus were a complication utterly foreign to my experience. He had not returned with the proper ones yet, when a brilliantly red-haired creature dressed in pale green satin and glittering diamonds appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, Althea," purred Ormand, as we rose to our feet. "May I present Rodney Dorashi, our new associate?"

"How nice to see a new face around here," breathed the luscious Althea. She ignored my outstretched hand, glanced up through her long lashes as she came close, and kissed me on both cheeks. I was too stunned to respond in kind—Was I supposed to?—so she lowered her head and let her red-gold curls tickle my nose while she lightly touched my jeweled collar with one white finger and made small talk about my long journey.

I was growing quite dizzy, as much from her heady proximity as her exotic perfume, when Fiasal returned.

His nonchalant, "Down, Theal" did not gain her attention, so he casually took hold of her soft arms and kissed her thoroughly.

After what must have been a satisfying length of time, she leaned back in his arms. "Silly." She giggled. "I was coming to you." He grinned down at her with devilish charm and murmured something about all hell breaking loose, but I did not catch what he referred to.

The orchestra, hidden behind a screen of tropical plants, began to play soft background music, while Ormand was busy checking his new menu. I glanced up in time to see

a small dark-haired dryad step out of the elevator. Her silvery gown was deceptively modest; a second glance showed that the over-fringe swayed enticingly with her slightest movement. Her eyes were dark and tranquil and I felt a protective impulse as she approached.

"Melete, my dear, our new partner. . . ."

She was very small and even on tiptoe she did not reach my collarbone, but she welcomed me most expertly!

She tried my name softly, as though tasting a new treat. "I do like the sound of Roh-dn'y," she decided as she slowly unclasped her arms from around my neck.

At that moment a goddess swished through the hall. "Juliette," whispered Falsial. My first impression was of green eyes, as cold and arrogant as huge emeralds; then I noted the spun gold hair, the exquisite white hands with long enameled nails, a bone-thin figure that was still lusciously rounded, and the whole vision fashionably uncovered with black lace.

When she had the undivided attention of everybody, she gestured at the table with her graceful hands and sneered, "Who's ordering?"

Then, when Ormand introduced me, she smiled slowly and remarked graciously, "I'm so glad you arrived safely, Rodney."

I bowed. I did very well for me. But she made no move to come over and kiss me, or shake hands either. For as long as I knew her, and I was acquainted with her for many years, Juliette kept her haughty mien intact.

Ormand held her chair for her and seated her first. Obviously, wherever she sat was the head of the table. Food fit for a gourmet's inspection was soon served on silver platters, and although I had no idea what it was I ate, it was delicious and more rare than anything I'd ever dreamed about.

While we were waiting for another course to be served, Althea, on my left, inquired, "How long did you know our old friend Frechette?"

"For two and a half days and one conversation," I replied. "It was a very short acquaintance. He lapsed into unconsciousness as soon as I got him home and he only rallied the last few hours—long enough to give me his magic seeds and suggest that I leave the apartment before the police arrived. He was badly injured, but I had no resources to summon a doctor." I looked questioningly

around the table. Would they think I should have done differently?

But they nodded. "We know," replied Ormand soothingly. "He contacted us sometime the second day, probably while you were at work. So we knew about you. He preferred it to be this way."

For a few moments everyone sat silently thinking their own thoughts. But mostly the repartee was sharp and brilliant and much of it was a continuation of former encounters, so that I sat silently listening to their exchange of ideas without any clues to understand what the jokes were about.

When I asked how many there were in their group, Fasial explained that Ahmid was the only one missing. "We have dozens of artisans and experts, and hundreds of gardeners and laborers, but we six—pardon, I should say seven now—direct things."

"Seven is an odd number," murmured Althea. "Whom shall we invite as a partner for Rodney?"

"No one," decided Juliette crisply. "An extra man in our midst is a pleasant addition. Let's keep it that way."

It seemed to me that all three girls smiled at me with boldly inviting eyes. Actually, I was unbelievably inhibited and they were just friendly, outgoing people.

Ormand finally brought the gay party to a close. He stifled a yawn. "This has been a long day, and I'm dead for sleep." In a few minutes they all trailed into the hall, calling good nights, making plans for the next day, and descended in the elevator like a bright flock of laughing butterflies.

As soon as I was alone, my two silent genies appeared and helped me to bed. And as so often happens to all of us, once I leaned back in bed I could not get to sleep. I lay there with my eyes wide open and no amount of sheep counting could change it.

I turned over twice, stretched out along the huge bed, scratched my belly, and counted the rich frogs closing my silk pajamas. Somewhere in the depths of the palace a door slammed, a strain of music grew fainter and fainter, then died. Silence.

I tried to imagine the quantity of rich draperies and thick walls that shielded me from the noise of the busy streets; then I remembered that the nearest highway was some two miles from this retreat. I no longer lived in the teeming tenements of Metropolis.

I smiled to myself. So *this* is Trysis. I had thought a

job here might mean serving customers their meals, carrying trays, or washing dishes; but Fasiel had said they had scads of laborers and gardeners, so why did they think I could direct any of their work? Obviously they had me mixed up with someone else, but I might as well enjoy my stay here while it lasted.

But there were still questions I wished I could answer: if Frechette had wanted me to join their group, why had he insisted that I leave my apartment? He had never mentioned these people. And after we got here, why had no one seemed interested in the seeds in my plastic straw? There was a puzzle, all right . . . tomorrow I must watch more carefully. . . .

So the next day I watched as carefully as I could, but Ormand was delighted to show me anything I expressed an interest in. He conducted me through the gleaming laboratories where the potions were prepared and explained the procedures in detail, but the processes meant little to my untrained mind. All I remembered was that the fine powder from a single seed was sifted into a huge caldron, turning the glutinous mixture in it pale pink.

III

AS THE DAYS passed no one seemed in a hurry to put me to work. They came in twos and threes and visited with me by the hour. They hunted up interesting books and articles for me to read, and gradually introduced memory tapes and sub-audio recordings to use while I slept, to help me bridge the many gaps in my education. They seemed to be running a friendly contest among themselves to see who could pour the most information into my brain without being obvious about it.

One morning long before we had completed our tour of the arts and sciences, I took advantage of a good opportunity while Ormand breakfasted with me, to broach the subject I was most curious about.

"Mmm, look," I began as I held a light for his after-breakfast cigarette. "That business of eight hundred years—how about that? How can you prove a remark like that?"

"I don't have to prove it," snapped Ormand shortly. "I just happen to be more than eight hundred years old."

"Yeah? Well, you didn't answer my question last time when I asked you where you were when Columbus discovered America; you just hedged and told me where you weren't."

Amused now, Ormand nodded as he flicked the ashes of his cigarette into a waiting silver tray. "I got a definite impression you weren't interested in details at the time. . . ."

"I know," I agreed. "I myself have aged several years since we drove across the Colorado Fiasco last month. My appreciation of details has improved."

He smiled slowly, took a deep breath, and began in a dreamy voice, "Do you know the land of Nubia and Abyssinia, where the Blue Nile begins? Back beyond the stretches of Egypt, where the Nile is called the Abbai, there is a land of pleasant living, not easy, but pleasant.

"I served in a coptic monastery there for a long time. When my ability to remain unaged finally attracted attention, I traveled to El-Kahirah—ah—Cairo to you. Attaching myself to the household of the Kadir of Jamhuryat, I taught mathematics and astronomy to the eager students of the vicinity.

"It was while I was there that I first heard of your explorer," he declared triumphantly. "A Portuguese navigator named Cristobal Colon had made some discoveries of wild lands to the west beyond the ocean.

"Some said the place was covered with gold plate, others contradicted the story and said the place was worthless. Mosquito land." He smoked contemplatively for a few minutes. "We weren't especially impressed with his feat; the people living around me did not identify with it at all."

I made no comment so he continued. "A youth in the kadir's household, Fasial by name, was always eager to hear my stories. He used to listen to them by the hour. Of course I didn't mention any names he would know, and many of them were just tales I made up, but he grew up at my side and never let me out of his sight."

"Fasial . . . ?" I inquired with recognition dawning suddenly.

Ormand nodded. "Althea was a Greek slave when I found her. Stunned by brutal treatment, she never recovered her memory of where she came from or who contributed to her mistreatment, but she has been dancing for us for many years."

I recalled the continuous banter and raillery of Fasial and Althea. Had they been joshing each other for the last

eight hundred years? Rather belatedly I suggested, "Maybe they wouldn't care to have me know about them . . . ?"

"Those two?" Ormand laughed belittlingly. "Why not? You are one of our group and sooner or later you'd know."

The subtle flattery of Ormand's last words gave me a warm contented feeling. I had never belonged to any group and my family was a dim memory; but I belonged here!

"I swept Melete out of the clutches of the Spanish Inquisition," continued Ormand with more fervor than usual. Clenching his hands into fists, he growled, "I still get satisfaction thinking of the surprised look on the face of that Jesuit don when I grabbed him by the throat with my bare hands and pounded his face to pulp!"

"Well, hurray for our side." I applauded.

Only then did it occur to me that little Melete was older than my grandmother by several centuries. These things were never fair! I'd been cheated again! With a grimace, I inquired dully, "Was she the only one you saved?"

"It was the only time I happened to be in the right place at the right time." He buffed his fingernails with exaggerated smugness.

Well, anyway, he didn't have to make a joke about it. Angriily I demanded, "Why?"

"Why!" Ormand raised an eyebrow. "Do you think I was about to take on the whole tribunal of the Spanish courts, single-handed? I'm a peaceful tradesman, and always have been."

I shrugged and subsided. If he chose to misunderstand my question, I'd have to work out my own answers. There was no reason to be angry with Ormand just because he had given my favorite dream a death blow. If Melete was irreparably out of my reach, I had asked for the information, had I not?

"What about Juliette?" I prompted.

"We met in Rome. That is, I was on my way to Rome when she walked into my camp, which was pitched on the outskirts of the city. She hardly asked permission to join my small band; she just took over. And things went well for me from that day on."

Strangely enough, my insides were not wrenched at all when I learned that Juliette could be my grandmother ten times over.

"I believe I missed Ahmid," exclaimed Ormand as he sat thinking over his long journey. "Fasial and I were just

brushing the dust of Cairo from our heels when we met him."

"Ahmid has the most . . . most multilingual accent," I remarked conversationally. "It's as thick as potato soup."

"Hah! As thick as levantine gruel," agreed Ormand. "And once he picks up a bit of dialect, he never improves it or lets go of it. He just incorporates it into his jargon and keeps going."

We laughed at Ahmid's expense as we rose to leave the table; Ormand could measure the improvement the group coaching had made on me as I gracefully bowed very low and smiled mockingly. "I do apologize, apologize abjectly, for doubting your word, sir. I am only sorry you neglected to strike up a passing acquaintance with our fifteenth century explorer."

It was the sort of playacting everybody here indulged in. An easy way of smoothing over a possible sticky moment, it also showed that some of the graceful manners of the group were rubbing off onto me in the right places.

Ormand waved his arm expansively and laughed. "Quite all right, Rodney. Ask me anything. . . . Whenever you have a problem, come and ask me about it."

Just as he was about to enter the elevator, he hesitated, turned half around and inquired, "Did you have any special reason for wanting to know about that Portuguese explorer? There were other more interesting characters in that era, you know."

"Well, it's a personal thing," I explained. "Back in the twenty-first century, the Dorashi family was affluent enough to engage some experts from London to trace our family tree. I guess it was Christopher's brother Bartholomew who actually carried the line forward; but who brags about Bartholomew and Margeurita Colona, who played it safe and stayed close to home . . . ?"

I laughed. "As you were talking, it occurred to me that you might have met this ancestor of mine, passed him in the street, or attended some social function that he addressed It would have been a coincidence, would it not?"

"It would indeed!" Ormand nodded thoughtfully. "However, it was close to a hundred and fifty years later, while we were busy in Rome, that I made my first short visit to Spain. I have always been a trader first, before anything else."

"Well, that takes care of old Chris," I mused as I waited for the elevator to come back up for me.

This was the morning that Fasial had agreed to help me look for an apartment, and I found him waiting on the steps of Ormand's office, down on the square.

"Girl watching?" I inquired lightly, as I came up behind him silently.

"Oho, optimist!" he scoffed as he lounged on the sun-warmed step. "Point one out to me."

Then, as we surveyed the mid-morning scene companionably, he nodded negligently toward the far side of the square where a stout dowager was busily supervising the unloading of her matched luggage. A tall gray-haired man stood quietly to one side, elegantly doing absolutely nothing.

"A few early birds of our new class are settling in," he remarked carelessly.

"So I see," I murmured agreeably. "Who are they?"

"I have no idea who the fat hen clucking over her luggage might be." Fasial shrugged disparagingly. "The other is an actor from 'Frisco. He has not got the price of a decent meal for himself, much less the terrific fees to join a class here." He laughed arrogantly. "But we invite him every now and then; he saves a good many evenings from boredom for us . . . a most pleasant fellow."

There was little else to claim our attention, so we cut across the greensward in search of the apartment he had described to me.

We walked carelessly through a line of creeping gardeners, who made way for us automatically and closed ranks as we passed by. These lines, maybe thirty to forty men abreast, moved slowly on their hands and knees, giving their undivided attention to the grass immediately in front of them, so no weed ever had a chance to sprout on Ormand's velvety acres. These were, obviously, the sheep I had seen grazing in the distance, the day I had first arrived here.

Fasial grinned as he unlocked the door of a rabbit warren-type building. "You can have a suite on the main square, if you like, Rod. I'm not trying to shove you into a dump, you know. . . . I used these diggings for quite a spell, myself, so I know what I'm talking about when I say this is a handy spot."

He gave the door a familiar shove with his shoulder, as he added, "There's an easy shortcut through the hedge, there, and across the jai alai courts, that can save you five minutes every morning."

I nodded as we went in. Small and bare, it was a far

cry from the luxury of the penthouse I had been occupying, but I felt completely at home as soon as I crossed the threshold. I did not fill it with any of the thick rugs or elaborate furniture that Fasial generously offered me from the well-stocked storerooms, but kept it ascetically bare.

Fasial was dismayed by my choice. "You are reverting to your youth in Metropolis," he scoffed.

"I know how I feel about this," I declared stoutly. "And these rooms, as they are, have the feeling of home for me. Look! A bed beneath the skylight and a chest; over here a table and a cupboard; and in the other room a few leather chairs for my guests. . . . Perfection!"

Fasial shrugged. "If you say so," he agreed doubtfully, stretching out in my softest chair. "Let's have a party here tonight. It will be our last free night for some time. . . . The classes start again tomorrow and we'll all be riding herd on the beginners for a while." He sighed lugubriously. "It makes me tired, just to think of it."

I laughed at his show of utter exhaustion. "You have my sympathy," I offered generously, then flopped onto the nearby sofa.

"Look Faz. I'm a rank beginner here, myself, and I don't know how to phrase my problem, but if a client stays here three weeks and regains five years, what happens to you—I mean me? Do we eat our meals with the guests? Ormand said they don't ever know when they are eating the Anzee mixture. Wouldn't a separate diet for us look odd?"

"No problem," replied Fasial nonchalantly. "We all eat in the club dining room or in the assembly lounge. There are just a few concoctions I ignore. The technicians watch the trays closely the first few days of any class, and they aren't apt to get yours mixed up with any client's. You'll catch on."

"It sounds simple," I agreed.

"How many details did you notice the first day you were here?" he suggested. "Our guests are even less observant." He grinned. "You have to watch out for the tenth one, of course; but you can't believe the lack of curiosity of most of them! Actually," he explained, "the personnel of Trysis has a completely different schedule from that of our guests. Our diets are plotted for a long interval, so we never go forward nor slip backward."

"I suppose I could have asked Ormand," I suggested slowly. "Your explanations seem to fit my problems better, if

you can excuse the reverse compliment. And Ormand always seems busy with important things."

Faz grinned. "Just don't worry, pal. These things all work themselves out. Has Ormand given you a list of rules and regulations?"

I nodded. "That green folder with fifty loose pages—and a thousand do's and don't's?"

"You better work them over till you've memorized them. Our leader gets pretty perturbed when his flunkys slip up in public."

He smiled. "Talking of Ormand, I promised him I'd show up before lunch to work over some estimates for him. Take my advice and never let him know you can do any of his work!"

His plausible excuse got him smoothly out of the room. Something I had said irked him; but I couldn't figure out what it was. In a moment he poked his head back around the door, again.

"Hey, boy!" he hissed, pretending great stealth as he oozed back into the room. "I meant to tell you before . . ."

I grinned knowingly at him, so he relaxed and sat against my table with one leg swinging slowly.

"I'm going to be master of ceremonies at the presentation ritual come Third-day," he announced in his own normal tone of voice. "I know a good place you can watch the whole performance, if you like."

"Ritual?"

"Sure! It's a welcoming ceremony that Ormand has devised to let these wealthy characters understand who is running the place." He smirked. "One of these days it'll be your turn to play the Exalted Ruler of Trysis. Ahmid is doing it this time, but watching a few performances before you are on won't hurt any."

"All right, if you think I should," I agreed without any enthusiasm. "Just what is it like?"

"OH"—he took a deep breath as though it were too complicated to explain—"it's a formal occasion. The crystal chandeliers are all lighted in the main reception hall, and everybody wears his most glittering best cothes. The Exalted Ruler stands on the lowest wide step of the grand staircase, so he is on a slightly railed dais, and all the newcomers are introduced to him, one at a time. Then he makes a short welcoming speech and it's over."

"I'm sure it's an interesting bit," I conceded. "But from

your tone of voice, I think you've left out some tricky details."

"Now why would I do that?" he asked solemnly. Changing swiftly to a more frivolous mood, he added, "It just makes me feel so good to know that every one of those self-important celebrities has to crawl when he comes to Trysis!"

Fasial could see that I was not especially impressed. He looked at me for a long minute. "Obviously you've never had any experience with the Privileged Few," he jeered with a diabolical grimace. "They're used to accepting plenty of service and giving plenty of orders—especially giving out orders."

I smiled. Who could resist his capers. "Thanks for thinking of me, pal. I'll be sure to watch. Do you want me to take notes, too?"

"Well, all right!" he retorted. Then added, "Take notes if you like. . . ."

Flashing his most charming smile, he made his second exit. "See you at the party," he called lightly.

That night after the last guest had departed, I locked my door and walked slowly through my private domain. This was home!

I stretched out on my bed, turned out the light and gazed at the heavens through the skylight window. Here was the most wonderful thing I could imagine: to have a view of the wheeling stars all night long as I lay abed.

I bent my arms above my head as I tried locating the summer constellations that I knew. The brilliantly white Vega was far to the west, so the hour must have been very late. And just as I was about to drop off to sleep, I heard the faint sound of a jet as it screamed across the heavens from west to east.

IV

THE LAST MEMBERS of the new class trailed in to Trysis sometime the next day and I got my first taste of how easily the dilettante creatures lost their way from one building to another, and carelessly turned up in places they had no business to be.

I spent more than an hour fruitlessly hunting for an international celebrity wearing a gold sari. About ready to give up, I leaned against a retaining wall out beyond the tennis courts. As I lit a cigarette, I caught a gleam of an embroidered veil hanging on a low bush. An occasional movement of green slippers, farther along the hedge, gave me some clue to her whereabouts. So I relaxed, and waited casually for developments. (My orders said nothing about censoring their amusement.)

Soon, Melete emerged from a nearby building and stopped. "What brings you this far from the square?" she inquired, as she inhaled a mouthful of smoke from my cigarette. I could have asked her the same question, but knew she made it her business to turn up wherever I was.

Smiling down at her, I nodded toward the strand of glimmering sari caught on the prickery bush. "The rani was missing after breakfast assembly and Fasiel suggested that I take this side of the grounds to look for her."

Melete nodded. A slow smile crossed her face as she considered the situation. After another puff, she handed back my cigarette, walked over to the hedge and kicked at one of the hidden figures.

"Your number, ingrate," she spat coldly, as the gardener rose guiltily to his feet. "Turn in your tags and get off the grounds within the hour. That's an order!"

The second she stopped speaking, she dismissed him as though he had never existed. Shaking and stuttering, he backed away from her with a hopelessly stricken look.

