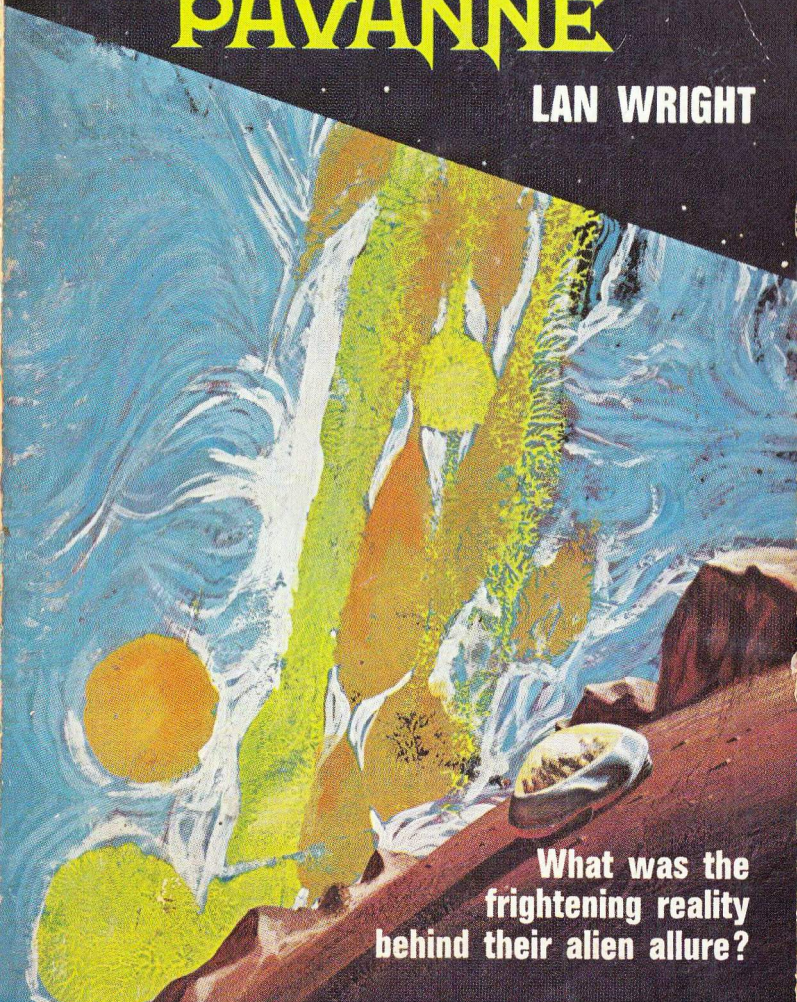


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THE PICTURES OF PAVANNE

LAN WRIGHT



What was the
frightening reality
behind their alien allure?

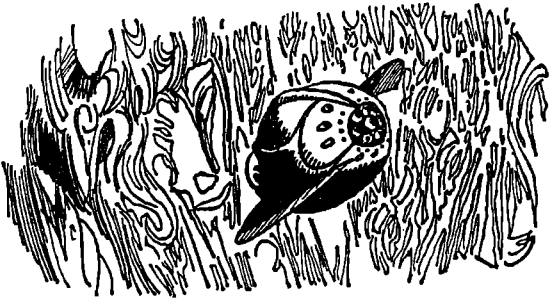
They were a miracle to behold. A visual mystery, a beatific, hypnotizing ever-changing art form.

Max Farway, the brilliant Terran artist, was destined to try to capture their majesty on canvas. The wealthy but physically deformed artist was obsessed by the Pictures of Pavanne.

He traveled to the barren planet, that had only the tourist city of Pavanne cultivated and adapted to human needs. It was a carnival town, trapping tourists by the millions from the entire galaxy. And Harkrider was the master of Pavanne.

Harkrider controlled the planet, and amassed fortunes through the allure of the bewitching Pictures. Yet somehow, this omnipotent master of Pavanne was afraid—afraid of Max Farway, who unknowingly held the answer to the devastating perplexity of the Pictures of Pavanne. . . .

Turn this book over for
second complete novel



THE PICTURES OF PAVANNE

by

LAN WRIGHT

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1120 Avenue of the Americas
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I

MAX FARWAY stood in the sunshine and felt the warmth of it on his bare head. Beneath his feet was white concrete, and beneath the concrete the brown, moist soil of his native Earth.

I've been away too long, he thought, and the beauty of it welled inside him as he looked at the distant range of green hills that were hazed by their own remoteness and by the heat of early afternoon.

Slowly and painfully he made his way across the few short yards from the Lunar ferry to the ground car that would take him and the other passengers to the control buildings at the edge of the field. He had been deliberate in being the last to leave the ferry since his slow progress from his berth to the entrance would have been an embarrassment to him as well as his fellow travelers—not that he cared very much about their feelings. Now, he realized, he'd made a mistake. He had to board the ground car under the covert gaze of fifty men and women who watched with pity and curiosity as he hoisted his shortened leg painfully up the few steps. He moved crabwise along the central gangway and eased himself into the one vacant seat beside a plump, sweating Terran who shifted irritably.

Farway felt the resentment bite at him. It was an old and familiar acidity, but one which grew more hateful with the passing; and yet it held him like a drug, to be repeated and repeated with growing addiction.

Bitterly and deliberately he edged his body more firmly on the seat, and felt a masochistic delight as the other tried to avoid the physical contact that Farway was forcing upon him.

"I don't have leprosy," snapped Farway, his voice loud enough for the rest of the passengers to hear.

The man reddened and smiled as if Farway had made a joke, but his embarrassment was all too clear. It spread from him in waves so that it affected everyone. The mile long trip to the control center was made in a miasma of silence that had Farway as the center of its being. He sat in the middle of it and hugged his secret delight.

The formalities at the control center were swift and efficient. Outside, in the wide patio lounge, friends and relatives of the new arrivals waited to welcome them. Men and women kissed and shook hands; said their farewells to ship-board companions of the past few weeks; greeted and were greeted by those who had come to meet them.

Only Farway seemed alone.

He threaded his way between the chattering groups, aware that conversation stopped as he passed, to be resumed with an even greater and more frenetic animation after he had gone. He knew that the incongruity of the giant human porter, whom he had hired to carry his luggage at huge and quite unnecessary expense, did much to emphasize his dwarfish ugliness. As always, he fed on the pain and the embarrassment.

Beyond the cool lounge lay the open courtyard and the sun. Close to the main exit stood the white copter with the Farway symbol gleaming red upon its side. It was a great deal closer, Farway noted, than the regulations allowed, and its positioning was such that he had only a score of meters to walk before he was greeted by the white overalled pilot.

"Mr. Farway, sir." The pilot topped him by a good half a foot as he saluted smartly.

Farway ignored the salute. "Let's get home." With no little difficulty he climbed up into the interior of the copter.

He settled himself in one of the passenger seats, his legs dangling and short of the floor. The pilot followed him and paused hesitantly beside the seat.

"Well?" asked Farway. "Have you forgotten how to fly this machine?"

If only the man would answer him back. If only he would show some fire. But no! There was a flush to his cheeks, a nervous smile to his lips. Beyond that—nothing!

"Sir!" The smile was replaced by a nervous solemnity. "Sir, I have to tell you before we leave the field. Your father died during the night."

Strangely, there was nothing.

Farway examined his emotions with his usual care and deliberation. He was clinical in all his self-examinations since his emotions were the things which he enjoyed most. He could feed upon them, enjoy them, nurture them; he could hate them, detest them, feel disgust or pleasure or pain. They were never buried or submerged; they were to be savored and prolonged even to the point where, long afterwards, he could recall every nuance that touched each nerve within him.

His father was dead. Max Farway examined himself. There was nothing.

The pilot hesitated, shifting from one foot to another, but Farway ignored him. Perhaps there would be some fatuous expression of sympathy; the man might even ask if there was anything he could do. What can be done for the dead? Farway wondered. They die and are buried, and that is an end to it. One day, he would lie on a bed and stare at a ceiling with eyes that would grow blank as the curtains were drawn across them for the last time. The heart would lie quiet at last; the blood would cease to flow; the brain would lose its hold on consciousness. His twisted limbs would relax as they had never relaxed in life. There was sybaritic delight in the thought of no more pain, no more ugliness.

When I die the world dies with me, thought Farway.

The pilot moved away silently, and a few moments later the copter lifted itself into the clear blue sky and headed away from the field toward home.

Farway dozed a little. The sunshine was hot through the unshaded window but he made no effort to close the blind. He had not felt true sunshine for almost six years; it warmed his body and loosened his muscles. The heat and color of a score of alien stars were embroidered on his mind, but none of them held the comfort that was carried in the golden haze flooding upon his native planet.

He awoke when the altered beat of the motors told him that they were nearing their destination, and his eyes opened in time to catch the panorama of the Farway home as they swooped upon it.

Six years and a dozen worlds; and now he was home again.

There were servants and lackeys; a small car took him from the landing field; there were men to see to his luggage; a man to drive the car; another to take his elbow and assist him up the wide, marble steps that led up to the great porticoed entrance.

"Get the hell away from me," snarled Farway, and reveled in the bitter acid of rejection.

At the top step he half stumbled, and would have fallen but for the steadying hand that seized him. Again he shook it away and passed through the wide doorway into the great house that he knew as home.

Inside the vast entrance hall he paused for several long seconds to savor the moment of return. The sun cast light and shade across the gleaming plastic floor and up the curving sweep of the wide staircase. As always the long windows were devoid of drapes, and there was an air of austerity that was belied by the opulence of statuary and carving around the walls.

Farway followed one of the servants up the stairs, walking in his usual crabwise and ungainly fashion. At the head of the broad upper corridor the double doors to his father's room were closed and draped in black. He hesitated before them for a second and then turned resolutely toward his own room that lay in the other direction at the far end of the corridor.

As the door closed behind him the room enfolded him like a mother; it was the same as it had been on the day he left. There, on the platform below the great arch of the window, stood the shortened easel with the untouched canvas virginal upon it. The same dirty, multicolored rag hung from one of the supporting pegs; the paints and palette lay on the dirty work table; the brushes—carefully cleaned—stood in their appointed places. On the far side, away from the great window, his low bed was carefully made ready for his occupancy, and beside it, set into the wall, the three short shelves that held no more than fifty books—books that he had read and read again through the long, painful years of his youth.

In one corner stood the metal sticks with the plastic tips at the ends; once these had been his sole means of propulsion. Beside them, unstrung, the shortened metal bow—a relic of the time when he had tried to take his place with other youngsters in the craze of that particular year. Remembrance brought pain to tear at him, but he clung to it and savored it, recalling each humiliation, each hurt,

each ribald joke. Then he put them all away until another time and another remembrance.

Farway stood for a long time and allowed the atmosphere of the room to envelop him. He grew back into it like a hermit crab into its shell, and when—finally—he felt at peace he left the room and went back along the corridor toward that other door, closed and black clad, at the head of the stairway.

It wasn't locked.

He turned the ornamental brass handle and went inside. The light was somber from shadowed windows that kept out the afternoon sun; there was a faint, almost intangible antiseptic, an aura of after-death that chilled him.

"So—you have come at last, Max." The voice shocked him and his eyes sought the speaker sitting, lonely, beside the bulk of the four-poster bed. His stepmother's voice was strong and untroubled as it had always been. Even death, so it seemed, could not bend her with its weight.

"You have come too late."

"I know." He paused; then, in expiation, "I came as soon as it was humanly possible."

"He was four weeks in the dying." She rose from her seat beside the bed and came toward him, her clothes rustling as she moved. "Four weeks while he waited for you to come, until finally he could wait no longer."

Farway shuffled toward the bed so that he could look at the lined, patrician face with its too-long nose and chin. In death the lines that he recalled were gone and the skin was as smooth and untroubled as a young boy's. The gray eyes were closed and there was a pinkness to the cheeks that held more of life than ever Farway remembered from before.

"You need never have gone away, Max."

"Yes, I did." He turned away from the corpse. "You know I did. He smothered me with his guilt—"

"He only did what he thought was right. Max, you could have helped." There was no reproach in her voice. "He loved you perhaps even more than he loved me."

"Then why didn't he kill me at birth?" Farway lashed the words at her with a viciousness that surprised even himself. "He spawned me, protected me, tortured me, forced me into a world that turns its face every time I appear."

"He loved you." The words were a shocked and whispered protest.

"He loved his guilt. He fed it and nourished it—made

it grow into what he called love. Then he watched over me and protected me, and in that way he salved his guilt and his conscience. And I?" Farway lifted his shoulders in a small, helpless gesture. "I was the puppet tied with strings to his efforts at salvation."

"You misjudge him badly, Max."

"No." He shook his head. "He misjudged himself. He could never understand what it meant to be the way I am. Do you know, Alicia, he never once asked me?"

"How do you ask a think like that?"

"It's simple. I ask it all the time." He smiled and the smile blossomed into a chuckle. "I say to myself, what is it like to be a five foot dwarf with a twisted spine and one shortened leg, with overlong arms and a cretin's head? And then I look at the people around me. I force them to look at me, to notice me, to see me. And then I know what it's like because I can see it written in their faces."

Farway turned from her and looked back at the shadowed bed. In the death room, suddenly, and for the first time in his whole thirty-five years of life, he knew for certain what he was. The pain that welled within him was something fresh and frightening; it blossomed and grew into a brilliant and horrible flame; there was a new beauty to pain and suffering that Farway had never known before. Twin streams of tears made their marks down his smooth, hairless cheeks, and the salt of them tainted his lips.

"I hated him," he whispered, "and the more he loved me the more I hated him."

Alicia Farway was sobbing softly, and her sobs pulsed to the rhythm of his own tears.

"I hope to God he rots in hell! I hope to God that I am there to see it!"

II

FARWAY DIDN'T GO to the funeral two days later; instead, he stood in the giant window of his studio room and looked down upon the men and women who had assembled for the occasion.

From his aerie it seemed like a gathering of saurians upon some reptilian feast. They came in their private copters and walked from the landing field up the long straight road between the acres of lawns and the giant trees. Men and women in the traditional weeds of mourning, they walked slowly and deliberately, the great ones of Earth come to bid farewell to a dead brother. Some Farway recognized: friends and relatives whom he should have greeted, people he hadn't seen these six or more years gone.

There was that perversity of his nature that gave him pleasure to know that they would be embarrassed by his absence. His stepmother, Alicia Farway, had done nothing to try and persuade him, and he had felt a grudging admiration that—in her grief—she would not plead or cajole or wheedle. She neither asked nor demanded; neither did she reproach either by word or by implication.

After the cortege had left Farway turned to his paints and his pictures.

There were many that he had brought with him, legacies of his wanderings among the man-worlds of the Galaxy. Some were completed, needing only the final glister of preparation; others were half finished, laid aside until his inner eye should see what was needed to make them live and breathe with his own special talent. Soon he would send for Magnus and show him what he had created, and Magnus—with his clumsy hands and artist's soul—would weep his pathetic tears of envy, would drool like a glutton after six years of starvation. Then he would take them away to his gallery and sell them for fantastic prices.

Farway wasn't interested in the money that Magnus garnered in this fashion; he wasn't interested in the fact that Magnus took a fifty percent commission; but it amused him to see how the art dealer's boisterously artistic sensitivity could so rapidly turn to a pawnbroker's quickness for a fast deal. Magnus had spent the six years of Farway's absence bombarding him with tapes and letters and video-grams, pleading that Farway should send on whatever work he had created. The communications had ranged from the angry to the pleading, from the threatening to the demanding—and Farway had ignored them all.

He spent all that afternoon and the greater part of the evening working on a multicolored rock scene from the satellite of Melladore. The fantastically rich colors of the tumbled satellite surface contrasted so vividly with the deep,

star scattered depths of space that Farway had spent a long time and a lot of money trying to capture the alien beauty that he'd seen first from the viewport of a privately hired vessel.

The picture hadn't been finished, but he knew that he held inside him the means to complete it when the right time came. He had left Melladore and moved on to the Rigel sun and its three human clad planets.

Now, the time was come; the beauties of Melladore's small satellite would flow from him to completion over the next hours or days or weeks. There would be a compulsive flood of emotion and talent to be translated into color on the canvas before him; and when it was completed he would be drained and empty, run-down and exhausted mentally and physically. Then would come the satisfaction and the delight, the knowledge he had created something which no one else could create, and people would look at it and measure him by what they saw in the painting.

In his creations Max Farway was a whole man.

He didn't know when the funeral party finally broke up. He was too engrossed to pay heed to the whine and drone of the departing copters. The night came down over the Farway estate, and suddenly it was too dark for him to see; for the present the spell was broken.

He covered the canvas and cleaned the brushes carefully; stretched his twisted body and tried to ease the aching muscles which seemed to have taken on their own perverse pains. There was liquor in a cabinet and he poured himself a large glass before relaxing on the half propped pillows of his corner bed. The old, familiar emptiness was there now that the spell was broken, and he knew that he would have to wait until the urge was there again. It wouldn't be long, probably tomorrow when he was refreshed by a night of rest.

After a while he drained the glass and limped across to the door leading to his shower room. The water was hot and luxurious, and he reveled in it until his skin took on a lobster red tint and he could feel the sweat breaking out even through the all-pervading slash of the needle jets.

He dried himself and dressed, then he left the studio room and limped along the wide carpeted corridor. The guests had all gone and there was no sign of any of the servants. He walked crabwise down the curved length of the stairway, and cursed his father for having been a lover of the old ways. The house was large and comfortable; it

was also antediluvian and antique. The old man had never even installed a grav-shaft for the convenience of the family or guests; food was still prepared in an outdated mausoleum called a "kitchen" by an ancient, white clad servant who performed mysterious rites with fire and with gleaming pots and pans. As a rich man his father had been entitled to his foibles and eccentricities, but Farway was determined that if ever he lived at home again and with any permanency then there would be considerable changes.

But not yet—the house would go to Alicia during her lifetime, together with a large income to support her in luxury. As for the remainder, Max Farway knew that he had all the money he could ever use, and that the Farway Foundation would see to it that the fruits of his father's economic genius would continue to grow and prosper.

Farway paused at the bottom of the stairs, breathing heavily from the effort of moving from one step to another. Bitterly, he wished that there was some devil to whom he might sell his soul; it was such a small thing to pay so that he might be as other men. All the money in the entire galaxy . . . He pushed the thoughts away. This was no time to indulge in his usual bout of self-pity for there was no audience; there was nobody to embarrass.

He crossed the wide acres of the main hall toward the library. There, amid settings of wood and leather, dark and aged with the airs of centuries, his father had gathered his treasures, his books, pictures, antiques and curios. Farway remembered from the old days that the room was a treasure house of the past, and—whatever criticism he might have of the old man—there was no doubting his feeling for the past and for the beauty of individual objects.

During the two days since his return Farway had resisted the temptation, but now the door carried an invitation to enter that was irresistible. The wood was dark and grained, carved with ancient oak leaves, and adorned with heavy brass. It was riddled and disfigured with the marks of antiquity that enhanced the need to open it and see what lay beyond. The old man had called it his "doorway to the past," and that was how Farway thought of it.

Inside, the room was in darkness, but as he moved to operate the lights Farway noticed light at the far end of the room. It was small and unrecognizable, coming as he had from the brilliance of the hall. He closed the door, wondering who was there, and at the sound his step-mother's voice called, "Who is it?"

"Max." So, this was her refuge now.

"Come in, Max. Can you see well enough? Please don't put on the lights."

He crossed the length of the wide room by guess and by remembrance, trusting that there had been few changes during the years he had been away. Once he knocked against an unfamiliar table with his right knee, but there was enough light now for him to find his way, and the room had changed but little as far as he could tell.

Alicia was seated in a large, tapestry covered chair with a high, winged back; it was one that he remembered. Before her on a low table was a tridiscscope, a small reproducer flaring with brilliant color and light and movement as it transmitted impulses from a recorder to recreate in miniature a scene of brilliance and alien beauty that Farway recognized at once. It flickered and changed perspective even as he looked at it, seeming to move with its own peculiar life as the impulses bestowed motion to the ion particles within the crystal tube.

Farway eased himself into a chair, seating himself carefully as he always did.

"The Pictures of Pavanel!" He said it almost without thinking, a rhetorical statement drawn from him by an inner stirring of something that was less than emotion. Then, to cover it, he asked, "These are yours, Alicia?"

Her dress rustled as she moved. "No, your father's. I was remembering . . ." She paused as a tremor shook her voice. "He was planning to visit Pavanne later this year. Now . . ."

The patterns moved and fell into new positions, each one emphasizing the strange and fantastic convolutions of light and color and life that flowed from the greatest of the Galaxy's many wonders—the two mile square alien artifact known as the Pictures of Pavanne.

Farway sat quietly and watched; within him there grew a deep longing, an ache that became so unbearable that it threatened to engulf him. He sat and clutched his hands into sweating knots of tension.

The miniature reproductions flowed and moved, now close up, now far off the surface of the planet named Pavanne; now from the right, now from the left; above, below; each angle showing a different aspect and a different beauty, a new face and a new form. The quietness within the room grew into something almost tangible as the climax approached.

Farway had seen it before, in miniature, and his whole

body tensed with expectation as he recognized the first faint flickering of light which told him that the blue-white star that made up half of Pavanne's stellar parents—the other was a normal G-type sun—was about to move into position so that its light would be radiated by the flat surface of the Pictures. There was a pulsating brilliance which grew slowly, spreading and moving with an alien and beautiful life, a great flower that blossomed and grew to a breath destroying radiance as the blue star moved across the face of the planet and cast its light directly upon the Pictures of Pavanne.

Suddenly, it was over.

The miniature fantasy faded and died; the Pictures returned to their normal awe-inspiring beauty; the tridiscscope glimmered and fell dead; the show was over.

Alicia stirred and touched a button beside the chair so that the library lights glowed into being. The room seemed cold and dead after the beauty that had been with them so recently.

"Now," she said, almost to herself, "he'll never see them."

On a wall behind her Farway saw a new picture, one that had not been there six years earlier. A giant, two meter square canvas, it was set in the center of the wall directly over the antique Adam fireplace. With the room lights on, it dominated the room, and Farway recognized it at once. It was the work of Aylett Panvlevi, the greatest artist for the past two hundred years. Pahlevi's recreation of the Pictures of Pavanne was the final work of its creator, and it was recognized as the only one of thousands upon thousands of artistic representations that even came near to reproducing the fantastic beauty of that alien scene.

Aylett Pahlevi had spent nine years painting it, and when it was finished he had committed suicide out of sheer artistic frustration.

"It must have cost a fortune," whispered Farway.

"Such was his obsession." Alicia caught the line of his looking. "With an obsession like that of your father for the Pictures of Pavanne money was of little consequence."

"Obsession?" His father was the last person to move away from the cold, hard facts of economic advancement and venture into the realms of artistic obsession. "With them? With the Pictures?"

"For almost five years he talked of little else. He read about them, studied them, talked to experts. Finally, last year, he decided that he had to visit them. When he fell

ill he was in the middle of the final arrangements so that the Foundation could function while he was away." She rose and walked across to one of the tiers of bookshelves which lined the walls. "All of these"—she waved a hand in an all-embracing gesture—"are books and tapes and records about Pavanne, about the planet, the twin stars, the Pictures."

It was an astounding collection for one man—even a rich man—to have amassed in so short a space of time as five years. Obsession! Yes, thought Farway, that had to be the word; obsession, i.e., to haunt, to fill the mind.

"Have you seen them?" asked Alicia. "What are they like?"

"No." He shook his head. "No. I never seemed to get around to it."

She turned her head, her eyes the mirror for her surprise. "No? But I thought the Pictures were the ultimate mecca for anyone with an artistic soul?"

Was there a hint of sarcasm? A gentle irony? Perhaps he wanted to detect it even if it wasn't there.

Irritably, he snapped, "It was too far off. There was always something else." He couldn't remind her of Pahlevi and his frustration; he hardly admitted to himself that he was afraid of the challenge presented by the Pictures of Pavanne. Oh, he had looked at them often, just as he had done a few minutes ago. His whole being had ached with longing. A dozen times he had made up his mind to take the months' long trip across the star lanes, to join the flood of sightseers and tourists, some of whom had saved for a lifetime merely to spend a few days on an alien world looking at an alien artifact.

"I believe you're afraid of them." She said it softly and with a wonder that twisted Farway's stomach. "Max! I can see it in your face. You're frightened."

"Rubbish! Your husband's death has you seeing things." Her face stiffened and the knowledge that he had hurt her removed his own pain and gave him a momentary burst of pleasure that he was tempted to prolong. Instead, he lifted himself painfully from the chair and limped toward the door. "You're tired, Alicia. It's been a long day. Follow my example and go to bed."

He knew that she was watching him as he left the library.

The stairway was much more of an effort than it had been earlier, and when he reached his room he slammed the door angrily behind him. At least the old house had one means of releasing his nervous tension that wasn't present

in modern hotels. The quietly sliding, automatically operated doors carried their own built-in frustrations.

He crossed to the platform which bore the easel. He lifted the cover from the Melladore painting and looked at the almost completed work. It was flat, dead, arid. A pitiful daub drawn by the hand of a stumbling cripple. Anger and longing welled inside him as he knew that he would never look at it again as he had looked at it before. The spark was dead, destroyed by that tridivision he had seen in the library. The Pictures of Pavanne! He knew now why Pahlevi had killed himself. The man had spent nine years creating his finest work, and when that nine years was ended he had looked at it and seen that it was nothing—absolutely nothing. So Aylett Pahlevi had died, and they called it suicide!

Farway picked up a palette knife from the desk behind the platform. Slowly, and with infinite care, he slashed the Melladore painting to shreds.

III

WITH ALMOST scientific predictability, Willem Magnus descended on the Farway estate the next day.

Max Farway had expected him to arrive for the funeral, and when the scrawny, bald-headed art dealer had failed to put in an appearance Farway guessed that the only reason was that even Magnus hadn't sufficient gall to start talking business while the funeral service was in progress. Had Magnus showed up it would have been almost impossible for him to have refrained from talk of pictures and money and percentages. Thus—and predictably—Magnus flew in at midday.

One of the servants announced his presence, but Farway did not even disturb himself from his bed. He had Magnus brought up to his room.

And that, he realized, was a mistake; there was nothing he could do about it, though, because realization only came as the door opened and the cadaverous, six foot three of Willem Magnus was ushered upon him.

"Max! My boy, my boy! After all these years!" Magnus

and platitudes went together. "You've lost a fortune—I tell you, a fortune." He crossed to the bed and literally seized Farway's right hand in his own two claws, pumping away with all the exuberance of a long lost relative returned to the bosom of his family.

Farway allowed him to vent his seeming pleasure with ill grace, and wondered—not for the first time—how he had allowed himself to become so intimately involved with such an artistic culture as Magnus.

"I tell you—a fortune," cried Magnus. "I wrote to you. I told you. Didn't I tell you, Max? Your paintings are in vogue. I can sell all that you can paint. The critics—I told you about the critics, I told you about Arnold Horne? No, no, I didn't, because he only wrote about you a few weeks ago."

"Willem," broke in Farway wearily. "Please sit down and talk coherently."

Unwillingly, Magnus sank into a chair.

"Now," said Farway. "This Arnold Horne, what did he say?"

"He said you were marvelous." The claw-like hands fluttered extravagantly. "He said you were the greatest of the living artists."

Farway allowed himself to bask in the glory of the words. He knew of Arnold Horne by reputation only; the man was the new lion of the art world, the scourge of mediocrity. His reputation had flown out across space to the stars, so that the name of Arnold Horne was synonymous with talent and with taste; the new artistic renaissance climbed aloft on the burly shoulders of Arnold Horne.

"He said that, one day, you would be as good as Aylett Pahlevi." Magnus uttered the tribute in the hushed voice of a man in the presence of God.

For Farway the spell was broken. He felt sick and weak. So this was the ultimate accolade! His eyes moved involuntarily toward the easel upon which stood the Melladore, covered now, hidden from prying eyes—from all, that was, save those of Willem Magnus.

He must have caught Farway's sudden change of mood; he noted the shifted gaze, the taut pain in the cripple's face. Before Farway could stop him he had risen to his feet and crossed with two large strides to the platform beneath the high arch of the window.

"What is this? Your latest, Max? Can I see it? But of course—" As he spoke his right hand twitched the cover

up and back to reveal the slashed ribbons of canvas swaying under the impetus of the sudden movement. He looked at it with an expression of pure horror spreading over his sunken cheeks and lantern jaw. "Oh, Max! No, no! Max, what have you done?"

"It was rubbish," Farway snapped sourly.

"No, it was good; that much I can see. Very good. Max, why did you do it?"

Farway threw off the bedclothes and tottered on his twisted legs toward the platform. Without his special boots he knew that he looked even more ludicrous than was normal, but the stress of the situation forced him into actions which he would not usually have contemplated. Angrily, he jerked the cover back into position.

"I told you, it was rubbish. Now, mind your own damned business. Get out of here and let me get dressed."

"Max," wailed Magnus. "After all this time—"

"Get out, damn you," snarled Farway. "I'll see you downstairs when I'm ready."

As the art dealer left, Farway realized that he was trembling uncontrollably.

He showered and completed his dressing in a frenzy of ill temper. Damn Magnus! Why in heaven's name had he ever had anything to do with the man? At first their relationship had amused Farway; there had been a certain egotism in having one of the leading art dealers of Earth pester him for his work. For whatever else he might be Magnus only acted on behalf of painters and sculptors who had some genius to offer. He had no use for commercial flash and glitter; if he acted as agent on behalf of anyone then that person had something to offer which set him above and apart from the ordinary ruck. To be chosen by Willem Magnus was akin to receiving the royal accolade.

Farway had visited his private gallery in London on many occasions. It was a small, single shop in a massive block which housed the offices of the Farway Foundation. The ground and basement floors were taken over entirely by the monolithic, streamlined emporia of the mass sales organizations, and—for that reason if for no other—the Magnus Gallery was unique. It was the only place of its kind within the bounds of the financial heart of London.

Behind the plain frontage and beyond the electronic doors was a veritable treasure house of modern art. Here, too, Magnus was unique. He never dealt in anything that was more than fifty years old. By tricks of lighting and

display, settings and surroundings, he used his own artistic sense to create the maximum effect for each and every article he had for sale. Yet, individual though each set piece might be, there was an overall light and color of a brilliance and splendor that seemed to hypnotize prospective customers into buying. His effects were outrageous, but his success was phenomenal.

By the time he had dressed Farway had cooled a little. He left the attic studio and limped along the corridor and down the wide stairs.

Inside the library he saw that Magnus was standing before the Pahlevi painting, and he knew to within a letter how the conversation would go. His ill temper came flooding back.

"Max." Magnus didn't turn from his intense study of the picture. "Max, I never knew your father owned this. He kept it very quiet. I suppose it is yours now, eh?"

"No," said Farway irritably. "It belongs to the estate."

"Ah, well." Magnus chuckled deprecatingly. "You know what I mean, eh? Would it—perhaps—be for sale?"

"No, it wouldn't."

Magnus turned away from the picture and looked at Farway from under the bony crags of his jutting brow. "Is that why you carved up your own work?" He lifted his head to indicate the attic studio. "Ah, that Pahlevi, he was mad, Max. You don't want to take notice of what he did or did not do."

Farway sank into an easy chair and glowered broodingly at the magnificent scene. Atom by atom, stroke by stroke, color by color, Pahlevi had built up that two meter patch of genius; he had poured into it nine years of his life and energy; and when he had finished he had decided that it was all in vain.

"He did the best that any man could," said Magnus quietly.

"And yet—to him—it wasn't enough."

"Is that why you're frightened of the Pictures?"

Farway snapped his head around in surprise. "Frightened of it? What the devil—?"

"I can see it in your face, Max."

"You've been talking to that bitch of a stepmother of mine—"

"Alicial" Magnus shook his head. "No, I haven't seen her yet. I came straight to you. She has said the same thing, is that it? Then it must be true."

Farway said nothing, but the wrath seethed inside him like a furnace.

Magnus seated himself in a chair to one side of Farway and studied the Pahlevi. "In all those six years away from Earth you never went near to Pavanne, did you?"

"I had other things to do, places to go, pictures to paint."

"Is that what you told Alicia? But everyone goes to Pavanne if they have the time and the money. You have both. Max, I don't understand you. The greatest work of art in the known Universe, an alien creation of incredible beauty, and yet you—who revere art and beauty with every fiber of your being, never got within twenty light-years of the place." Magnus turned his head, a frown creasing his high, craggy brows. "And now, this painting you've destroyed—"

"It's none of your damned business," snapped Farway.

"Arnold Horne thinks more highly of you than you do yourself.

"The self-denigration of the true artist," Farway sneered. "Without it we are nothing."

"Rubbish! Every artist is an egotist. He has to be or else he would never even attempt to rival the works of the nature. And yet, they do it. When they succeed they create something that even nature cannot duplicate. That is the true genius of an artist, Max. You, of all people, should have learned that lesson."

"The Pictures of Pavanne are not a work of nature."

"Ah, so we're back to them. All right, so they are the work of some long dead alien race. A monument, perhaps, to the fact that they passed this way millions of years in the past."

"Ozymandias, king of kings!"

Magnus chuckled. "Not quite, Max. The Pictures of Pavanne will last as long as the planet itself. It took only the desert sands to bring down your Egyptian king."

Farway grunted; with every passing second he wished that he had refused to see Magnus.

The art dealer said, "Have you ever thought that Arnold Horne might be right?"

"About what?"

"About you. Perhaps you are already as good as Aylett Pahlevi. After all, Horne's judgment was several years out of date. It is based upon the works you created before you went off on your travels. You must have improved out of

all recognition, if that slashed canvas is anything to go by. Max, Max! Why did you do it?" The claws waved in despair, and the cadaverous head wagged from side to side in mournful disgust. "I tell you, Max, it was good. Even from those shreds of canvas I could see. And I think Arnold Horne is right. I think you are as good as Pahlevi—perhaps you are even better."

Pahlevi! Pahlevi! Farway wondered if the man's ghost was about to walk into the room. He sat and looked at the books and the tapes in their ranked shelves around two sides of the great room. There, on the table, was the tridiviewer where Alicia had left it from the previous night. On the wall before him was Pahlevi's painting. All around him were mementos of the one thing in the Universe that he had avoided during his long years of wandering. It seemed that, in death, his father had bequeathed to him that which he held dearest, that thing which Alicia had called obsession. Now, here was Magnus to drive it home a little deeper and a little more painfully.

"Perhaps you will succeed where Pahlevi failed," Magnus said softly.

"Failed?" cried Farway. "You call that failure?" He rose from his chair, open and derisive laughter twisted his thin lips. "Nine years of a man's life, Willem, and you call it failure!"

"Not I. Pahlevi himself called it failure by killing himself. "But you—you've known pain and disappointment all your life. One more failure couldn't hurt you, Max, not in the way that it hurt Pahlevi."

Damn you, thought Farway. Damn you to hell and back! With your skull head and your claw hands; yet even you are more a man than ever I shall be. And I know you, Magnus, your thief's soul . . .

Aloud he said, "Your confidence is touching," in words that were deceptively soft as each of them was forced from his thin mouth.

"I know it hurts," said Magnus. "It hurts me in a smaller way that I cannot be like you—a painter, an artist, a creator of something that will last until long after you are dead. It hurts you in a different way, Max, that you are not as other men. You don't have to tell me of the ache inside you. I have it, too, but for different reasons." He stood up slowly, his full lean height towering over Farway. "And I tell you this: I would change places with you this very minute if I had within me the gift of immortality

that is yours." He walked stiffly and slowly across the thickly carpeted floor toward the door, and paused with one hand upon the handle.

"Think about it, Max. I believe that Arnold Horne was right. I believe you are already greater than Aylett Pahlevi."

IV

THE GHOSTS of the past, thought Farway.

He sat quietly in the oasis of the library and thought about the sequence of coincidence that had thrust upon him the Pictures of Pavanne. If only he had stayed away! There had been no real need for him to come home at all. He had done it merely to preserve some semblance of outward respect; but respect for whom? For Alicia? She knew him and would have expected nothing else had he stayed away. His father—already a dying man? He, too, knew his son for what he was. Family? Friends? Farway had few friends—almost none on Earth—and his family had long since written him off as an oddity, a peculiar cross they had to bear in a collective way that was repulsive to each of them individually.

There was a forbidding and overpowering sense of destiny creeping in to surround him; he felt as if he were impelled by outside influences over which he had no control at all. First, there was Alicia, and through her his father; then there was Magnus, and through him Arnold Horne. And with each new contact the ghostly hand and presence of Aylett Pahlevi was forced upon him.

Farway shuddered as a coldness trembled his muscles. He thought of a fantasy wherein the disembodied Pahlevi had taken possession of him, and through his eyes and hands and muscles would try again to create that which he had failed to create during nine years of his former life. Angrily, he thrust the thoughts away; this was fanciful nonsense conjured from the dark recesses of a morbid mind.

He rose unsteadily from the chair and crossed to the large antique desk that stood beneath the wide, bowed library window. The papers on it were stacked neatly, ar-

ranged tidily as if his father's last act had been to put them in order against the day when he would once again be able to sit at the desk and work upon them.

There was a small receiver for tapes and films; a neat file of letters in a red, plastic folder; a visiphone to one side, and a tiny microphone on the other side that led to a hidden recorder; an auto-calendar that was several weeks out of date; a selection of stylopens in a plain metal rack; a tridi-cube of Alicia taken on the day that she had become mistress of the Farway household almost twelve years before.

Time had not robbed her of her beauty, thought Farway. His father had always had an eye for a handsome woman, and he could remember a long succession of them who had been his "aunts" during the painful years of childhood and early youth. Until Alicia!

He recalled their patent disgust at the sight of him; he remembered the small sadistic cruelties of one or two when his father wasn't around. For the most part they ignored him, and not one of them attempted to take the place of the mother who had died in giving him life. Until Alicia!

Farway never knew the truth until he was a grown man, then—gradually—it came out. He learned of the accident that had shattered his mother at a critical period during his conception; he learned of her determination to give his father the child that he wanted so badly. There had been operations, drugs, treatment by the greatest specialists of the day; there had been warnings and grim forebodings; there had been knowledge that she could not have borne another child ever after.

From early youth Farway had lain awake at night and cursed the skill of those who had forced him into life, plucking him from the oblivion which he should have as a matter of right.

His mother died, her child had lived, and not all the skill or knowledge of the medical world could do more than give him life. In the years of his childhood there had been other men to study him, probe him, examine him; there had been discomfort and pain beyond the mere discomfort of his twisted body, and all it had accomplished was to make living just bearable. For Max Farway life was to be lived in the shell which was his inheritance—there was nothing else for him. Except to die!

He sat in the padded chair behind the desk. It was, as it had always been, too large for his shrunken body, and his

legs, damn them, dangled ludicrously. He was as lost in its depths today as he had been as a child.

Placed geometrically in one corner of the desk top was a large, red folder. He reached across the desk and pulled it toward him. On the front was a white square of paper that bore the printed name *Damon Wisepart*. He flicked the limp cover, and the letters within the folder fluttered like white wings successively to rest. What was it that he feared? What strange alchemy bred within him a hatred and a dread of something he had never seen? Something he knew of only by repute, by picture, by three-D representation! And yet it ruled him with almost as great a tyranny as did his own deformed and tortured body.

Alicia had seen it, and so had Magnus. He had to assume that others knew of it even if they did not realize the cause. He must have worn it as he would wear a coat, and yet he hadn't recognized it himself as a conscious piece of raiment. All those years of wandering, and through them all he had stayed away from Pavanne. After six years he had to come home to learn the truth.

He left the chair and limped over to the ranked shelves of books and tapes that Alicia had indicated the night before. There were files and records, books and folders, and as his eyes looked over them he could see that each and every one of them had a single word in common; each and every one bore the word, "Pavanne." Their authors seemed to have possessed a singular lack of imagination in choosing the titles. Farway drew one of them from its resting place, and wondered how different it might be from those on either side of it. What possible difference could there be, one from another? And yet, somehow, his father had found differences. From each one he must have extracted some grain of truth that was lacking in the others.

Alicia had called it obsession, and that seemed to be an understatement in the light of the evidence before his eyes.

Their serried ranks of neat, bright covers made a splash of color against the dark wood of the shelves and panels. The titles and authors showed clearly, ranged unevenly and in a variety of lettering; the repetition of "Pavanne" was small and large, straight and slanted; in black and in gold; cuneiform, italic, and arabic. His eyes fell upon one title and one author, and his memory sought identification that was only momentarily withheld.

The book was *The Mathematical Mystery of Pavanne*. The author was Damon Wisepart!

Farway frowned slightly, his interest aroused. He half turned toward the desk with the red folder on it. Then he reached up awkwardly to take the book down from its resting place. A brief glance at the title page told him that Damon Wisepart was a mathematician of some considerable eminence—if the string of letters after his name was anything to go by. They indicated degrees from almost every leading university in the Solar System. Well, at least they gave credibility to the title of the book, Farway decided; but where did his father fit in? What sort of relationship could he have had with a man like Professor Damon Wisepart?

From the hall the muted sound of a deep bell drew his attention and the clock on the wall told him that it was lunchtime. He replaced the book on its shelf and limped toward the door. Later, he promised himself, he would look more closely into the writings of Damon Wisepart, and into the contents of the red file on his father's desk.

Magnus was already seated when he reached the dining room, and Alicia came in almost immediately through the other door that led in from the terrace.

Magnus rose and bowed to her with an extravagantly theatrical gesture. "Alicia," he told her as they sat down, "this is the only household I know where I enjoy eating. It is the one place where food is naturally and properly prepared. Oh, I know"—the hawk face wagged knowingly—"there are those so-called specialist restaurants where the steaks are fresh killed and the vegetables are grown in the soil. But, I ask you. What are they? Traps for tourists and gawking out of town visitors on a night out." He attacked a large portion of fresh melon with evident gusto. "No, no. I said to myself as I came here, at last I can eat like a human being."

"You talk too much, Willem," Farway broke in sourly.

"A besetting sin, I agree." Magnus took no offense. "But there are other vices, my dear Max, which do far more harm."

"You talk with the air of an expert." Farway drawled the words out sarcastically, and felt the old familiar tide bubble within him, a fierce ecstasy of anticipation. "Are you an expert on other things than art?" He turned to Alicia. "Do you know, my dear stepmother, that in my room not an hour since, this jackal had the nerve to tell me that he envied me? What do you think of that?"

The telltale red points of her cheekbones told him that

she was seeing the danger signs. Quietly, she replied, "You have a great gift, Max. Anyone would be happy to possess it."

"You need a soul to be an artist, to paint, to create," said Farway. "To be a dealer like Magnus here, to trade upon the work of other men, you need only to be able to count."

Magnus threw up his hands in aggravation. "Alicia, I despair," he cried. "We have a genius in our midst who acts like a small boy. You should take him over your knee and spank him." The half humorous laugh that followed only served to infuriate Farway still further.

He lurched to his feet and threw his napkin across the table in a paroxysm of futile temper. "Magnus, I won't stand for it." His voice broke slightly. "I know you; you've talked it over with this—this bitch here, haven't you?"

Magnus stared at him pop-eyed with amazement, his mouth half open in consternation. "Max, you can't—"

"Be quiet, damn you. I know all about it. She told you that I'm frightened of the Pictures. You've been comparing notes behind my back. Well, I'm sick of you both—you hear? Sick, sick, sick! I've been away for six years, and I've not been home for six days before you're at me just as you were before. Hoping to get a nice, fat profit from my paintings. You leech . . . you parasite . . ." His whole body was shaking as the words tumbled from his lips in an uncontrollable flood of hatred and contempt. Only the eyes, gleaming and bright with emotion, told of the masochistic pleasure that bubbled deep inside him.

Magnus was gaping at him in horror, his chalk white face even paler than usual. "Max, Max . . ."

"Shut up! You hear me? Shut up!" He should have staggered from the room now, but some force held him there exulting in the scene which had him as its center.

Alicia sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes looking steadily in front of her; yet even from that angle Farway could read the pity and understanding. The knowledge that she could react like that only served to drive him to an even greater frenzy.

"You think I can't do it, don't you?" he screamed at them. "You think I'm frightened . . . well, I'm not. I've never been frightened of anything in my whole life. And you know why? Because I wish I were dead . . . I wish I'd never been born . . . and if you wish that then there's nothing left for you to be afraid about. There's only hatred to live for; there's only

pleasure in that . . . damn you . . . damn you. . . ." He was fairly frothing at the mouth, aware suddenly of the silence that surrounded him.

Magnus had lost his horror. It was as if some of Alicia's understanding had been absorbed by him. She still sat quiet and made no move.

For Farway, abruptly, there was nothing. The frenzy died, leaving him empty and dazed, his whole body soaked with the sweat of self-induced tension. He collapsed into the chair, his breath bursting from his lungs in great, choking sobs, while tears of frustration fell in rivers down his pale, narrow face. The silence grew into minutes.

"I'll do it." His voice was but a whisper now, barely reaching their ears. "I'll do it just to prove that you are wrong, Magnus . . . and you, Alicia. I'll do what Pahlevi failed to do . . . you hear me? I'll prove to you that you're both wrong. I'll paint the Pictures of Pavanne."

He stumbled upright and turned for the door, his head thrust below the cruel hump of his twisted shoulders, the shortened leg hampering his efforts to get out of the room as rapidly as possible. He hardly remembered the stairs or the carpeted corridor; there was only the sunlight, brilliant, through the wide window of his attic studio, and the softness of the pillow in which he buried his face.

Oh, God, he thought, what have I done?

V

A PAIR of young blackbirds skipped and flirted on the brilliant green grass beneath the dipping arms of a leaf-crowded willow; sunlight dappled the ground with light and shadow. To the casual observer newly come from Earth the sun would have been too bright and the sky too blue, there was an unreal aura to the green of the grass and the leaves of the tree, and yet it satisfied the soul and the mind of Jason Harkrider as he sat in his vast chair and allowed the warmth and the light to envelop him.