Transferring her attention to the unperturbed sybarite, who was inspecting her bedraggled scarf with obvious unconcern for any of us, Melete smiled sweetly and explained, "His excellency, the leader of Trysis, insists that his gardeners expend all their energy on his lawns and gardens."

Then, brushing her fingertips together fastidiously, she let a note of scorn creep into her voice. "So *do* try to confine your amorous attentions to our gardeners during their free time."

"Why, you snippy little—" shrilled the titled harpy, belatedly realizing that she had been insulted by an expert. She sprang forward furiously with fingers clawing in true feline spirit, but Melete coolly grabbed one wrist with a basic judo hold and flipped her back into the bushes. Unsubdued, she rolled to her feet in one catlike turn and came raging back into the fray.

Melete, however, had no intention of waiting around for

trouble to catch her. She ran behind me, flung her arms around my waist, laughing and screaming in mock terror, "Save me, save me!"

The rani was not so blinded by rage that she would try clawing both of us. Seeing that she was outnumbered, she tossed her head disdainfully and stalked off toward the square, still mouthing unprintable imprecations.

Melete and I finished our cigarette, then strolled slowly in the same direction.

It was a beautiful day. Glancing up, I remarked, "Look, chériel! There is the striped canopy over the balcony of the penthouse. From this distance it looks like a bright dream."

Melte nodded. "You know, scuttlebutt has it that the penthouse is something special—like paradise." She laughed companionably. "No paying guest is ever allowed to go up there. And the stories that have circulated about it have made it a Shangri-la with more built-in delights than all the heavens of six oriental religions."

As we neared the square, the huge palace cut off our view of the silken awning, gleaming in the sun. I turned to my beloved. "Will you be taking part in the ceremony tomorrow?" I asked.

"Sure will," she assured me. "I teased Ormand into letting me accompany you while you watch it."

The Welcoming Ceremony, next day, looked smooth and ingratiatingly polite from behind the tapestry screen where we watched it. The beautifully dressed participants stood in a semicircle and politely took turns approaching the dais where Ahmid stood.

But one month later, when I stood on the dais, I found out there were details I had missed.

The third floor balcony was dim. From this vantage point, I could look down on the shifting kaleidoscope of brilliant colors as the assembled guests milled about the huge reception room. In the middle of the floor a group of dancers whirled through the endless intricacies of a cancho, and as many more collected in shifting groups to chatter and gossip, while the waiters threaded their way through the concourse with trays of tidbits and multicolored drinks.

The crystal chandeliers, hanging from the ceiling like long, glittering stalactites each lighted by hundreds of candles, added their bit of magic to the scene as I squinted my eyes

and produced rainbows for the dancers to glide through.

Fasial shifted from one foot to the other with bored indifference as he stood at my elbow. "Shall we go, *Excellency?*"

This was it. I took a deep breath and nodded. A wave of festive gaiety rose to engulf us, as my companion signaled the attendant to open the doors.

I caught our mirrored reflection out of the corner of my eye as we crossed the corridor together: two tall young men, shoulder to shoulder, in identical raiment. The decorations across my chest were more elaborate, but Fasial wore an air of sated elegance and savoir faire I could never hope to equal.

"Is there anything I should know about these people?" I asked huskily, with a belated attack of stage fright creeping up.

"They are just beginners," he soothed. "The idea is that you represent Trysis; let them thank you for their chance to come here."

I nodded. I knew all that from rehearsals.

"I can't see why a regular handshake wouldn't do just as well as this foot kissing ritual," I muttered, as we started down the first regal flight of stairs. "It would be more to my liking."

We had been over this ground before and Fasial refused to quibble about this detail now. "Ah so, *Excellency?*" he intoned glibly.

I understood. It was too late to sift out trivia. I reached out blindly for the towel he carried across his arm. My hands were slippery with perspiration. As I hesitated on the landing, he dabbed carefully across my face once more and smiled reassuringly. "Remember, these supplicants can shake hands with royalty any time, but royalty can only smile at them. You turn back the years.

"Besides," he added with lofty unconcern, "it's better for their morale if they crawl a bit." And he dropped the towel behind a handy chair as we passed.

We descended the last swooping curve of shallow stairs. The milling throng turned their attention to us as the orchestra ceased playing midway through an arpeggio flourish. The echoes still hung on the air as I descended one more step.

"That's far enough, Rodney old boy," prompted Fasial in an undertone, from his position one pace behind my left shoulder. "Let them come to you."

All people resemble a few general types. For a few minutes I tried picking out the ones whose histories I had scanned in their bulky dossiers in the official files Ormand kept in his office.

There was a duchess from southern France, an arrogantly assured baroness from central Europe, a British lord, a famous actress, a notorious beauty, and a cold-eyed despot from the Council of California, standing to one side with the co-realtor of the Denver Domain.

As the trumpets picked up the softly questing echoes of distant hunting horns, and increased the tempo to the blaring climax of Mardin's *Processional Triumphant*, Ormand strutted forward slowly from a side door.

Being garbed all in black didn't decrease his size, but gave emphasis to his regal presence. With consummate showmanship, he waited until the petitioners were all assembled, and the orchestra and audience had achieved absolute silence. Then he turned slowly to face me and bowed with dedicated devotion.

"We are honored by your presence, Excellency!"

He straightened up and gestured expansively toward the waiting group. "With your gracious permission, I present the new applicants who would thank you for your beneficent contribution to humanity."

He didn't need a response. He could have played the whole scene as a monologue. When it came to acting, every one of the clan was an accomplished performer. Ormand's *métier* was dignity with authority.

He waved forth a fat, untidy dowager, the epitome of all self-indulgent women who smile into their mirrors and convince themselves they look ten years younger than their contemporaries, and pop a few extra bonbons into their mouths to ease their disquietude. When he included her exact age in his introduction, she tittered playfully in a high girlish voice and flatly claimed she was at least ten years younger.

Then, clutching my wrist, she began a long whining recital of her most pressing afflictions and imaginary troubles. I had the nightmarish feeling that I might never get my arm back for my own use. This prattling creature seemed determined to wring it off at the wrist, while she smothered me with her pettiness. I could only look blankly at Ormand.

"Your pardon, Excellency," he grunted. "I swear I instructed this miserable creature, but she is incorrigible."

He forcibly separated the gushy woman from my arm,

but she was still trying to explain her problems as he took a firm grip on her elbow and propelled her back to the circle.

"So much for handshaking, eh, Excellency?" hissed Fasial derisively, from behind my shoulder.

In his best master of ceremonies voice Ormand was introducing another novice. A thin, sallow woman who might have stepped straight out of a Spanish painting came forward, curtsied low, touched the tips of my fingers that I reached out to her, and retreated without a sound.

"That one has been sending us application blanks for years," murmured Fasial disdainfully. "I doubt Trysis can help much there."

I felt sorry for her. She *was* a negative sort of person, but Ormand need not have mentioned aloud that a last minute cancellation had provided the only opportunity she would ever get to spend a few weeks here at Trysis.

I took a deep breath and stepped back a step. This bit was utterly tedious. I was obviously a figurehead: I had done little but stand quietly in one spot. "Just appear elegantly at ease," they had coached me. "Look slightly remote; don't stare directly at anyone. We'll carry the action until you get the feeling of the scene." But at this point, I didn't feel anything.

An actress, too talented to bother with mere beauty, came forward next.

"Constance D'Mallory has charmed two generations of theatergoers. We, of course, know her as Martha Hawgan," continued Ormand.

She spoke with the deep inflections of a great actress as she paused and remarked, "I'm aware of my good fortune, Ormand. I play this stage every six years if I can afford it." The smile that had charmed so many thousands was used to good advantage here.

Ormand was as amused as the rest of us, as she turned to me. "May I say that the essence has done wonders for Your Excellency since I was here last?"

She did not touch my hand; she melted to the floor and touched her forehead to the carpet and rose smoothly without a trace of self-consciousness. Obviously she had been here before and knew the ritual.

"Tsk, tsk! Poor Martha," said Fasial in mock sympathy. "She's become too smart for her own good. Ormand will never renew her application again. Her swaggering refer-

ences about coming here every six years almost got bounced out last time."

But no one was paying any attention to Martha's fine performance. Ormand had just summoned a gorgeous Eurasian. Her brocade gown, fitted like a second skin, was reembroidered with rubies and amethysts and twinkled as she moved. Every male in the room stood straighter and breathed deeper as she undulated toward the dais.

"Annessa Dellarti, whose patron is Maximilian Hans Korm is next."

Annessa had been properly instructed. She had measured off ten inches from my foot with her almond-shaped eyes, touched her forehead to the spot, and stepped back two steps before I had recovered from the shock of hearing Korm's name mentioned.

For a long second I was back in Metropolis. None of these wealthy ones who bowed so graciously today would have wasted a second glance on me in Metropolis; not even if any of them had run over me with their motor cars.

I took a casual step backward and murmured, "May I *should* let them kiss my foot. As you say, the discipline is good for their morale."

"Hear! Hear!" mocked my partner, sotto voce.

I stepped forward again and locked my hands behind my back. Facial bent over and inspected the carpet with intense concentration until he could gain control of his facial muscles again, while Ormand scowled blackly at both of us.

A tall blonde girl, who must have had some viking ancestors, came forward hesitantly, as Ormand made snippish remarks about her husbands and the three billion credits she had inherited. His irony was lost on the garishly dressed widow whose two strings of emeralds were eclipsed only by the five diamond bracelets jangling on her left wrist.

"We shall try to comfort Bonita Jones-Minter-Chesterfield Parkington, here at Trysis, poor girl, until she regains an interest in life again."

This one must have lived a very sheltered life. Even with four husbands she might not have had to make any decisions for herself until now, but such naïveté should never have been allowed to wander loose in a labyrinth like Trysis. Even the two wolves from the California Combine, who had stood aloofly along the wall, glanced up and made a mental note of her passing.

I could still remember how bewildered I had felt when

I first came here, and I'd had the friendly guidance of all the crew who lived here to show me the ropes.

The emerald-bedecked widow was, by now, helplessly embarrassed with stage fright in the middle of the arena while the guests and Ormand stood silently by, gloating over her confusion.

Standing there on the dais, I was beginning to perceive the purpose of this ceremony. Ormand was an expert at choosing the one personal weakness that could make his victims squirm with embarrassment, as he held their hidden secrets up to public ridicule. And woe to anyone who tried to struggle against their fate.

It was true! People *would* pay any price for a few extra years of youth, and the price Ormand was charging was so exorbitant it made my skin crawl.

Obviously, the actress Martha Hawgan was the only one who had figured out that the best way to counteract this was by sheer indifference to his bite. Just rise above it.

I decided I could give Bonita Jones-Minter-Whatever-Else some bit of help, so I tried for an expression of boredom and satiety as I turned to Ormand.

"Do you find this amusing, my friend?" I inquired softly, raising my eyebrows in subtle reproof.

"Amusing?" inquired Ormand carefully. (This interruption was not in the script.) Then he shrugged. "Illuminating, certainly," he snapped. "And educational no end!"

He breathed thickly through his nose much as a pawing bull begins his raging frenzy, as I gazed reprovingly down at him. Now that I had diverted his attention from his embarrassed victim, I must extricate myself from his fast flaring fury and do it right here on stage!

"Well, I feel the need of a cigarette, if you can oblige me," I suggested pleasantly.

"A cigarette?" A mere detail. He reached for his case and found it missing, then looked pointedly at Fasial, who was standing several paces away where I had left him.

He, in turn, began to search through his sleeves and pat his cummerbund, while in the background the efficient Juliette picked up her case from a nearby table and slapped it smartly into his hand.

Fasial took his time, inspected it to be sure there were cigarettes inside, closed it again, then passed it on to Ormand who was now only faintly annoyed by the unexpected interruption. He opened the case and offered it to me with a flourish.

"Our estimable Juliette has a discriminating taste in cigarettes, Excellency," he recommended unctuously.

"Indeed she has," I agreed, as I selected a long green tube with a gold tip and a monogrammed crest.

No one worked up a spontaneous ceremony with more enthusiasm than Fiasal. His performances all had dash and élan: the glamour boy of the group. He was waiting with an elaborate lighter, which he passed on to Ormand who once again made a ceremony of offering me a light. Then Fiasal stood alertly at my elbow with a silver tray and caught each flicked bit of ash.

Under cover of this byplay, the confused Bonita backed slowly to the anonymity of the semicircle, where Mart Hawgan offered her a clean handkerchief and the comfort of her shoulder.

I smoked nonchalantly while innumerable pairs of eyes watched my slightest move. This was my first taste of hazing up an act and I was enjoying it. The co-realtor from the Denver Domain glared at me with cold-eyed fury as I frittered away as much time as I could.

Finally, I discarded the long cigarette in the ashtray at my elbow, smiled pleasantly at the audience, and nodded graciously to Ormand to continue the presentation. Neither he nor Fiasal had suggested by the blink of an eye or a impatient gesture that I speed up my dawdling performance.

A few more neophytes were introduced; then Ormand hesitated, looked around inquiringly at the dozen applicants still waiting to come forward, and pointed to the despotic one from California. With a sweep of his arm, he waved him forward.

The dictator bestirred himself leisurely as Ormand wheeled around to me and proclaimed, "Aha, Excellency, I give you Pierpont Lantimosyl!"

His Patrician Optimate, the Senior Councillor of California had been a kingpin long enough to become accustomed to the homage paid to him, and he became petulantly irritated if the bowing adoration was deliberately omitted. But to have his name mispronounced was heaping insult on injury. He stalked up to Ormand and glared.

"Lantimo-dee," he snapped. "Remember to pronounce Lantimodee, Bey!" With the same clipped impatience he used to order his lackeys around, in his own domain, he snarled, "I've come prepared to pay whatever outrageous fees you charge for three weeks' rest here, but no charade. My personal physician recommended your spa. But just k

get about *me* bowing and scraping—I'll have no part of such stupidities!"

Ormand was not visibly impressed. "I'm not responsible for the vagaries of your quack shaman, Cantiloupy," he replied, looking him in the eye. "You invited yourself here; invite yourself elsewhere."

"I know of no other resort that sells youth as you do," retorted the red-faced despot stiffly.

"Well, I know of no other way to sell it," replied Ormand, spreading his hands in a careless gesture of dismissal. "We do things just one way here at Trysis. We've run quite a few classes and by now we know exactly how to conduct them for the best interests of all concerned.

"If you care to leave within the hour and take all your luggage with you, we'll refund your money and forget the whole deal. Voila! It never happened. By tomorrow," he threatened more sharply, "we will no longer refund a cent. We may throw you out, but you'll have to walk out and thumb a ride to the nearest crossroads."

They stood glaring at each other.

Ormand pushed out his lower lip in a grimace of distaste, deliberately turned his back and slowly paced three or four steps away from his victim, to give him a moment to consider how little we wanted his presence or his money. Then, as he turned back, he simulated a look of mild surprise that he found the senior councillor still standing there, and his soft hiss was more chillingly effective than a loud bellow. "Well, move boy, move! Crawl or get out! And do it fast!"

And as the arrogant Councillor Lantimode got down on his knees and crawled, Ormand turned to me with a triumphant toss of his head and smiled. "Aha, magnificent! Our Mr. Cantiloupy will become an apt pupil once he becomes accustomed to our methods!"

"Indeed so." I applauded. I had stood there and enjoyed the whole scene.

The despot from the Denver Domain followed his partner's example. He got down and crawled. He did not deign to favor us with one word of praise or criticism; one might say he acted like an automaton who did not quite believe his own actions.

And as he came near the dais, I felt the same eerie thrill you can get by letting an unleashed tiger snuffle at your sandal-straps when it is nearing his mealtime!

Ormand brought the presentation to a close without fur-

ther incident. I gazed down at the half-circle of people standing before me. In time I would welcome many classes and they would all blend into my memory; but this was my first group, and as such, they seemed special.

I took one step forward and started speaking slowly. "May you each enjoy the gifts of youth, vitality, and regeneration offered to you. . . ."

The phrases Fasial had coached me with sounded too stilted, but I could think of nothing with which to replace them, so I continued, "This offering of the Gods has been guarded with a singleness of purpose that sacrifices all, at the altar of duty. May you prove worthy. Selah!"

Althea entered a side door as I finished speaking. "I am to guide the beginners' class of pantomime," she explained in her low husky voice. "I await your pleasure, Excellency."

I nodded a dismissal and Ormand waved the group in her direction. He murmured, "We beg your indulgence, Master." And they all bowed and backed out of the room.

As the door slid closed, Fasial stepped to my side and offered me another cigarette. "Magnificent performance, Excellency," he drawled.

"Your timing is extraordinary," agreed Juliette, as she retrieved her cigarettes from Fasial. "And that bit with the cigarette was better than good."

I was elated.

The musicians were leaving the room by a side door and half the lights were already turned out by zealous servants, so there was nothing left for us to do but go back upstairs. Somewhere along there, reaction set in.

"I had no idea playacting could be such hard work," whined as I dragged one foot after the other.

"Oh, you'll get used to it," replied Fasial carelessly. "First time around is hard for everybody, and you really did very well."

After I had peeled off the elaborate uniform I had worn and was waiting for Fasial to reappear from the other dressing room, I walked idly through the entrance hall of the penthouse and noticed the blue tray still standing on the table where Fasial had placed it the first night I had arrived here.

Apparently no one but Ormand and Fasial knew the priceless seeds were hidden there. I had no better place to keep them, so I left them where they were without touching the straw.

That night, as I was watching the stars from my sky

light window, I recalled the time Ormand had first explained the way Trysis was operated. It had seemed as glamorous as a theater play. Now I was beginning to catch a glimpse of the prompter, the banks of lights and the raw side of the scenery, and it was not quite so exotic. What type of person needed the bowing and scraping of his clients the way Ormand fed on it? Obviously he thought of himself as a little tin god.

The late jet screamed shrilly across the heavens, as usual. I shifted my pillow and settled down to sleep, but before I had reached oblivion, another screaming jet came over. It had a different sound. A deeper, more powerfully pulsating undertone than any I had ever heard, and it did not cross the heavens and die out to the east. As I listened, it seemed to come straight over the building and then quit, as though it had landed nearby.

The runways at the helicopter port were far too short for a jet to land on. I puzzled over the sound I had heard until I fell asleep.

The next day I had Ahmid's job of filling out case histories for late arrivals. It was a piddling job that kept me busy in a far corner of the outer office for the whole day; by the time I stood around gossiping with the group, the subject of the odd-sounding jet was snowed under more pressing matters.

With the new classes in full swing, I had no chance at all to go scouting around the 'copter port. We seven who directed the programs were teamed up in various groups of two, three or four and must always be ready, on cue, to maneuver the neophytes' classes from one diversion to the next spectacle. It worked, but no one had any free time for their own pursuits or problems, so I let the question of the odd-sounding jet slide to the back of my mind.

A few nights later I was roused from a deep sleep. It had not been a noise that roused me, of that I was sure. My nerves had contracted, and as I lay there, alert and waiting, a concussion shook my sturdy low house as though it were a deck of cards; another undulation washed back as something rose from the desert flats behind the lush domain of Trysis and flung itself straight out into space. For two seconds the skylight was brighter than day, then faded swiftly to purple, pink, and then gray-black again.

Although a few guests complained the next day that the jets flew much too low across the desert, no team member mentioned the incident and I was not sure I would be smart

to introduce the subject. I did not hear anything like again, although I listened for a long time each night for many weeks.

When Ormand had first explained the three week seminars of exotic rituals the clients of Trysis enjoyed, he had stressed the account from the visitor's point of view. The wasting long hours in devious rituals of dress and parade were true. But I learned that this aura of Trysis was nothing more than a series of diversions, each executed with exquisite timing to keep our "guests" occupied, busy, and amused from the moment they opened their eyes until they dropped pleasantly exhausted, into bed.

The rules, utterly rigid for us, were a series of guide lines which took care of every situation so smoothly that no guest noticed Trysis was run at all; the organization was a model of perfect effortlessness.

For instance, rule Number Fourteen: "Keep smiling in front of our guests," didn't mean an idiot grin at all times; what it did mean was to present a pleasant mien and be agreeable. Number Fifteen took the same principal a little farther. "Whatever crisis arises, or whatever your personal feeling of the moment, do not let our guests be witness to any animosity or squabbling between directors, or between directors and laborers."

I memorized some six hundred rules, and in time they became so automatic I never gave them a conscious thought. But every once in a while I would stop short and wonder why I had been chosen for this spot. Experts from all over the world begged for a chance to work here, and some of them had college degrees and long lists of recommendations that were unbelievably choice.

V

TIME PASSED unremarked at Trysis. In retrospect I can only measure it approximately.

It must have been sometime during the fourth or fifth year that I was there that I overheard an interesting conversation between a superior court judge of the Colorado Combine and the Premier of Texas. They were stretched out on a slab in the steam room.

By accident I had learned of the strange acoustics

the place. I had noticed that Ormand occasionally loitered on the doorstep of the small building. It was a normal thing for him, the owner of the place, to look in to see that all was in order, perchance to stop and rest, or check over a list while standing there. But one day when I stopped there to sort out the messages on my clipboard, I realized why Ormand favored the spot.

The wall was built of hollow tiles, and a peculiarity of their construction had formed a sounding board so that anyone pausing at the door could overhear a muttered conversation at the farthest corner of the room.

As I stepped into the room a voice right at my elbow asked, "Who came in?"

I glanced sharply to my right and then to my left, but the only persons in the room were the two older men half asleep on the massage tables at the farther end of the room.

Another voice answered the first question before I betrayed my discovery. "It's only the new helper . . . it will be all right if he stays over there by the door. He won't be able to hear us from there."

I obliged them by reshuffling my papers busily right there at the doorstep.

"That one wasn't here last time I was here," complained the first voice pettishly.

"No, Frechette was pushing us around for a long time. But he's gone; this one must be his replacement," soothed the other voice. "Are you sure the credits are here?"

"I tell you, I've traced more than five billion just the last few months and it goes right down the drain here. But no sign of it, once it's here!" continued the pettish one.

"Oh, that Ormand Bey is a wily toad," sneered the first voice, as he generously mixed his metaphors. "You don't think he would leave any footprints around if he found a way to divert that much, do you?"

"For God's sake, don't mention any names," hissed the other one piously. "A name on a recording tape is too . . ."

"They couldn't possibly tape this place," replied his companion complacently. "That's why I always like to use this room for conferences."

I stepped over to a shelf and started counting towels. The voices were inaudible from there. A quick check of several other spots proved that the step in front of the doorway was the only place to listen from.

I leaned against the doorway again, as the voices con-

tinued. ". . . from Rio. Then our sleuth in Brazil traced the Rajah's Eye as far as this sinkhole. And that's the last it was ever seen."

"Is the Rajah's Eye that huge emerald that was supposed to have been in the headdress of an idol in Ceylon?"

"It's as big as your fist—I've seen it," explained the other. "I don't care where it came from; it's gone forever, now. The blueprints of that installation on Attu were more important— They're gone, too."

The fragments of conversation meant little to me. My papers slipped out of my hands and slithered across the floor. Before I had collected more than half of them, Ormand had stepped into the room. Coming in from the blinding sunlight, it is possible he did not see my shadowy figure bending over, picking up notes and messages from the dim corners.

When I straightened up, he was just settling himself on the doorstep with a sheaf of documents to study. A confident smile played across his face as he listened to his enemies tell what they knew or suspected about Trysis.

I cannot explain why I felt the two men on the massage tables needed help. They were powerful figures in political circles and they would never lift a finger to help me. This I knew. But to have Ormand sitting there listening to their private conversation seemed sneaky and unfair to me: at least let them know he was nearby.

I did not take time to figure out my line of reasoning, I simply stood up and remarked, "Shall I take your papers back to the office, Ormand? I'm going there right now with these others."

"I'm not through with them," he replied shortly.

Being subtle is not one of my accomplishments; no doubt he could read the expression on my face to guess that I had learned his secret. That I had interrupted a conversation he wanted to hear was enough to rouse his ire; that I would reveal his presence to his enemies was too much!

Whatever tidbit he had hoped to learn was irretrievably lost. The plotters raised their heads and looked around, then glanced questioningly at each other.

"Hand me *your* lists, Dorashi, I will put them with mine," he replied in the honey-tongued manner he used for his listening clients' ears. "These gentlemen have been here in their steam bath long enough. You may start massaging their backs."

"I know nothing of massage," I declined quickly.

"It is time you learned, then," he declared with oily insistence. "I will personally teach you the rudiments of the art. . . ."

"Strip off your clothes, wrap a towel around your middle, and begin on this gentleman. Press with the palm of your hand, so, and lean into the rubbing, so.

A long time later I assisted the two solons into their clothes and they left the sauna without a thank you or even a nod.

I did not get off so easily, however. The steam room must be put to rights with each detail completed under Ormand's critical eye. As a final task, he insisted that I scrub the floor; when I was almost finished he blandly ordered me to do it all over again.

"How would you like to keep right on scrubbing this half acre of tiles, Dorashi?" he taunted. "It is possible, you know. You will not be old by the time you put in fifty years. I can make you work your sore muscles for any length of time it pleases me. . . ."

Then, in a lower growl, he asked, "Just what did those two conniving schemers say?"

"They called you a fat toad," I sparred, with obvious satisfaction. Ormand's crafty heckling had taken its toll and I was angry enough to be defiant.

"They mentioned a cache of valuables . . . I don't know just what. One mentioned a sum of five billion credits that he had traced here but couldn't find."

"Indeed!" mused the lord of Trysis, as I slacked back on my heels. Then he added, "And what do *you* think I did with it?"

"Probably shipped it out on an interplanetary rocket to one of the moons of Jupiter." I shrugged insolently. "Several years ago I heard one stop in the desert. Just because I haven't heard another doesn't mean others haven't stopped here." I was just making a wild guess, but he didn't know that.

"You *are* smart!" he snorted. But his remark was a threat, not a compliment. "I didn't give you credit enough for figuring that one out so fast!"

Then his playful mood vanished. "I will tell you this much, and for free!" he spat menacingly at me. "You had better learn to mind your own business and keep your nose out of things that do not concern you, you lackey! You exercise your talent for snooping—and helping the under-

dogs—and you'll gain nothing but your own destruction, believe me!"

"Is that what happened to Frechette?" I mocked scornfully. "Did he snoop into too much and get his wrist slapped? I've often wondered if he was running away from here, or running for help to some other place. What a pity I knew him for so short a time!"

"It is a pity!" retorted Ormand shortly. "He might have taught you some manners. He knew how to handle impudent varlets better than I do. He had sly sneaky ways of catching up with underlings and keeping them in line. I *do* wish he were here. More than you could know, I do wish it!"

I shrugged. It had been a good try. The muscles across my shoulders ached like a sore tooth. While I was angry, it had been bad enough; as soon as Ormand stopped picking on me, I could feel each pulled muscle and aching bone.

Even at this point I wasn't scared of him. I knew he owned Trysis and I'd seen him make important people grovel, but they had been all too eager to regain a few years of their lives. I was young enough to feel independent. I still thought Ormand had no hold on me; that I could pick up and leave when things grew too unpleasant.

I leaned back on my heels, considering how far a dash through the door might get me; but Ormand must have caught the calculating gleam in my eye. He snapped an order to get back to scrubbing.

I ignored it. One more time across that unyielding tile floor would be too much.

In one quick move, I hefted my scrub brush, threw it at Ormand's head and rushed past him through the doorway.

In my mind there was only a nebulous thought that this was the end of Trysis for me. I had carried it no farther than that, as I started to run in the general direction of the front gate.

I had gained only a few paces along the path when Ormand's shrill whistle alerted the nearby gardeners. At first they ran toward him; but a short barked order at the farther ones turned their attention to me.

My dash for freedom was that short-lived. Two agile helpers made a flying tackle for my feet as others grabbed my arms.

Ormand stood up with blood streaming down his face and whistled piercingly once more. Every flunky within

earshot rose up and converged on the spot where I was still forging ahead slowly with gardeners hanging onto me like Spanish moss. They overcame me by sheer numbers; nor were they gentle. When they were sure I was down, they stomped on me with their heavy boots.

Later, when I regained consciousness, I ached in every spot of my body. If I had thought the scrubbing detail was hard, I knew now that the beating I had absorbed was much worse.

The dark hole that I had been thrown into was damp and cold and not large enough for me to stretch my aching muscles. Somewhere in the melee they had scuffed off the towel I'd been wearing around my waist, and they had not bothered to pick it up and toss it in with me. And the cement slab that covered the slot was unyielding, as I found out when I tried to stand up.

There was nothing to dig in the hard-packed dirt with except my fingers, but I wasn't much interested in escape anyway. It took too much tugging and aching pain just to get myself upright; I slid down the hole to a crouching position again and sagged back into a stupor. Next time I roused up, I was surprised that no one had made any effort to get me out. Much, much later I decided no one was going to bother.

Time is a comparative thing, and I had nothing with which to measure the length of my interment. My stomach had given up calling for food and I didn't even feel very thirsty, although my tongue was thick and dry. I still shivered, but it had become a way of life and I no longer expected to ever become warm again. And light was an abstraction I no longer remembered.

Finally, when two huge jailers slung the concrete slab aside and hauled me out by one arm, I tried to stand up. Squinting with eyes that had become used to the darkness, I raised my bruised hands to my battered face, took a deep breath and passed out.

My jailers splashed me unceremoniously in a shallow tank of water and scrubbed the caked dirt off my body with a rough brush until I came to again, then dragged me down some stone steps into a cell and left me there.

I had already wrapped the single blanket around myself and stretched out on my bunk, when Fasial's shocked voice came fuzzily to my ears.

"They told me it took sixteen gardeners to throw you in the hole, pal. But just what did you prove?"

I tried for a nonchalant "Hi there, boy!" but the unintelligible croak that came out meant nothing. My elegant visitor seemed to blur and float off in a mist, so I finally gave up trying to focus my eyes. It was just easier to sleep.

My jailers had not asked my permission to starve me, nor did they ask me to resume eating. When I showed no interest in their rough fare, they fed it to me by force. A required ration was shoveled into me at each mealtime for two days, then Fasial returned with poltices and ointments and tried patching me into some recognizable condition.

"Melete will have hysterics if she ever sees you like this," he remarked as he daubed some solution on my abraided jaw.

I shrugged.

"Don't be too nonchalant, friend," he admonished. "It's only because little Melete has been throwing her weight around where it counts that you ever got out of that hole alive."

"She shouldn't have bothered," I croaked, wincing as the antiseptic stung my neck.

"My idea, exactly," agreed Fasial in an unconcerned tone of voice. "After all, Ormand is a grizzly bear to cross when he's pleasant, but these days he's biting everybody's head off without any excuse at all. He even squabbled with the class members and sent them all home without any explanation! Turn over and let me daub some of this on your back. . . ."

"Then, when Melete found out you'd been thrown in the hole, she braved his wrath like none of the rest of us would have dared. She lay down on the floor and kicked and screamed. When that had no effect, she stopped eating. Declared she'd starve to death rather than wait around for your funeral.

"She'd go sit in front of Ormand with her big eyes accusing him of every crime in the book and just look at him without a word. That got to him, finally; but don't think he gave in easily."

"No?"

"No! You've got to apologize."

"I won't do it," I declared flatly. "I don't owe him an apology and I won't apologize for anything I've done!"

Fasial sat back in disgust. "That's just about what I expected from you," he sneered. "Just let Melete starve to death and make us all unhappy, while you rot in a

hole to keep your stiff-necked pride all shiny and warm!"

He stood up and left the cell abruptly.

All I could think of was poor little Melete. That she would fight for me against the monster! I couldn't apologize. Crawl to that colossal ego while he gloated in swollen arrogance? Never!

But if Melete starved to death and I died slowly in an unmarked hole, did we gain anything? Either way, Ormand won.

I had two hours of lonely misery to decide I was probably going to do as Ormand wanted, whether I was sorry for my attack on him or not. So, when Fasial returned with a barber and some clothes, I was agreeable to any suggestions he offered.

After the barber had left and we were alone again, Fasial unfolded two sheets of paper. "These are a few notes I've jotted down for your benefit, pal. Memorize most of them. You'll have a long unpleasant time convincing Ormand that you are truly repentant enough to be allowed to associate with us again."

I squinted at the papers he handed to me. "What sort of a worm is this?" I asked.

"You make up your own variations," he replied nonchalantly. "Just be sure they're all miserably abject."

"Why?"

"Oh, Rod, don't tell me you never saw anyone . . . no, I suppose you haven't noticed that Ormand holds court every Second-day morning in the reception hall, and those who sue for favors or forgiveness crawl at his feet?"

"I guess I noticed it in passing," I mumbled. "But I never expected to be in any trouble, so I paid no attention."

"Yeah," agreed Fasial sourly. "Don't we all. Well, you crawl on your belly and when he signals his permission to begin, you call yourself all these unpleasant names and agree that you deserve all the misery you've endured. You don't ask for anything; you simply praise his abilities and virtues with great admiration. Use all these laudatory phrases"—he indicated the other paper—"and be sure to vary the sordid names you call yourself."

"Oh, good!" I scoffed.

"After about five minutes, you kiss his foot and if he kicks you, you are in free! Forgiven! If he just ignores you, you start over from the beginning."

I looked up at Fasial in amazed disgust. "You don't

think I'd actually go through a scene like *that*, do you?" I demanded thickly.

He shrugged. "I'm sure Ormand would rather you stayed stubborn. It doesn't hurt him one bit while you're starving in the hole. Your crawling, however, takes up his time. . . ."

That was the last straw. "I wouldn't kiss his foot in a million years!" I yelled, throwing the crumpled-up papers across the small cell.

"Unfortunately, you don't have a million years to work out your difficulties, friend," replied Fasial stiffly. He was quite miffed that I didn't fall right in with his plans. "A special session has been ordered for your particular case, and you will show up prepared to follow the procedure in one hour!"

In a more friendly tone he added, "You're lucky you don't have to spend many long miserable nights looking forward to this. . . ."

"Oh, sure," I agreed derisively. "I'm the luckiest man alive."

The scene proved to be even worse than I'd imagined. The long formal reception room stretched out forever in length as I entered the door accompanied by several stout jailers. We had made our way up from the dark sub-basement to the luxury of these sun-brightened rooms where an exotically dressed audience lounged to watch my humiliation.

As I limped forward, the group came into focus. With surprise I suddenly recognized the audience as Juliette, Ahmid, Melete. . . . *Melete!*

She rose at the same moment, with her eyes extended in horror; holding her hands tightly across her mouth to keep from screaming, she ran blindly from the room.

I stood there stupidly, trying to think why she had fled. Finally I turned; there was some other reason I was here, but my guards were of no help.

"You may allow the prisoner to come forward," pronounced Ormand unctuously from his seat on the dais.

The two jailers shoved me down and held me firmly on the floor. I struggled. Did they expect me to crawl on my hands and knees for ten yards before I started my apology?

I found out I didn't have to crawl at all. I wriggled on my belly with my nose along the floor.

When I came to Ormand's red sandals, my mind went blank. I could not remember whether to begin by flattering

a fiend, or running myself down with unpleasant epithets. minute point. But I thought it over for a long moment. Then I mumbled a few phrases both ways and repeated them because I could not recall any of the variations Fasial had written out for me. I hashed them all together in one unintelligible jumble and decided I'd had enough.

I made a quick motion with my head past the demon's shining sandals. They remained motionless, an inch in front of my nose. I did not pretend to kiss them; I merely slid my face past and flinched.

I distinctly remember thinking that a kick in the face wasn't my idea of fun. I seemed to be in two places: down here on the floor, groveling half-heartedly; and standing loosely to one side, watching myself.

The sandals had not moved a particle. I glanced up. The command was busily reading a sheaf of reports and seemed to have forgotten I was lying at his feet, so I took a deep breath and added a few choice bits from Fasial's pointers. Still no response.

Suddenly he raised his head and glared at the guards who squatted midway across the room.

"Drag this mumbling idiot out of my sight!" he roared. The guards took his order literally, and grabbed me by an arm and a leg and, bumping me unceremoniously along the floor, they ran out of the room.

The six-fingered minions helped me to an upright position once they had gained the comparative safety of the corner of the building.

"Da hole? Da hole?" asked one guard eagerly.

"No!" replied the other. "*Cell* Hole when Excellency orders! Hole soon enough."

The stone cell, which had seemed pleasantly comfortable after being dragged out of the hole, now felt stifling and dark after spending an hour upstairs in the sunshine.

Only then did I begin to realize that I was in serious trouble. The kind I might not walk away from alive.

I picked up the crumpled ball of paper Fasial had offered me and looked ruefully at the lilting praises and flowery compliments I had not even thought about. The disparaging phrases were flights of fancy of their kind, too. And I began to see what could have been made of these bits.

A long night followed a long day before Fasial appeared again. He stood quietly beside the barred door and looked

at me without speaking; he did not even call the guard to unlock my cell as he had other times.

"Hi, pal." I smiled and came close to the barred cell to enjoy whatever news he could give me, but he just nodded his head.

Finally he took a deep breath and said thinly, "Let Rodney, if you get another chance . . ." He shrugged his shoulders hopelessly and stopped.

I pushed my arms through the bars of my cell as though to stop his retreat. "Listen, Fasial, every part I've ever played here, I went on cold, as actors say. At best you came and gave me some hint of what was expected. Now, tell me, word for word, with inflections and gestures, how to get the scene right. I know it isn't a play," I added dejectedly, "that's the only way I can face it. As though it were my part in a tragedy."

He looked at me dubiously for a long time. Then, assuming a dramatic stance, he suggested, "Well, when I say, 'Gracious lord! Mightiest Archon of the Triad Colonies of Nodal Sagacious prince of Medalian Star-Councils; co-ordinator-of-revels in Flarran's enchanted palaces; regent-supervisor of the galaxian syndicate of Deneb; Hail!' you've got to mean it. Don't just mouth the words!" He gestured with outstretched arms.

"Hey, Faz!" I marveled with open-mouthed admiration. "You really have a gift for it. What do all those names and titles mean?"

"Names and titles?" He blinked his eyes and seemed to realize for the first time what he had actually said. "That's just examples, so you get the idea," he replied, excessively casual and offhand. Then he quickly returned to coaching me again. "Be sure to speak up! Mumbling your best compliments will never get you off the hook," he added sharply. "Remember that you are facing the floor and your voice won't carry without a little lung power behind it. And if you still have that list I wrote out for you, I suggest you memorize it."

He refused to repeat his flowery speech, so I let it pass and figured maybe he *had* just let his over-active imagination run riot.

At any rate, knowing exactly what was ahead of me the next time I was summoned to Ormand's court, I went much better. There was no audience present that I noticed. The lord of Trysis was praised so fervently that he could actually believe I meant it—no honors escaped

ulsome summation. And no worm ever crawled as low as described my own path.

Before I had finished—I still had a few phrases in reserve—Ormand grazed the side of my nose with his sandal.

"Stay out of my sight for a few days, Rodney," he muttered. "Go pet some sense into Melete, will you? She has starved herself to the brink of . . . of . . ." He shuddered.

I nodded and stumbled out of the room.

Juliette was standing just outside the door with a scornfully triumphant smile on her face.

"Welcome back," she remarked laconically. "Our starving Melete is sunning herself on the terrace." She waved toward the pleasant patio, opening out at the end of the corridor.

I followed the direction of her wave, and found Melete ensconced on a chaise lounge with flowers and papers strewn over tables and chairs as though she had entertained visitors here at all hours.

I stopped to kiss her.

"Dahling! I'm *so* glad you're back. Have a grape?" Her mischievous smile was not as depleted from starvation as I had imagined it would be.

"Sure seems good to be back here again," I agreed. I glanced around curiously. There was something peculiar about the situation that eluded me for a few minutes; then I understood.

"Your green eye shadow is very becoming," I mocked as an opening gambit.

"Thank you, dahling," she murmured with a derisive smile.

"It's slightly overdone out here in the bright sunlight," I added slyly. "But I'm sure, slathered on that way, it gives you a becomingly wan appearance indoors."

"Juliette told you!"