On the back of the chair, and looking over his right shoulder, sat the large, hunched shape of a black raven, its

bright eyes cocked acquisitively at the pile of fruit that was scattered untidily on the table adjoining Harkrider's chair. It ruffled its feathers and hunched itself, beak half open in anticipation of the morsels that its master fed it from time to time.

Harkrider reached out with one withered hand and took several grapes from the pile; there were a score or more different fruits from a variety of Terran worlds, and this was the time of day when Harkrider put fruit into his mouth and savored the sharp acidities and the soft sweetnesses of them. He bit into the grape and felt the juices flood his mouth and tongue. The raven croaked, apprehensive lest its own appetite be forgotten, and Harkrider allowed it to snatch three grapes from between his scrawny fingers.

The blackbirds ceased their love dances and fell to pecking at the ground with their beaks, jumping in tiny upward movements as they stabbed and jabbed at the soft soil.

Harkrider watched them with little interest for several more seconds, and then touched a button on the arm of his chair so that the whole scene faded and died. The sunlight disappeared to be replaced by the harshness of artificial radiance. The grass became the brown, carpeted floor, and the willow tree a silken covered divan. In the depths of the great chair machinery grumbled softly to itself as the hidden tubes drew from the body of Jason Harkrider the solids and liquids that his own organs were no longer capable of assimilating.

There was something compulsive about the Earth pictures; they were not among Harkrider's favorite participant scenes, yet it seemed that the soul of every human being needed the periodic soporific of his home planet from time to time. For Harkrider had never been to Earth.

He had been born, he had grown up, and he had slowly decayed here, upon the dead world of Pavanne; and now that Earth called to him with ever-increasing strength and a longing that grew with the passing of time, he was too old and too weak even to consider the idea.

A century and a half of depravity and excesses had taken a harsh toll; Harkrider lived on drugs and was maintained by machines. His pleasures were of the mind rather than of the flesh, and yet he could still taste food like the grape that slid down his throat; his eyes could still see all that he wished; his mind was still sharp, and his tongue still acid.

A machine removed the mashed grape before it could reach his long dead digestive organs; artificial lenses cleared

eyes that were shadowed by infirmity; the false heart did not race with excitements of youth. In a cruel moment—and they were many—one of his daughters had said, “You’re more machine than man, Father, and the more interesting for that.” And the pair of them—each a mirror image of the other—had gone into paroxysms of laughter at his futile discomfiture.

The mere thought of them twisted his lined, wrinkled face into decrepit anger; a line of saliva coursed unheeded down one side of his chin. Jasmine and Jacintha! Never were twin daughters more unhappily named. With their squat bodies and their peasant faces; their straight black hair twisted and coiffured into fantastic and unlovely coils. They were parasites upon Harkrider that he could do little about.

It wouldn’t have been quite so bad, he thought, if they had been able to buy husbands who would—for a price—have taken them from his sight. He remembered the wasted years of effort when he had produced a succession of beautiful, amoral men who might have satisfied them and taken them from Pavanne. Wasted years and wasted money before he realized the perversion which kept them together, and barred them from the male sex.

It was even more repulsive when he recalled the late desire he had for an heir to take over the Harkrider empire. The humiliations of taking a wife who loved his money and was only disgusted by his person. He had needed drugs and doctors; and there had been only degradation for her and humiliation for him; and at last—almost half a century too late—Jason Harkrider had sired a family which was to disgust and anger him.

The door to his room whispered open on silent runners, and Harkrider turned his head to look at the tall, blond young man who entered the room.

He scowled crossly. “What is it, Heininger?”

“Your daily report.” The blue eyes were, as always, cold and unemotional. The thin, pale hands held a folder full of papers. Harkrider relaxed and prepared himself for the pleasurable task of learning how much his wealth and power had increased during the past twenty-four hours. One of the few advantages of a dead world like Pavanne was the fact that the time system could easily be related to Earth normal. Human physiology didn’t need to adjust itself to a new set of time values.

Harkrider closed his eyes and let his head rest against the back of the chair. The raven mewed softly, and moved

sideways along the chair, its eyes malevolently upon Heinger as if it knew that his presence at this time of day meant a temporary end to its master's interest in feeding it. With his hands clasped across his chest Harkrider might well have been asleep, but Rudolph Heinger knew better. The daily ritual was, for him, a matter of survival; if things went well then Harkrider was amiable and rewarding; if they were bad then the small, ancient eyes would flash their displeasure, and—somehow—that displeasure would rebound upon the head of Rudolph Heinger.

Over the years Heinger had developed his own system for ensuring his personal survival as Harkrider's amanuensis. He always kept something in hand for those days when things went badly. There was a trick to the metaphorical tightrope that he had walked for almost eight years, and he had learned the hard way during his first months as secretary, procurer, bookkeeper and general factotum to the lord and owner of the tourist world, Pavanne.

Heinger didn't enjoy his work. He endured it because, one day, he would be wealthy enough to take himself off to another world and live in luxury and power, just as did Jason Harkrider. His only fear was that he might end like Harkrider, an ancient invalid, tied to one great chair, mobile only within the limits of six large rooms wherein warm air and a steady humidity were as important to life as breath and blood.

He sat down opposite the old man and rustled the papers between his thin fingers.

"Get on with it," snapped Harkrider.

Heinger coughed. "We are now only four days from the Passage of the Blue Sun—"

Harkrider mumbled unintelligibly, and Heinger paused for a second, realizing that today he would have to tread carefully.

"The tourist arrivals are up by six percent during the past twenty-four hours, and the hotel concessions increased during that time by three thousand two hundred credits. Advance information tells us that there are no less than one hundred and three cruisers en route to Pavanne and due to arrive within the next three days. . . ." Heinger read on unemotionally, giving the facts and figures, the detail that Harkrider wanted to hear. There were details of restaurants and casinos, theaters and brothels, night clubs and cabarets; and each and every one of them contributed to the wealth and power of Jason Harkrider. Heinger gave only half his

attention to the task of disseminating the information; these were things that were not important to him personally. At the back of his mind he could not decide how he might broach the most important matter of the day. The tightrope this morning seemed uncommonly thin, and he had no wish to endanger his position for the next few weeks. The Day of the Blue Sun was the most important that Pavanne had seen for the last sixteen years; the yellow sun illuminated the Pictures once every one hundred and thirty-seven days. But the Blue Sun! That was something else again.

The Pictures of Pavanne lived and blossomed under the influence of the smaller star only once in about sixteen terran years, and during that time, those few short minutes drew to Pavanne the greatest and richest horde of tourists from all corners of the Galaxy.

If the Pictures were beautiful under the Yellow Sun, then they were beyond description when the Blue Star fell upon them.

The next few days would see Heininger consolidate his position and make the final moves in his plan for self-aggrandizement. He dare not do anything to jeopardize those final few microscopic days. . . .

His thoughts and his words were both halted in mid-flow; Harkrider's voice cut across them, sharp and high, like a hot knife.

"Again, Rudolph, again. What was that last part?"

Heininger read hurriedly back over the last few paragraphs. They concerned a drop in royalties from a large hotelier to whom had been traced an avaricious mistress and a swindling accountant. The accountant had tried to manipulate a computer so that he might fill his own pockets while his employer was besotted with other interests. The manipulations had been skillful, but not skillful enough to deceive Heininger. He gave the facts again, coldly and without emotion.

"What does the woman do?" asked Harkrider.

"She is manageress of a cosmetic store."

"See that she earns her living—ah—less pleasantly." Harkrider giggled. "I'm sure your imagination can think up something."

"And the two men?"

"The accountant. Kill him, and let the news be known. It will act as a deterrent to others."

Heininger made a note on the papers before him. "I have

given the hotelier twenty-five days to make up the deficit," he said.

"Will he do it?"

Heininger shrugged. "He might."

He went on with his report, reeling out the facts and figures, the details culled from a hundred sources and a score of mouths. Each mouth was subordinate to Heininger, and each one had to be watched and spied upon so that the threads of power and finance ran back unbroken to the scrawny fingers of Jason Harkrider. Once let a thread fall loose or break and Rudolph Heininger was as good as dead, for he knew too well that the master of Pavanne had his own private sources of information that could check and double check on everything that went on in the domed city of Pavanne.

The final sheet of the report passed, almost unnoticed, before his eyes. He let his hands fall to his lap, and looked with his cold eyes at the semi-recumbent figure in the vast, obscene chair.

"That is all," he announced.

Harkrider opened his eyes. "Good, very good, Rudolph. Almost too good to be true, eh?" He cackled viciously. "Now tell me the bad. Eh, Rudolph? Tell me the bit that you have held back until the last."

Harkrider's perceptive moods were the most unsettling of his many evil traits. The only saving grace was that he enjoyed his moments of apparent prescience, and flattery of those moments could often deflect the full brunt of his displeasure.

"Well, get on with it."

Heininger licked his lips. "One of yesterday's arrivals was a Terran vessel—"

"So, I imagine, were many others."

"A private ship," went on Heininger, unperturbed now that the time had come. "The property of the Farway Foundation. It brought Max Farway with it. He is the new head of the Farway Foundation."

The silence seemed to stretch into infinity. The wizened figure of Harkrider might have been carved from wood, a brown, bald puppet waiting for someone to tug at the invisible cords and bring it to life.

The dry lips moved at last, and the voice was a trembling whisper as Harkrider said, "Find out what he is doing here."

"It seems he is an artist of some repute. He has come to paint the Pictures."

From behind the lenses the ancient eyes flashed their anger. "I've grown tired of you these last months, Rudolph. I didn't ask what reasons he gave for being here. I asked you to find what he is doing here."

Heininger read the signs and felt a chill deep within him. Not yet, he thought, not for a few more days. He rose from his chair and left the stifling hothouse of the room.

VI

ONCE OUTSIDE the claustrophobic apartment, Heininger became the man he wished to be. He was all too well aware that his own empire was merely a small segment of that greater suzerainty ruled over by Jason Harkrider; but it was his own.

As the door closed behind him Heininger relaxed.

He took the stairway down from the penthouse to the office suite three stories down. It was a thing he always did because it kept him apart from all the other people who normally used the grav-shafts. It ensured that he saw no one that he didn't wish to see. It gave him time to collect his thoughts.

Over the years the Farway Foundation had loomed large in the dealings of Jason Harkrider, and yet Heininger had been unable to discover exactly what the connection between the two great commercial empires really was. He suspected that Harkrider secretly channeled his assets—or some portion of them—into the commerce of the Terran controlled Galaxy. Though why Harkrider should be doing so was a complete mystery. The total assets of Pavanne were at his command; he had a finger in each and every project from the smallest food concession to the largest and richest corporation building. The floods of tourist money from every civilized planet made Harkrider the richest man in the Universe. And yet . . . and yet!

Heininger reached his own ornate office by a rear door. He dropped the file of papers into a tray on the desk and sat down before the panoramic window to ponder the matter further.

From this vantage point he could look out across the city of Pavanne, with its towering blocks of buildings lifting their thin spires toward the artificial dome of the sky. The light was simulated to midday Terran brightness, and as the hours progressed afternoon and dusk and darkness would succeed each other, each in turn created so that Pavanne City was as Earthlike as possible. There were green parks and open squares; roller roads and copter lanes; flashing signs and brilliant sunlight. At night artificial lights twinkled more brightly and more harshly; artificial rain washed the city and freshened the air beneath the dome; the whole city took on a carnival atmosphere that was always cold and sterile to those who witnessed it night after night. Only the tourists enjoyed it.

They came from every Terran world and were of every type and class and color and creed. They came for one thing, and they spent their money on a thousand others. The Pictures of Pavanne were only the excuse for the greatest, eternal binge the Galaxy had ever seen.

Heininger looked on a familiar scene and wondered.

The Farway Foundation had come to his notice but gradually. There had been a hint here, an unguarded word there, a notation on a financial report, a quote on a share option from one of the giant video companies which maintained offices on Pavanne. Heininger didn't probe too deeply; he knew better than that. He learned early on that he would be told anything that he needed to know. If Harkrider didn't tell him then probing could have been dangerous, so he merely kept his eyes and his ears open and filed away the bits he learned for future reference.

The climax had come a year ago.

Heininger had thought little about it at the time, but there had been some connection between the Farway Foundation and some obscure scientist named Damon Wispart, who was examining the mathematical structure of the Pictures. Never before nor since had Heininger seen Harkrider afraid, and the fear had lasted for several long weeks. Heininger's position had become almost untenable, but he had weathered the storm by his usual balancing act. The storm signals had been there to see, and he had refrained from inquiring too deeply into the whole peculiar situation. If he had probed and pried, and if Harkrider had found out . . . !

Finally, he had learned that the scientist had left and gone back to Earth; the fear had left Harkrider; the Farway

Foundation had faded into the background; Heininger's life had resumed its more or less even tenor.

Now, the fear was back with Harkrider again, and it was back with Heininger as well.

He rose from his chair and picked up the file of papers. Perhaps if he hadn't mentioned Max Farway's arrival . . . ? No, it would have been worse had the old man found out about it from another source.

The hotel at which Farway was staying was one of the top luxury hotels on Pavanne. A suitable palace for the heir to the Farway fortunes. Heininger noted the details and wondered if it might not be useful to call on Max Farway and get to know the man? The report of his arrival had come through the usual official reports, but if he was an artist of some eminence, as the report suggested, then he would not think it unnatural if a personal representative of Jason Harkrider called upon him.

There were things that he had to do first, however. There were notes to be dictated into his desk recorder; there were two visi-calls to make—one of which settled the respective fates of the imprudent accountant and the hotelier's mistress; there was a memo for the computer . . . but that could wait.

Heininger left his office by his private exit and took the grav-shaft down to the ground floor. A guard on the main entrance saluted and cleared a path for him through the crowds that thronged the foyer. He went out into the brightness of noon, and headed west on the main roller strip.

From the reports that had reached him, Heininger knew that Farway was accompanied by another man and a woman. The man, Willem Magnus, was some sort of business associate; the woman, Alicia Farway—status not known, and that was peculiar. Heininger might have assumed her to be Max Farway's wife but for that odd notation, "status not known."

The Farway party had taken the largest and most expensive suite in the great Metropolis Hotel, and Heininger knew very well that entrance to them would normally have been barred to anyone but himself. He sent a message fractionally ahead to warn them of his coming, and followed the messenger too closely for them to decide not to see him. The messenger was emerging from the suite just as he reached it, and he walked through the doorway before the manservant could deny him access. It was a masterpiece of timing.

"Rudolph Heininger," he announced casually. "I see that

my message has been received. I trust that Mr. Farway will accept my visit of welcome."

The manservant hesitated and was lost. He knew of Heinger, and he hesitated to deny him entrance. Heinger walked past him and stood impudently on the threshold to the inner rooms of the suite. The manservant turned and preceded him into the luxurious drawing room.

Heinger's eyes were drawn immediately to the woman who rose from a divan at his appearance. She was tall, beautifully groomed, with bronze hair and a creamy skin that only the patrician women of Earth seemed to possess. Her figure beneath the simple dress drew Heinger's tongue to his lips in unconscious anticipation, and he wondered how he might cultivate a closer—even intimate—relationship.

Almost in the same instant he saw the boy seated beside her. A strange child with a too large head, and a face that was too old for the body . . . and then he felt suddenly sickened as the figure straightened itself to become a twisted parody of childhood, a stunted, humped body atop ugly, uneven legs; and above the body the white angry face of a macrocephalic dwarf.

"Is it your custom to intrude without invitation?" The voice was high and waspish, denoting at once the temper of the creature who owned it. Yet there was an authority to it that registered even as Heinger began to protest.

He bowed slightly and slowly, gaining a few precious seconds to gather his thoughts and choose his words.

"I must apologize," he replied smoothly. "It is clear that my message to you was delayed. Forgive me. I will leave you until a more propitious time." He hesitated again, knowing that the woman would save him.

And she did.

"Max, you're too bad. Mr. Heinger has come to welcome us to Pavanne. The least you can do is to thank him for his good wishes." Her voice, Heinger noted, was as beautiful as the rest of her. He wondered what relationship she bore to the ugly, stunted creature who stood only a few feet from him.

"All right, all right!" The dwarf turned and lowered himself uncomfortably onto the divan from which he had so recently risen. "Your name is Rudolph Heinger. What do you want?"

"You are Max Farway?" Heinger hoped his voice carried the right amount of reverent awe. "Your fame is well known to us, here on Pavanne. We hear that you have come to paint

the Pictures. I felt it my duty, as personal secretary to Jason Harkrider, to welcome you and to wish you success in your project."

"You see, Max, you see." The third person in the room, a bald, cadaverous man, waved his hands eagerly in the direction of the dwarf. "I told you, didn't I? Even here, on Pavanne, they know the name of Max Farway. I told you—"

"Be quiet, Willem," snapped Farway. His cold eyes never left Heininger, and he asked, "Just who is Jason Harkrider?"

Was it innocence or caution, Heininger wondered? Certainly, it was the last question he expected to be asked by Max Farway. It was true that Harkrider did not publicize his power or his position, but it seemed quite inconceivable that the head of the Farway Foundation should not have heard of him.

"Mr. Harkrider," said Heininger carefully, "has large business interests on Pavanne. He makes it his special task to know who are the famous among us." He paused. "I thought that you would have known of him through your commercial connections, Mr. Farway."

The dwarf gestured irritably. "I am an artist, Heininger, not a businessman." He made it sound like an insult, and Heininger decided that it was probably meant as such. "I am concerned with creating other things than money."

Heininger wondered just how far the man would go to sting him into anger. He forced himself to remain calm as he said, "There are many artists on Pavanne, Mr. Farway. Most of them are trying to paint the Pictures. I hope you have greater success than they do. No one has done it with any conviction since a man named Pahlevi . . ."

The dwarf was laughing at him, coldly and with raw delight, and Heininger knew with sudden horrible anger that he had reacted in exactly the way in which he had been meant to react. He had made a fool of himself in front of this woman. All he could do was to retire as gracefully as possible and await another and happier occasion.

He summoned a half smile, bowed, and said, "If I can be of any service you have only to ask."

The woman returned his smile; Heininger hoped he read understanding in her face. He turned toward the door.

As he reached it the piping voice snapped at him, "Heininger!"

He turned back.

"Heininger," said Farway. "Do you remember a man here,

on this planet, about a year ago? His name was Damon Wisepart."

The mathematician! The name sprang at him instantly. For a second he almost said, "Yes, I remember him." And then caution asserted itself. Here was something that might prove useful, something that he might turn to his own advantage. He considered the question for a second, and then said, slowly, "No, I don't think so. No, Mr. Farway, I do not recall the name. But then, we have so many visitors—"

He bowed again and left the suite.

VII

FARWAY STARED balefully at the closed door. The small baiting of Heininger had been a momentary triumph that had faded quickly.

"The man is a liar," he announced thoughtfully and to no one in particular.

"A snap judgment to make on a few minutes' acquaintance, surely," Magnus commented.

Farway stood up irritably. "I could read it in his face." He crossed to a table which stood, long and low, against one wall, placed there specially by the hotel staff so that he could reach the top and the drinks that stood thereon. "He knew of Damon Wisepart, and for a second he weighed just how valuable the information might be." The long, thin fingers reached for a decanter and a glass. "He sees advantage in not giving his knowledge freely. There is more to this man, this Heininger, than meets the eye, Willem."

"You can't be sure," protested Alicia.

"Of course I'm sure," Farway limped back to his seat on the divan with a half-filled glass in his hand. "I've spent too many years reading the emotions of my fellow men and women. They wear them in their eyes and on their faces as they would banners. If you can read revulsion you can read lies; if you can read pity you can tell fear; if you can see scorn you can sense deceit. Even a girl who shares your bed for money, no matter how large the fee or how athletically accomplished she may be, still—though the ava-

rice and the desire to please—I can see the revulsion deep inside her.” He shook his too large head, and took a drink from the glass. “No, my dear Alicia, that man was lying, and doing it very badly.”

“Who is this man?” asked Magnus. “This Damon Wisepart?”

“A mathematician of high repute,” Farway told him. “A man with whom my father felt it expedient to carry on a long and rather involved correspondence which was terminated about a year ago.” He drained the glass, rose and limped to the table to replace it. “Unfortunately, Willem, I am not a mathematician and the correspondence holds little of interest beyond the fact that Wisepart had some interesting theories about the Pictures of Pavanne.”

He cocked a wicked eye at Alicia. “It appears from the file of correspondence that your husband’s obsession was complete.”

Alicia turned away from him.

“Anyway, Wisepart seems to be a man of some authority judging from his books and papers—quite a reputation, in fact. It occurs to me that he might be a person well worth knowing, if I am to be on Pavanne for any considerable length of time.”

“I should have thought,” said Alicia coldly, “that this man Heininger might also have been worth cultivating.” She didn’t need to look at Farway to know of the temper which tinged his pale face.

Muted chimes from the doorway announced a visitor to the suite. Irritably, Farway called, “Who is it?” and the door relayed the voice of a man outside as he replied, “A message from Mr. Heininger.”

Farway chuckled delightedly. “You see, Alicia, your judgment is wrong. Heininger believes that I am worth cultivating, and not all my insults will prevent him from seeking some advantage.”

The hotel messenger bore a large white envelope on which was endorsed the name, “Max Farway” in black letters. Farway took it and dismissed the messenger with a negligent wave of his hand.

“I wonder what Mr. Heininger could have found to send to me so soon after leaving my presence?” He glanced at Magnus. “Any ideas, Willem?”

The dealer shrugged. “Whatever it is he must have arranged it before he left the hotel.”

“Indeed he must.” Farway nodded, and carefully split the

plastic seal. He tipped the contents into the palm of his left hand. There were three round, semi-luminescent metal discs some three inches in diameter and barely a millimeter thick. A single sheet of paper accompanied them. Farway read the brief note and examined one of the discs more carefully. His shoulders shook slightly as a chuckle broke from his thin, twisted lips; the chuckles grew to a burst of open and ironic laughter as he tossed the disc across to Magnus.

"So, our Mr. Heininger is just as important as he claimed to be. See, Magnus, three official passes to board any vessel heading out to view the Pictures. With the compliments of Rudolph Heininger."

"Wonderful," grinned Magnus. He turned the disc over and over in his scrawny hands. "We shall be able to see the Pictures as often as we wish without worrying about costs."

The smile slid from Farway's face. "Costs? Costs? Is that all you think of, Magnus?"

"At least," said Alicia, "it shows that your own importance is recognized, Max. You should be flattered."

"And yet, I'm not." Farway weighed the two remaining discs in his hand. "I ask myself questions that—an hour ago—I would not even have known how to frame."

"You're too suspicious." She took the third disc from Magnus and examined it closely. "I think it is a very nice gesture."

"Thousands upon thousands of rich and famous people from all over the Galaxy come here." Farway eased his twisted body into a chair, and tried to settle the deformed limbs into some semblance of comfort. "I ask myself, Alicia, why pick on me? Why should the private secretary of Jason Harkrider trouble himself with the presence here of a somewhat insignificant artist . . . ?"