"Certainly not," I replied casually. "Your boxes of nibbled candy under the newspapers and the empty soft drink bottles discarded under your chaise would tell anyone."

"Oh Rodney." She laughed as she casually kicked a magazine back over a tray of tidbits. "A girl has to nibble on something to keep up her spirits."

"I'm sure you're right," I agreed. Then, "What's the gimmick?" I inquired as I made myself comfortable on the end of her couch and picked over a tray of cheeses I had rescued from behind a screen.

"Don't say it out loud," cautioned Melete, "but Juliette uses this starvation bit to pressure Ormand into doing some-

thing she wants. . . . She claimed that if I died of station, she'd leave and take Althea with her; she might persuade Fazzy to go along with her. And of course, could order Ahmid to go, too, if she didn't get things way!"

"Oh, of course!" I echoed mockingly.

This was not the story Fasial had told me, or was different angle of the same intrigue?

I sampled a plate of sausages as I contemplated the pressures Ormand withstood from his group of loyal friends helpers.

"I'll bet things sizzle and crackle when Juliette screams a storm," I commented dryly.

"Ormand is the only one who has ever dared to wear one of *her* tantrums. And he just pulls in his neck and waits for the storm to blow over."

Brushing cake crumbs and candy wrappers off from her lap, she held up her arms. "Carry poor little Melete to her couch in the playroom?" She pouted prettily.

"You miserable fraud," I chided, as I picked her up in my arms. "I'll bet you've gained ten pounds while I'm away."

"That's just not possible!" she insisted, tilting her head haughtily. Then she laughed delightedly as she realized that I was teasing her.

As I strode along, I noticed that the square looked fresh and green as the first day I had arrived here in Trysis. "Was it terribly bad, down in the hole, Rodney?" she murmured in an intimate tone that suggested she might be persuaded to make it up to me. She ran her lips along my jaw, nibbling softly.

I grinned down at her. "I'll never try throwing a soft brush at Ormand again, as long as I live. I know that," I promised with conviction.

"My point, exactly," murmured Melete as she snuggled in my arms. "When Juliette and I want something, we want it just as badly as you want whatever you men want; we have smoother ways of getting our own way—and usually get it without any bruises."

"Oh, you're so right!" I told her.

I stopped abruptly. "What's way over in the rumorm room that you need so badly?" I demanded sharply.

"Nothing," replied Melete sweetly. "I just want to get back to my own apartment to change clothes. But it would be too brash to get up and walk away from the party."

where Ormand might catch a glimpse of me. . . . I'm very weak, you know," she reminded me with a limp grin.

Then, as I made a gesture of dropping her, she screamed as vivaciously as ever. "I'll walk from the playroom, you brute!"

It should be stated to Ormand's credit that he never alluded to the episode again. He treated me with the same regard that he had before the incident of the sauna room began. And I was as favored a member of the clan as ever before. It was I who could not feel quite as friendly toward Ormand for a long time.

The next time I loitered at the steam room doorway, I stayed only a few minutes and kept a close lookout for Ormand.

The rumors from the grapevine—and the sauna was a long tendril on the grapevine—had it that several individuals high in government circles were making a concerted effort to investigate the fortunes stashed away at Trysis.

Too many cogs in the state machine were eager to buy time at this spa for the snoopers to make much progress. But they were trying.

Needless to add, neither the wealthy judge of the Colorado Combine, nor the Premier of Texas, were ever able to make reservations at Trysis again.

VI

WE MUST have worked back into our three-and-one rut. A class of neophytes, eager for some vestige of their lost youth, invaded Trysis for three weeks; then we'd have one week of peace and calm. Three-and-one. There was a monotony to this routine. Even here at fabulous Trysis, one gradually felt it.

When spring rolled around once again, I felt restless and discussed the chances of a break with Ormand. Our whole group was celebrating a free weekend on the penthouse balcony when I brought up the subject. I had expected considerable opposition, so I had marshalled all my arguments in well ordered ranks. But when I suggested a trip, there was so much cooperation, I was overwhelmed.

"Try Hawaii first!" declared Juliette. "It has everything and more!"

"Just visit Kyushu," suggested Fasial. "We'll have to come and tear you away; there's no place like it."

"All I wanted was a week back in Metropolis," I explained in a small voice.

"Oh, don't go back," remonstrated Juliette, much concerned. "Never return to a place you dream of. It's disillusioning. Believe me. I speak from experience."

"She's telling the truth," agreed Fasial. "Save your dreams. Keep them and add to them, but never go back and throw them off."

"As you change, so do your standards," explained Ormand calmly. "But the community will remain the same. And what you look for will not be what you dream of; not what is really there. The Metropolis you knew four or five years ago will not be the same place you seek today. And the harder you hunt, the greater will be your disillusionment."

No doubt they were all eager to share the benefits of their experiences with me, but I was determined.

"If I'm to put down roots and stay here, then I had better kill off the dreams I still have about my old neighborhood in Metropolis," I maintained stoutly. I had never once mentioned Wendy's name since I'd been Trysis. In truth, I had only thought of her lately, in passing.

Ormand nodded in agreement. "If you understand what you are doing," he remarked pompously, "then you won't get hurt." But his smile was as crafty and sly as ever as he added, "Whom will you take with you?"

"Recommend someone," I suggested offhand. I had not expected to take anyone but if a spy must trail along, anyone was as good as another.

"You'll find a traveling companion will be a great help to you," explained Ormand smoothly.

"How about Ahmid?" suggested Juliette. "He's equal to ten of Korm's men, and could out-yell the whole crew if need be."

"Fasial will be too busy here at Trysis to even eat his meals for the next month," commented Ormand, knowing full attraction the two of us had for each other. "Ahmid is a good choice. However," he added diplomatically, "you should feel free to choose whom you wish."

I nodded. I could read the score without having my nose rubbed in it. Ahmid was available and for some obscure reason, Fasial was not.

We turned back to partying as someone flicked the t

to an exotic rhythm and Althea began a slow, sensuous dance.

The first day of my vacation dawned bright and clear. As I ate a sketchy breakfast, Ormand entered my apartment. "I thought I'd better stop in early before you got away," he explained, offering me a choice of three watches.

I recognized them as the same type of two-way radio I had once inspected under Frechette's pillow. At the same moment Fasial dashed in, carrying a large clipboard on one arm.

"Hail and farewell!" he saluted breezily. "Choose the platinum model, if you want my advice, pal. It's the most accurate."

No one would ever find out from Fasial's actions if he were unhappy about being denied a chance to go with me.

"Try to remember to wear this radar device at all times," cautioned Ormand. "We will be able to trace you and bring help, should you need it."

"I lived in Metropolis all my life and never got in any trouble," I pointed out impatiently.

"But you are not the same person you were," replied Ormand enigmatically.

There was nothing else to wait for, as I strapped the watch on my wrist, so we started out for the main square. The Number Five Trysis helicopter buzzed overhead and settled on the lawn as we cut through the hedge and joined the crowd. Ahmid checked the baggage compartment and jumped into the 'copter. I followed him in. It seemed as though everyone who wasn't on duty came to see us off.

The 'copter rose slowly, but once above the trees, it sailed swiftly westward toward the next large city.

Ahmid was certainly not eager to go along with me. He considered it a baby-sitting chore and vindictively planned to sabotage it if he could. It was much later when I learned that his twisted mind figured I had destroyed his friendship with Fasial.

The first few hours I watched him stomping my vacation to shreds, but I was not sure he was doing it on purpose. He made a big fuss at the airport, where the jet waited for the passengers from Trysis. We were that important. He spent an extra forty minutes demanding different accommodations and would not be placated until all the compartments were turned out for his inspection. He chose

one identical to the one reserved for us; then he stayed the bar where he made as much trouble as he could with the huge jet carried us eastward.

Less than two hours later—we could have shared a jet seat with the stewardess and gabbed with the copilots that length of time—we stepped from the jet-descent and were chauffeured to an exclusive hostelry.

The eight room suite at the Plaza Inn reserved for me did not please him either. He enjoyed an uproarious and demanding innumerable changes. By then Korm and his henchmen, had been informed that visitors from Tryst had arrived, and most of them had wives who were eager to meet a celebrity. Soon a receiving line was formed across the lobby. Lesser personalities struggled to maintain their places in a line that stretched far out through the auditorium and back through the dining rooms, and still watch visitors make their entrance.

As might be expected, the hotel manager and all the personnel employed there thought they knew who had arrived. And all the feminine relatives of all the crews decided they had an inside track to an invitation to Trystis too; one single daughter of Eve intended to pass up so ripe an opportunity to regain some of her youth.

Meanwhile the mob milled into the street, held up traffic, trampled each other, tore hair and clothes, and were completely out of hand.

The firemen finally turned their hoses on them, but the ones who were sluiced away only made room for the arrivals. Chaos reigned.

I watched the riot from my vantage point on the balcony, while Ahmid bellowed in three languages for order and quiet. When he resorted to Greek expletives of purple hue of origin, I knew he was out-maneuvered too.

He issued an ultimatum to the manager that we could not descend to the lobby unless order was restored and some semblance of equanimity prevailed.

I returned to our suite and ordered dinner be sent up for both of us; meanwhile things went from bad to worse down in the lobby. Bulletins were relayed to our suite at half-hour intervals by the tele-com operator on the tenth floor, but after the report of the huge mirrors being shattered in the banquet hall, and the panic that resulted when some bubble-head shouted fire, we directed that no more news be relayed to us that night.

The next morning, standing at my window high above

roar of the city, I watched the sun rise above the lake. The morning papers had spread the story of the stampede through the hotel all across the front pages. The rush to idolize the Leader of Trysis was played up and the havoc caused by the mob made lurid headlines. Interviews with the visitors from Trysis were promised for the next edition.

"This was not what I came to Metropolis for," I muttered unhappily as I brushed the papers away in frustration. "I doubt I could roam my old neighborhood now, and stand on a corner for an hour, the way I used to do."

Ahmid glanced up with an idea glimmering across his fat face. "Hey . . . hey . . . ah-h-h . . . wha . . . ?"

I glared at him. This morning it wasn't a bit funny watching him sort through his argots and dialects to express his ideas.

He shrugged his thick shoulders. "Hey boy, zat all you want? We can fix a deal easy, boy. Lemme see the business. . . ."

I whirled around to him. "Don't you start working up another riot for me!" I snarled angrily. "I'll thank you to leave the rest of my vacation strictly alone. *You're* from Trysis. *You* take over the lines of gawking sightseers. If you want adulation, you can get your fill of it till you choke! Just leave me out!"

He was still working on his idea. "Uh, the thing-a-ma-bob worker . . . you know . . . tele-com? How's for her getting us a waiter? We rent the uniform and you get the nice time and no one knows . . . Huh?"

"Well, why ring a hotel flunky in on our plans?" I thought out loud. "The less anyone knows about us, the better. We have plenty of clothes with us; I'll pick out a simple outfit and wear dark glasses until I reach the River-Bay section of town. No one there is interested in Trysis. Most of them have never heard of the place."

Ahmid, perforce, agreed to my plan.

"Hey boy, your two-way?" he prompted as I was about to leave the apartment. I nodded grimly. "The credits," he exclaimed. "Here!"

I shrugged. At Trysis there had been no reason to bother with money, and a ten credit note was more than I'd ever had at one time while I lived here in town. Pressing twice that amount on me, Ahmid followed me to the door anxiously.

"Hey, boy. You know what you said? The gawkers and such? I got lossa time while you're gone. . . . I been Lord

of Trysis lossa times. . . . Long before you ever move in I been Lord of Trysis."

"Be my guest—take all the bows you can get!" I jeered with a royal gesture, the equal of Fasial's most theatrical efforts.

I slipped quietly out of a service exit and caught a Rive Bay bus at the next corner. No one paid me a second glance as I arrived within walking distance of my former home before noon.

This was not the time of day to loiter along the streets, so I traversed the block where I'd lived. I wandered toward the lake front and settled down on the warm sand. There was a good moment to try my radio. After several slips, I contacted Trysis, half the way across the country.

As I tuned it finer a voice crackled forth. "Trysis here, on your nine-one spot. Identify—"

I recognized Fasial's voice. "Hi there, busy bee," I jibbed. "Yeah," he retorted noncommittally. "How goes it?"

"Well, for your private ear, I just found out how to get along with our thick-witted friend. Things should get better from now on."

"Oh?" he queried. "How now?"

"I'm out here on the beach enjoying some solitary fresh air, and he's enduring the stuffy adulation of the press and public back at the Plaza Inn." I snickered. "Did you catch a scanner-report of the shindig our devoted fans pulled off last night?"

"Was that *you*?" he inquired with shocked surprise. "I only glanced at a riot bit, in passing."

"Not me!" I denied. "Our fat friend brought it on by his own actions; but of course I got mixed in before we were through. . . ."

"I figure each to his own fancy, so I'm letting him have the center of the stage today. I'm not hogging any of his glory away from him at all."

"Well," murmured Fasial fervently, "may the gods who look after fools and free-booters have mercy on the reputation of Trysis after that camel driver slices it to bits!"

"I figure Ormand will make him pay for whatever damage he does with a comparable number of units of flesh," I replied flippantly.

"Why, you blood-thirsty little Shylock!" applauded Fasial with amusement.

"I tell you, comrade, it's been revivifying to hear you

voice," I conceded with the languid lack of enthusiasm we all affected that season. "Over and out."

With Fasial's voice still ringing in my ears, it occurred to me that I had mistaken the ultimatum given me last week. Faz *was* needed there at Trysis, with me gone. No doubt Ormand had figured I would take a month off if I asked for a week. Maybe I *could* take a month; there had been no time limit set. But he could never swing that next big group of clients coming in on Sixth-day by himself. Ahmid was pokey-slow and bumbling; the girls were decorative, efficient, and smart, but they couldn't herd clients the way Faz and I made them jump through every hoop on command.

I had just mistaken Ormand's explanation. I'd tell him when I got back again, and everything would be fine.

It proved to be a long, boring afternoon. I was out of the habit of being alone and there was little to watch except the slow waves. The few sunbathers who paraded along the sand all ran to lumpy muscles or bulging obesity; I had not remembered it as being thus. When I could take no more, I shook the sand out of my sandals and left.

I walked slowly along the streets. The small factory where I had worked was several miles from the beach, so I sauntered in that general direction until a bus came rolling along and carried me to the company's front door.

I entered the employment office and asked for the reimbursement manager, well-knowing that unless things had changed more than a little, one man did the hiring and the firing, and signed the paychecks as well.

Things hadn't changed at all. Maisie looked up from her typewriter, scanned the undistinguished tunic I was wearing and said, "We ain't hiring," before I opened my mouth.

"I'm not looking for a job, Maisie," I explained easily. "I'm just collecting the last paycheck I earned here."

She came over to the front counter, her expression a study of puzzled scrutiny. She could not discern the few traits that were left of the meek and lonely starveling who had tried so eagerly to please everyone when he'd worked here before.

"How long ago was it you worked here?" she asked, practicing her guaranteed-to-captivate-any-hero smile. (I had forgotten the jokes we factory workers used to snicker about when Maisie's name was mentioned.)

"Just go get Mr. Corder, Maisie," I replied patiently. "I've

kept my card stapled to my ID for just an occasion such as this."

"Whacha say your name was?" persisted Maisie, letting her curiosity get the best of her.

"The name for you to remember is Corder," I replied with emphasis. "I'll discuss the matter with him."

"He ain't in," she stated flatly.

This wasn't her day, however. Corder had heard his name mentioned as he passed the doorway just then. Mooders who wasted his stenographer's time got short shrift around here. He took a deep breath to blast the wastrel who he strode in, but I got in first.

"Your secretary is wasting my time, Mr. Corder," I complained petulantly. "I've been asking for you, but she doesn't seem to know of your whereabouts."

"Come into my office," invited Corder, obviously mistaking me for an important customer. "We can iron out any difficulties, I'm sure." (Same old oily smile and hand-washing gestures, I noted.)

"This is a small matter of back pay. I have my card here, and there's hardly anything that needs fixing—except my check."

"You sure you worked here . . . ?" demanded Corder suspiciously.

"Five years, as you can tell by my records," I replied unabashed, as I shoved my cards across the counter so he could see them.

Maisie swiftly pulled a large folder out of a file and handed it to her employer. He glanced at it and let his face mirror his annoyance. After all, I had only been a day laborer and I had been gone long enough so they could make a long, drawn-out business of trying to collect on it.

"Well, you should'a let us know if you weren't coming back," hedged the factory owner, confidently expecting to brush me off with this well-used line.

"I was called out of town unexpectedly, and this small matter had to be overlooked," I explained boldly, looking him in the eye.

He stood there. "I suppose you can fill out this deposition blank," he offered with a studied lack of interest in the whole matter. Unconcernedly, he handed me three pages of questions that poked into my private life from the day I was born. I had filled out a similar one when I first came to work here.

I flicked them away with one finger. "Let your secretary

all out your blanks," I snorted contemptuously. "And if you are inferring that I can't pick up my check today, I will call my lawyer and let him sue for charges, back interest, reluctance to pay, and whatever else he can find. And I'm sure SeEVERS and Rockton will be able to find something else!"

"You know how much lawyers like that cost?" slyly inquired Corder, who thought he could tell a bluff when he heard one.

I had mentioned the attorneys who charged the most exorbitant fees in town, but I did know them, even if they were the only ones I knew. Rockton had crawled at my feet not six months ago at Trysis, but I had no intention of mentioning Trysis . . . no one here would believe me. Jan Rockton had been delighted to spend several long hours explaining the interesting niceties of a law practice to me one afternoon.

"SeEVERS is too busy with a case in court," I replied knowingly. "But Jan Rockton would be glad to take my business. It's just the case he needs to show how corrupt this city is becoming. . . ."

Something in my voice convinced my former employer that I knew this lawyer and I could command his services.

"No need to get upset," he compromised blandly, while he backtracked with practiced ease. "Here, I'll make out your check right now."

I accepted the check and signed a receipt. As I left the building, Corder was still not sure if he had been bluffed or not.

But I knew!

I walked slowly along the street as factory workers began to pour out of the buildings. This was a day to remember. I had bearded the fat Mr. Corder and his snippy typist, bested them and walked away from them unscathed, single-handed and alone!

It made me feel eight feet tall. Five years ago I would not even have dared to dream of trying something like this.

Relax! I sneered at myself as though Fasial were looking over my shoulder. *They are really just little people and very unimportant.* . . . Then I forgot Fasial and Corder both, as I neared my old corner.

This was the spot where I had spent many summer evenings just quietly lounging against a building. It was the spot where I had met Frechette. . . .

The breezes were warm and the neighborhood kids played

shrilly along the curbs as I stopped. Across the way bartender wiped his fat red face as he leaned in the doorway during a lull in business, and a newer model of same police jeep came cruising along with Korm's bul checking the neighborhood.

I raised my finger to signal their attention. "Got a mate bud?" I asked, indicating my unlit cigarette.

"Sorry, sir," replied the minion of the law sitting near the curb. "It's against the rules for us to carry cigars while we're on duty. My lighter is in my other clothes."

Slumping to a more comfortable position, he offered conversational tidbit. "We gotta make this trip as quick as we can, and cut back downtown. We're keeping on along there tonight if it kills us."

"Good, good." I commended him in an approving tone then, as long as these officers didn't recognize me as one of the instigators of last night's riot, I inquired, "What was that riot *really* all about?"

"Oh, some foreigner checked in at one of them exclusive hotels," explained the voluble one of the pair. "At the mob got pretty hysterical. . . . We get some peculiar reactions to the high-powered publicity that's spreading around these days."

We all laughed companionably together over the foibles of the gullible public. Then, recalling their tight schedule the officers saluted smartly and zoomed swiftly along the street.

Standing alone, I had time to regain the mood of the long-ago spring evenings. Once more I was one of the haves-nots, despised and semi-starved.

This would be the high point of my day: the moment while I waited for a shy creature named Wendy to pass my corner. I'd hunch my shoulders and whistle a tune, tune softly to myself.

In a few minutes the air would begin to radiate a golden enchantment and the ugly street would shine through a haze of magic which would turn the scraps of newspaper into streamers and banners; the gray tenements would become the battlements of a castle, rising sheer and high from the cobblestone courtyard. There would be just enough time for the grossly fat bartender across the street to become portly innkeeper of London town.

Silvery trumpets would blare faintly in the background to herald the approach of Lady Wendy; she'd smile graciously in my direction. I'd always hoped she knew, without me

having to tell her, that I was Sir Rodney Dorashi, a knight ready to do battle for her favor in many tournaments, and face all the dragons in the kingdom, if that were her pleasure. . . .

The daydream never developed any farther. Some days she was talking to a friend and other days she just hurried on past me.

My imaginary shining silvery armor with plume-crested helmet must not have projected as far as the middle of the sidewalk, for she never noticed how outstanding I was. As she passed, my bubble of knightly drama would burst into rainbow colored fragments and I would be left alone to make my way back to the gray workaday world of Metropolis.

I had been neither elated nor depressed at this turn of events. I'd expected nothing more. I had no brilliant repartee with which to charm her had she stopped to talk with me—I'd simply warmed my lonely soul with this three minute fantasy.

Well, it was all a little silly, I suppose. And it really didn't seem like such a big deal now that I was here.

As a youth I had gulped down the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, and reread them many times. Still . . .

This was the moment to see if it still worked. At least I could laugh about it over a cocktail, or a cup of coffee, with Wendy.

As I slowly lit my own cigarette, I glanced up the street and saw Wendy's slim figure approaching. Her thin summer dress billowed in the breeze as she darted along.

Unconsciously holding my breath, I waited. What was the matter with this street tonight? No castle walls, no bells, no streaming banners or blowing trumpets?

I stepped forward. "Good evening, Wendy," I greeted her pleasantly. "I . . ."

She glanced up, startled, and uttered a blank, "What . . . ?"

At the same instant she caught sight of two urchins playing along the curb. Turning, she grabbed hold of them with the practiced clutch of a mother hawk; she shook them and screamed her frustration at them in a tirade that continued on and on until they disappeared up the street.

In all the years I had dreamed of her, she had never once even noticed that I existed.

I waited for my heart to break. The streets should crumble

to dust; some catastrophic upheaval should mark the occasion. But nothing happened. I didn't even feel badly. The funny aspects of the scene struck me, and I flicked my wrist-radio to Trysis.

"Rod speaking," I told the familiar voice that answered. "Could you play the first six bars of Stanisjanski's *Song Farewell* for me? The echoes of those woodwinds sort of fit the mood of the moment; and the dirge is for the passing of a long-dead dream."

I flicked the switch and the concerned voice of a well-trained technician at Trysis answered.

"Trysis here. The tapes you requested are being threaded. We trust this loss will not cause you too much sorrow."

"Why, no sorrow at all," I assured her. "I was warned ahead of time that I had outgrown this town, but I had to come see for myself. And it's true."

"Hey, call Ahmid and tell him to stand off the crowd as best he can; or stay and enjoy it for the rest of the week. I'm coming home. I'll grab a cab and go out to the airport and take the next jet home. Be seeing you. Over."

I listened to the regal march I had requested. After the first few passages, I flicked the switch back as I tried the melody. Gaining confidence, I whistled louder as I used it for a marching song and added variations, until I had a triumphal paean echoing along the street to accompany me as I stepped out with long strides to cover the miles I must go.

VII

I HAD COVERED a goodly distance without spotting a cruising cab or a tele-com booth where I might summon one when a sleek dark car cruised along, slowed, and stopped at the curb a short distance ahead of me. An elderly man eased himself stiffly out of the passenger seat and the car moved on, but the fellow stood there, waiting for me to come abreast of him.

He held out his hands in a gesture of friendly peacefulness. "I've not had a chance to thank you for helping us, Dorashi," he remarked conversationally.

His professionally trained voice rang no bell in my mind. In the gathering dusk I could not see his face distinctly.

"I'm sure you're made a mistake, sir," I suggested without breaking my stride.

"You're Rodney Dorashi, aren't you?" he inquired cordially, walking beside me.

"Certainly."

"Turn off your wrist-radio, and listen to me, Dorashi," he urged.

"It is off," I replied, holding up my arm so he could see for himself.

He nodded. "Where did you hear of us?" he inquired abruptly.

"Frankly, I don't know who you are," I told him, although I was quite sure he must be someone I had met at Trysis.

"I'm Abel Forman, Premier of Texas. I could have sent one of my lieutenants to contact you, but this is just between you and me, and better done this way. . . . You've been with Ormand Bey's organization for some years now, haven't you?"

I nodded. Whatever he was getting at was still a dark mystery to me and I wasn't giving away any of Ormand's secrets, if I knew any. This was one of the men who had been stretched out in the sauna the day I had thrown a scrub brush at Ormand's head and called down all that misery on myself.

"Where did you hear of our committee, or does Bey have a blueprint of our whole setup?"

I stopped and faced him. "Believe me, I know nothing of any committee of yours," I assured him. "What Ormand dredges up, he keeps in his files and I'm not his confidant." I laughed. "You might say I'm merely an errand boy. I come when he yells for me, and go where he orders me. . . ."

"Oh, come," he retorted skeptically. "You were there on stage, offering that sly Fasial a cigarette and holding an ash tray for him, when we all bowed down to him the last time I visited Trysis. Surely you know what goes on."

I was more than passingly proud of that bit of stage business I'd thought up, and equally elated that the group had kept it in their routines. But that was no concern of his. "Oh, I know the rituals by heart," I admitted loftily, "but that doesn't admit me to any private councils to make plans for the future."

We walked along silently for a while. As we crossed through a small park I noticed how dark the night had become. The Premier's car came cruising along the curb as we

emerged from the thick shrubbery at the next corner. But he waved it away.

"My bodyguards get nervous the minute I'm out of their sight," he explained with a deprecating laugh, then reverted to his main theme.

"Look Dorashi. You did us a favor and we'd like to repay you. Better than that, we'd like to know that you're on our side."

This crafty character must think I had been trying to play both sides against the middle, that day when I had massaged his back at Ormand's command.

"We'll make it worth your while. Don't take any risks and never send us any messages. Just keep your eyes open and remember who visits Trysis. We'll find a way to contact you there. Sooner or later one of our agents will get through to take a three week cure. . . ."

I shook my head. "I'm not good at intrigue. You would do better to find yourself another conspirator."

"Are you any good at regimentation?" he inquired sharply. "On the receiving end, of course! Do you know anything about being beaten into communes of slaves?"

His voice took on the spellbinding tone of a rabble-rouser. "We're so close to a new regime of horror, it isn't funny, my boy. Anything you've experienced under Korm's rule of violence would be just playacting compared to the next wave of corruption!"

He walked along beside me waiting for my answer, but I had nothing to say. I was no longer the simple youngster I'd been when I lived here in Metropolis, but I was unsuspecting by nature, and deception was not my line.

"Where's your sense of pride, your responsibility as a citizen?" he heckled.

"I think it was squashed under Korm's heel." I sneered. "Years ago."

"I'm not asking you to identify yourself with any patriotic group, out to save the world." He hedged imperceptibly then he tried biting ridicule: "You can still sleep snugly in your silken sheets there at Trysis, and enjoy all the exotic pleasures their decadent minds can conceive for your befuddlement! All we ask is a list of visitors who show up at Trysis, but do not come for the cure."

Ormand had once shrugged off Forman's oratory as "demagogue braying in the wind," and we had laughed our agreement. So I turned to him derisively and challenged. "Who are you saving us from, mighty one? What fate of the

world are you turning back single-handed? And what do you get out of all this?"

He shrugged. "You aren't the first one who couldn't see beyond their own small concerns. If I knew all the answers I wouldn't have to walk through these dark streets at night and beg for the cooperation you could so easily pass along to us. But I tell you Ormand Bey has just too perfect a setup there. He can conceal his visitors' comings and goings, and chose his clients at his pleasure. . . . There's a sinkhole there! A spot to brew a devil's mixture and drag down this whole continent and whatever else he can.

"He's too interested in state secrets; he has agents stationed in every section of the world who find out the secrets of our resources and defense. . . ."

I laughed disparagingly. "Who are all these secret agents? I've never seen any! Fasial and I are run ragged just keeping up with the rejuvenation routines. Ahmid is fat, stupid, and there are no others."

As I spoke, I remembered the reason Fasial had not been able to take this vacation with me. Too busy! Then I remembered that was not so. Well, other times and other excuses came to mind. The girls did travel considerably. They were irresistible and could collect whatever information Ormand required.

I slowed my pace as I considered the situation and Abel Forman was clever enough to pace quietly along while I pondered.

"I don't know," I admitted hesitantly. "There are some things you say that may be true. . . . Let me think it over. When you send a client to Trysis, let the password be *Conquest*, but do not expect too much."

We strode silently along until his car edged near the curb once more. I had no way of knowing if he were satisfied with this tenuous alliance or if he would use other methods to force my cooperation.

He stopped suddenly, and shook my hand. "Conquest it is!" exulted the Premier of Texas. He leaped into the tonneau of his limousine and was borne swiftly away into the darkness.

I never saw him again.

Back at Trysis I watched for strange visitors, but the wealthy, titled, and powerful guests were all interested in rejuvenation. As much as I could find out, no one had any plans for conquest here at Trysis.

If Ormand kept a sinkhole where he used illegal information, I never found it. I even pried through his files. A occasions presented themselves, I picked up rolls of tape and spirited them to my apartment and ran them at my leisure; I listened to a fantastic amount of ribald and low immorality. The most respected leaders of our gentle communities had their moments, apparently. This was excellent material for blackmail, but I found nothing pointing to conspiracy or intrigue against the government.

For three or four sessions nothing happened. No one murmured "Conquest" into my ear. Finally I decided Abel Forman had changed his plans or else he was giving me a few seasons to collect some evidence. Or it might take some time to find the right character to gain entry to Trysis. Reservations often ran several years ahead of admissions. I relaxed.

This was the season Ormand completed his new suite on the second square and we had room for twenty more guests each session. Larger classes meant a terrific amount of extra work for each of us. Juliette finally complained that she, for one, would burn down the new buildings unless something were done about the extra work load; so Ormand delegated the routine action to a dozen technicians who were familiar with the schedules.

This meant that Melete and Althea and I must keep an eye on them and be ready to cover their mistakes or prompt them when they faltered, but things moved back into a smoother, if wider, rut.

Trouble came unannounced.

The first three days of a new class passed without incident. Suddenly everybody seemed to notice that Ormand was paying a lot of extra attention to one quiet guest. She had spent her time, unobtrusively busy with her knitting, sitting out on the clubhouse terrace while the introductory pecking rite was consummated.

Pecking-rite? Every group of strangers must first decide who runs the group, who is second in command and so on down the line. A hierarchy is formed within two days, sometimes within two hours here at Trysis. It's invisible to outsiders but adhered to by the class; and it is not always just a feminine pursuit. Fasial pointed it out to me, else I would never have understood it at all.

The first time I noticed this Mrs. Spard was the morning I found Ormand sitting out on the terrace absorbed in making small talk with her. She was calmly knitting, the

ripping out her dropped stitches as she answered Ormand's questions, but not overly flustered by the unusual honor bestowed upon her. Ormand, on the other hand, was almost blushing. His wide face was painfully pink, but her cool conversation must have had some unusual attraction for him. He was obviously enamored with the woman.

I was simply surprised that Ormand would waste the good morning hours in flighty chitchat. Normally he spent all the first week of a new class concentrating on the myriad variations of each group and meshing our various schedules.

He was at her side during luncheon and afterward he took fifteen minutes to excuse himself for an hour of necessary business and concentrated work.

Other guests sat in tittering groups gossiping about Ormand's sudden fall from the lordly pinnacle of superiority which he'd always maintained. And around every corner, curious biddies waylaid me to suggest what this nondescript widow had that attracted the Master of Trysis. I could only shrug my shoulders and claim I had not noticed anything unusual.

By the end of the week, Ormand was obviously smitten and followed the lady of his choice around the grounds, or accompanied her to whatever ritual her schedule called for.

I caught Juliette and Althea laughing together. Althea was mocking Mrs. Spard's serene composure with exaggerated posturing and grimaces. Juliette stood there with a sneering smile on her face, encouraging the act; only her furious grip on her cigarette revealed her concern. When I came around the corner, they asked me what I thought of Mrs. Spard as the future power behind the throne here at Trysis. Their speedy conclusions that Ormand would marry this nobody shook me considerably. I suggested that Ormand might just need an occasional change of conversation, but my mild answer was received with hoots of derision and scorn.

Mrs. Spard, of course, had no more free time to knit quietly on the terrace; every paying guest gushed with friendly curiosity and those who could not find any excuses to chat with her sat watching her every move.

As the three week session drew to a close, I looked forward to the Farewell Ball with more than usual eagerness. This final gala was a regular event, something sparkling by which each guest would remember fabulous Trysis. To me it meant the approach of a little peace and quiet. And I needed it.

Ormand usually led off the formal Grand March with Juliette on his arm; this evening he elected the effervescent Mrs. Spard for that honor. They made a pleasant-looking couple, and Juliette concealed her feelings beautifully, of course; it was just because Juliette and Ormand had always complimented each other's virtuosity so perfectly that this seemed a second-rate performance to me.

Ormand talked and laughed with sustained interest as they danced. One might say he ignored the rest of the guests almost completely. This last party was not the end of the world, nor need it be the last he saw of the dazzling widow, if he chose. And I wondered what he planned along that line.

Suddenly he faltered, stepped on her toe and almost stumbled. With abject apologies, he tried again, but trod on her other foot. I was amazed. Ormand, although he was huge, was an agile dancer with considerable ability. Juliette had never suffered a bruised toe as long as I could remember.

I looked up and caught her eye across the floor. She was startled, too, but seemed to gain some clue to her problem as she watched them. She smiled with satisfaction.

By this time Mrs. Spard was showing Ormand how the certain step should have been done and he, who could improvise circles around anyone there, stood in concentrated study and nodded agreement to her instructions. In time they finally gave up and strolled toward the buffet set up along the loggia, and the party ground along without them to the last festive bit.

The next morning the guests, elated with their renewed zest, milled around the central assembly hall as usual on Departure Day, exchanging addresses and promises to write which they never kept. Sometimes it seemed that when the clan was most worn down the guests spent hours just bumbling around, buying rounds of farewell champagne cocktails and repeating their goodbyes, but making no move to leave.

Mrs. Spard stood a little to one side of the melee as I crossed over to the club bulletin board, to clear off some of the accumulation of posted notices. She called to me, although she had a last message to give me, so I dropped the outdated posters in the waste basket under the bar and made my way to her side.

Instead of the proffered tip—which many sought to use

as goodwill toward another vacation here—she murmured, "Conquest!"

I was surprised. More than that, I was shocked. "At *this* moment, Mrs. Spard?" I admonished, reprovingly. "Actually, there is nothing," I hissed as I bent over her luggage. Then in a courteous voice I added, "If you feel that you have lost a valuable piece of luggage, Mrs. Spard, we will be glad to replace it, of course." And at that moment Ormand came up to us and interrupted our conversation.

I had caught a glimpse of him over the lady's shoulder as he approached; all he heard was my concerned remark about her luggage, as I intended.

Equally alert Mrs. Spard picked up her cue and described a small piece of hand luggage to Ormand. I stood right there listening, in case he had an idea, until he pointedly suggested that he would take care of the missing bit. I was free to leave, on legs that were trembling so badly I could hardly walk away.

If she were from Abel Forman, I was caught between two forces that could crush me. And they would, too!

I had a week of vacation to regain my composure, then another gathering of guests. And among the group was the radiantly assured Mrs. Spard!

It was a continuation of the last session. Ormand smiled and danced attendance on Mrs. Spard's slightest wish. Juliette, who had figured she knew the answer, was a study of surprised despair—or despairing surprise. And I wondered what Ormand read from *my* desperate expression.

Mrs. Spard, on the other hand, was beginning to blossom under Ormand's loving attentions, but her wishes were not so easily fulfilled as before; and her criticism of the service was apt to be a trifle tart and unpleasant.

Ormand offered her gifts of jewels. No doubt they were too lavish for a gently-cultured lady to accept at that stage of the courtship. She admired them with a great show of appreciation, and refused them with reluctance, her awakened avarice barely concealed by a gracious smile. Meanwhile, Ormand showered her with small casual gifts and appointed extra servants to care for her slightest wish.

She exchanged her subdued clothes for a fabulous wardrobe of flashy gowns, and her nightly entrances on Ormand's arm were a feature of that session. She was becoming a ravishingly beautiful woman, but her powers were going to her head.

Ormand seemed not to see the times she flirted with the powerful Overlord of Montana, or smiled irresistibly at the wealthy playboys who readily made assignations in various discrete spots.

One day, as I was sifting names through the files in Ormand's office, Juliette wandered quietly through the room and stopped in the doorway of Ormand's private sanctum.

"Greetings, Excellency," she addressed him tentatively. "Do you have a free moment?"

"I'm always free to you, diva," he purred. "Come in. I begin to think these larger classes *are* too much trouble for all we gain, just as you said."

Juliette shrugged and leaned against the doorway. "Don't try to sluff me off with flattery, Ormand," she replied evenly. "Just what do you figure you're doing, breaking all the rules we made so carefully for guide lines to success?"

She got only an amused laugh from Ormand for her trouble.

"Do you expect to invite her to every session?" she inquired with a horrified hiss.

"Why not?" asked the lord of Trysis arrogantly. This one did not give an accounting of his actions to anyone.

"Well, she'll be three years old in five more sessions," replied Juliette cuttingly.

"Why, Ju-li-ette!" exclaimed Ormand with slow, amused reproof in his voice. "Do you know me so little? You *do* think I can't see beyond the end of my nose, do you not?"

A long silence ensued. They must have stared at each other with dawning comprehension for long minutes. Hidden down among the files, I realized Ormand knew Mrs. Spard was a spy from Abel Forman's camp, and I began to feel the flutterings of panic deep in my middle.

They must have suddenly realized that I was working within hearing distance of their voices. Ormand called to me in the affable tone of voice he used when he spoke to those he considered his equals: Juliette and Fasial. "Are you alone, Rodney?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied, knowing better than to presume on his pleasure.

"What do you think of our ineffable guest?" he inquired suavely.

"Do you usually ask my opinion?" I hedged as I entered his luxurious office.

"I do ask it now," he replied evenly.

"Well, I've noticed that you keep a thick dossier of al

your guests, Ormand. And if there is any detail you have overlooked, it is something no one else knows about, either." I wasn't about to commit myself to any assertion, and I lost the point I was about to make about her as I walked the tightrope between little and nothing. "Mrs. Spard was certainly a cultured, quiet lady the first session," I improvised noncommittally.

"A quiet spy," spat Ormand venomously. "Sitting there, counting my gardeners as she knitted, and peering at each one as though she might identify them in an official lineup! Didn't *anybody* notice but me?" he inquired with lonely reproach, then continued.

"She surveyed our silver service with computer-accurate eyes; scanned the buildings to be sure the outsides fitted the insides; counted the balls in the jai alai closet and the towels in the steam room. I'll bet she knows how many wax candles we burn in each crystal chandelier in the reception hall and the given names of the musicians in our orchestral

"Certainly I will offer her invitations to Trysis," he snorted. "Sooner or later her computer brain will slip up and she can trigger her own downfall; I only intend to keep an eye on her tricky plans and I can do it best here at Trysis!"

He glanced at Juliette, who was beginning to unwind and smile. These tortuous weeks had taken their toll. Watching Trysis being pulled down around her ears at the instigation of a whim had been nerve-racking.

"You, my pet," he admonished gently, "put that worried mask back on your face and wear it there. If I hear you laugh once, before this comedy is finished, I'll make you pay dearly for your mistakes! I'll spank you!"

"Ormand, Ormand!" crooned Juliette softly to herself. "You omniscient, boneheaded, impetuous—Rock of Gibraltar."

"The advice goes for you too, Rodney," Ormand remarked grimly as he dismissed me with a wave. "Keep that disgusted expression on your face every time you look in my direction, and don't dare let it slip."

The three week period sped by; now that I knew Mrs. Spard wasn't actually winding Ormand around her finger, I could stand to one side and watch her with more casual appreciation of her abilities.