"No, Max, no!" protested Magnus. "Not insignificant. I tell you, you are another Pahlevi—"

"Be quiet," Farway snapped at him. "By God, Willem, I'll regret having brought you with me if you don't stop this eternal acclamation. I know what I am—I don't need you to tell me." He turned his attention back to the discs. "Now then. Why should Heininger come to see me? Why should he try to butter me up by presenting us with these passes? I'd take a guess that he hasn't issued these on his own authority on very many occasions before. So—I ask again—why me?"

"Do you have to read motives into everything?" Alicia returned the third disc to him.

"And why should he deny all knowledge of Damon Wisepart?" Farway ignored her interruption.

"Perhaps he'd never heard of him—just as he said," Magnus commented.

"Oh, he'd heard of him, all right. I read it in his eyes, and yet he held it back. Willem!" He turned on the art dealer. "Willem, find out when the next vessel leaves to view the Pictures. I think we will take advantage of Heininger's generosity as soon as possible."

It was a part of the heritage of Pavanne which maintained the story that the Pictures were under human surveillance every minute of every hour of every day throughout the year. The real beauty of the Pictures could only be appreciated from varying heights, the minimum of which was two miles. Control of flight paths was so tight that special hours had to be allotted each day for flights at different altitudes by different groups of vessels, so that the lower flights did not interfere with the view from ships that were farther out and cruising at distances up to ten miles. From that height above the surface of Pavanne, the Pictures appeared as a bright jewel glittering with an enchanted light. Experts agreed that the best viewing height was four miles, since—at that range—every small detail could be seen, and the brilliance of the overall panorama was so sharp and so clear that it seemed to watchers in the ships that they could reach out with two fingers and reap a harvest of beauty that was unsurpassed anywhere in the known Universe.

On the days of the Yellow Sun, once every one hundred and thirty-seven days, the ships flew at a height of five miles in vast fleets which allowed thousands upon thousands of tourists to look on the mind-shattering scenes as the Pictures grew in stature and pulsed with a new and iridescent life.

When the Blue Sun moved into its once-in-sixteen-years position, the Yellow Star was only fractionally off-center, and while the Blue Star conjured up such visions as might be seen in paradise, the sister globe added its own off-center illumination to an already wondrous scene.

From five miles up hundreds of thousands of people would witness something so unique, so awe-inspiring and so brilliant that the mind was dazzled even more than the vision.

Publicists did not need to advertise the fact that people looked on the Pictures at such times as these with tears streaming down faces that bore the wonderment of revelation. It was a known fact that pilots of the tourist vessels

were closed in their control rooms, unable to see the brilliance below them, since that brilliance was destructive of Time itself within the hearts and the minds of those who saw it—whether it was the Yellow or the Blue Sun that was in position.

It was a matter of record that once, in the early days, before the growth of the City of Pavanne, a small, private vessel piloted by a millionaire and carrying a dozen passengers and crew, had spun out of orbit and plunged—like a moth drawn to a candle—down five miles of space straight into the heart of the Pictures, there to explode with totally destructive force.

The Pictures had borne not one single mark or scar when the wreckage had been removed.

An inquiry had decided that the pilot and the rest of those aboard had been mentally paralyzed by the spectacle before them. The vessel had moved out of control, and no one had been capable, either mentally or physically, of preventing the disaster. Ever afterwards the strictest regulations had governed the flights of tourist vessels over the Pictures of Pavanne.

To Farway and Alicia and Magnus the discs had meant a very special kind of treatment. It was treatment which included a private suite away from the massed ranks of other passengers; there was deference from the crew; there was food and drink of unsurpassed quality. And, for Farway, there were more questions and deeper suspicion.

He sat amidst opalescent walls that shielded him from the common herd, and listened with only half his attention to the soft, sultry female voice that talked—unseen—about the Pictures of Pavanne; how they were discovered; what they were thought to be; how long, how wide, how colorful. All of it he knew, and the voice drifted over and around him while he tried to puzzle out the significance of Rudolph Heininger's visit and the oddity of his welcome.

A few words struck a sudden responsive chord within him; they didn't register on his mind but they stirred questions that needed to be answered.

"Alicia! What was that?" He looked at her sharply. "What did the commentary say?"

He saw that Magnus and she were looking at each other in surprise, their faces puzzled and a little anxious.

"Well?"

"She said—" Alicia passed the tip of her tongue over her dry lips. "She said that a certain professor of mathematics

believed there was a mathematical answer to the riddle of the Pictures, a secret that he hoped to unravel."

"Wisepart," breathed Farway.

"She said that he never completed his investigations." Her puzzlement was reflected in her voice. "She said that he returned home to Earth over a year ago without ever publishing his findings."

VIII

FARWAY SAT quietly in his seat, tremors of bewilderment shivering at his stomach.

None of it made any sense. A year ago the correspondence with his father had come to an abrupt halt without any indication of the reason. The last few copies of letters written by his father were petulant and ill-tempered; there had been no reply to any of them from a man with whom he had corresponded on terms of growing friendship for almost four years. Abruptly, it had all ended. Now, here, with Pavanne close at hand, the mystery became even more of a cipher.

Why, Farway asked himself, should Wisepart return to Earth and not visit a man with whom he had maintained contact for so long and in such an earnest manner?

It didn't make any kind of sense.

"Max, what are you thinking?" asked Alicia, her voice reflecting her own concern.

"Be quiet, damn you. I have to think; I have to work it out. There's a connection somewhere that I don't understand. But Heininger knows!" He hitched himself from the seat and paced the floor with short, dragging steps, his shoulders hunched and his head bent in thought. "That must be it. Heininger knows something, and that is why I received treatment far in excess of anything that I might otherwise have expected."

"But—but how are you connected with Wisepart?" asked Magnus. His hands flapped like separate members detached from his body. "I don't see how he could know about you before your arrival here, on Pavanne."

"He didn't," replied Farway. "He knew of my father, and he knew of the connection between my father and Wisepart."

"Then why didn't Wisepart visit your father on his return to Earth?" asked Magnus.

"That, Willem, is the question I am asking myself . . . and I can't think of any answer that makes sense. From the letters in the file their contact ended as surely as if one of them had died—" He halted dead in his tracks as a new thought came to him. Then he shook his head. "No, that can't be. Wisepart left for Earth a year ago. My father has been dead but a few short weeks."

"We don't know that Wisepart ever got to Earth," said Magnus softly.

"Willem, you're as bad as Max. You're both reading too much into this," protested Alicia. "It has to be coincidence."

"Coincidence! Coincidence!" Farway's voice rose hysterically. "How naïve can you be? Heininger knew about Wisepart. Aren't you convinced by now? Do I have to draw you a picture?"

She sat white and silent. His conviction was too strong, and she knew deep within herself that he had to be right. Yet, she wondered, how much of it was bred within the dark recesses of his own tortured, imperfect mind?

She glanced across at Magnus, and the art dealer shrugged expressively. She doubted whether he knew or cared exactly why Farway had shot off at this tangent. Clearly, Magnus believed that this was merely another manifestation of Farway's gigantic complex. Well, he might be right, and yet there was a horrible certainty about the way in which Farway pieced the bits together. It was too coincidental to be coincidence; it fitted too neatly. Alicia was forced to admit, for once, that it was not merely a product of the cripple's twisted mind.

The glow from the walls and ceiling began to fade slowly. Farway ceased his prowling and glared suspiciously at the fading light.

"The Pictures!" said Magnus. "I think we are about to see them."

Slowly the walls faded to blackness; the ceiling lost its pink luminosity. The outer wall faded into normal darkness and then that darkness took on its own stygian quality that was more than mere blackness. It was a darkness that could be felt, a tenebrosity that was deep as space itself is deep; and then they saw the stars.

The outer wall of the cabin became a view screen on space

itself, aglitter with stars that shone like individual jewels against the black velvet of spatial night. Drawn by a compulsion that was greater than all his other emotions, Farway limped to the chair he had previously occupied and sank down into it. Alicia and Magnus leaned forward eagerly awaiting the revelation promised by the soft, unseen voice of the commentator.

"This is only the prelude, the appetizer, for the greater things that you will see in a few days' time when the Blue Sun passes across the Pictures. The Pictures as you see them now are lit only by the stars, and yet they are beautiful beyond anything you have ever seen—they are beautiful beyond measure."

In one corner of the screen the vast arc of the planetary globe moved slowly into view as the ship adjusted itself and turned its viewports in the right direction. The loom of the planet was dark, but it could be seen as a vast, sombrous half-shadow that spread before them, growing with each second until it filled the entire screen.

The shadow lifted fractionally in one corner; light grew and pushed back the darkness, but it was light such as Farway had never seen before. It spread and grew into a rectangle, moving in upon them until it was in the center of the screen, a shimmering aurora, a kaleidoscopic spectrum emblazoned against the darkness of the planetary surface. There was crystal whiteness of a luster that defied description; there was a penumbral darkness, a chiaroscuro that drew the eyes and when it had drawn them faded and moved into a scintillation of flame and color that flared and dazzled. The eye of the beholder tried to see beyond it, seeking the half hidden glimpse of paradise that lay just beyond the edge of sight. The whole of eternity was held in that ever-growing, ever-widening rectangle.

Farway was only dimly aware of the sob that broke from Alicia's lips. His own mind and body were stunned and paralyzed by the complete and utter shock of what he saw. This was what he had seen in miniature in his father's study; this was what Aylett Pahlevi had given nine years of his life to recreate. None of it meant anything any more.

He allowed his mind to slip into the sheer wonder of it, so that it washed over him like a flood that covered and enveloped his whole being with such a burst of intoxication that it was like being born again, for the first time, with all his senses intact. Dazedly, he tried to apply words within his mind. There were none! His eyes tried to pin down some

pattern or some color—something, anything that would enable him, later on, to begin to do what he had come to do. There was nothing.

He sat back and allowed the fantasy to grow, and at the back of his mind a small voice said, "And this is only by starlight . . . this is only by the stars . . ."

Before he had come on the journey he had made up his mind that his entire attention would be given to seeking some pattern, some basis on which his own artistic recreation of the Pictures might be based. He knew that, if his task was to be accomplished at all, no matter how long it might take, then his first sight and his first recollections of what he saw were going to be all important. Now, with the reality before him, the intention was destroyed before it ever had time to become fact. Max Farway was, like others before him, mentally paralyzed by the phenomenon that lay before him; he could only sit and look and wonder.

Vaguely, he knew that no predetermination had any meaning; he knew why Pahlevi had taken nine years—he might as well have taken nine and ninety for all the good it might have done. There were no words to describe what he was seeing, and yet—senselessly—his mind tried to apply words so that later he might recall what he had witnessed, and reproduce on canvas the scenes imprinted on his mind.

After an eternity the ship began to turn.

Slowly, the Pictures moved off-center and slid into the limbo of darkness beyond the angle of sight. There was only the loom of the planet now, and beyond were the stars, but as Farway looked at them the stars seemed dead and cold and empty. There was an ache within him, a longing to turn the ship back again so that he could lose himself in the lotus vision of the Pictures. Something had been taken from his life without which he could barely exist. And then he forced himself to relax.

His whole being ached with a tension that was mental as well as physical. One part of his mind held an exultation that was unlike anything he had ever experienced, for this was beauty transcending anything he could ever have imagined. He remembered, as a youth, weeping as he had looked upon the Fabrizi Collection for the first time. They had all been there, all the great pictures about which he had read with such avidity. Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Hals, Constable, Picasso, Sutherland, and a hundred others, gathered together under one roof—an artistic feast to satisfy the heart and soul of any man.

And now he had seen the Pictures of Pavanne.

And this, he thought incredibly, is only by starlight! This is only by the stars!

In a few days he would look at them from a greater distance, and with the light of the Blue Sun transcendent, cascading its luminosity upon them. There was almost a touch of fear in the anticipation.

Another part of his mind held a dull ache, a helplessness that grew in his brain with terrifying intensity as he recognized the hopeless task that lay before him. The name of Aylett Pahlevi rang in his mind, and he thought of the dead artist and his nine years in the wilderness of frustration. Nine years of the man's life hung now in a private room on Earth; nine years, ending with death at his own hand, these were the rewards of the greatest artist of the century because—in his own mind—he had failed.

The Pahlevi Pictures were famous and yet they were dead and lifeless compared with the reality; they were pieces of paint stuck haphazardly upon a piece of canvas. Now he had thrown down a challenge that he could never fulfill. No one—be he man or God—could hope to recreate the revelation of the Pictures of Pavanne. They were completely alien, utterly beautiful, terrifyingly unique.

Beside him Alicia stirred, and as their eyes met Farway could read in hers the shock of wonder and emotion at the vision she had seen; and then, slowly, the wonder died to be replaced by a glow of infinite despair and pity.

For some seconds it puzzled him. He looked away from her and back to the blank wall of the cabin glowing faintly as the internal lights were reborn. Then he knew what she was thinking, and the terrible tremors of anger spread through him like an all-consuming fire. He sat still and allowed the passion to build up as he always did, savoring it, nursing it, enjoying it with his own masochistic delight.

That she should pity him! That she should doubt his ability to do what Pahlevi failed to do! Ahead of him the long years stretched into the distance of time, and his anger cooled under the shock of fear, quenched by the realization of what lay before him. Had Pahlevi known? Farway doubted it. And once he had known there was no going back; no artist worth a name could turn his back and admit defeat. All he could do would be to go on and on until he had ended his self-imposed penance. Then—and only then—he could die.

For Max Farway the journey had not yet begun, and

already it was too late. He could not turn back. Not now! Not ever! Not with Alicia's pity burning inside him like a raw pit of acid.

"Max!" Magnus' voice trembled slightly as he spoke. "Max, what are you going to do?"

"Do?" Farway's anger was reflected in the high pitched break that crept into the single sarcastic syllable. "Do? What do you, Willem, do?"

"Well, you know . . ." The hands flapped vaguely as Magnus tried to define his meaning without invoking the rage he knew was implicit in the artist's reception of his question. "All that . . . I've never seen anything like it. How will you do it, Max?"

"Don't be stupid. I've looked on the Pictures for the first time for about five minutes, and you expect me to answer a question like that?"

"For almost an hour," put in Alicia gently.

"What?"

"You were looking at them for almost an hour, Max. I would never have guessed but for the clock." She nodded to the luminescent figures of the wall clock. "Our time sense has been distorted by what we've seen."

"Pahlevi must have spent many visits such as this before he even put charcoal to canvas." Farway accepted what she told him with no sense of wonder. It had happened to him before. His artistic curiosity asserted itself. "I shall need to plan and to look again and again. I wonder what would be the effect of smoked glass?"

"What on earth—?" began Magnus. Then, as realization dawned, "Oh, I see."

"Well, it must have some effect on the light patterns. It might dim them sufficiently for an objective consideration of the problems." Farway stared unseeingly at the blank cabin wall, as if he were still looking intently at the Pictures. His mind no longer pursued the acidity of unnatural anger; his pulse quickened as he sought the problems and the answers. For the first time he felt excited; nothing was too hard that he could not at least attempt it. Techniques had improved in the long decades since Pahlevi's day; there were new materials, new perspectives, new treatments; there was a wealth of learning and skill within him that had been built up over many years.

In a burst of enthusiasm he felt that here was the thing for which he had been looking for so long; this was the challenge toward which he had been working. All the other

paintings he had created in the past had been merely exercises in preparation for this—the ultimate in artistic creation.

Alicia started to speak, and then she saw the light in his eyes and the color in his normally pale, thin face. She saw that he was far off in his own world of self-created ecstasy, and she dared not break the spell upon her stepson.

The question about Damon Wisepart died on her lips.

IX

RUDOLPH HEININGER'S action in leaving the passes for Farway had been entirely off the cuff. If Max Farway hadn't mentioned the name of Damon Wisepart then Heininger would probably not have decided that it was essential to cultivate the ugly dwarf with the twisted emotions and the hard, almost insane glitter in his eyes. That Farway was an artist of some distinction didn't interest Heininger one little bit. Too many artists had visited Pavanne in the past, and too many would come in the future; some would be famous and eager to enhance their reputations; most would be young and eager to create a reputation on the strength of one great masterpiece. And—of course—the masterpiece had to be the Pictures of Pavanne.

Someone had commented once that there were more artists on Pavanne than in the whole of the remainder of the Terran dominated Galaxy, and Heininger was prepared to believe it. Almost every restaurant had at least one who tried to eke out a precarious living by doing on-the-spot drawings of the patrons as they ate their food; and almost every tourist took home at least one mediocre representation of the person he or she would like to be. Well, he supposed they had to live. Some that he knew hired themselves out as gigolos and for even less respectable purposes, and there were even one or two who—over the years—had managed to attain some sort of reputation that enabled them to leave Pavanne and start a new career on some other, more beautiful world than the arid, airless rock pile that was Pavanne.

Heininger had long since learned the lesson that all the

residents of the planet would learn in a few months or a few years: the lesson that Pavanne was a trap. A beautifully disguised, wonderfully camouflaged web of evil, vice and corruption. For Heininger the thousands of permanent residents were the mice who had taken the bait, and were now trapped by their own greed either for wealth or for fame—or for both. The planet no longer symbolized the Pictures, nor the Pictures the planet; the goal of Harkrider's world was money, and the means of getting it were the chief compulsions of a sordid tourist trap.

He ate a leisurely, if somewhat late lunch, in a small select restaurant where he was well-known, and then he made his way back to the Harkrider Tower. It was now late afternoon, and Heininger could anticipate a few hours of personal freedom, freedom which he had every evening, sure in the knowledge that Jason Harkrider would be too fully engaged in one or another of his obscene recreations to worry about the absence of his secretary. Heininger thought of Estelle with a dreamy pleasure, regretting that she wouldn't be free until much later that night; and yet the anticipation was a part of the pleasure he got from their liaison.

The pleasures of anticipation were removed as he entered his office and saw—in the center of the desk—a single sheet of paper on which was scrawled in a large, imperfect hand the one word: **HARKRIDER.**

He picked it up and screwed it viciously into a ball, his lips twisted with anger as he did so. He was back in the service of his master once again.

Harkrider's suite, as he entered it, was still as hot and humid, but now there was an overriding odor of spices and cooked meats that told him this was the time of day when the gourmet in Jason Harkrider demanded alien dishes from ancient Earth made with turmeric and other exotic ingredients, served with rice and a varied assortment of side dishes and sauces which tainted and perfumed the atmosphere within the suite. Harkrider's breathing was heavy and catarrhal, and at his shoulder the great, black raven hovered and fidgeted, waiting for the morsels that its master might push at it with gnarled, brown fingers. In the depths of the great chair the sounds of buried machinery did nothing to assuage Heininger's apprehension. He wondered which of them was the greater slave, himself or the raven?

As he advanced from the door toward Harkrider he saw—seated on the far side of the room—the plump, dark-haired figures of Harkrider's twin daughters. Not for the first time

did he think of them as Female Tweedledum and Tweedledee; their faces were round, plump blodges and in the midst of each a round, plump blodge of a nose looked as if it had been put on as an afterthought by an inexperienced sculptor. The black hair, artificially coiffured and gleaming with sparklets, was the one thing which identified them one from the other. Jasmine's hair was parted on the right and Jacintha's on the left.

"Where have you been, my Rudolph?" Harkrider shoveled a spoon obscenely into his mouth, slobbering slightly as he did so.

Heininger bowed slightly toward the twins; as always he trod warily in their presence. The old man he could handle because of his immobility, and because over the years he had learned to interpret and anticipate his moods. With Jasmine and Jacintha one never knew. Their moods were always perfectly in tune with one another—and always completely unpredictable.

Before he could reply, Jasmine said, "Perhaps he's been spending a few lascivious hours with his new girl friend. Eh, Jacintha?" And the pair of them fell to knowing laughter as Jasmine patted her sister's fat thigh.

Heininger felt a chill strike him; he had kept his latest liaison a complete and utter secret; he had been discretion itself because he knew of old that Harkrider viewed with displeasure anything which might affect the life and emotions of his closest employees.

As calmly as he could he said to Harkrider, "I called on Max Farway."

"I know. What did you find out?"

"Little enough." His eyes stayed hypnotically on the giggling women. "He appears to be what he says he is."

"An artist. And you gave him three of my special passes." The beady eyes cocked wickedly in Heininger's direction. "You didn't even consult me. Are you always so free with my personal favors, Rudolph?"

"He is where his little Estelle is concerned," piped Jacintha, and Jasmine nearly fell off the divan in a paroxysm of laughter.

"I felt it expedient to cultivate him further," said Heininger carefully, "and there was no time to consult with you."

So, they even knew her name, and that meant that they knew where she lived, that she worked as a casino attendant, that she was Caucasian, that she was beautiful, that he loved her. The muscles of his stomach knotted in horrid

frustration. "He inquired about a man with whom you are acquainted, sir." He had to distract them from the subject of Estelle somehow.

"So! So!" Harkrider shoveled more food into his mouth. "And who was this—this acquaintance that was mentioned?"

Heininger hesitated, wondering whether the presence of the twins and their open malevolence had affected his judgment. Perhaps he should not have mentioned this part of his talk with Farway? Perhaps . . . but it was already too late for "perhapses."

"Well?" snapped Harkrider.

The moment was gone. Aloud, he replied, "A man by the name of Damon Wisepart."

There was a choking sound from the great chair, and the indecently wrinkled head began to jerk in rhythm to the choking. Food splashed from the half open mouth, dripping unheeded down the chin, dribbling filthily onto the arm of the chair and down the front of Harkrider's jerkin.

The raven flapped its wings eagerly and hopped around the back of the chair uttering small mewling noises as it tried to get at the disgorged food. Harkrider waved at it with his stick-thin arms and the bird's wings fluttered disgustedly as it fled to settle on its perch on the far side of the room.

Gradually, the choking subsided; Harkrider's breath came in great, sobbing gulps as his lungs fought against the strain placed on them. The trembling of the limbs and body subsided before Heininger's eyes as he stood quietly and relished the situation with the immobility of a statue. It wasn't often that he could create such a scene as this. One thing was proved beyond any shadow of doubt, the name of Damon Wisepart struck terror into the heart and soul of Harkrider. As it had done a year ago so it did now.

On the divan the twins rocked with half stifled laughter, clutching at each other with plump arms, and clearly reveling in their father's discomfort. The brown, wrinkled face turned toward them, and the tiny, brilliant eyes—watering and tear-filled—fixed on the pair of them with a glare of unutterable hatred, a hatred which was transferred to Heininger as Harkrider turned his head.

"Come here, Rudolph." Harkrider's voice was soft and slurred, but it bore a timbre which was all too familiar to Heininger.

He hesitated a bare second and glanced at the twins. There was a gleam of eager anticipation on their faces, a feral

eagerness tinged red by the crimson of their laughter. For a second Heinger wondered if, at last, he had overstepped the mark. Slowly, he crossed to the great chair, apprehension trembling his nerves.

"Give me your hand," ordered Harkrider, and, as Heinger stood irresolute, he snapped again, "Give it to me—now."

Heinger raised his right hand and held it out, and the fear grew stronger inside him. Harkrider grabbed the hand in his own brown claw and deliberately wiped it over the revolting smears of food that splattered the arm and the side of the chair.

"Clean it up."

Jasmine shrieked with renewed laughter. "Father, that's brilliant. Wonderful! Only you could have thought of it. Go on, Rudolph. Clean it up—clean it up—all of it."