She managed to rendezvous with various guests (all male) at spots she wanted to inspect. The laboratories were an endless source of interest for her. She even hiked far out on

the desert flats one day with Ahmid and an athletic guest as her guides. That she might entice Ahmid into some trouble passed through my mind, but I only thought that she might inveigle him into revealing some statistic she was not agile enough to track down by herself.

As the three weeks drew to a close, Mrs. Spard scintillated at the Farewell Ball, one of the youngest and most exuberant guests present. And her farewells the next day were long and osculating favors which she conferred on many, including Ahmid. I stayed safely behind the bar busily washing glasses.

Ahmid seemed to savor the attentions she had shown him and began to dream a small private dream of his own, all the week we rested. I had to take it for granted that Ormand the omniscient could see the heartbreak his stupid helper was building up for himself; Fasial paid him no attention and Juliette acted as though she and I had not been included in Ormand's confidence at all.

To my surprise, Mrs. Spard did accept Ormand's invitation to another visit to Trysis: she was avid for another round of youth. Young youth, obviously.

She did not appear at the Welcoming Ceremony, and her acceptance of Ormand's attentions became a trifle off-hand and perfunctory right from the first day. She did less spying, but collected a coterie and organized pool-side parties that lasted all hours.

They were interrupted only once that first week when Ormand invited a famous designer to bring his newest collection of models to promenade a fashion show for all his guests, and offered Mrs. Spard carte blanche to choose whatever pleased her.

Ahmid sulked through this display of power and glory, but he was at her side as soon as the group returned to the swimming pool. So another week slipped by.

One afternoon Ormand leaned over the files as he entered his office and asked, "What are you doing, burrowing around in there, Rod?"

"Actually, Excellency, I'm hiding," I confessed. "I'm five years ahead on this group of statistics and . . ."

"Come again," he interrupted cynically. "Who needs them?"

"It's a little hard to explain," I confessed plaintively. "Mrs. Spard stood on the high diving board and peered up at the silken awning over the penthouse lounge for the longest time, on Fourth-day. And everytime I get within range of her voice since then, she tries to force a link of friendship."

with me, and I can feel a command invitation to show her the penthouse coming . . ."

It wouldn't be friendship; it would be "Conquest" she would use as a wedge to pry me up there, but I did not add that detail.

Ormand roared with laughter. "Oho, court jester," he shouted. "Out!"

I looked piteously at him, then slowly crawled out of my filing cabinets. As I neared the door, he suggested quietly, "Go look up Faisal. He's the boy to find you a safe retreat: he'll work you up a covering story that will be fool-proof."

I nodded and ran. And that's how we happened to be sitting in my apartment a few nights later drinking a last night-cap.

The last of the swimming pool crowd were screaming their hilarious final jokes, when a sudden peace and quiet descended over the area.

"How do you stand the noise?" inquired Faz with a tired shake of his head. "You don't have to stay in this rabbit warren, pal."

"Oh, I don't mind especially," I replied casually. "I've always liked this place. It's home—and one of these days the guests will probably go back to playing cards in the clubhouse, or watching plays over in the theater, I hope."

"Well, dawn comes rushing to meet me faster all the time." He yawned. "If I don't make an effort to get to sleep by midnight, I'm a dead duck." He rose, picked up his jacket and strode toward the door. "Tomorrow is the end of two weeks. . . ." His voice trailed off hopefully as he stepped outside.

I was a step or two behind him as he stood on my small porch enjoying the scenery lighted so brightly by the full moon. I heard him grunt with surprise.

Puzzled, I looked over his shoulder.

"Shut the door," he urged softly, turning to me. "This moon is bright enough for our purpose."

Standing in the darkened doorway, we were screened from any casually passing eyes. To our right, the lawns sloped down gently from my doorstep to the pool, and afforded us a panoramic view of the scene.

The crowd was gone. Ahmid and Mrs. Spard were chasing each other silently around the pool. Ahmid caught her in his arms as she dodged, but she broke free as he slipped on the wet tiles. He careened to the very edge of the pool

with scrabbling cartwheels, while she laughed, not loud but pointedly, as his clumsiness. Then she waited disdainfully for him to resume his pursuit.

Ahmid's husky voice carried indistinctly in the quiet night air. He was trying to tell her something, but she would not listen. She drowned his questions with her derisive laughing. Then, as he grabbed her arms and held her, she shook her head and chanted, "No, no, no, no, no," between spasms of mirth.

He muttered something, and as he waited for an answer she broke away suddenly and climbed the diving platform with gracefully alluring movements. He clutched the platform poles and shook the whole contraption till it rocked but her laughter was as uncaring as before. She was not frightened by his violence. And with the self-confidence and inexperience, she enjoyed her game of tease and run.

"You can't shake me out of this tree, Ahmid," she scoffed lightly, looking down at him with scorn. Then, belittlingly she added, "Now you run along home and let me take a more dip."

"Doesn't she know what she's doing to him?" I burst out indignantly to Faisal.

"Shush!" he cautioned. "You can't change the course of events. They're both adults. You can't read the rules to them each day like children. Just watch quietly."

We were more than fifty yards away from the pool, and they wouldn't have heard us if they'd been looking for us, and they weren't.

Ahmid stood at the base of the diving tower still trying to make her understand his groping unfulfillment, as she postured brazenly along the highest board. Then she dove in a great loop into the calm water. A wake of molting bubbles followed her across the pool to the shallow end.

He followed along the tiled edge of the pool as silently as a panther, and as she made a leap to get out of the water, he shoved her silently backward. With deliberate slowness, he took hold of her wrists and forced her down onto the bottom of the pool. For many long minutes he stood there, motionless, with his hairy knees cold and dry, while he kept his foot on her back.

When she had ceased to struggle and he was sure a precious breath of oxygen would no longer do her any good, he waded out of the water without a backward glance and came across the grounds in our direction. He passed within ten feet of where we were standing in the shadow

puffing and snorting a little as he toweled his huge shoulders.

We watched him plod straight across the lawns until he disappeared into the shadows of the theater building, and we were sure he'd holed up in his private lair on the southern edge of the grounds.

We stood there without moving for a long time. I couldn't believe it had happened. As I inhaled a ragged breath that sounded like a sob, Fasial glanced at me. "Don't go near the pool, Rod. Let someone else find her," he remarked softly, with a shrug. I nodded and turned back to go indoors, though I wouldn't need to go to bed this night.

"Let's make a night of it," he suggested as he followed me in and closed my door. "If you have a deck of cards you haven't marked, we can play penny-a-point and drink up whatever you keep in your reserve supply cabinet. Glad for the company, I agreed and set up the card table.

Fasial could rationalize anything. As I developed a case of shakes and dropped the cards, he suggested, "Look, Rod. Mimi was Abel Forman's spy. Spies know the chances they take. If Mimi *didn't* know, then it's Abel Forman's fault.

"But she knew! You can be sure she knew."

I stared at him. It was like Faz to be on first name standing with this Mimi Spard, spy, while I still thought of her as "that Mrs. Spard," guest.

"But the woman is dead!" I insisted.

Fasial shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "If the Premier of Texas wants to wage war with us, he's going to lose a lot of soldiers—spies or whatever. He might as well get used to the idea," he scoffed. "Why do you think Ormand kept inviting Mimi back again?"

I straightened out the cards again and dealt another hand. Fasial watched me silently, then remarked tentatively, "We should keep our stories straight. You know this business will all have to be sifted through the spotlight of public scandal tomorrow. . . ."

I looked up. The idea had not occurred to me.

He sorted out his hand and kept his high cards, then said slowly, "We *didn't* hear any noise from the pool after the crowd left, did we?"

I shook my head.

"Naturally we didn't look. I think we *did* notice that Ahmid passed our door as the group was breaking up, maybe two minutes before. Agreed?"

I nodded uncertainly.

"We played cards and forgot the time. We do this maybe once a week, so it's not remarkable. Even tho' we do no oftener than once a month, actually; we can cover Almid's stupidities without hurting ourselves. And *he* isn't a to think of a story for tomorrow."

"Do you think Ormand will swallow the story?" I asked anxiously.

"Ormand? Not for one minute!" he replied scornfully. "But we won't be telling this tale to *him*; this is for the news media, the inspectors, the headlines, and all the rest. He grimaced.

I must have looked unconvinced. Faz shrugged tiredly. "Look, Rod," he explained patiently. "I wouldn't be surprised but what Ormand knows what has happened down his pool right this minute. . . . How do you think he keeps ahead of the game, if he isn't omniscient? This story is just to keep us out of his way. Ormand will deal out the lumps and favors at his own convenience."

Recalling that it was Ormand who had recommended Fasial to me for a cover story—though it was not this one—I agreed to his version of the drowning incident. But I still asked, "How could he be omniscient?"

Faz grinned at me. "Actually, the grounds are patrolled pretty continuously, as you would know if you were the type who prowled around, and plenty of spots are bugged for sight as well as sound."

We went back to our cards for a while, but we played a most perfunctory game. Finally, I went behind the bar and dug out a vintage bottle, and poured us each a drink there.

"Come on, Faz. We'll never get rich playing two-handed," I suggested. "Drink up."

"Well, just sitting and drinking won't move the hands of the clock off two-fifteen, either," he muttered.

I knew he had a point there, so I hauled out the game. I didn't care for much, but the one he loved.

I had the chessmen all set out before he noticed what I was about. So, using a fair imitation of Althea's voice when she tries to coax him, I called, "Come on, Fazy-boy. Pretty please? Play some chess, huh?" Then in my own voice I added, "I'm no better at this than Thea is, but you have to admit we indulge your preferences more than you deserve, pal."

"Here's to a lifetime of being indulged," he toasted, downing his drink. "You're doing better all the time."

Once more, during the game, I brought up the subject that was circling round and round in my mind.

"Why do you suppose she changed so much in eight weeks, Faz? She was such a quiet, competent woman when she first arrived. And she seemed so loud and brassy and inconsiderate this last week. Twelve, fifteen years shouldn't make that much difference in anybody . . ."

"One taste of Trysis seems to make our guests happy," he snorted caustically. "It's the second or third helpings that bring out the avarice and greed in them."

He tried to explain with gestures.

"It's something you have to experience to believe, Rodney. If you haven't ever been more than twenty-seven, and you haven't, you can't imagine the agony of growing old without having ever lived. Mimi wasn't old, but she was mature and no doubt she *was* a quiet, dependable character all her thirty-seven years. She probably never considered flirting with a provincial governor or gallivanting around with the local playboys. . . . But she indubitably envied her more brazen-sisters who did, and obviously made the mistake of thinking they were happier than she.

"This was the uncounted-on second chance and she tried all the forbidden . . ." Suddenly he seemed to lose interest in his commentary as I captured his queen with my knight. "Hey, you rat! Thea doesn't play that kind of a game!"

"Thea and I have different aims in life," I gibed triumphantly.

He laughed. "Do you ever think back to the days when you first came here, Rod?" He lighted himself another cigarette. "I don't mean to dredge up unpleasant memories, but you were so lonely and unaggressive and confused."

"Thanks for not saying young, timid, and scared." I laughed. "Actually, I still am, you know."

Faz shook his head slowly and looked at me with unbelievably old, experienced eyes. "You've never used any of our stuff, have you?"

"Nope!" I chirped. "This little chick has to put on a few years before he can sluff any off."

Fazal queened a pawn and murmured, "You will, in time, you will. . . ."

"Actually, you're the youngest person here at Trysis. How come the vivacious widow didn't make a play for you?"

"Mel" I asked, shocked. Faz mistook my surprise for feigned innocence. It's the sort of thing he'd have done.

"Don't you think you could have amused Mimi better than Ahmid?" He smirked, as he checkmated my king.

I shrugged. "She didn't chose Ahmid. He was chasing her. Didn't you notice the way he started building himself a dreamworld the day she kissed him, and everyone else within reach, last Farewell Day?" This conversation was skating too close to thin ice to please me.

Fasial stared at me. "Really? I missed that bit." He squinted his eyes calculatingly. "You're getting smart enough to figure out some of the answers, boy. . . . Why not the rest?"

I laughed. My drinks had blunted whatever wits I had so I assumed he was still talking about Mrs. Spard.

"Didn't Mimi chase you around the square, too?"

In a relaxed mood I answered my own question: "I suppose she didn't have time to ensnare all of us. Maybe she was keeping you and me for frosting on her cake—the last sweet mouthful."

Fasial didn't laugh as I expected he would.

"Not me!" he snorted. "Trysis personnel don't ever mess with the customers! We know Ormand was guarding his property, not indulging his emotions, and if Ahmid was stupid enough to think he could follow the leader and chase Mimi for his own amusement, he'll find out differently!"

He picked up the white king and set it carefully on his white file, then moved it over to the next rank, deep in thought.

"I tell you, Dorashi," he hissed softly, "I have a great regard for my own hide. I have every intention of keeping it in one piece and I plan to retire from this venture unbelievably rich; and healthy enough to enjoy it all, too. And if you so much as offer one hint to Ormand of what we saw here tonight, I'll get sucked into the mess and get thrown into the same hole Ahmid will be in."

I nodded. I was conversant with the depth and character of Ormand's holes.

"Nothing rouses Ormand as much as a threat to Trysis. When he sees red, he can't reason anymore."

He drained his glass, then refilled both our glasses carefully. "So don't be a hero," he finished, smiling again. "That's all I'm asking. Let fat Ahmid swallow his medicine and you just stand quietly by. He'll live through it. Ormand has a calculating eye for the torture his victims can take. . . . He just runs them lightly through a period when they be-

for death; then lets them recover—sadder, but wiser! And I don't want any part of it. Please remember!"

Fasial must have drank more of my good booze than he intended, or the stuff was more potent than he calculated. He was certainly belaboring the point like a character who had a guilty conscience and dreaded to be found out. I walked the tightrope myself, these days, so I knew how he felt.

Morning found us bleary-eyed and slightly drunk, no better or worse financially, but positive we both had spent the night together playing cards. Our perfect alibi.

During breakfast time a technician who happened to pass the pool spied the submerged object and raised the alarm.

Ahmid sat shoveling his breakfast into his face as stolidly as ever. Faz and I picked at a morning-after breakfast with dull headaches. When the news broke, the guests had hysterics or shrugged the tragedy off, each to his own bent.

Ormand, of course, had to initiate an investigation that covered each minute of everyone's movements. The declared verdict was a tragic accident, and proved the wisdom of Ormand's rule which stated that solitary moonlight swimming was not deemed safe after guests and guards had left the area.

This was a fork in the road for me, a parting of the ways. I decided whose side I was on, and whoever came to Trysis again suggesting "Conquest" would best be shrugged off. So I never sent any names to help Abel Forman, and if he ever did anything for me, I don't know what it was.

Within a decade we sent a sheaf of eulogistic telegrams and a huge floral display to that premier's funeral. And still no upheaval within the government. As far as I could judge, things remained calm and quiet.

Oh, yes; Ahmid suffered for his sins.

After the inspectors and examiners and various investigators had nosed around Trysis, they agreed Mimi Spard must have met with a tragic accident while swimming alone. Certainly no one mentioned Abel Forman or Ahmid in the same breath with Mimi Spard to any outsider. And they didn't ask.

I was busy helping the guests finish out their last week, while Ormand and Fasial worked with the intruders, so I saw little enough of them. After the last guest had left the grounds, Ormand cancelled all the reservations for the

next several sessions, had the swimming pool filled in and the site obliterated with trees and shrubs, and we all sat back with relief for a quiet rest.

VIII

YOU MAY BE sure we enjoyed our one week; then Ormand called his court into session.

The formal reception hall in Ormand's palace was used for many ceremonies, none more impressively somber than his court sessions. The crystal chandeliers, unlit, hung like cold, silvery stalactites of unshed tears. Half-unfurled banners and pennants crossed behind the dais proclaimed the sovereignty under which he decreed justice. Here again, my lack of more than bilingual abilities saved me from unsuspected depths of horror.

At the appointed hour, every man who lived at Trysis filed into the long hall.

Fasial, resplendent in green and gold raiment, stalked proudly a long way ahead of me in the line, and Ahmid was somewhere far behind. My own green and gold uniform, proclaiming me a member of Bey's personal staff, gained me considerable deference; but I remained where I first happened to find a place in the line.

Each man approached one step to the dais, salaamed low and turned to right or left to find himself a seat. The ceremonial bow, in essence, was the same rite old-time courts used to use when each witness raised his right hand and vowed to tell the truth, the whole truth, etc.

The long queue of silent men moved ahead swiftly enough. I had time to observe the stony expression on Ormand's face. This was not the gracious lord of Trysis who devised fetes and carnivals for his guests and crew; this inhuman spider sat in unreachable judgment, his alien mind seething malignantly as he stared frigidly at each supplicant.

For one second, as I approached the dais, this demon passed his eyes across the space I occupied, and I was nothing. A before-the-beginning-of-creation nothing.

Numbly, I found a seat one tier behind Fasial and a little to one side.

How the guilt-ridden Ahmid endured that trek up the long hall, I can't imagine. Even the formal tarki worn over

his uniform was soaked with sweat as he bowed and turned to find his seat.

This tribunal was not interested in moral issues. The usual theft, arson, rape or murder was taken care of in other courts. This was Ormand's court and only an offense that injured Trysis or waylaid the plans for Trysis was important.

As the last straggler found his place, Ormand lighted two symbolic tapers on either side of his dais. The court was in session.

He glared at us. Without any announcements or preamble, he began a vitriolic harangue. We were all guilty, and subject to that much.

Apparently lacking the singleness of purpose he deemed necessary to make Trysis a success, we were all dragging his creation down to failure. If we insisted on negating *his* efforts, we would better be about our insignificant pursuits and leave Trysis. . . .

No lazy "molaps," whose unguledated parents must have collided once in the dark and dropped their unnamed offspring on a dung heap to hatch, need think the Lord of Trysis intended to spend 815 years of his life working up a failure and would carry them along, too. . . .

When Ormand had everyone in the room cowering guiltily, he picked out his victims individually for further degradation.

Touching a button on the dais in front of him which activated a tape recorder, he began thinning out the ranks of his company.

A third of the gardeners who huddled in a clutch in the far corner of the room were banished in one fell swoop without pronouncing their names. Every third name on an alphabetical list was crossed off. The laborers lost half their numbers without any references to their crimes. Ormand named them off swiftly without reading from any notes, as though he knew each man and his mistakes; possibly he did.

The technicians were weeded out a little more slowly. They were a more intelligent lot and fewer had slipped up. They came forward in groups of four or five to receive their sentences, and accepted their banishment stoically; there was no appeal from this bar of justice.

Ormand did not call Ahmid's name when he got as far as our level. As he swiveled his eyes in our direction, the fat culprit rose and approached the dais in lonely silence.

It was bad. Demoted to creeping gardener and forbidden to speak or make contact with anyone for the dura-

tion of his servitude, he caught the full force of a biting public reprimand. Ormand could strip the hide off a crocodile when he was in good form; now he had the stolid Ahmid on his knees and in tears. As a final flick, he offered his fat victim his freedom to leave Trysis if he preferred.

I have never seen anyone bright red with embarrassment turn gray with hopeless terror so quickly. Ahmid groveled. He completely forgot we were watching his abasement as he groveled. He begged permission to suggest an amount of torture that might gratify the arbiter-of-his-fate, and he swore he'd endure it gratefully. That abjectly shaking object in front of the dais, begging for torment and agony, turned my stomach. I was about to be sick.

Why the niggling offer of bus fare to Frisco should leave Ahmid so eager to cut off his own arm in designated slices escaped my already benumbed senses.

By now, Fasial and I were the only ones left untouched by the vengeance. I glanced around. I figured the worst Ormand could do to me was throw me out of Trysis as he had offered to Ahmid, and that didn't scare me much. There were a lot of places I could make a new start. Trysis wasn't the only place in the world. . . .

My stomach was twisting for Fasial, though. He was such an arrogantly proud actor; I couldn't see him slaving through so much humiliation.

He swears he was sweating because he figured Ormand would call me next and reduce me to babbling idiocy; what I might reveal would splash mud on his spotless record. He himself could charm a bird out of a tree, and he felt equal to coaxing the Lord of Trysis into a better mood and letting him off lightly—if he could get in there first.