Jacintha bounced hysterically on the divan beside her. "Jasmine, Jasmine! I've an idea, too. About his girl friend."

Heinger felt the physical sickness die a little to be replaced by a mental turmoil that was far and away more terrible. He couldn't tear his eyes away from them as they sat close together not five yards from him.

"Go on. Surprise me," said Jasmine.

"We'll buy her off," Jacintha exulted. "We'll offer her more money than she knows what to do with—more than she can refuse. And then poor Rudolph will have to look elsewhere for his fun."

Jasmine's face was bright and evil with pleasure as she nodded avidly, giggling and almost convulsed with her own evil amusement.

How he got out of that filthy, stinking room, Heinger hardly remembered, but as the door closed behind him he vomited horribly, cursing in futile, convulsive gasps of rage and frustration as he did so. The tears which ran down his cheeks weren't entirely the physical results of being sick.

He went back to his office by way of the stairs, holding his infected hand away from him as if it had a plague from which he must stay immune. Even after soaking it for long minutes in hot water and disinfectant it still felt unclean and almost leprous. The scene that had been enacted those few minutes before told him one thing with frightening clarity: his career on Pavanne was coming to a close, and it would be far better if he closed it himself rather than leave it to the unpredictable sadism of Jason Harkrider.

Heinger thought it hardly likely that Harkrider would

do anything precipitous. The Day of the Blue Sun was too close for that, and the City of Pavanne was building toward a climax that came only once in sixteen years.

Once that climax was past—that was another matter.

It was hard for Heininger to think clearly and with utter detachment. The hatred he bore for Harkrider and his evil brood was like a rat gnawing deep inside him, and he would have given a great deal to be able to exact some sort of vengeance for the accumulated insults and indignities that he had been forced to endure. In the short run, though, objectivity had to be his first consideration, and revenge earned nothing that was of value. Indeed, attempted revenge might only jeopardize his own future, and that was something that Heininger had no intention of doing.

In the few days or weeks that were left to him Heininger had only one wish, and that was to consolidate his position. At one time he had thought that he might have another year—perhaps two—but the events of the past hours showed him that this was not to be. Now, he had everything to gain and little to lose, and the time was close upon him when risks had to be taken if his future comfort was to become future luxury.

Introspection had at least calmed his rage, but there was still a pang as he thought of Estelle. Not that he pitied her or was frightened for her; like everyone else on Pavanne she was there for financial gain, and like everyone else—himself included—the larger the prospective gain the more amoral she became. The twins only acted so as to hurt him, and Heininger had no intention of allowing that hurt to overburden him so that he lost sight of his own goals.

He was able to smile wryly to himself as he pondered a situation that had developed with startling suddenness over the past hours. It was a situation that he had, somehow, to turn to his own advantage.

From a locked drawer in his desk he lifted a visiphone that was not normally either visible or in use. It was one of his small secrets installed at his behest and in utter privacy some five years earlier. By bribery and blackmail he had managed to obtain a line of communication out of the Harkrider Tower that was completely outside the scope of Harkrider's internal security force. A personal electronic lock on the drawer had completed the one really dangerous action he had taken on Pavanne; it had been dangerous and calculated and utterly safe.

A tiny, secret compartment at the back of the drawer

disgorged a small, red diary, and from it he noted a code number which he spoke gently into the visiphone. While he waited for an answer he replaced the diary and closed the small compartment. The screen on the phone glowed to life, and the miniature head and shoulders of a bald, thin-faced man swam into view.

Heiniger had no vision unit on his phone as a matter of prudence, and the bald man frowned as his own screen remained blank.

"Who is this?" he demanded.

"No names," said Heiniger softly. "But I think you know my voice."

The frown became a brow lift of surprise, and the man smiled in recognition. "Of course. Shall we scramble?"

"Yes." Heiniger pressed a small button at the side of the phone. Off screen the man's invisible arm did the same thing. Then Heiniger said, "Well, how are you, Keeley?"

The other shrugged. "I live as always. But you've been very quiet lately, Heiniger."

"Prudence, patience—and lack of need. After all, your services are rather specialized."

Keeley chuckled in appreciation of a private joke.

"Keeley," said Heiniger, "I want some information and I want it quickly—just as soon as you can dig it up."

"Go on."

"About a year ago there was a scientist digging around on Pavanne. His name was Damon Wisepart." He saw the black cloud settle on Keeley's thin face, and he wondered. "Somehow or other he was mixed up with Harkrider, but I don't know how. At the time I felt it safer not to pry. You know Harkrider."

"That I do," agreed Keeley aggrievedly.

"When all the bother died down it was only because Wisepart had left for Earth—"

Keeley laughed loudly and without humor, breaking across Heiniger's sentence and stopping him in mid-track.

"Wisepart—" Keeley hesitated. His eyes lost their incredulous surprise and took on the blank, unfathomable stare that Heiniger recognized as Keeley's substitute for suspicion. "You mean you never heard?"

"I wouldn't be calling you if I had," replied Heiniger evenly.

"I thought you knew everything that went on here, on this damned planet."

"Not everything." Heiniger shook his head. "Even Pa-

vanne is too complex for me to know everything that goes on. I never dig any deeper than I have to; you know that."

"Besides, Harkrider wouldn't like it if he found out." Keeley smiled.

"Tell me about Wisepart."

"Normally this would cost you a fortune. I'll throw it in as a bonus. When you've heard it you may not want to dig around any more."

"I'll be the judge of that. Wisepart went back to Earth. I want to know why."

Keeley shook his head slowly. "He didn't. He was found dead by a party of tourists heading out to the Pictures on a land crawler."

Heininger sat very still, stunned by Keeley's words. The inevitable questions crowded in upon him.

"The whole thing was hushed up," went on Keeley. "Why, I don't know, but someone was very scared at the time, and that someone was big enough to stifle every atom of scandal." He licked his lips and allowed his eyes to drop from the screen so that he looked unseeingly at the desk that lay below the level of the screen. "One thing I do remember that wasn't very pleasant. He wasn't dead when he left the dome."

Heininger felt horror stab at him. "You mean he went out without a pressure suit."

"Or was taken out unconscious—and dumped. Oh, yes! And someone or something had put out his eyes."

X

HEININGER's brief horror was dulled instantly by the more sinister emotion of fear. That a single visi-call could have produced so much confusion seemed inconceivable, and he did not doubt for one instant that Keeley was right in what he had said, for Francisco Keeley was the one person on Pavanne whom Heininger would believe without question.

Keeley's slight, stoop-shouldered form and innocuous appearance disguised an entrepreneur of considerable ability. There was little that went on in the city or on the planet

that Keeley did not know about or learn about; he was an extraordinary procurer; he would buy and sell anything and everything, provided that he got his commission. He was a good friend and a very, very bad enemy.

Their mutual respect for one another had begun within a very few months of Heininger's arrival on Pavanne to take up his position as secretary to Harkrider. Heininger had long since realized that their first—apparently innocent—meeting had been engineered by Keeley. Their subsequent relationship had been easy and profitable to both of them, even though each of them realized that the other was primarily interested in maintaining his own position without being compromising in any way. Heininger knew quite well that Keeley was preparing the way for his own obligation by giving him the information for which he had asked. His own imminent departure from Pavanne made it unlikely he would be called upon to pay that debt—but he didn't need to give Keeley any hint of that.

After long seconds of thought Heininger said, "You're sure of all this?"

"My only surprise is that you did not know."

"You know my position, Keeley; I have to steer a middle course between discretion and curiosity. I don't look for trouble."

"With me it is different. If I don't get to know these things—all of the things which happen on Pavanne"—Keeley shrugged small on the screen—"then I'm out of business."

"You're very much in business at the moment." Heininger made up his mind suddenly and completely. This situation might well be the one on which he could capitalize to bring nearer the future luxury which was his goal. "Can you dig a little deeper on this Wisepart affair?"

Keeley frowned. "Just how deep?"

"Everything! I want to know who, and how, and why. I need to know badly, and I need to know quickly."

Keeley said nothing for several long seconds. His eyes were half closed and they were fixed on the desk that lay off-screen and below Heininger's line of vision. One could almost see the wheels turning in his computer-like brain, sifting the implications, working out the odds and the risks.

"This isn't like you, Rudolph," he commented at last.

"Situations change. Mine has changed—at least in one respect. It might change a great deal if I have this knowledge."

"Then I'll be the judge of its worth once I have it,"

Keeley said with a smile. "You'd better have access to a large amount of cash. I have a feeling that this is going to be—shall we say—rather unusual."

"All right," Heininger agreed. "I have a suspicion that it may be difficult. Keep me informed of your progress."

He broke the connection and returned the visiphone to its compartment, locking the drawer securely.

Was he going in too deep? He wondered. Always, in the past, caution had been his main consideration. No matter how justified it might seem he had never taken the slightest risk until he had studied each individual situation from every conceivable angle. That policy had paid off handsomely, and he felt apprehensive that this sudden departure from long established practice might result in disaster.

For an instant he considered calling the whole thing off before Keeley made the first moves, and then he realized that he had already gone too far. By backing out he would certainly arouse Keeley's interest even further, and the quick brain behind that thin mask of a face would decide to dig around anyway—simply because Rudolph Heininger was involved.

What was it Keeley had said? "This isn't like you . . ." and that one phrase made Heininger realize just how far out of line he had stepped. Keeley had spotted it at once.

On the desk the intercom unit buzzed mutedly and a green light flickered into life. Heininger reached over and touched a button.

"Yes?"

The receptionist in the outer office said, "I have a call for you—"

"Not now," said Heininger irritably. Then, as discretion asserted itself, "Wait. Who is it?"

"Mr. Max Farway."

Heininger was glad that the viewscreen wasn't locked in otherwise his surprise would have been plain to see. And yet, should he be surprised? Farway would just about have got back from his trip to view the Pictures. What was more natural than that he should call to express his gratitude.

"Put the call through," said Heininger, and seconds later the screen projected the too large head of the Terran cripple. "Ah, Farway. I hope you've enjoyed your trip."

Farway smiled thinly. "There are no words to express what I have seen today," he replied. "I must thank you for your consideration, Heininger; it was a most welcome gesture and one which places me eternally in your debt."

Heininger smiled deprecatingly. "It was my pleasure."

"And not one in which you indulge yourself too often." Farway returned the smile, thin-lipped and disarming.

"If I did it too often then the profits of Pavanne City would be seriously affected. Shall we say that I am discerning in the application of my favors?"

"As you should be," agreed Farway. "Which makes me wonder, Heininger, why you chose me to endow with your—ah—favors." The thin mouth twitched with wicked sarcasm. "After all, there must be many, many more important people than I—"

"A whim, no more," broke in Heininger as casually as the sudden fire within him would allow.

"A whim." Farway nodded slowly. "I wondered . . . you'll tell me if I'm wrong . . . but I wondered if it was some obscure psychological twitch brought about because I asked about Damon Wisepart."

Heininger sat frozen at his desk, striving mightily to retain his unconcern, knowing that he was losing the battle, knowing that Farway could see that defeat.

"Of course, I'm probably wrong, but it seemed so strange that you had never heard of the man, and yet the commentator aboard the vessel that took us to the Pictures felt that he was sufficiently important to be mentioned."

Heininger was beyond words in the face of Farway's sarcasm. Why on earth had he called Keeley? Why hadn't he allowed the whole matter to drop? First it had been Farway—but Farway, alone, need not have bothered him. Now it was Keeley as well; the ripples on a dead pool were widening too fast for him to attempt any form of control, and any counter ripples he might start would only add to the turbulence. In the past eight hours he had made more errors than in the whole of the past eight years, and the reverberations were beginning to echo uncomfortably close to home.

"Exactly what did happen to Damon Wisepart?" Farway's voice was soft and subtly conciliatory.

"He—he went back to Earth."

"Ah! So! Your memory seems to suffer remarkable shifts of lucidity, Heininger—or perhaps you only learned of this after we last spoke together." Farway's smile was ironic. "No matter. Perhaps—by the time we speak together again—you will be able to recall exactly what did happen to him."

The screen faded to blankness, and Heininger was left seething with futile rage and frightened apprehension.

Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! He pounded the desk top with his fist in sheer frustration. How could he have been caught like that? He must have been mad to allow that twisted caricature of a man to prod him into error in that fashion. And then he wondered . . . just how much did Farway know? And how had he found out about Wisepart?

Of course, there was the commentary. But, apart from that, was he merely guessing that Wisepart had not, in fact, reached Earth? Was he playing an illusory game of chess designed to keep Heininger on the move? Well, in that at least he had succeeded, Heininger had to admit; but when it came right down to basics, why was everyone so concerned about Wisepart?

Harkrider had been frightened out of his wits almost a year ago, and someone had thought fit to remove Wisepart from the scene altogether. Harkrider? Possibly, but if so why had he not arranged it through the person of Heininger? And now, Max Farway had come upon the scene ostensibly to witness the Day of the Blue Sun, and then to paint the Pictures of Pavanne. And Harkrider was showing concern once more.

Heininger shivered slightly and wondered what would happen if Keeley did his work well; would he deliver the answers to the questions? Or would his probing touch some raw spot that would endanger not only himself but Heininger as well?

All of a sudden, the Universe was not a safe place.

Heininger cleared his desk and locked some papers away in the personal safe set in the wall to one side of the vast window. He left the office and went out through the public part of the building, pausing only to tell the receptionist that he was leaving and could be reached at his apartment for the next two hours.

The apartment was a luxurious penthouse in the small block which adjoined the Harkrider Tower. Each apartment was occupied by one of Harkrider's senior staff, and each was a symbol of its occupant's status in the Harkrider hierarchy. As the old man's personal secretary and confidant, Heininger rated the penthouse which enjoyed sweeping vistas of the city, had its own copter landing area, and was connected by direct visiphone with the Harkrider aerie high in the Tower.

In the early evening, with dusk descending artificially, there was little chance that Harkrider would want him. Heininger knew that he would be safe for several hours while Hark-

rider gobbled strange varieties of food from a dozen worlds. He would eat with his bare hands, tossing morsels of carrion to the raven as he did so. He would be seated in that obscene chair while the simulator projected him into the midst of a chosen scene from the ancient past of Earth or from the colorful present of the Terran dominated Galaxy. Harkrider's pleasures were limited to those senses of sight and sound and taste which physical senility had left to him.

Perhaps it would be a Chinese scene; or one from France of the eighteenth century; a drug orgy from pre-atomic America; the bloody twentieth century wars, or the soaring scenes from cosmic space. There was no end to them, and their purposes were all the same—the personal satisfaction and the endless amusement of Jason Harkrider.

Heininger entered his apartment and flung his jerkin angrily across the entrance hall. It had been a bad day, one of the worst he had ever known. He needed a long drink, and an hour or two of peace and quiet so that he might think and plan.

As he moved from the entrance hall to the luxurious lounge a bell sounded softly, drawing his attention to the visiphone. Someone had called while he was out. A girl's voice came clearly to him across the room.

"Rudolph. I had to call you. I can't keep our date tonight. Something important has come up, and I don't know how long it will keep me; so don't wait around. I'll call you tomorrow evening."

The machine clicked off, and Heininger hugged his sickness and his rage. So, they hadn't wasted any time, those two bitches!

Oh, Estelle, if only you knew!

He slumped down in the chair beside the autobar, dialed for whisky, and pressed the repeat button to keep them coming.

XI

"I THINK that Mr. Heininger is considerably shaken," said Farway with some satisfaction.

"Simply by your call?" asked Magnus.

"No, my dear Willem, not by the call, but by the implications behind it."

Farway had taken the action and called Heininger after a lot of thought on the return trip from outer space. He had forced the wonder in his mind into the limbo of memory, and concentrated on the implications to be drawn from the small fact of Wisepart's non-arrival on Earth.

Both Alicia and Magnus had tried to persuade him that there was too much coincidence in the sequence of events that he was trying to put together, but Farway had remained unshaken.

"I saw his face, Alicia," he had insisted. "I read the knowledge of Wisepart in his eyes—and yet he denied it."

"And on so small a thing as this you build a house of cards!" Her face had shown how troubled she was.

Farway had been goaded into asking her if she feared that he was becoming as obsessed as had been his father, but she had turned from him and refused to be drawn into further argument.

Now, in the hotel suite, and with the visi-call to Heininger behind him, Farway was more convinced than ever that chance had placed him upon the track of some peculiar occurrence involving Heininger, Wisepart and his father.

"It has to be that, Willem," he insisted. "Somehow or other there are three facts to be related. First, Wisepart's disappearance, second, Heininger's denial and subsequent admission of acquaintance." Farway shook his head. "The man must be a fool to make such an elementary error. He must have known that Wisepart was mentioned in the tourist pap of a commentary."

"What is the third thing?" asked Magnus.

Farway chuckled. "Heininger's fear just now—I could smell it even over the visiphone."

Magnus flapped his hands. "Max, Max! Does it mean anything at all? You are chasing shadows. What of the Pictures? Aren't they the reason why we came here? You're clouding the main objective—"

"Stop it, damn you." The smile had gone from Farway's face. "Are you daring to suggest that I'm trying to obscure the issue?"

"Max, please!" Alicia stepped from an inner room. "Magnus means nothing of the sort."

"Don't you realize how vast a project I've undertaken? Didn't what we saw today tell you that I have a lifetime of work ahead of me?" Angrily Farway turned away from

them and limped toward the great expanse of window that formed one wall of the wide lounge. "I dreamed of today—yes, and feared it—for six long years. I've talked with other artists, painters, photographers, writers, dozens of men who have been here and looked on the Pictures and turned away knowing that they can never recreate by so much as the smallest particle the scenes which we have witnessed.

"I listened to them, and I saw the bitterness in them, the disillusion, the knowledge that here was something that no one could reproduce." He turned from the window and paced the thick carpet with short, limping steps, his hands clasped behind his hunched back.

"You remember the sunset, Willem, the one I painted from the slopes of the Southern Andes?"

"Of course. A masterpiece—"

"And the crashed spaceship on the Moon? The one that has lain there for four centuries? Well, I tell you, those are the frenzied scrawlings of a year old child compared with what I have undertaken."

"Then why torture yourself, Max?" asked Alicia. "There is more work in the Universe than can be accomplished in the lifetime of a million painters—you told me that yourself. No one will blame you—"

"You just don't understand, do you?" His face was white and angry. "This is my immortality."

"Your—" The word stuck in her throat.

"I can paint a hundred things, a thousand, and I shall be like Pahlevi. Isn't that what you said, Willem, another Pahlevi? Well, I don't want to be another Pahlevi or another Rubens or another Picasso. I will not live in the shadow of anyone, neither will I die that way."

He turned back to the window. "I've never told anyone this before, but there are nights when I lie propped in my bed, unable to sleep because of the discomfort of my body. It's dark. I think that this might be my last night of life; this might be my deathbed, and I've done nothing—nothing that will give me immortality."

"Max—" Alicia realized that he wasn't even aware of her presence just at that moment.

"Someday, sooner or later, I'll lie on a bed and know that I'm dying, and in that moment I shall know whether or not I am immortal. With most men their immortality lies in their loins, but with me it lies in my hands and my eyes and my brain." He swung back on them, his eyes wide and wild. "Did you know that, my dear Alicia? Did you know

that people like me are sterile? Even if I could persuade a woman to love me—or even to marry me—it would be as futile a gesture as throwing a stone into a bottomless pit.

“And so I must seek my immortality elsewhere with paints and colors, with brushes and canvas and plastic. So that, on the day I die, I won’t feel the pain and the futility of knowing that I lived in vain and accomplished nothing. I shall be able to lie there content in the knowledge that I have done what no other artist has ever done or will ever do.”

“The Pictures—” whispered Magnus.

“Yes, Willem. The Pictures of Pavanne. I’ll put Pahlevi to shame if it takes me twenty years. And when I’ve done it I’ll make sure that it isn’t hidden away in one man’s private library. I’ll present it to the world—to Earth—and all who see it will read my signature, and I shall have my immortality.”

Magnus looked at Alicia and met her white, stark face; the eyes brimmed with tears, and the pity written clear upon it was deep and overwhelming. She caught his gaze and turned away with lips trembling on the verge of sobs.

“I wonder how my father felt?” Farway’s voice was so soft that they could hardly hear it. “He knew he was dying. I wonder how he felt knowing that his immortality lay in the sterile body of a deformed dwarf. Was he frightened, I wonder?” He turned away from the window. “Alicia, did he cry a little toward the end? Were there tears on his face?”

Wordlessly, she nodded, not daring to turn and face him.

“Then he knew that the end was near, and he knew that his life was a wasted thing, an abortion that might as well not have happened.

“Well, I won’t die that way.” His voice was high with emotion. “I won’t die that way, because my immortality is here on Pavanne, and I’ll find it if it takes me the rest of my life.”

And then the spell was broken.

Farway looked at them wildly and in his eyes was the knowledge or revelation that had never been intended. He hobbled across the room, his shortened leg thrown forward with an ugly paroxysm of energy. He vanished into his own part of the suite and left them alone.

Alicia stood like a statue, rigid with the shock of what he had said. Magnus sat where he had been the whole

time, his shoulders hunched, his eyes unseeing on the floor before him.

"What do we do, Willem?" Her voice broke a little as she spoke. "I never knew—"

"How could you? How could anyone?" He rose slowly, his shoulders still bowed as if under a heavy load. "And who is to say that he is wrong? Sometimes, Alicia, I have nightmares like that. I have never married. I have taken my pleasure where I have found it because few women will even look at this—this dog's face of mine. And when I die—" He shrugged hopelessly. "Who is to say that he is wrong?"

"I wish I'd never heard of the Pictures." She said it with such uncharacteristic vehemence that Magnus was startled out of his own introspection. "I thought—when my husband died—that Max would come back to Earth and settle down. You know, Willem, he only left because I married his father—"

"Yes, I know." Magnus broke in. "He told me so before he left Earth. Alicia, don't torture yourself about all this—it isn't worth it. Max is Max, and nothing you can do will change him one iota." He flapped his hands in despair. "I know because I've tried to influence him, and I get nowhere."

"He was afraid that I would bear children." She turned and met his astonished gaze. "Funny, isn't it? He was afraid that his father would achieve the immortality that he now seeks. And that's why he left Earth, only I wouldn't recognize the reason until now. All those years, Willem, he stayed away because he feared that I might change the true order of things, and he came only because he knew that it was not to be.

"His father's death left him free to pursue his own ambition—to paint the Pictures. His old fear is dead, and another one has come to take its place." She laughed harshly, a cold, sad sound that was made of melancholy. "And now he's frightened by something else, and we have to live with his fear until he releases us."

The silence stretched into minutes. Magnus sank back into his chair and Alicia stood as she had from what seemed an eternity, her body rigid and her eyes cold, unseeing. By her very immobility she might have stopped time itself.

At last, Magnus said, "You can always leave, Alicia, and take yourself out of his life. You are a rich woman now, and a beautiful one. You have all your life ahead of you—"

"You don't understand, Willem," she told him wearily.

"I loved my husband dearly. Oh, I know, it isn't the usual emotion for a young woman who marries an old man, especially in these enlightened days, and yet it's true. He was kind and gentle—undemanding"—she chuckled wryly—"if that's the right word. But he was very proud of me, and for that I loved him even more."