As the nemesis glanced in our direction, I stopped breathing. Faced with the reality of torture, I lost my bravado quickly. But he passed us by!

With one arrogant survey around his court, he touched the recorder button. "Enough!" he declared imperiously. The court was over.

As he snuffed out the candles, we all struggled to our feet; he strutted insolently out of the room, not one whit touched by the misery he had created.

Fasial sank back into his chair. Slowly he found his kerchief and mopped his neck and face with shaking hands, but made no move to leave the room. He stared at the floor, dully.

Ahmid, who had not backed more than a few steps from the dais when Ormand left, was slowly peeling off his bright tarki. He slid the badly used silken robe through his fingers and let it fall in a little heap in front of the dais. His tunic with golden facings followed the tarki onto the floor. Standing there in the middle of the gloomy court room, he stripped down to his skin, layer by layer. Rings and bracelets he placed in a little pile on top of the mound of gaudy clothes, Barefoot, and as naked as the day he was born, he stood there for a moment. Then, slowly, he raised his arms and slipped the long silver chain that held his identification tags over his head and added them to the pile. He gazed at the expensively beautiful plumage he had worn, as though it were a part of him, the best part, for a long minute. Then he turned and padded silently and anonymously over toward the far corner of the room.

The huddling group of gardeners set up a thin keening wail of parting that finally roused Faz to action. Slapping his hands together once, he grabbed me by the arm and croaked, "Let's get out of here!"—the first words he had spoken since dawn.

Our badly depleted core of workers turned back to the business of Trysis. Within a few months Ormand had replaced most of his banished technicians and workers with others, and filled out the ranks of his gardeners again.

For ten years we worked hard, carefully, and continuously, to please Ormand. Every session was snapped off with precision and style, and the spa gleamed in the sun with the continuous three-and-one routines.

With a leather strap welded around his neck which monitored his whereabouts and his silence, Ahmid crept across the stretches of Trysis, well hidden among the line of gardeners who followed a daily course, weeding out the few troublesome plants that dared mar the lawns.

I hardly ever noticed which creeping automaton was the fat Ahmid, as their dull blue-gray coveralls were all anonymously alike.

As I neared the age of thirty, Ormand suggested that I think seriously of joining their Anzee seed rites. He pointed out that *he* must be the senior member of our group and as he had no wish to grow older than thirty-eight, I must remain considerably younger than he. There must be no possible doubt in any client's mind who rated seniority here.

I agreed that twenty-five to twenty-seven was a good spot to keep, so an unbelievable number of tests were run on my system by certain technicians; after the checks were finalized, a figure was settled on and I joined their next feast on the balcony, feeling self-consciously that I was passing some kind of landmark in my life.

There was no sensation of reversal. Our consumption of the Anzee seed essence was much more gradual than the diets of our clients. I just slid slowly back to a few years less. I could see no difference; but I did not grow any older.

At fifty, I was as healthy and agile as ever. No gray streaks marred my dark locks, and no wrinkles creased my eyes. I jumped out of bed as eagerly each morning as ever, ran till dark as far and as easily as before.

Ahmid returned to our midst about this time, little the worse for having spent twenty-five years on his knees. His back was crisscrossed with welts and scars from the beatings he had endured as he learned to garden as the other gardeners did, and three big X's had been branded on his arm; but the loss of a lot of slobby fat around his middle cannot be counted all bad. He was in better physical condition than he'd ever been in all his long, self-indulgent life.

We welcomed him back into our midst with a big party as though he'd been a thousand miles away from us, and made a fuss over him until he found a comfortable niche in our group.

In time our stories hailed him as the savior of Trysis: the one who had sacrificed his freedom for the good of the class by bravely doing away with our enemies. (None of our group was fooled by this. It just made a heroic story the workers and technicians could circulate. It aired the misfortunes Ahmid had endured, and made it easier for him to live with himself.)

So Trysis became my world. With its tides of colorful people washing over it in continuous waves, I was at the center of a brilliant court and enjoyed every minute of it.

In a generation's time, the people I had grown to know as customers of Trysis gradually passed on to their reward and others took their place. These were equally brilliant and interesting, but I had less reason to care if they stayed or left. They were outsiders in a way I can't explain, except to say that only our group there at Trysis remained the same, an anchor to hang on to.

Ormand was always a couple of years older than the rest

of us, befitting him as our leader. Fasial and I chased around busily, a buoyant twenty-seven, and the girls remained their glowing young selves. Our technicians and laborers remained the same age, too. Even the lowly gardeners who never faltered in their daily progress across our vast lawns, all remained one age, while the outside world receded farther and farther.

I learned not to start a conversation with, "Remember when. . ." No one was interested in looking backward.

Just once, when an Egyptian ambassador arrived at our spa, the red carpet was really rolled out for him. Faz and Ormand dusted off their native patois and buzzed around him with much interest.

When others joined their circle, the group politely changed to Americo without a break in the conversation. As they made the transition at my approach, the polished Egyptian official remarked blandly, "We should make a final switch to your Americo, Ormand, and keep it so. Then I need only translate your conversation once. With your patois, which you do speak beautifully, I must translate from the Americo to Egyptian to your older Egyptian. And I am such a poor scholar I have never studied my own ancient languages. It is the sad fact, and I am desolate." He gestured expressively to show his regret.

And Faz suavely remarked, "Seel When we leave a country for six or seven hundred years, they stab us in the back by changing their language!"

It was a remark that Fasial knew exactly how to bring off so well that everyone was amused and flattered instead of being insulted. Ormand wouldn't have tried it, and I would not have thought of it.

And that's the only instance that I can remember of their referring to their long past, or any long past era.

IX

FOR A GOOD many ears I stopped counting my birthdays. Occasionally I computed the length of time I'd been living here, and on this particular day, for example, I was a young man of twenty-seven who had lived at Trysis for 185 years, three months, and four days.

We were in the midst of an extended four day party. All

our free weeks seemed to droop and founder without extra alcoholic stimulation. Then they'd develop a desperate overtone as they wore on, but I paid little attention. I was sure it was just a phase we'd all work out of again.

One night, after we had been singing for a long time, and laughing more than usual, little Melete came over to me and thrust a huge vellum folder into my hands. "Ah s'y, Rod old bean." She mimicked a favorite comedian. "Are you still looking for this?"

Everyone watched the byplay out of the corners of their eyes as I took it and opened it. I had learned long ago, to conquer a French menu and order competently. "Why do you think I was looking for this menu, chérie?" I asked easily, more to gain time than anything else. I opened it and glanced curiously at the three-dimensional cuneiform characters brushed in long rows inside the folder.

Ormand lifted his head from the couch where he had been impersonating Nero, while Juliette peeled grapes for him, one by one. "We are leaving for home, Rodney, and there is room for you to go along with us if you care to," he explained in a matter-of-fact manner. "We thought you might like to learn a few basic details like alphabets and languages and other useful bits." He shrugged. "No pressure. It's entirely up to you, but we'd all like to have you along."

I looked around the circle of faces I had known for so long, bewildered by the sudden solemn turn of events. "I don't know where I'd go, if you all left," I admitted slowly. "I guess my friends are all here, and I don't have any family to go back to."

The idea of leaving Trysis was too strange to take in, all at once. I brushed my fingertips across the embossed coat of arms on the menu as I sat deep in thought. On closer inspection, the lions were actually three-eyed monsters with inexorably implacable features.

"Where is the place you call home, Ormand?" I asked finally, recalling that he had never been especially interested in visiting upper Egypt or Eastern Africa, where he'd claimed to have started from.

"Where we are headed for is not my home; but it is in the same general direction across the galaxy."

"Across the galaxy!" I echoed, stunned.

"From this solar system, we take off in the general direction of the Sagittarius constellation; far beyond the most distant star of that constellation is a small dim planet that circles Ergol-Elect and is used as a transport terminal. That

is where we change to a galactic transverse for PahCorReesh. It's in another arm of the universe than this far outpost."

Ormand was not bragging. I doubt he meant to make an invidious comparison; he was just faintly homesick for his own cosmopolitan world, but I did not notice.

"How did you get to this 'far out post' in the first place?" I asked edgily.

"As I told you once, long ago, I am a simple trader," replied Ormand. "My company on PahCorReesh has a monopoly on Anzee seeds and they send out scouts to find new markets for their product. This yellow star, Marbed-four, was on our navigational maps. . . ."

"You might mention that Rod's kin call that same yellow star Sol," interrupted Fasial who had been trying to edge in to the explanation for some time.

"True," acceded Ormand, nodding his head. "The tribes on this sphere seemed always to be warring with each other. And even individuals with a personal religion based on love worked harder at hating each other than anything else. . . ."

"Occasionally, scouts who were given the territory to reconnoiter were hunted down by mobs before they could demonstrate our products."

"Ah, stop crying!" scoffed Faz derisively. "You know we planned the whole campaign before we let Triad-Cor talk us into taking on the job."

"But, of course," admitted Ormand coolly. "We'd have been stupid, indeed, not to."

Turning to me, he continued: "This planet had no spaceport when we first arrived, so we set our flitter down on the edge of a huge expanse of desert sand in North Africa; after we'd stashed a reserve of seeds in a safe place, time was no object. All we had to do was learn the language and the customs of the people and mix with them until we could pass as local citizens."

"And smell like them, too," added Fasial with a fastidious shudder. "Gah!"

"You mark my words," drawled Juliette, popping the last grape into her own mouth. "When old Faz gets to heaven, he'll still be whining. Even that place won't suit him. They'll be spraying the golden paving blocks in his alley with attar of roses instead of concentrate of Jasmine. Tsk, tsk, tsk."

Althea and Fasial snickered, but Ormand ignored Juliette's banter as though he had not heard it. "If you'll remember,

we tossed a coin to see who would take the northern route and who went south," he added.

"I remember whose coin we used," jeered Fasial, inferring that he had been shortchanged. "And you dropped the coin in your boot when you took off after that southbound caravan. And as for choice"—he shrugged—"there was no difference. I swear the common rabble smelled to high heaven wherever they lived."

"Mere detail," commented Ormand, who had obviously kept his eye on the overall plan.

He turned to me. "This is where I went south and studied in a monastic order, as I once mentioned to you. Fasial traveled north and worked the bazaars of Alexandria and Cairo. . . ."

Raising his voice for emphasis, he declaimed, "That one had the fleshpots of Egypt in his pocket, and he still complained!" Subsiding, he admitted ruefully, "Anyway, he picked the best deal and lasted the longest. I finally went to find him in Cairo."

"One can hope your reports to Triad-Cor indicated the superior brilliance of your partner," murmured Fasial with a grin.

Ormand did not deign to answer. "Some time later Ahmid and Althea set their flitter down on a plain in Kurdistan. She went west toward Greece, and we found Ahmid, who had wandered south, as we left Cairo."

Amused, he added, "Regardless of how much wretched abuse I once claimed Althea absorbed as a Greek slave, she was entertaining an appreciative clientele to the tune of three vases of rubies and opals a month, by the time we got to her establishment in Corinth."

"And that's terpsichorean art with a high purpose, I always say," commented Fasial glibly.

I must have looked as perplexed as I felt. I could see, now, how Ormand had oversimplified the facts and *this* version of his story was becoming more complex as it was unfolded.

Noticing my confusion, Faz reverted to absurdity. He leered with prudish innuendo and whispered loudly, "Would you prefer to have our poor heroine caught in the clutches of native vultures?" He snickered slyly, then turned and cocked an eyebrow derisively at Althea.

With a toss of her head, she grabbed a sofa pillow to throw at him, but Juliette's supercilious "Indubitably!" was so chilly and final, she dropped it, squelched.

I looked around the room with disbelief. A few hours ago we had all been laughing and joking together. A close-knit group and the best of friends.

Now, although Ahmid still sat stolidly in a corner behind a chessboard immersed in his slow game, and Melete sat silently beside me caressing my wrist with her fingertips, the rest of the group were snipping at each other with long-suppressed animosity.

As soon as Ormand had mentioned their company's home base of PahCorReesh out loud, the spell was broken. This team had worked as one, with one aim in mind. What was the phrase Fiasal had once coached me with, long ago?—"With a singleness of purpose that sacrificed all, at the altar of duty. . . ." Maybe he understood about this better than I knew.

"You see the bitter reaction to Ormand's letting Althea keep her pretty loot?" murmured Melete close to my ear. "He claims she showed exceptional enterprise and independence, and as long as we hadn't begun to market our Anzee seeds, her time was her own." She shrugged. "She can keep her stuff, for all I care. There's nothing that choice about the opals, although the rubies are beautiful.

"I suppose it's the principle of the thing. Juliette claims she, too, could have picked up a fortune here and there instead of forging ahead so diligently toward Rome if she'd known she could keep her booty afterward." Then with a knowing smile, she added, "We'll see what the final ruling on that deal is."

As I smiled down at her, uncomprehendingly, Ormand continued his story.

"Juliette has a flair for strange planets: she didn't even wait for me to find her; she simply blended in with whatever cover she found handy. I've always figured a certain band of gypsies got pushed, ordered, and finagled toward Rome; whether they intended to go there or not. . . ."

"I've always thought we should have stayed in Rome. We could have worked it into a success with just a little more push," murmured Juliette, retrospectively.

A sly smile crossed Fiasal's face, but before he could frame the biting remark he was thinking, Althea spoke up. "You think you could have charmed Vasco Shezari back again?" she taunted, with an insinuating sneer. "Hah! Not if we'd worked Rome and Naples for all ten centuries!"

Before the two girls could get into a bitter squabble about something that had happened so many hundred years earlier,

Ormand asserted his prerogative as leader. "You can stay as long as you please when *you* run the campaign. We were all through in Rome and I gave the orders to move on! Enough!"

Juliette ignored the reproof by concentrating her attention on lighting her cigarette.

Althea turned to me. "Do you have any idea of the number of details we have to watch and check when we join a new culture, Rodney?"

I shook my head, so she ticked them off on her fingers for me. "First of all, we land on a strange planet with the single purpose of joining whatever social pattern we find there. . . .

"As soon as we can pronounce a few words we must *think* in that language. If a caravan of beasts is the local level of travel, we 'forget' about jets and flitters. Forget isn't exactly what we do—we bury our other experiences so deeply in our subconscious that we never even dream of our former existences. And yet, it is all there when we return to PahCorReesh, just as fresh as yesterday.

"As we integrate with the local group and learn the basic language, we gain some inkling of the rules and customs; like, is everybody allowed to wear a green dress on Third-day, or may only the aristocrats wear an embroidered hem on their togas while the rest stay modestly clad in blue shifts. And *that* varies, too."

With a deep sigh, she added, "And after we get it all worked out, we move on to anogher segment where things are done unbelievably different."

"Just mentioning PahCorReesh has triggered some awareness you didn't have before," I suggested to her. "I don't know if I can express my idea, but you seem different—strange, yet not strangers. But you're already stretching your memories for experiences I've never even imagined, and there is a visible change."

Althea smiled. "Well, you know, the customs and language between fifteenth century Corinth and this spot here in Arizona in the twenty-fifth century are not as far apart as a jump from here to PahCorReesh, or vice versa."

Juliette glanced up. "Dah-ling," she purred in that sweetly biting tone, "some day when you get back home, try studying your Zomeidstar table of socio-logistics; you should be able to tell the level of progress of any ethnic group at a glance."

"I can tell it," snapped Althea self-confidently derisive. "My problem is personally descending to their mores and tribal traditions."

"Every time our group gets to the point of automatic light beams, we jump back to a dim level where they're rubbing two sticks together to light a smoky old wick in a pottery shard, and calling it a lamp." She shuddered.

Obviously Althea's perfect beauty and Juliette's beautiful perfection were rasping on each other's nerves.

"We're all tired," soothed Ormand. "That's why we're finishing up here and going home."

Fasial froze in the act of picking up a rook from Ahmid's game. "You mean to say Triad-Cor sent us a release without any begging or pleading?" he queried.

"Oh, I think it was our turn to get a break," observed Ormand expansively. "But I threatened them for good measure: either we got transportation home sufficient for all our goods, or the Anzee weeds would envelop our outfit. They knew what I meant."

Fasial grinned slyly. "You wouldn't, would you?"

"I wouldn't what?" snorted Ormand indignantly. "You know G-347 and ArbelDee were all covered and choked with Anzee weeds in two seasons from a single seed, and one undetected Anzee plant could smother this fertile planet with rank jungle-like growths so fast that I shudder to think of it."

"All I'd have to do is relax the pressure on my gardeners for one day. . . ."

Fasial smiled appreciatively at his leader. "The documentaries I saw of the clouds of seeds blowing over ArbelDee were hair-raising," he admitted.

"Indeed," remarked Juliette condescendingly. "You should have been in there, helping rescue the last wretched mob of survivors, and got your thrills first-hand!"

Fasial wasn't about to explain that he *had* volunteered for duty on one of the last-ditch missions, or offer her any excuses why he had not done so. Neither would he give her an opening to brag about her heroic deeds in the face of death-dealing odds. He yawned and flicked an imaginary speck off his sleeve. "A messy bit, no doubt." He sneered.

Ormand turned to me. "Well, what do you think, Dorashi?" he exclaimed. "An interesting life like ours is hard to beat, isn't it?"

I suddenly felt very small. "Do you think I could learn enough to keep up with you?" I asked, bewildered. I lifted the menu I had been holding. "I mean, just learning to read French on a menu like this was a major accomplishment for me. To learn a completely new language to get along

with an alien species who follow strange customs and eat unheard-of things. . .” I shivered. “I don’t know if it would be worth the effort I’d have to make. . . .”

“Now, Rodney.” Juliette smiled soothingly. “You’d have several thousand years to make a try at it. Just as long as Anzee grows the seeds to keep us young. Besides, you never considered us too alien, did you?”

She turned to the table to snub out her cigarette, and as I watched her, she suddenly *did* seem utterly strange. A trick of the lighting seemed to give her hair a greenish cast and as she lifted her head, a nictitating membrane seemed to close slowly over her eyes. She had always been extremely thin, but now she looked skeletal; and when she moved, she seemed to undulate slowly, like a snake or lizard.

A cold chill passed down my spine as I crossed the room to hold my lighter for her cigarette. I noticed a thin line of shiny scar glitter along the outer edges of her white hands, as she held her cigarette. I recalled the six-fingered 'copter pilots and the gardeners who had once shoved me around with their six-fingered hands, but they were mere minions. Of course, a sixth finger was only an over-supply by Terran standards, but what icy calculation or utter desperation could force one to submit to mutilation and still count it worth the price?

As I came back to my seat near Melete and sat down, I felt that I was sinking into a bottomless pit. If I turned my head, I might float sideways and swirl, suspended in nothingness. . . .

I swallowed hard and said the first thing that came to me mind. “I’ll never forget the look on your face, Ormand, the first night I was here, when you realized Fasial had given me this menu by mistake.”

“I’ll never forget the chewing-out I got, later, for handing it to you,” replied Fasial with conviction.

“Well, I was afraid you might run away from us before we could explain things to you,” remarked Ormand affably. “A menu full of squiggles had been known to trigger a panic on harder characters than you.”

I relaxed. “While you are explaining,” I suggested jokingly, “will you please tell me what I’ve ever done around here that makes me worth my salt?”

“We thought you’d stopped worrying about that long ago.” Ormand smiled agreeably. “There’s never been any secret about it. We’ve never felt that you and your kind are quite

as alien as you feel now that you know we come from PahCorReesh; but your ways *are* different from ours. And we do have a tendency to revert to our own mores and customs if we isolate ourselves here at Trysis.

"You are a sort of catalyst. By simply being a Terran, we can watch you and keep our reactions more like yours. See?"

I stared. How simple! How they must have laughed at my small childish attempts to keep up with them! They'd been trained for *years* to scout and observe. They came knowing what to look for. Why, they were alien spies!

Deep in the pit of my stomach a pulse began to pound with slow heavy beats, as though the thought of my long life being spent—misspent—among these strange creatures was roiling my fury with a vengeance.

"You know," commented Ormand, as the silence began to stretch out, "we've tried to get native talent interested in sponsoring our product. But it hasn't worked out. . .