"All the more reason for breaking with Max."

"Max is all that is left." She looked at him bleakly. "He is all that is left of the only man I have ever loved. Oh, I know, you can laugh at that, but I can't break away and drop him as if he didn't exist. He is rich, and ugly, and twisted mentally and physically. He's clever as well, that you must admit, and with help and encouragement he can become great. Can't you read the loneliness in him, Willem? When he talks about women and marriage and immortality, he is only trying to tell us how lonely he is. He'd deny it if you asked him, but it's true nevertheless."

"It's funny, but I don't think he realizes that by seeking and achieving his own immortality some of it will rub off on his father. And I think that would please him more than he would ever admit."

XII

FARWAY HAD ALWAYS exhibited a sheer genius for ignoring awkward situations, and when he emerged from his own rooms an hour or two later, it was with the almost light-hearted air of a man intent on enjoying a tourist holiday in the pleasure capital of the Universe.

He wanted, so he announced, to visit a certain exclusive restaurant which was reputed to be the finest in the city of Pavanne. Only the most exclusive and the richest among the planet's temporary residents could even step beyond its brilliant portals, but once inside they were treated to a gastronomic display that would have put to shame the greatest and most famous feasts of recorded history.

"It is said," Farway announced with evident delight, "that the cost of a meal here would purchase for a night the favors of the mistress of Louis the Fourteenth of ancient France."

"Clearly, an outrageous piece of advertising," answered Magnus as they walked along the short glistening path that led between glowing ranks of scores of flower beds toward the ornate entrance of the Société des Gastronomes Anonymes. "As is the name of this—this tourist trap, Max. Really, how you can be taken in by such an extravagant piece of dignification I will never know."

"The most famous eating place in the Universe, Willem," replied Farway. "Only once in your lifetime will you have the opportunity of such an experience. I can't believe that you would ignore it."

It was an experience, that much Magnus was forced to admit. It was something that he would remember all his life, and it lasted for almost four hours.

The menu was exotic, esoteric, unbelievably complete; it was a documented marvel, a catalogue of the gastronomic art unequaled anywhere in the Terran dominated Galaxy. The wine list alone ran to a dozen highly decorated pages, and as they discussed their choices with an army of waiters, it was clear that each man was an undisputed expert in his own particular field. Each item was the subject of a long and almost technical discussion, and each dish—when it was finally agreed upon—was then the subject of another discussion to decide which wine suited not only the dish but the palate of the consumer.

Farway reveled in the whole bizarre business; Alicia, amused, joined him tolerantly, clearly enjoying the experience because he was enjoying it. Magnus followed in their wake, lost and half bewildered.

While Alicia and Farway decided upon a selection of ancient Chinese dishes, Magnus kept to traditionally ancient English cooking that he had known in London. He did relax to the extent of taking garlic flavored Terran potatoes cooked in cream as a side dish with a superb meal of duckling cooked with white wine and oranges. The waiter eyed him askance, but the mere thought of missing either one of his two favorite taste experiences was too much for the scrawny art dealer.

Alicia and Farway ate their way through a vast parade of individual Chinese dishes with evident enjoyment, and at last—with the table cleared, with Blue Mountain coffee direct from Earth, with brandy in large balloon glasses before them—Magnus agreed, grudgingly, that Farway had been right.

"Of course," Farway agreed serenely. "I think this place

would be almost as good a reason for visiting Pavanne as the Pictures."

"We are about to be visited, Max," said Alicia. She nodded slightly in the direction of a slim, black-haired man with a neat chin beard who approached their recess from the main body of the restaurant.

Farway glanced up, saw the man and noted the sketch pad under his right arm, and the slender art case hanging by a strap over his left shoulder.

"Hah! One of our itinerant artists."

"Then, please, Max, don't be rude to him," pleaded Alicia. "It would spoil a wonderful evening."

That Farway could laugh so easily was an indication of his peace of mind, and she was thankful for it.

The artist bowed as he reached the table. "Would you care to have a portrait, Madame?" He asked. "Such beauty deserves to be immortalized."

"And you can create that immortality?" asked Farway.

"Max! Please—"

"Oh, very well! If you want a picture from this—this peripatetic peddler."

The artist smiled, but there was a glint in his eyes that didn't escape Magnus' attention. To divert him from Farway Magnus said, "You're here to paint the Pictures?"

"Isn't that why every artist is on Pavanne?" he countered as he sat down at a spare chair and arranged his colors on the now half empty table. "Yes, I admit it. I have been here—well, for a very long time." He began to sketch rapidly and with complete authority, his eyes flickering from Alicia to the page of the large sketch pad half propped before him.

"And have you painted the Pictures of Pavanne?" Farway asked softly.

Alicia looked at him sharply and angrily, but he was not paying her any attention; instead, he had taken a menu card from its resting place and was using a black pen to sketch rapidly and easily on the blank sheet at the back.

Before the artist could answer Farway, she asked, "What is your name? I would like to know it—and then, when you become famous—"

He laughed, revealing a wide mouth with brilliant white teeth. "I hope that your confidence will be amply rewarded, Madame. My name is Florian, Albert Florian—at your service."

He worked steadily and with mounting concentration, but

Farway soon gave up. He seemed to lose interest in what he was doing and laid the menu card on the table with the drawing he had made hidden from view. Alicia relaxed and allowed the pleasant euphoria of the meal to envelop her. Florian had chosen his time well, she thought, for few people would be so unaffected by the food and the wine and the surroundings as to refuse the offer to have their likeness recreated by a professional artist, however bad that artist might be.

On reflection, though, she decided that Florian could not be a bad artist or the Société des Gastronomes Anonymes would hardly allow him to darken their establishment with his presence. She looked at the man with renewed interest.

He was well-groomed, of neat appearance, about her own age she would guess, and the archaic chin beard gave him a piratical air which—she was pretty certain—was purely for the benefit of the female customers.

Florian worked for almost an hour with a speed and a concentration that was fascinating, and when at last he laid down his pens and his chinks he laid aside his concentration as well. He looked at the drawing and then smiled across at Alicia.

“It has been a privilege, Madame. I hope you like it.”

She took the sketch pad from him and looked at the drawing.

“Oh!” What she had expected she didn’t really know; perhaps a photographic reproduction, technically correct wherein bright colors hid the artist’s lack of skill. As he had worked she wondered just what he could accomplish in so short a time.

And now she knew.

“Oh, Max! It’s—it’s—” She shook her head, quite at a loss for words. “It’s like looking in a mirror that flatters one’s every feature.”

“You’re pleased?” asked Florian.

“More than pleased—delighted.”

Farway leaned forward idly and took the picture from her. He studied it closely, and then looked expressionlessly at Florian.

“You have an eye for detail,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Isn’t that the function of the true artist?” said Magnus. “Really, Max, what a comment to make. The damning by faint praise.” He took the sketch as Farway passed it to him. “Yes, Mr. Florian, I should be happy for you to visit me when we both return to Earth.”

"Willem, it is good, then?" asked Alicia. "Is it as good as I feel it to be?"

"Indeed it is." Magnus smiled.

Florian laughed and half bowed in his seat. "It is easy to depict beauty such as yours."

"The platitude of an artist who has not yet been paid," sneered Farway.

"I seek no payment," snapped Florian. "If you are not pleased with my work then you do not have to pay me."

"What do you think, Magnus?" asked Farway. "Do we pay him?"

"Max, this is good—very good." Magnus laid the portrait on the table. "Surely, you don't need me to tell you that. Tell me, Florian"—he turned to the artist—"do you sell much of your work? I mean your real work, not the tourist trash."

Farway laughed out loud, leaning back in his chair so that his face was lifted toward the high vaulted ceiling.

"Beware, Florian, of angels bearing gifts." He pointed across the table directly at Magnus. "See, Alicia, how the jackals gather at the feast. Willem knows talent when he sees it, and when he sees talent he smells money. That is his talent, small though it is." To Florian he said, "You know this dog-faced man with the bald head? The most famous art dealer on Earth. If he says you have talent, Florian, you have genius, and Magnus will make it into money for you—and for himself."

Florian sat quietly with a frown creasing his lean face; he sensed that he was the center of some storm, yet he was not of that storm. He saw the troubled face of the woman opposite, the red-faced embarrassment of the art dealer, the evil, delighted sarcasm of the dwarf—for dwarf he most certainly was. Florian hadn't realized until that moment, but the strings of memory were tugged and the lights of recognition were switched on. The name of Willem Magnus was easily identified now that the cripple had aided him.

"And you, sir, are Max Farway," he said softly. "I am honored and appalled."

"Appalled! By me?" Farway gaped at him suspiciously.

"Appalled that I chose to demonstrate my poor talent before one of the acknowledged masters of current art."

"A flatterer," sneered Farway. "I told you, Alicia, a panderer to psychology who has not yet been paid."

"Max. Stop it." Alicia's voice was hard and low. "If you

say another word I shall leave. Mr. Florian has done me the honor of paying a great deal of attention to what would normally have been an ordinary commercial transaction. I am grateful, Mr. Florian, for the sketch and for your compliments. What do I owe you?"

Florian stood up and shook his head. The pens and chalks he slid into the case; he took the pad from the table and tore the sketch carefully from it. With a pen he scrawled a rapid signature across the bottom and handed the portrait to Alicia.

"No payment, Madame." He smiled at her. "I have been privileged to meet Max Farway. I have an introduction to Willem Magnus that will be invaluable when I return to Earth. I want nothing more."

Magnus nodded to him. "By all means. As I said, I should be glad to have you visit me in London. If your work is such as you have shown tonight then your future is assured."

"Come, Magnus," protested Farway. "No artist leaves Pavanne until he has painted the Pictures. You may be dead before Florian reaches Earth again."

"I have painted the Pictures," Florian told him simply. "And I leave for Earth in two days."

"That's on the Day of the Blue Sun," said Alicia.

Florian laughed. "I've seen it—once—sixteen years ago when first I came to Pavanne. I've lived with the memory of it ever since." He paused and looked down at Farway. "Now, it will be the last thing that I shall see as I leave—this stinking world." He turned away from the table.

"Florian," Farway called sharply.

The artist turned back and lifted his brows in an unspoken question.

"Florian. How long did it take you? To paint the Pictures?"

Florian smiled sadly. "I finished just over a year ago, and I have been working since, and saving, to pay for the trip back to Earth. It took me—oh—fourteen years."

"It took Pahlevi nine," whispered Magnus.

"I am not Pahlevi, but he is—or will be." Florian nodded to Farway.

Farway scowled at him across the table, then he picked up the menu card on which he had worked and tossed it upside down onto the gleaming white cloth.

"There is your payment, Florian. See—I've signed it. You will be able to sell it for a pretty price—when I'm as good as Pahlevi."

The penciled sketch lay where it had fallen; it showed the head of a man, lean and bearded; it showed Florian. But where Florian was clean and neat and open, the sketch was a caricature of cruelty that had a brilliance of technique to make it even more cruel. It was an insult—a brilliant, cold, calculated and cynical insult.

Alicia got up slowly from her seat; she saw the anger and the fire in Florian's eye, noted the tensed mouth; she heard the beginnings of Farway's hysterical giggling.

"Mr. Florian," she said quietly, "it is late. Would you do me the honor of escorting me to my hotel?"

XIII

ALICIA FARWAY took breakfast alone in the private dining room of the hotel suite. Of Farway there was no sign even though it was after ten in the morning.

She ate sparingly and with little appetite; the toast was thin and dry, the coffee hot, black and unsweetened. Even the late appearance of Willem Magnus did little to disturb her introspection until—as he joined her at the table—he murmured a half-apologetic, "Good morning, Alicia."

"Oh, Willem!" She smiled at him sadly. "I'm sorry I left you in the lurch last night. It was unforgivable."

"Nonsense, nonsense! You did the right thing. Florian would have been more than an equal for Max, I'm afraid." He shrugged and shook his head. "I hate to think what might have happened if the situation had been allowed to develop any further."

"It takes two to make a quarrel, Willem. I don't think Florian would have allowed it to go too far."

"It doesn't take two when one of them is Max." Magnus looked puzzled. "That doesn't sound quite right, does it?"

She chuckled. "Thank you, Willem. That's what I needed."

"Then my day has begun well." He poured himself some coffee. "Did he bring you straight back to the hotel?"

She looked at him speculatively. "No, he didn't."

"Ah, then I ask no more questions."

"He was a perfect gentleman."

"You mean that he apologized after seducing you," came Farway's rasping voice as he limped into the room from his own part of the suite. "I was most surprised at the way in which you threw yourself at him, Alicia. Really, I wouldn't have believed it."

"Max, this is intolerable," Magnus protested.

Alicia laughed out loud, quite unperturbed. "Ignore it, Willem. He's merely trying out his claws for the day ahead."

Farway sulked and brooded; there was no sport for him if Alicia was in such a mood. He wondered just what she and that Florian fellow had been up to; and then he brushed the thought aside. Whatever else she might be, his stepmother did not take up with the first itinerant draftsman who happened along.

No, that wasn't fair, either. Florian was more than a draftsman, and Farway had to admit the evidence of his own eyes. In just under an hour the man had created a sketch of such warmth and detail that it had startled Farway as he looked at it for the first time. Then, too, he respected Magnus' judgment; he had read the admiration and surprise on the art dealer's face, and he had recognized the sincerity of the offer made to Florian that he should contact Magnus on his return to Earth.

Magnus didn't give his patronage to everyone.

And he had painted the Pictures! That was the surprising thing. He had stuck at it through long years away from his home world; he had looked on the magnificence of the Day of the Blue Sun, and he'd stayed to paint what he had seen.

Farway was intrigued. If possible he would have to see the Florian creation before the man left for Earth, and that would be in a couple of days.

"What are your plans for today, Max?" Alicia asked.

Farway shifted uneasily in his chair; he had slept badly on an over-full stomach that even drugs had not properly relieved, and—as a result—his entire body ached with more than usual discomfort.

"I want to visit this—this Florian fellow. How do we find him?"

Magnus shrugged. "The restaurant will know where he lives."

"I don't think we need bother them," Farway commented tartly. "I'm sure Alicia will tell us."

She laughed at him again, and anger flared within his

body. What could have happened that she could react so easily? Blast Florian!

"Of course, you're anxious to see what he has made of the Pictures." She nodded. "Yes, I can tell you where he lives. I went there last night and saw some of his work. Willem, you were right, he is very good—at least, I think so. But he didn't show me the Pictures." She hesitated. "And I didn't ask to see them."

Farway sneered. "Your mind was on other things, no doubt."

She rose from the table and smiled at both of them. "I'll see you for lunch. Willem, I'll give you the address before you go."

Florian's apartment lay in the poorest area of the city, close to the power plants and the supply depots; it nestled close under the down-curve of the city dome, and the inhabitants had to put up with eternally blazing lights, the noise and whine of machinery, and all the other inconveniences that went with low costs and cheap accommodation. It was an area greatly favored by the artistic community of Pavanne City.

Magnus hired a copter from the roof of the hotel, and within half an hour they were climbing the four flights of stairs to the top of a square block of flats set tight against the semiopaque wall of the dome. There was a warehouse on one side, and to the rear loomed another monolithic building of hideous aspect and unidentifiable purpose.

Farway expressed his displeasure in no uncertain terms as they climbed the final flight, and angrily dismissed Magnus' attempt to help him.

They stood on a small, cold landing with a short corridor running away to the right and to the left. It was bare, brilliantly lit with doors set at intervals, and on each door was the name of the occupant in a small card beside an ancient buzzer button.

Florian's door was the third along and to the right; his name was artistically painted in golden, flowing letters.

"I suppose that artists will always be the same whatever the century and whatever their respective positions in society might be," commented Magnus as they looked with mutual distaste at the entrance to their destination.

"I don't live like a pig," snapped Farway. "Or perhaps you don't think of me as an artist, Willem."

Magnus shrugged and kept his mouth shut. He reached out with one claw-like hand and stabbed at the buzzer with the index finger. There were no means of telling whether it was working or not until the door slid open with unhappy rumblings that betokened long neglect.

Florian called: "Come in, come in. I'm in the back room."

"Probably still in bed after last night's debauchery," Farway grumbled sourly. "Heavens knows what Alicia sees in the fellow."

They went into the apartment and the door closed behind them.

"Who is it?" called Florian. "You, Kelvin?"

"No, it is not Kelvin," said Farway, "whoever she might be."

Florian seemed to materialize from the inner room, his mouth half open in a smile of surprise, his eyes agleam with good humor.

"Only one person owns a voice like that. This is an honor, Farway—Mr. Magnus."

"And there, Willem, you see the true perspective of our positions. You rate a servile 'mister.'" Farway didn't wait to be asked, but sat down in the only comfortable chair in the room. "No doubt that is worth some sales back on Earth, eh, Willem?"

"Kelvin is my neighbor," commented Florian, unperturbed. "He, too, is an artist. He borrows things from me, and—sometimes—he brings them back. What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"Magnus here wanted to see some of your work before you left for Earth," Farway told him with ill-concealed disinterest. "Just why, I can't imagine. We've only been on this damned world two days and already he's chasing every promising amateur in sight."

Magnus saw the flash of amusement that lit Florian's eyes; he was relieved that the man could see humor in Farway's attitude. Obviously, Alicia had been talking to him on the subject of Max Farway.

"Promising I may be," Florian admitted lightly. "Amateur, no, that I cannot agree with. After all, your—ah—sister paid me well for her portrait last night—"

Farway's neighing laugh rang high through the apartment and cut across Florian's words. His twisted shoulders shook with the convulsions of his body, and the long, thin hands hugged his knees in a paroxysm of delight. "My sister! Wait

until I tell Alicia that." He cackled obscenely. "She couldn't even tell him of our true relationship, Willem."

"Your—your wife, then." Florian was red with confusion. "I'm sorry—I didn't think—" he bit the words off short.

The humor fled from Farway. "You didn't think *what?* That I can have a wife like that?" He glowered at Florian. "And you would be right, damn you. She is my stepmother. A pleasure girl that my father married in his dotage—"

"Max, I won't have it," snapped Magnus. "Alicia deserves better than that."

"Indeed she does, Farway." Florian nodded, and the confusion in his face was replaced by twin spots of anger against his whitened countenance. "I don't think her name should be mentioned in this manner." He turned to Magnus. "If you'd like to come through to the studio, Mr. Magnus, I'll be happy to show you what few paintings I have."

He led the way through a curtain of brightly colored plastic strips, and Farway followed them slowly and angrily. Beyond was a room of surprising size; the floor was also of colored plastic and the walls were painted in varying pastel shades that made it look even bigger.

"This is where I work and where I sleep." Florian gestured toward a single, unmade divan that stood against one wall, and then toward the raised dais that took up the whole of the other end of the room beneath a wide, high window that gave maximum light over an easel set at an angle. To one side of the dais and propped against the wall stood about a dozen framed canvases, and a smaller quantity lay upright on the floor, one on top of another.

"There is little enough for you to see," said Florian. "My efforts over the years have been concentrated on one task—I don't need to tell you what task that is—and because of that I have done little other work. Still, there they are."

Magnus crossed to the pile of paintings, while Farway hovered sulkily near the door, unwilling to show even the vaguest interest. Their voices droned over him, unintelligible only because he wished them to be so, and several times he heard exclamations from Magnus which he knew were the art dealer's automatic reaction to each and every picture that he saw, whether it was good, bad or indifferent. He limped across toward the bed to look at a small picture that hung on the wall. It was of a woman's head, and it was no more than eight inches high by six wide; the detail was astonishing, and he felt something stir within him as he looked at it. She was alive and laughing, her black hair so

real that one wanted to brush back a wayward lock that fell over the taunting green eyes; the skin was dark brown, warm and glowing. Farway knew at once that it was the work of a man in love with the woman. He stepped forward to get a closer look and his feet kicked something that lay under the divan.

He stepped back to see what it was and saw an edge of cloth sticking out at an angle, cloth which covered something hard—the something against which his foot had kicked. Awkwardly, he reached down to straighten whatever it was and move it out of the way, and as he did so his hand closed on the outline of a frame.

Curious now, and still with the laughing portrait capturing his imagination, he pulled the frame out from its resting place; it was large and heavy, and it scraped against the floor as he pulled it clear. Slowly and with infinite pain he lifted it and laid it on the bed, and then he turned his eyes to look again at the woman loved by Albert Florian.

“Don’t touch that, Farway.” Florian’s voice was hard with an edge of anger so that it struck apprehension even into Farway’s normally unresponsive person. “Damn your prying —”

“What?” Farway’s surprise and apprehension turned quickly to his normal ill temper. “Willem, what’s this idiot babbling about? I—”

Florian crossed the room in half a dozen long strides, his hands reaching for the parcel that Farway had laid on the bed. Farway half reached down at the instant Florian grabbed for it—and the covering fell away to reveal the picture beneath.

Farway froze, his hands only inches away from the canvas; he heard Magnus’ voice explode in a gasp of utter amazement, and Florian cursed low and hard, but he made no attempt to cover the scene—his hands withdrew in defeat and he turned away to leave Farway to his bemused vision.

“And that’s all you really came for, Magnus, isn’t it?” he snarled. “You and your damned puppet. Well, now that you’ve seen it you can get out. I’ve nothing more to say to either of you.”

The Pictures of Pavanne lay before them in miniature—if a painting four feet by three could be called miniature—and Farway was too stunned to be aware of Florian’s rage.

“Magnificent! Magnificent” whispered Magnus. “Florian, now I know why you have so few others to show me.” He waved his claw hands in an agony of bewildered effort as

he strove to conjure words when no words would come. "You—your fame is assured when this is seen and known."

"I don't want fame because of that." Florian was calmer now. "That is only one painting, and I have a dozen or more which I think are just as good."

"But this—" Magnus shook his head. "This will mean that all your others will be famous as well. Anything you paint from now on—"

"Don't you understand," Florian broke in fiercely. "I don't want fame because of that. That picture will never be shown until I am dead—maybe not even then. I have created that which I wished to create, and now it is done and I can turn to other things. That is why I am going home."

Farway felt the words wash over and around him, but they didn't really register on his mind. He sank onto the edge of the bed and sat there, a pathetic, twisted creature, looking on a scintillating vision of reproduction that lay on the soiled and rumpled bed cover. He knew that here—as close as a man would ever come—was the only painting of the Pictures of Pavanne that would ever really matter. Almost by instinct he traced the lines and the whorls and the colors; he noted the technique by which Florian had created his masterpiece. He had painted the Pictures small and in the center of the canvas, and around them he had painted—in all its long dead grandeur, and in all its cold, implacable solidity—the planet of Pavanne illumined by the icy stars.

Tears streamed down his face but he didn't heed them; he was aware of sobs that crept unchecked from between his ashen lips; there was silence all around him. Magnus looked at him as he raised his eyes, and there was a dumb pity in the hangdog eyes of the art dealer; Florian was without emotion, a statue with black, expressionless eyes and a thin chisel of a mouth.

"It's—it's done, Magnus," Farway whispered. "I'm too late—I was always too late—" His voice broke and the rest of the words were stifled before they could be born.

"That's a daub, Farway," snarled Florian. "I hadn't the guts to try and do it with the light of the Blue Sun upon them. Pahlevi tried it and damned nearly succeeded. I saw the Day of the Blue Sun sixteen years ago, and I was too scared to do other than this—too scared by what I saw. Yes, I painted them by starlight as you can see. There's a lot left over for everybody, for every other artist in the Universe. There's too much for all the artists who ever lived, and that's why I'm going home. I'm like Pahlevi." He chuckled

without the slightest hint of humor in the hollow sound. "I failed as well. The difference between us is that he did something about his failure. I'm just running away, back to the mother womb of Earth."

XIV

FARWAY STOOD UP and then lurched out of the room and out of the apartment. His personal armageddon lay within the creaking door that slid open to allow him exit. There were no words to express the agony within him, the torment of knowing that Florian had found the answer to the Pictures of Pavanne. The bearded artist had gone as far ahead of Pahlevi as Farway had dreamed of doing, and the flame of despair was a living thing that consumed him as he hobbled along the landing on his twisted legs.

"Farway!"

He didn't pause as Florian roared at him.

"Farway! You damned coward! Can't you face it?"

He paused halfway down the final flight of stairs, caught by the vehemence in Florian's voice. Feet pounded above him, and then Florian was looking down at him, panting briefly from his sudden exertion, his face white, the lips drawn back from the teeth in a humorless smile that was almost a sneer of contempt.

"You—running away?" The contempt was there, all right. "Isn't that what you've done all your life, Farway? Come back, man, and look at it—look at what I call failure, and then tell yourself that you can do better."

Farway swore at him obscenely, the foul words bubbling from his lips in a torrent, while his limbs trembled and tensed with the ferocity of his emotion.

"That's more like it." Behind Florian the dog face of Magnus loomed to peer timorously down on Farway. "See, Magnus—it is as his stepmother said. You have only to taunt him, to bait him, and he comes to heel like a well-trained dog." The dark eyes studied Farway, but the contempt was dying a little. "It's a pity she isn't here to see it. And yet I know she has no stomach for it. Her life would be that much better if she did."

Farway retched with the force of his emotion, his whole body knotted and taut as he fought to express his pain and his rage. Only breathless gasps escaped his lips.

Florian sat down on the top stair and looked down at him.

"Listen to me, Farway," he said urgently. "I know what you're feeling. I felt it myself when first I saw the Pahlevi—before your father bought it. Oh, yes!" He nodded. "I know about that.

"And I tell you; this isn't the end for you any more than the Pahlevi was the end for me. Aren't you enough of an artist to know that everything has a thousand facets if only you look for them? And the Pictures, well, they have a million—enough for every artist who ever lived. My painting is only one aspect—and a coward's way out at that." He stood up again and leaned forward, hands on his knees to thrust his bearded face closer to Farway. "You're four times the artist I shall ever be, Farway. You've got that little bit more—that extra something—that every artist wishes he could have. Give it time, man; you can't kill all your dragons with one sword stroke, and you don't have to torture yourself any more than is necessary. Remember, you have one advantage, at least, over me and almost every other artist to whom Pavanne is a mecca. You have money and power at your command; you can come and go from this damned world just as you please. You're not marooned here as I have been, with Earth staring at you across light-years of space, as unattainable as a dream." The dark eyes stared somberly at Farway. "What you have seen, Farway, is the result of sixteen years of martyrdom—sixteen years with every fiber of my being quivering for my home world. That is a penance you will never have to perform. Wait for the Day of the Blue Sun, and then think, man, think. That's all you need to do."

He turned abruptly and vanished up the stairs and toward his apartment.

Magnus came slowly down toward Farway, and the cripple turned away from him to resume his lurching descent. They went wordlessly to the hotel.

Farway went straight to his room. Magnus lunched with Alicia and told her of their unfortunate visit, and of Florian's work.

"As you suspected, Alicia, he is good—very good. But I agree with his own valuation of himself. He isn't as good as Max, but he could be in a few years. I think his technique has suffered and remained undeveloped because he has been

concentrating on the Pictures for so long. Once he gets home to Earth—well—we shall see.”

“So that is why he didn’t offer to let me see his painting of the Pictures,” Alicia said. “I wondered . . . well, it’s his affair, I suppose.”

“I hope he changes his mind. He has created something unique, and yet, now, he seems to hate it.”

“What do we do about Max?”

Magnus shook his head. “I don’t know, Alicia. Let him go his own way, I suppose.”

“There is a ground trip out to view the Pictures tomorrow,” she remarked thoughtfully. “We still have that gift from Heminger. Why shouldn’t we make further use of it? It might rekindle his interest.”

“Alicia.” Magnus smiled. “You take too much trouble over him. He isn’t worth it.”

“Perhaps. But arrange it, will you, Willem?”

Farway didn’t appear for supper either; he ordered a meal direct from the hotel restaurant and had it delivered to his room. From the brief glimpse that Alicia had through the half open door as he allowed the waiter to enter, she saw that he was painting. A portable easel stood in the middle of the room, and the indefinable scent of paints and oils drifted through into the lounge.

At breakfast next morning she told him of their plans, and Farway fell in with them in his usual disinterested manner. The affairs of the previous day might not have occurred.

After breakfast when Farway had gone back to his room, Magnus commented on his attitude to Alicia. “He seems to wipe the unpleasant things from his mind. Have you noticed? He treats them as if they never happened.”

“Relegated to the limbo of memory.” She nodded sadly. “And in memory they do more harm than if he kept them in the open.” She looked at the wall clock. “We’d better be moving, Willem. Call him, will you?”

There were only eight people in the group that left the hotel to be taken across the city by copter to the great airlock that was the tourist doorway to the Pictures of Pavanne. The vehicle that took them out into the dead wilderness of the planet was a long, low machine with triple caterpillar tracks to cope with the uneven surface. The entire passenger cabin was covered by a clear plastic dome so that those within could see the vaulting heaven and the rugged, awe-inspiring landscape through which they passed. It was, said Magnus, like traveling in the open. The cabin lights were

kept off and the impression of being in the open was only dispelled by the warmth and comfort of the cabin. Outside the bleak rocks and low hills, with their reddish tints, only enhanced the deep black of the sky wherein the stars were tiny, unwinking points of ice cold light.

The Pictures were ten miles from the city. The trip took almost forty minutes as the driver paused to tell them about the hills and the rocks and the scenery.

"Tourist pap," Farway dismissed it in a contemptuous voice.

They came upon the Pictures quite suddenly.

The vehicle rounded a low range of hills, red and ancient and eroded; they were on a slight rise and they looked directly at the vast panorama of the Pictures of Pavanne, set as they were at an angle of about fifteen degrees to the level ground. They formed a vast plateau rising from a low point up and across the flanks of a range of hills. The hills themselves gave the impression of having been flattened and crushed to provide just the right base at just the right angle as a resting place for the Pictures.

But there was not the overwhelming splendor that had so stunned them when they had looked on the Pictures from outer space. They glowed and moved, shimmered, sparkled, scintillated: a cosmic chiaroscuro that brought wonder to the heart and to the mind, but which did not so mentally disturb that the mind became paralyzed by what it saw.

Alicia stole a glance at Farway as the vehicle stopped on the rise and the commentator's voice droned its prepared paean of praise. The cripple sat hunched in his seat, his eyes fixed rapturously on the scene before him. He was alive, vibrant; it seemed to her that he lived again, where before he had only existed. With the panorama of the Pictures stretched before him, Farway knew that what Florian had said was true; he looked on another facet of a dream, he saw another vision—and he wondered.

Within him the eager rising tide of creation swept up as it had so often in his life, a raging torrent that made him feel that nothing was beyond his powers. He knew it to be transient; he knew that it would not last; it would fade away and be replaced by the evils of doubt and despair; yet while he enjoyed it there was nothing he could not accomplish, nothing he could not do.

Florian was right. The Pictures of Pavanne still waited to be conquered.

The vehicle moved down onto the plain; it traveled across the bottom edge of the Pictures at a distance of no more than

two hundred meters, so that they could look up and across the acres and acres of alien creation. It was like looking into a mighty kaleidoscope—and yet that was as incomplete a description as to say the sky of Earth was blue. Farway sought for a pattern, and saw none; he caught glimpses of colors that moved and faded, swirled and vanished; at one moment he seemed to be looking down into a vast maw of light and color, and then he was looking up at drifting, cloud-like dreams of light and shade. His heart ached to be a part of what he saw, to be able to know just what it was that assailed his senses; and there was an ineffable sense of loneliness, for this was too big for the mind of any man to comprehend.

The gasps of wonder from his fellow travelers only made the ache within him greater, for their wonder was an emotion of the mind—his was of the heart and of the soul. The “oohs” and “aahs” that assailed his ears sickened him beyond measure. They were the noises of children who knew not what they saw, save that it was big.

At last, they turned away.

Its tracks biting deep into the red soil as they headed out and away from the Pictures, the vehicle made a circular run to the south so that they could look back on the Pictures from a distance of several miles. For Farway the spell had been broken and reaction was setting in.

He wanted to get back to the hotel and to his room; he wanted to be alone to think and plan.

Alicia saw the light in his eyes and left him to his thoughts. She had seen that look before, and she was glad that it was there.

The vehicle turned in a wide circle back toward the city and soon they could see—around a jutting ridge of low hills—the translucent curve of the city dome. It shone against the blackness of the sky: a golden half orb, alien and out of place, yet incredibly fragile, like a bubble that one could puncture merely by reaching out with a finger.

Red rocks, red soil, black sky; an eerie glow from the stars above. Despite the warmth of the cabin Farway shivered slightly, for there was an implacable coldness that seemed to eat at the heart.

The dome grew in size; it towered into the alien sky and stretched away toward the horizon, golden, opaque, gleaming with inner light and life. The vehicle dipped into a depression in the ground and lifted its nose to the sky, and from one

of the passengers came a startled cry that was almost a squawk of disbelief.

"Look, there. What's that?"

A gesturing finger ahead of Farway directed his eyes to the left and to the edge of the depression. A dark heap was outlined by the light of the dome, an untidy, out-of-place bundle.

"Hey, there. Stop the car. Back up."

The driver heard the shouts and the engine pitch deepened; the machine slowed and halted.

"Oh, God!" Alicia murmured. "That's a man out there."

XV

THE MORNING had gone remarkably well for Heininger. True, it was only two days to the Day of the Blue Sun, and—because of that—his daily report to Harkrider had been excellent. The city teemed as it had not teemed for many years, with floods of people pouring money into the Harkrider coffers. Had the situation been different he would have toned down the report and saved a little for the future, for those days after the Day of the Blue Sun when things would not be so good. But Heininger had ceased to worry about the days after the Blue Sun. His plans were made and he could face Harkrider in his obscene chair with an air of apparent equanimity.

The simulator showed a Terran city in the grip of winter; the snow lay thick upon the ground, and lights twinkled from towering fairy spires, glittering on the white carpet. Wind whistled, and trees swayed, their branches showering scuds of snow to the ground beneath.

Harkrider's room was like a giant, living Christmas card, and Heininger hadn't seen one of those for almost nine years. The old man crooned and smiled, his mood a good one, better even than Heininger had expected.

The one discordant note was the presence of Jasmine and Jacintha. They sat together on a divan and giggled and whispered and eyed him slyly.

"Why can't we have winter here, in Pavanne city?" rasped Harkrider. "Heininger, why not? Can't it be done?"

The simulator was switched off and the winter scene faded. The room became Harkrider's room, and the raven moved uneasily on the back of the chair as if frightened by the sudden change of scene.

"It would take too much water," replied Heininger, "and we should have to drop the dome temperature quite considerably to make sure that the snow stayed. I don't think it would be very practicable."

"Pity, pity." Harkrider guzzled from a glass of sparkling red liquid and took a large bite from a hideously colored sweetmeat.

"The figures are good, Heininger, the best for a long time. I am well pleased. Tell me—what happened about that wretched bookkeeper and his mistress?"

Heininger frowned momentarily, then he replied smoothly, "Taken care of. Everything is in order." He had almost forgotten under the pressure of the last few days, and he made a mental note to check at the earliest opportunity.

The twins gurgled together on the divan.

"Will that be all?" asked Heininger.

"Shall we tell him?" said Jasmine in a loud voice.

Harkrider chuckled horribly, red liquid spilling from his lips and down his chin. "They're baiting you, my Rudolph," he said.

Heininger smiled frostily at the plump pair. "It would take more than their peculiar sense of humor to upset me."

"Tell him, tell him, tell him," chanted Jacintha.

"She was sick," said Jasmine with evil relish. "Your Estelle was sick when we had finished with her. She was lovely, though; wasn't she, Sister?"

"Lovely, lovely! All white and gleaming and soft." Jacintha cried. "And she was sick. My poor Rudolph, won't that make you unhappy?"

"Not particularly." Heininger tried to remain nonchalant and uncaring. He wouldn't give the slightest indication of pain that might add to their evil pleasure. Even Harkrider was grinning his evil, Buddha-smile while his hands worked like remote control units to push food between his almost nonexistent lips. "There are plenty of other women in the city. Besides"—Heininger smiled as nastily as he could—"if I know Estelle you paid dearly for your fun. I hope it was worth it."

They stared at him from black, angry eyes, and there was pleasure in the knowledge that his unconcern had reached them.

"Is that all?" he asked the old man.

"Yes, yes! Get out."

Heininger went back to his office and spent an hour at work on several matters that needed to be cleared up. It was almost two days since he had given Keeley his instructions and there had been no news from the man. The thought rankled and worried him.

He had been tempted earlier to call Keeley and ask what progress had been made, but he put the thought aside; there was no point in it, and such an action would only tell Keeley how concerned he was.

It was past noon when he left the office, and he debated where he should have lunch. He could eat peacefully in his apartment or at any one of a dozen top class restaurants where he was well enough known to receive favorable attention. A quiet lunch didn't appeal to him, and as he left the Harkrider tower he paused indecisively.

What of Farway?

Since the disastrous visi-call of two days ago he had heard nothing of the artist. In fact, the past two days had been too quiet from all points of view. What would be the chances of Farway being at the hotel for lunch? he wondered. The idea appealed to him the more he thought of it. Farway might not be there, but there was nothing to be lost by making the short trip, and a personal contact might well be rewarding if he could engineer it.

The roller road was heavy with midday traffic, but for once he enjoyed the contact with other people. His normal daily routine had the taint of Harkrider about it, but out here—in the open—with the city dome a thousand feet above his head, Heininger felt free and clean. Every time he left that filthy room he felt as if he needed a hot bath! Well, it wouldn't be for long. His plans were laid; his way of escape lay open; in three days he would be bound for Earth with his future assured.

By the time he reached Farway's hotel he was basking in the pleasant euphoria of personal satisfaction at a job well done.

The hotel lobby, when he entered it, was in an uproar.

He hesitated, uncertain what to do. He had no wish to get involved in some unpleasant argument that seemed to be going on; the trouble was that it was taking place between him and the restaurant which was his destination.

And then Heininger saw Farway.

The cripple was seated on a low divan beside the vast

bulk of the reception desk. Alicia Farway sat beside him, very straight and stiff, her face white and her eyes red. Her whole attitude was one of pain and shock.

Heininger hesitated for a moment, and weighed the position.

It could be in his interests to offer his help. After their last unfortunate contact. . .

He pushed his way through the milling throng; a woman was weeping high and hysterically; a man was shouting angrily and waving his fist at another man. . . . Heininger recognized the latter as a courier with the tourist service.

Farway saw him as he approached and his thin face showed a sudden measure of relief that Heininger found reassuring. At least his presence would not be unwelcome.

"Farway! What's going on here?"

"Can you get us out of this damned mess?" asked Farway angrily. "There was some trouble on the trip out to the Pictures this morning. They insist that we wait for the Law Squads, but you can see that my stepmother is in no fit state . . ."

"Of course. Leave it to me." Heininger felt exultation that he should have decided to come here. Now, he could at least place Farway somewhat in his debt.

He went across to the courier, and asked, "Who is holding the party up for the Law Squads?"

The courier nodded to another man. "The hotel manager, sir. He won't let anyone go to their rooms. . . ."

Heininger pushed his way across to the fat, paunchy man with the scrubby moustache who was mustering his authority with a great deal of shouting and arm waving. He grabbed the man's shoulder and turned him away from the argument in which he was embroiled.

"You the manager?"

"Yes. Who the . . ." The angry eyes widened with sudden apprehension. "Oh, Mr. Heininger—"

"Those people over there, they're friends of mine." He nodded toward Farway. "I'm taking them to their suite—"

"But the law—"

"—Can visit them there. All right?"

"Well, yes, I suppose . . ." The beady eyes were wide and bewildered.

"Good." Heininger didn't wait. He released the man's shoulder and went back to Farway. "Come on. I've fixed it."

He helped Alicia from the divan and was greeted by a wan smile of thanks. The grav-shaft was out of sight of the

main lobby and he led the way along the corridor toward it. Moments later the door to the Farway suite slid closed and cut them off from the rest of the hotel.

Alicia sank into a chair: she was pale and shaking slightly.

Heininger went to the bar and poured a couple of strong drinks which he handed to Alicia and to Farway. The cadaverous form of Magnus was close behind him to attend to his own wants.

"Now," said Heininger. "What was all that about?"

"We went on a ground trip to see the Pictures," Alicia told him. She smiled wanly. "We thought we might as well use your gift once more."

"Go on."

"On the way back we found a dead man," rasped Farway.

"What?"

"Lying in a depression about two miles from the dome. It was horrible." Alicia put her hand to her forehead.

"How—" He swallowed hard striving to regain his shaken composure. "How did he die?"

Magnus shrugged expressively. "How can one tell? The courier went outside in a suit and got him into the airlock of the vehicle and there he stayed until we reached the city. They took him away and we didn't see him again."

"There was blood on his face," said Alicia softly.

"Had his suit been damaged?" asked Heininger.

"No," said Farway. "He wasn't wearing one. He'd been put there without a suit."

Heininger's mouth and throat were dry, but his face bore the sweat of fear. Visions of the dead body of Damon Wisepart fled frantically across his thoughts, and he tried to drown them with little success.

"There was blood on his face," Alicia said again more urgently. "I saw it before they moved him. Someone . . ." She choked and gagged in painfully remembered horror. "Someone had put out his eyes."

The specter of Damon Wisepart rose up before him. Heininger turned away and went to the table bearing the drinks. He moved slowly and deliberately, striving for an effect of apparent unconcern while every nerve in his body tried to take control of itself.

He took a long pull at the drink he had poured and waited for the alcohol to calm him. Then he said, "Never mind. It's over now. You can stay here in your suite until the Law Squads come. I'll leave you now, but if there's anything I can do . . ."

"You've been most kind." Alicia Farway smiled at him, a faint, white smile that showed gratitude despite the strain of the past hour.

"Yes," echoed Farway grudgingly. "Most kind. Thank you, Heininger."

"My pleasure." Heininger smiled and turned away to the door of the suite. He had to get out of there before his nerve failed him. All thoughts of a quiet, comfortable lunch had long since fled.

"Heininger." Max Farway's voice called him back. It was harsh and high, and there was a wicked lilt to it that caught Heininger in mid-stride.

He turned back, his face carefully composed to a suitable gravity.

Farway's pinched face and blazing eyes fixed on him as the cripple said softly, "Heininger is that what happened to Damon Wisepart?"

Heininger's stomach turned over. He couldn't know! It just wasn't possible, and yet—somehow—he had put two impossible facts together and come up with the right answer. Frantically, he tried to control himself, but he knew that it was too late. Farway nodded slightly. "I thought as much."

"Max! No!" Alicia's face was horror-stricken, and Magnus gaped in shocked distress from Farway to Heininger and back again.

Heininger turned and got out of the room somehow. There was a fear in his heart that he had not known for a long time. Farway knew! But that wasn't the worst of it; there was still the dead man out there in the dead wastes. How long had he been there? Who had put him there? Above all—who was he?

Heininger got down to the ground floor by way of the grav-shaft, and the few minutes gave him time to gather himself into some semblance of order. The manager was still arguing, waving his arms and shouting, the woman still weeping hysterically. The argument was progressing without surcease.

There was a line of public visibooths to one side of the hotel lobby, and Heininger went straight to one that was empty. He dialed a number, and waited for the screen to clear. A voice said, "Law Squad Headquarters. Who is calling?"

"Rudolph Heininger." He held his identi-disc close to the phone and waited a few seconds while the automatic recorder at the end verified his identity.

The screen shimmered and faded to reveal the head and shoulders of a man in a uniform with insignia at the shoulders.

"Heininger. What can I do for you?"

"How are you, Bodella. I want some information."

The officer frowned. "If I can give it."

"I hope so. You know the dead man who was brought in by the tourist party?"

Bodella's eyes narrowed and he cocked his head slightly. "You found out about that quickly."

"I went to the hotel to call on an acquaintance and I walked right into the middle of it."

"Why the interest?"

"Everything on Pavanne interests me, Bodella," he snapped. "Remember what I do and who I am. Now, have you identified him yet?"

The law man nodded slowly, reluctant to give the detail that Heininger so badly needed. "Just one thing, Heininger. Keep it quiet for a while."

"Of course."

"His name was Keeley. I suppose you know him—sorry, knew him."

Heininger felt as if the whole planet of Pavanne had fallen on the back of his head; it was the confirmation of his worst fears.

"Are you all right?" asked Bodella.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. Thanks, Bodella, I'm all right." He broke the connection.

XVI

THE BRILLIANCE of the city at midday hit him as he got out of the hotel, and he stood for several seconds gulping air into his lungs. The crowds on the sidewalks parted as he barged his way through toward the roller road, for he had one thought only in his mind—to get back to his apartment, to sit quietly, to think.

The roller road seemed intolerably slow, and yet he knew that it was bare minutes on the fast central band. Such was

his state of mind that he underestimated his position and found himself on the slow outer band with several hundred yards still to travel. He was forced to wait, with impatience and tension mounting inside him, until the slow band passed the Harkrider Tower and allowed him to step onto the sidewalk outside his apartment building.

His penthouse was an oasis of peace; calm, cool, quiet—it enveloped him and pacified his jumping nerves. The autobar provided whisky; the divan comfort; the lounge reassurance. His heart slowed its pounding and his breath came more easily; as his physical well-being increased so did his mind calm down and begin to work with some semblance of logic.

“Is that what happened to Wisepart?”

Farway’s words still rang in his ears; but he knew for sure that the cripple was fishing—a wild shot that had hit a bull’s-eye with fluke accuracy. And his face had confirmed it! Well, that couldn’t be helped now.

Things had suddenly collapsed around him these past few days. Yet he could have done little to stop them. He could have stayed away from the artist and his retinue, but that sort of regret was too late by far. He shouldn’t have called Keeley

Briefly, the panic was back with him.

What had Keeley uncovered that had brought him to a horrible death outside the city dome? Had he talked before he died? Had he told who had hired him to start digging?

If he had, then Heininger’s hours were numbered.

And yet . . . were they?