"Frechette was the most promising prospect we tried, but after a while he couldn't seem to change his habits. He built Trysis for us from a mere idea, but he got set in his ways and we'd argue about every minor improvement toward the last; finally, after one violent quarrel, he just left us."

"I have a feeling," remarked Fasial retrospectively, "that the loss of his relatives weighed on his spirits more than we understood. He used to look at pictures of his friends and family, especially those who had died of old age, and then look in his mirror at his own still youthful appearance—and get very morose."

"This counting years is an odd concept anyway," observed Juliette perplexedly. "I think the natives of Terra would be better off without it."

"At best, they never get to count very many," agreed Fasial cynically.

Ormand picked up the skein of thought and added, "We decided Frechette must have picked you because you had no relatives to make you unhappy, as he was."

"Who knows." I shrugged, thinking of the tired little old man who had been so willing to quit when I finally met him. "Were there many others before him?"

"Oh yes," mused Ormand. "Dr. Carstairs of Montreal, and Vasco Shezari in Rome—"

"Carlos was with us in Rome," ammended Fasial. "It was

Shezari who went through all that trouble with us in Naples don't you remember?"

"Yes, but Vasco Shezari went with us to Rome, too," chimed in Juliette.

"Well, yes." Ormand shrugged indifferently. "Before Shezari in Naples, Del Tecko; remember him? And Lana Dameese. He didn't last long. . . ."

"Pedestraw was the first one!" Ormand smiled at some bright memory of long ago. "Maroupee Exodius Pedestraw was our first associate in Athens. That was our first small attempt at commercial dealings. Before that, we just marked time to get adjusted."

Fasial dropped an affectionate hand on my shoulder. "And you think you should be able to be a full-fledged trader in three days," he scoffed lightly. "Why, we spent more than two hundred *years* working this simple planet, before we ever ground a single seed for our first customer!"

I flipped the menu over and placed it on the table at my elbow. "So, after all your hard work, why must you leave now?" I inquired in a tight voice.

"We pioneered this planet, and we've skimmed off the top layer of valuables for Triad-Cor," boasted Ormand proudly. "We'll record our experiences in Triad's computer banks, and let them decide if they want to dig over the shale for smaller profits."

"If we have the ability to go on to cultivate richer lodes, and we do, why should we waste our talents here?"

"Why, indeed!" I replied disgustedly. "Isn't that pretty sneaky?" This sudden alien and his boasting were getting under my skin.

"All coins have two sides, Rodney." This creature was starting another harangue to prove to me how right he was. A pounding in my head drowned out all but occasional phrases. "Part of the bargain . . . pay our prices . . . own share of profits . . ."

Something surged within me and I stood up and glared at Ormand through a red mist. "You thieves! You cheats! You sly, slimy snakes!" I spat at them.

The group of traders looked at each other with dismay, as though, sooner or later, all the Terrans they had ever befriended had turned on them like this.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Rodney," replied Ormand softly. "I truly am. It seemed to me that you were happy to be with us. You came here of your free will . . . and you've enjoyed it most of the time."

"Don't tell me what I've enjoyed," I snarled thickly. "I was just one of a long line of bellwethers for you aliens. . . .

"Remember I asked you what you wanted"—I pointed my finger within an inch of Ormand's nose—"the first few miles we traveled west, on our way out here to Trysis, that first day? Remember? And I told you no one ever gave anything away for nothing. I told you—"

"And after I bought you a good meal, you were glad to come along." Ormand over-rode my reproaches easily. "You were so happy to have a full stomach for the first time in your life, you said you'd be glad to learn a simple trick like signing your name to a meal tab. Remember that, Terran!"

"And whose gold are you defending?" he snorted contemptuously. "Did any of your pious people ever let you earn a decent living, slaving in their shops?"

Ormand ground out his cigarette in an ash tray with shaking fingers.

"My company had no ambitions to enslave any peoples! This was purely a commercial operation! If Triad-Cor had sent in an army and ground down your kind, we could have skimmed off twice as much in a fraction of the time it took us. But we came peacefully and sold you Terrans—"

"Sold is right!" I snarled, utterly disgusted with my share of the plan. "Right down the drain!"

I turned abruptly and slammed out of the room. Making my way from the penthouse, I strode across the square and paced the dark lanes out toward the helicopter port.

The cold wind felt good as it blew against my feverish-hot face, but the dark silence brought no ready-made plan, for me to follow.

I have no idea how many hours I tramped the countryside; finally, exhausted, I straightened up to stare at the sky where a galaxy of stars hung in winking splendor all across the heavens. With a sigh, I turned back toward the massed clump of buildings and trees that was Trysis.

Suddenly a blinding brilliance out on the desert flats boiled up beyond the facade of buildings. The trees bent outward and away from the force. The silhouetted shapes of trees and houses were still imprinted on my eyeballs when the repercussion, like a wall of moving air, pushed at me. And the afterglow faded from violet to pink to gray, as I had seen it once before, long ago, through my skylight window.

Used to the noisy reaction of thunder after a flash of lightning, the silence gave me an eerie feeling that this had

not really happened. Nightmares are silently violent like this; but before I could decide, another flash lashed the skies with violent color.

I broke into a run. As I crossed the squares I noticed a self-skitter parked at my door, but I passed it swiftly without a second glance. The disturbance was obviously out on the desert flats beyond Trysis.

I topped a rise of ground out beyond the swimming pool, and saw a row of huge, squat freight cars. A long line of trucks stretched from Ormand's warehouses to the loading area where the crates and boxes were swiftly transferred. They weren't really freight cars; they were freight carriers. Ringed in a glare of white spotlights another open one was being swiftly loaded with huge crates.

A bull-voiced overseer, reading a master-plan, was directing the influx. From where I stood, his deep voice carried faintly but clearly to my ears as he shouted a series of numbers and harried the loaders to greater speed. Another hold was filled and sealed as I watched; at a waved signal, the panels closed down over the frame, the legs retracted, and the craft hovered motionless for a fraction of a second. A single flash of light erupted from its base and the huge craft rose straight up into the darkness.

As another undulation of air spread out, and another squat freighter trundled forward to the loading ramp, a voice at my elbow made me jump.

"Ah, Roh-dn'y! I'm so glad you came to see us off!" Little Melete was as pleased and as friendly as though I had not snarled at her a few hours ago.

"I saw the bright lights," I stammered ineffectually for an explanation. "I didn't know what was going on . . ." I waved my arms.

"Well, of course," she agreed enthusiastically. "I'm so glad you came."

Ormand welled up out of the shadows. "There's a package and some letters for you in the flutter-car parked at your apartment, Rodney." His traveling clothes were strangely fashioned and added to the breach that had widened between us.

"Our transportation home arrived even sooner than I dared count on. I figured we had time enough to explain our operation to you and persuade you to go with us—you are still welcome, you know."

I looked at him in amazement. These people were completely overlooking my outburst. They weren't angry at me.

They understood my motives better than I did. I had not riled them at all.

"Thank you for everything," I said simply, shaking hands with this alien. "I'm sorry . . ."

"Don't have any regrets!" admonished the Lord of Trysis. "This must be your decision. We were pretty sure a trip beyond your solar system would be too lonely for you to tackle; but we offer you the chance anyway."

Fasial appeared. The coruscation of his long cloak, as it billowed out from another wave of air, was blinding. "I thought maybe you'd be smart enough to avoid a mushy farewell scene, pal!" he quipped, concealing his feelings under a nonchalant manner as he slapped my shoulder.

Melete held back until the others had all made their parting speeches. "Roh-dn'y," she sniffed. "I always hoped you'd come with us! You know you can still come with us, if you change your mind," she urged. "Right up to the last split-second that our lift-lock seals off."

I kissed her, for all the times I had put off declaring my love, and all the times I had been casual instead of ardent. "Stay here with me, chérie," I urged. "Stay with me. We were meant for each other. Please stay!"

The freight lifts had been taking off every few seconds as we stood there. The gardeners, technicians, and 'copter pilots were filing into the last few.

"Do those things go all the way to that place beyond the Sagittarius constellation?" I asked, as the traders stood around me for one final moment.

"Those cars? No. Those are mere lifts to our star-liner waiting a few hours beyond this solar system. They will all be swallowed whole, in the base of our galactic ship," someone explained absently.

Obviously they were waiting for the signal that finally came. They made a concerted start toward the waiting craft. Melete kissed me and slipped out of my arms. She had not even considered staying with me. She was one of this group of aliens, and there was no doubt in her mind where she belonged when the time came to move on.

I lifted my arm reflexively to stop her; then I knew I could neither stay her departure nor go with her.

I called, "Goodbye!" and they turned and waved. "Farewell Arriverderci! Remember the messages in the car! Adios! Goodbye!"

I watched them as they disappeared into the maw of the oval-shaped lift. A last attendant slid into the ship, and for a

long second, while I counted to ten, the lock stood open, waiting. Then the panel slid down over the gap with finality. The legs were retracting when some unseen switch started turning off the floodlights.

Then a brilliant flash lifted the last alien craft up to its mother ship waiting in the darkness. The field was empty beyond all description!

Numbly I turned back toward the sleek mobile-skitter waiting at my empty apartment.

X

THE LETTERS directed me to use the car to the next town or as far as I cared to drive it. And reminded me that they had once promised me a lift to the next town.

A list of numbers gave me an access key to a Swiss bank account, and financial directions for the disposal of Trysis proved that they had thought of details for my comfort long after they would be gone.

A note from Fasial made me smile. With characteristic raciness, he suggested that I not bother to recover the straw of Anzee seeds on the blue plate up in the penthouse. The real seeds had been shaken out of their straw within minutes after I had arrived at Trysis, long ago. And the pellets that were inserted were a synthetic replacement worth nothing.

He also named the huge sum of credits he had lost in wagers place on the span of my curiosity, and the fact that I'd never felt any urge to investigate the crumpled straw had caused them all great pain.

"We spent hours of anguish, working over the reasons why you ignored that enticingly placed tray," he'd written.

I stayed on alone at Trysis. There was nothing of interest for me in the outside world. I'd already grown away from Terran ways. Even more than I'd suspected, I was one of Ormand Bey's crew.

As the first numb shock wore off, I reread the notes my friends had left, and I found a thin sheet of paper folded as a lining in the envelope Fasial had left for me. It was blank, but as I unfolded it, marks appeared and soon the sheet was covered with closely written words:

"Copy this letter as soon as you discover it," he'd warned me across the top. "This writing will fade out again within a few hours of exposure to sun and air."

"Rodney old pal, I'm writing this on Third-day, the nineteenth of March, 2426. Knowing that we are about to pick up and go back to PahCorReesh, I hope you will be with us. But I have this unpleasant doubt nibbling at me whenever we work at our moving plans, so I'm pretty sure you'll decide to stay on Terra.

"Ormand has sent an ultimatum to our company, Triad-Cor, that we must be picked up soon. A matter of a few months.

"I know you could be persuaded to go with us, if you had enough time to consider the problem. But Ormand has the last word, of course, and he says not. Nothing to be said until *he* says so. No one will know exactly when we are leaving, but he can make an educated guess closer than I. The best I can do is prepare this note ahead of time, and slip it into your luggage when we leave.

"Our millenium will be up in a few months more. Our contract says definitely a thousand years. No more. It's been a long time away from home for all of us. . . .

"I think you and I would make a good pair for Ormand's team. After I get Ormand away from Ahmid, or vice versa, I hope to convince him that my plan would work.

"We sure don't want Ahmid in our midst again as third man. That old witch, his mother, was frantic when he left her compound on PahCorReesh and took off with us. But Ahmid's old man swings a big club. He's a major stockholder in the Triad-Cor corporation, and we got fabulous terms in our contract for letting him come along with us. Anyway, his old man needed a place to stash him safely away while things cooled off on PahCorReesh.

"I'm telling you, I could hardly believe my eyes when Ahmid drowned that poor little Terran spy, Mimi. Remember her? It gave us the best hold on old Ahmy we ever had to keep him in line. He's always figured any female he honored with his sluggish attentions should fall down and grow weak with delight. And Mimi sure brushed him off! Well, so much for that.

"If you consider my offer at all, remember you go out to strange planets with the best group leader Triad ever had. Ormand's name on PahCorReesh is quite allophonic to the one he's using on Terra. . . .

"Remember the time you were feuding with him, and you asked me to explain some bit? And I spouted off with a string of titles? They are for real, and plenty more like them. That boy has ability and perserverence plus!

"Juliette has been with us for three trips. She was something we swept up off the streets of Char-Dee on Mealo. It's an average planet of a yellow star on the far side of the galaxy. Her imperious manners are amusing, but she has the ability to get in there and dig hard when the chips are down. Ormand wouldn't waste time on her otherwise.

"Althea is the independent one. She dances, no matter what planet we land on. And more power to her.

"Melete is the one I can never quite believe. She was born with titles and wealth and opportunities we'll never achieve yet she tags along, unassuming, no trouble, and lots of fun.

"That leaves just yours truly to explain.

"I was a camel driver, a dirt-encrusted, louse-infested camel driver's assistant, when Ormand happened to pick me up.

"My sire owned two mareds of ground on Moneet. Enough to keep his family from starving, providing some of us got out and shifted for ourselves. He had fifty-eight offspring and eleven wives when I left. They've all been gone so long the family name has disappeared from the census rolls. No one remembers it and I never go back anymore. When I was herding camels for GarelTam, I used to stop off and see my folks, but they were only indifferently glad to see me unless I brought gifts. Then when Ormand picked me up out of the dirt, they were envious of my good fortune. But after a while I was still twenty-five and my youngest brothers, who had not yet been born when I left the village, were old men. I could see the envy turning to something more vicious, so I stayed away.

"I have a villa on PahCorReesh and an estate on Noda near Ormand's huge country place. So I've done fairly well for myself. But believe me, it's work.

"Ormand is a good boy for keeping on top of the Anzee weeds. And using a gimmick as volatile as Anzee seeds, we need his discipline to succeed. His devotion to Trysis was phenomenal there on Terra. On the other hand, it's a normal thing for him to keep his mind on his work. And a success like Trysis just incites him to new heights. No doubt he will use the concept of Trysis again and again.

"He had the singleness of purpose to push this deal to a whooping success, but his touch with individual people has no imagination, no rapport. I've spent ten lifetimes smoothing over his brusqueness, smiling customers out of their sulks, putting umph in the triumphs, and then rounding up the

strays. I'm the glue that keeps the business together. Ormand and I complement each other's best traits and we know it.

"Did you ever figure out that our gardeners were all beginners from PahCorReesh? Willing trainees who had no sponsor. Triad gives them a chance to advance from probationer to apprentice, but it's a long hard grind that way. Five hundred years on a strange planet, far from home; one misstep sends them home, stops their chances of advancing, and they are dropped. Whatever tyrant they happen to serve under has the power of life and death over them. Triad-Cor was very happy to send these men to Ormand. It's seldom a Master Trader needs more than a few.

"We figured you might notice their six-fingered peculiarity, but you never mentioned it. Occasionally our gardeners had company as they made their rounds. You remember how hard it was to pick out Ahmid when he was reduced to their menial job?

"Our agents often crept along with the crews. Especially when we thought spying Terrans were looking for something they couldn't exactly figure out. Any agents who stayed over for any length of time used this cover. It gave them some idea of Ormand's thoroughness to report back to Triad-Cor and our youth-and-rejuv. clients weren't apt to notice them.

"I think our worst slip-up was the time Frechette left us and picked up a carton of Anzee seeds on the way out. Our technicians didn't miss the small container until they checked their inventories and found one missing. If you ever saw chaos explode over the scene, it did that day! Even then, we didn't suspect Frechette at first. After all, he knew the awful consequences of handling the seeds carelessly.

"No doubt he planned to bootleg them to an accomplice and pass the secret of the Anzee seeds along to his fellow Terrans. Maybe he thought he could develop a center like Trysis and compete with Ormand. The fool!

"The Anzee plants grown from a prepared seed never produce the essence we use. They just grow thick, rank stalks. It takes the careful nurturing of measured exposure to the sun on Anzee. The special rays that sun pours onto the planet, Anzee, does something to the seeds. *Then* they are cross-pollinated and carefully tended so they never grow more than three inches high. I wonder how Frechette thought he could work that end of the deal and vend his merchandise, too.

"Anyway, he failed to contact his partner in the twenty

years we didn't hear from him. This bit no one knows for sure. When he called us on his two-way wrist-radio, he was close to his mortal end. He said 'fate' had caught up with him. There was no way to get the seeds back to us in time after he was run over.

"He couldn't let that fascist Korm find the seeds in his coat after he was dead, and he couldn't leave them to scatter spores over Metropolis. So he had to offer them to you, Dorashi, and get you to leave your apartment for a few days. He told us we'd have to contact you to get them back.

"Oh, he described you perfectly. We just couldn't find you.

"Talk about running in circles. Fifteen of us from Trysis ran in overlapping circles hunting and searching that town over, looking for you. Your small tenement room was ripped apart, board by board, and put together again to be sure that no stray seed had fallen by the wayside there.

"We had a ten day visa that assured us of freedom from Korm's minions for that long. But when nine days were up, most of us flew home. Not to give up the search, but to bring reinforcements from Trysis. We had some idea other equipment and a helicopter might aid us to scout the area. We certainly didn't consider looking around the countryside. No one even thought you might be wandering around the empty country. No one intended to give up until we recovered all of the seeds. Ormand never considered less.

"As the leader, and the member most responsible for their recovery, he was the last one to leave Metropolis. What whim caused him to hire a car when he checked out of the Inn, we'll never know and he didn't explain. Anyway, he was heading away from town, full of consternation at our failure, when he looked up and saw this ragged hitchhiker climbing up onto the edge of the highway.

"Amazed at this last minute reprieve, he bellowed 'I've got him! I've got him! Stand by!' into his two-way radio.

"He backed up and picked you up. The soggy bag you threw on the floor of his car was reeking with the odor of Anzee weeds.

"Ormand kept his radio tuned to Trysis so we could monitor his progress across the country and make preparations for his arrival.

"Incidentally, we store the Anzee pellets in sterile vacuum capsules, then refig them at low temps to be sure they stay in the condition we get them.

"The lumpy bag you threw so casually into Ormand's car

was alive with Anzee spores. The mushroom-like growths had been coddled in the dark warmth of your dew-drenched bag and had sprouted turgid growths that were seeking a way out. After the week or ten days you had been wandering the countryside, the fungi had spawned enough woody stems to fill his whole car.

"When Ormand led you up to the penthouse, here at Trysis, three technicians and I carried the bag carefully to a sterile laboratory dugout that we had prepared especially for the purpose, and destroyed the whole bit with laser beams.

"Oh, the plastic straw was a common variety and easily replaced. By crumpling it a little and inserting some plastic pellets, you could hardly detect the difference unless you had inspected it closely. And you never did.

"Most of these things we've kept quiet about; but if I don't explain why you must watch Trysis carefully, you may not bother.

"I think you will make a good third man on our team, better than any others we've tried. I've thought so for a long time. If I can convince Ormand, I'll try swooping back again, give old Trysis a quick once-over for safe keeping, and talk you into the deal. So think it over, pal, and keep an eye out for me."

The letter was signed "Falame, Prah Fashik mod Noda."

I had already decided to stay at Trysis by the time I found Fasial's letter. There was no reason for me to make the painful change back to Terran modes of living.

After living prodigally for 185 years as a young man of 27, I was astounded to find how fast a short forty years raced by. Now I am nearing a true seventy. Tired out, rheumatic and old, I still pace the area of Trysis regularly.

The velvety lawns are gone long ago. The buildings are slowly falling into disrepair, and the sandstone cliffs that screened the resort from the highway loom high and stark now that the trees have withered and died. I cross the parched sandy walks and inspect the crannies and dark nooks and hope I have not missed a long-dormant sprout.

One nascent seed could hide along the cliffs, grow to maturity, coddle its strength, reseed and multiply, burst into bloom at some propitious moment and fling the seedling spores to the ravening winds. No force on earth could contain them, then.

But I don't know what kind of a plant or spore I'm looking

for. A green ivy or a white toadstool, likely, but it could be a blue fungus. I expect I'll never find out, unless Fasia! shows up again, soon.

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