Keeley must have been dead for several hours, for it would have been impossible to take him outside the dome during the tourist part of the day; there would have been too many eyes to see the horrible deed taking place almost within sight of the main lock. Therefore it had been done during the night hours—probably disguised as part of the refuse squad which nightly deposited its more noxious collections in special pits far from the city limits.

So . . . it came to this. . . . Keeley had been dead at least ten hours. If there was anything to worry about then Heininger would have ceased already to be in a position to worry. There was some grim comfort in the thought; but still it did not clarify the overall position.

He paced the thick carpet with a glass clenched in his hand. It was too late for regrets about the past; what he had to do now was decide about the future . . . a future that extended only three days ahead, so far as Pavanne was

concerned. Three days? Why did he have to wait three days? The entire situation smacked of urgency, and yet he was dithering about small details. After eight years on Pavanne, three days was nothing. Heinger realized that he had allowed his fear and hatred of his master to inhibit him beyond all reasonable bounds. His plans were laid; there was nothing to stop him from leaving this damnable world at once. Harkrider could whistle.

Elation dawned as the idea took root. He became more and more convinced that Keeley had died without revealing their relationship, and that meant that whoever or whatever was at the back of Keeley's horrible end would have no means of knowing just how Heinger was involved. But if Harkrider was responsible . . .

The sooner he got out the better.

Heinger looked at his watch; it was past two in the afternoon, but his desire for food had not returned. It was buried by the greater urgency to run and not stop running.

He left the apartment block and walked several hundred yards along the sidewalk past the autoshops crammed with tourist trash. There were miniatures of the Pictures, cheap and flashy and utterly devoid of any artistic merit; there were tridis set in lumps of rock and mounted in plastic blocks; each and every one that sold to the gullible and the ignorant put another coin in the coffers of Jason Harkrider. Heinger's lips curled in a slight smile. Soon he wouldn't care.

The public visibooths which were his destination lay in a small arcade, and he went into the first one which was vacant. He didn't use his credit card, but placed several coins into the relevant slots before asking for the number of the Central Travel Bureau. The bureau sign glowed on the screen, to be followed by the printed sign, STATE YOUR NEEDS.

"When is the first available vessel leaving Pavanne for Earth?"

Deep in the bureau records his words were recorded and the information sifted from the memory cells; in seconds the screen glowed.

"A combined tourist view of the Pictures during the passage of the Blue Star, and a direct flight to Earth immediately afterwards leaves at 14:00 tomorrow. Onward transit to Earth is at 16:30, ten minutes after completion of the passage."

There followed a list of available cabins, fares, and other data which told Heinger that the vessel would be almost

empty. It wasn't surprising, he thought; not many people would cross half the Galaxy and then take the first ship out again—not even to take advantage of the cheaper fares involved.

Heininger left the visibooth well-satisfied. There was no need for him to book passage in advance. All he needed to do was to leave his apartment at 13:00 the next afternoon with a small bag containing his few essential belongings. He would be through the main lock by 13:30; he would join the ship at 13:45. There was even the pleasurable thought that he, too, would see the passage of the Blue Sun.

By this time his appetite had returned, and he called in at a small auto-bar for a hot drink and a tasteless, highly colored plate of synthetic meat and reconstituted salad. Pap for tourists on a restricted budget—but it was all he had time for. Harkrider would want him before long, and at this stage he had no intention of antagonizing the old man.

When he got back to his apartment Bodella was waiting for him.

Heininger's eyebrows lifted in surprise as he left the grav-shaft and saw the slim, ascetic law man standing in the narrow hallway before his apartment door.

"Bodella? What on earth—?"

"I was about to call on you at the Harkrider Tower."

"I've been out for a meal. What do you want?"

"A talk—about Keeley. Can we go inside?" He gestured to the door.

Heininger frowned his displeasure. "Well, for a few minutes. Harkrider will be after me."

They went into the apartment and the door closed silently, cutting them off from the outside world.

"How is the old man?" asked Bodella. "Everyone expects him to die at any moment." He chuckled. "They've been expecting it as long as I can remember."

"With his resources and money he'll probably live forever." Heininger thought of the obscene chair that held Harkrider captive, yet preserved him far beyond life's normal span. "That damned chair—" He cut the words off abruptly and tried to shut the thought of it from his mind.

Bodella sat down. "Ah, yes. The chair. I've heard a lot about it. What did you have to go to Keeley about?"

The switch was brilliantly made and so completely unexpected that Heininger was taken completely unaware. His mouth opened and closed like a stranded fish while his thoughts struggled to orientate themselves.

"What? Keeley?" He shook his head. "I—" His throat closed up completely, leaving him dumb with terror.

"We found a note pad in his office," said Bodella gently. He reached inside his pocket and took out a small, white square of paper. Heininger took it from him. It was a photostat copy and it showed words that had been reproduced from another and smaller sheet. It showed two names: *Heininger-Wisepart*. There was a large question mark beside them.

"I'm trying to do you a favor," remarked Bodella. "Anyone else would have had a call from a copter crew with a request that they come to Squad Headquarters at once." He hesitated a moment. Then: "Well, I'm waiting."

Heininger sank into a chair opposite Bodella. His brain was working at top speed, and he knew that he would have to talk his way out of this if he was to carry out his plan to leave Pavanne.

"I—I asked Keeley to find out what he could about Wisepart."

"Why?"

"He'd been in touch with a man on Earth—er, Wisepart, that is—a man named Farway. Well, it seems that these two had lost contact, and Farway's son—the painter—has come to Pavanne to see the Day of The Blue Sun." He settled easily into the tale, his confidence growing as the words flowed. "This Farway was trying to find out what had happened to stop the correspondence between his father and Wisepart. I got curious, because people don't just vanish into thin air. Keeley has all sorts of contacts—as you well know, Bodella—and I asked him to dig around and find out what had happened. I was waiting for some news when this—this—"

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Heininger shrugged. "I was too shocked—it never occurred to me."

"Will Farway confirm this?"

"I don't see why not. He didn't know I'd asked Keeley to make these inquiries." Heininger frowned. "But the rest of it—yes, I think he will."

Bodella stood up and crossed to the door which opened silently at his approach. In the doorway he hesitated and turned back. "Look, Heininger; I owe you a favor or two, as you reminded me earlier. I can only offer you some advice. This Wisepart business has been hanging over us for about a year—"

"I know. Keeley told me."

"I don't know what it's all about, and I doubt if my superiors do either. All I can tell you is that someone or something is too damned powerful to allow it to come to the surface." His thin face was somber, the eyes dark and worried. "And now, this Keeley business. Look; Farway is a powerful man. I know of the family by repute. If he starts to stir up trouble then all hell will break loose in Pavanne City. There is only one man more powerful than Farway, and that man is Harkrider."

"What are you trying to tell me?" demanded Heininger.

Bodella shook his head wearily. "I don't know myself. It's like an iceberg bobbing beneath the surface. Only one man was big enough to hush up the Wisepart business, and that was Harkrider. If he wanted it hushed up then he won't want anyone digging around. Maybe that's why Keeley is dead—I don't know. But I do know that there could be a clash between Harkrider and Farway over this, and I'd advise you to keep clear of it, Heininger."

XVII

HARKRIDER'S ROOM was hot and sweltering when Heininger went in. The simulator reproduced a brilliant, sunlit panorama of a Terran mountain range with deep, green valleys and snow gleaming on the topmost peaks. Pine trees garlanded the lower slopes and there were scents of pine and flowers in the heavy air; there was the smell of burning wood and fresh cut grass. On the slanted fields at the base of the mountains there were animals to be seen moving, herbivores that munched at the lush grass, while the uneven chime of bells sounded from a great distance.

Harkrider was in one of his wistful moods, longing for the things which he could have had as a young man, but which were now denied him forever.

Heininger stood and sweated and waited for his presence to be noticed.

On the back of the great chair the raven eyed him, its head cocked wickedly to one side; it ruffled its feathers

and moved a little, shifting position so that it might better look at Heininger. Heininger returned its glare and felt revulsion for the ugly bird as he remembered the past years when it had attacked him on more than one occasion to the accompaniment of harsh shrieks of amusement from Harkrider. Once he had struck it a violent blow with a file of papers and had damaged one wing. Harkrider had vented his rage on Heininger for several weeks thereafter, but the raven—once recovered—had not challenged him again.

The great beak opened a little to reveal the scabrous tongue, and the bird mewed slightly, an eerie sound amid the brilliance of the recaptured Terran landscape. It disturbed Harkrider, and his thin, wrinkled hand stabbed angrily at the button in the arm of the chair. Earth faded and was gone; the room became Harkrider's lair once more.

He scowled angrily at Heininger. "You've kept me waiting. Why?"

"I was called upon by an officer from the Law Squads," replied Heininger serenely.

"Oh? Why?" The gleaming eyes were wary and uneasy.

"A man was found dead outside the dome. A man named Keeley." He watched the wrinkled face for any sign of apprehension. "The body was found by a tourist group which included the Farway party." There was nothing to read there. "Since I knew Keeley the Law Squads thought that I might be able to help them."

"And were you?"

"No."

The scrawny head turned away from him, and the wizened hands began once more the endless task of transferring food from the table into the artificial, cavernous maw of Jason Harkrider.

"You must be careful, my Rudolph. I do not wish the Law Squads to interfere with my business—and you are my business." He wiped his food-stained fingers down the front of his jerkin.

"Surely you are more powerful here than the Law Squads," said Heininger innocently. "You own Pavanne, therefore you can control the Squads. Why should I worry or need to be careful?"

"Because I tell you so." The old man's voice screeched with rage and his hands took on a palsied trembling. "Don't try me too far, my Rudolph, or you may find that you're not as valuable as you seem to think."

Heininger bowed his head in apparent submission. It

wasn't worth an open conflict at this stage. Subserviently, he said, "Of course." Then, "What orders have you?"

"I have been thinking. After the Day of the Blue Sun there will be a falling off in tourist traffic until the next phase of the Yellow Sun." One hand passed a morsel of food to the raven as it hopped eagerly around the back of the chair. "There will be ample time to bring into effect an increased tourist levy. I think five percent is a nice round figure. How much will it increase the revenue?"

Heininger allowed his brain to slip into the smooth realms of calculation; in seconds he replied, "By fifty-seven thousand credits a year based on the last full year—"

"I want a hundred thousand," snapped Harkrider petulantly. "See to it."

Heininger took out a pad and made a note.

"Do you think I'm becoming too greedy, my Rudolph?"

Heininger shrugged. "People will always pay to see the Pictures of Pavanne."

"Exactly. And pay they shall."

On the far side of the room, half concealed in the shadows of an alcove, a door slid open, drawing Heininger's attention by its movement. It was, he knew, the private entrance to Harkrider's suite, an entrance through which his current favorites and his family could gain entrance. Through it came the entertainers, the sycophants, the panderers, the women—all of them with only one aim, and that to extract as much money and tribute as they could by serving the evil whims and desires of their master.

Heininger watched with growing distaste as the twin monstrosities of Jasmine and Jacintha came through the door.

They giggled and clutched at each other as they saw him.

"He's here, Sister," twittered Jasmine. "Shall we tell him about his Estelle? What we did to her?"

"Later, later. Keep him in suspense." Jacintha wrinkled her nose at him in an infantile gesture of mockery.

Harkrider waved them to silence with one brown hand. "I'm glad you've come. Now, listen to me, and listen well. Heininger, my daughters will fly out to see the passage of the Blue Sun tomorrow. See that my private vessel is ready and available for them. Make all necessary arrangements for it to have a priority flight path."

Twin wails of anguish and disgust greeted his words. Jasmine stamped her feet in a small paroxysm of temper.

"We don't want to. Who cares about the Pictures? Father, we don't want to go outside the city," she shouted.

"You'll do as I say while I am master here."

"Won't, won't, won't," chanted Jacintha.

"Then you'll pay in other ways," hissed Harkrider. "I'll cut your finances. I'll issue orders that will keep you out of every pleasure house in the city. Then what will you do, eh? Take your temper out on your new playmate?" He looked at Heininger. "Heininger will see to it; won't you, Rudolph?"

Jasmine swore luridly, and Harkrider picked up a sloppy handful of food and hurled it at her across the room. It fell short, spattering on the thick luxury of the carpet.

"You'll do as I say; won't you, my pretties?"

The twins gazed sulkily at each other.

"You old swine," said Jasmine. "One day someone will pull you out of that chair, and you'll be dead before they can connect all your pipes and tubes together again."

Harkrider snarled at her wordlessly. To Heininger he said, "Make the arrangements, Rudolph. They'll do as I say." He waved a hand in dismissal. "Now, get out."

Heininger smiled across at the twins and bowed ironically. Then he left the hot, steamy room.

When he got back to his office he found Max Farway seated in one corner, waiting for him.

The appearance of the twisted cripple halted him dead in his tracks, but he recovered quickly and crossed to his desk to sit down behind it.

"This is a pleasure, Farway. What can I do for you?"

"I want to see Harkrider."

"What?" His astonishment was quite involuntary. "Impossible."

Farway got up from the chair with some difficulty and limped toward the desk. "I'm not used to dealing with impossibilities, Heininger. I want to see Harkrider, and I want to see him now."

Heininger shook his head. "It can't be done. No one sees Jason Harkrider unless he desires it."

"Then I might tell Bodella a slightly different version of the real truth." Farway smiled thinly as he noted the slight frown on Heininger's face. "I think it might make things a little—ah—difficult for you."

"You can only tell the truth."

"Exactly." Farway turned his back and limped toward the window that looked out over the city. He stood there

hunched and ugly with his arms folded across his narrow chest. "For instance, I can tell him that you made the first approach to me. I can say that you denied all knowledge of Damon Wisepart. I can tell of the letters which Wisepart exchanged with my father. I can show those letters—"

"It would do you no good," Heininger broke in. "The Wisepart scandal was smothered when it first broke a year ago. Even Bodella wouldn't be able to do anything about it—even if he wished."

"I've realized that. But Bodella won't be able to keep quiet about Keeley. Too many people know about it; there are too many witnesses. And that means that the Law Squads will have to find a scapegoat."

Heininger felt the first niggings of apprehension. Farway was too smooth and too controlled; there was not the mercurial temper that Heininger had seen before. Farway knew exactly how this conversation had to be conducted, and he knew how it would end. There was more than mere apprehension in Heininger as he asked, "Why should they want a scapegoat?"

"Because, my dear Heininger, the same people who killed Wisepart also killed this man Keeley." He turned back from the window and smiled sadly at Heininger. "Remember you told me that yourself. Now, it seems elementary to me that if these people were big enough to keep Wisepart's demise secret then they are powerful enough to look for—and to find—a person to take the blame. Do you follow?"

Heininger said nothing. Farway had spelled it out all too clearly. There was too big a chance in challenging the cripple at this time; in less than a day he would be away from Pavanne and free. Until then he dare not risk anything that might hinder his departure.

Slowly, he rose from his chair and walked back toward the door through which he had so recently come. Farway followed him in silence. They took the grav-shaft up to the Harkrider suite, and the door opened to admit them to the old man's presence.

As they went in Farway coughed and gagged as the atmosphere hit him and caught the back of his throat. The first thing that took his attention was the black bulk of the raven which flapped excitedly on the back of the old man's chair; then he saw Harkrider himself—a wizened, shrunken elf, bald and brown, his eyes brilliant in the dead walnut of his face.

"Heininger! What do you want? Who is this? Get him out of here." The voice was high with anger. "By heaven, I'll see you suffer for this. Get him out, get him out!"

Heininger said coldly, "This is Max Farway. He demanded to see you."

"Leave us, Heininger," Farway ordered. "We have much to talk on." Then, as Heininger hesitated: "As your master just now said, *get out.*"

Farway heard the door close as the man left, and even had he not he would have known that Heininger was gone because of the frothing incoherency and the palsied shaking of the evil creature who sat before him. He moved a few steps nearer and his gaze fastened on the twin girls who sat, fat and ugly, in one corner, huddled together like Siamese twins.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Harkrider. Your fame is Galaxy-wide." Farway smiled. "At least we can observe the niceties."

"Get out! Get out!"

"In a while." He sat down on a chair, easing his body into it and wincing as his limbs and muscles adjusted themselves to new positions.

"He's ugly; isn't he, Jasmine?" said one of the girls.

"Ugly as sin. I wonder what he does for women?"

Farway felt the hot flush of anger flood his face, and the old familiar grinding agony build up inside him; he felt his muscles trembling with the slow rise of temper, and it was a fierce and pleasurable fire that grew and tried to consume him utterly.

"He buys them, I expect," said Jacintha. "That is, when he can find one who is desperate for money." She collapsed in a howl of laughter.

"Or else—maybe—perhaps he's impotent." They fell into each other's arms shrieking with almost hysterical pleasure.

Farway forced himself to a calmness that felt unnatural.

"Are these—creatures of your breeding, Harkrider?" he asked.

"My daughters," hissed Harkrider, "and they have described you as you are. Now, get out of here."

"And your immortality rests on these misbegotten hags." Farway let his lips curl into a sneer of distaste. "One thing is sure, no man would bed with them for a king's ransom. There has to be desire before all else."

Jasmine spat at him.

"Or have you thought of artificial means?" Farway sug-

gested thoughtfully. "Harkrider, I pity you. I wonder now, why people fear you. I heard of you as a man full of power, and I thought that you must be as my father was, but without the dedication which tied him to his ambition. And I come here—and what do I find?"

The evil eyes blinked at him and betrayed passions which—in a mobile man—would have bred violence, even death.

"I find a puppet," sneered Farway. "A half man long past the time when death should have claimed him. And after death? Two heirs to carry your name? Twin horrors, Harkrider, each of them as ugly as I am myself, yet neither carrying the soul nor the desire to be immortal."

"What do you want here?" The voice was a mere whisper, carrying a hatred more deadly than if it had been born in violence.

"That's better." Farway relaxed in the chair. "I had a similar difficulty with Heinger, but he saw the point in the end." He folded his hands carefully in his lap, making the next few seconds stretch into a silence that brooded through the hot, stifling room. "I want to know about a man named Damon Wisepart."

"I do not know him."

"Too quick, too quick," Farway admonished gently. "You know, and Heinger knows him, though he denied it at first. Try again."

"What do you want of this Wisepart?"

"Since he is dead—nothing. But I am curious to know why he died. I am curious to know what it was that he and my father wrote to each other." He reached into his jerkin and from an inner pocket drew forth a folded folio of papers. "I have them here, the letters which Wisepart wrote, and copies of my father's replies."

"Then you must know—"

"But what is there to know, Harkrider? I do not know, and that is why I am here." Did he read relief in the ancient eyes? Farway couldn't be sure. The wrinkled face hid the secrets of its owner too well. Did the frail body relax just a little? Again, he could not be sure. Perhaps he was seeking signs that he wished to see.

"I know only that Wisepart was on the track of something concerning the Pictures of Pavanne, something that he wrote about in the most hesitant and guarded terms. He said that he couldn't really be sure, yet he had an inkling that there was something deeper . . ." Farway paused. "It would take something very large to accomplish his death

and to stifle the fact of his death. It would take a powerful man to do all this. That is why I came to you."

"You're mad. A cripple and you're mad."

"I'm no more a cripple than you. As to madness—are those two more sane than I?" He nodded to the huddled figures of the twins. "I have been gathering details while I've been here, on Pavanne. I don't have the full story yet, but I have enough to make public when I get back to Earth. Remember, Harkrider, that Wisepart was a respected and learned member of the Terran community. He was an old man with few relatives—certainly none who would bother about him as yet. With the passing of time his death would have become obscured. But if I go back to Earth in the next few weeks and tell how he was found, out there beyond the dome, with his eyes put out—"

"You don't know that. You can't prove it."

"I don't have to. Someone else more powerful than I will come here—"

"This is my world, damn you. No one interferes with what happens here," shouted Harkrider. "I rule it. It's mine—"

"You couldn't stand up to an impartial investigation once the news gets out," Farway interrupted. "They'll crucify you. Someone knows what happened and once the dam is breached, Harkrider, you'll go under with the rest." He rose from the chair and limped toward the door, eager now to get away from the stuffy room and the sweating, crumpled figure in the giant chair.

"Wait, Farway. Wait."

He paused and turned back. Harkrider was panting, his body pulsing as his lungs drew in deep gasps of air; his arms hung limply over the arms of the chair.

"If you do this . . . I'll break you, Farway . . . I'll finish you, and the Farway Foundation."

"You're not that big."

"Aren't I?" Harkrider giggled knowingly, and from some inner reservoir seemed to have drawn fresh reserves. The body which had trembled and shaken as with an ague, the eyes which had gleamed with evil rage, were calmer now. The evil was still there, but it had an air of satisfaction that Farway didn't like. He stood still and waited.

"I'll tell you a story, Farway. This world, this planet has milked the tourist trade of the Galaxy for almost two hundred years. This city has grown and developed for one purpose only—to take the cream from the Universe of man. Everything which is here, on Pavanne, is owned

by me. Every hotel, every restaurant, every gaming house, every brothel—everything that operates pays me.”

“And yet you are come to this?” asked Farway. “A lone chair in a stifling room—”

“Save the mocking till I am finished. Have you ever wondered where all the money goes that is brought here from the Galaxy outside? Have you ever wondered what good it does—or what harm?”

Farway said nothing, but there was a chill that hadn't been there moments earlier. Had he ever wondered? Had anyone ever thought about it?

“It goes back into the empire of man. It buys businesses; it buys land, trading concessions, precious metals, factories, industries, stock holdings. It smooths pathways here; it kills men there; it makes others bankrupt. This is its power, Farway. I can bring down governments, and I can kill powerful politicians and businessmen without even stirring from this room.” He chuckled obscenely. “You talk of power; you talk of the Farway Foundation. Shall I tell you what the Foundation really is? It is one of my agencies, it does my bidding, and I can snuff it out as easily as I can a candle flame.”

Farway stood immobile; his mind refused to believe what it heard because the whole thing was too fantastic. Harkrider was mad. His father would never have been a party to such a monstrous scheme. Whatever else he might have been the old man was a dedicated worker, he looked on the Foundation as a monument to his life, and he would never have allowed it to become sullied in such a manner as this half man had suggested.

Only when Harkrider said “Wouldn't he?” did he realize that he had spoken out loud.

“No,” he rasped. “No, he wouldn't.”

“He would—if he didn't know.”

“How could he not know? It just isn't possible.”

Harkrider cackled his glee. “You show your ignorance of the world of commerce all too clearly, Farway. This began almost two centuries ago. It was started by my grandfather and perpetuated by my father. There are a score of firms such as the Farway Foundation, and each of them is a tribute to planning and remote control. There are interlocking companies, private corporations, public trusts, a pyramid upon other pyramids of control. There is a network of control that an army of accountants couldn't unravel in twenty years. I pay figurehead directors; I buy a

thousand bank accounts and deposit boxes. Every trick and every scheme that the mind of man could invent has been used to shroud in secrecy all that I've told you. And your father never knew because the whole thing was too vast for one man to understand, too big for a hundred men ever to unravel. It all comes back to me, here in this room, and I tell you this: it isn't too big for me to tear down if I so decide." Harkrider's breath was rasping through his lipless mouth as his lungs strove to keep up the necessary flow of air. Deep in the chair machinery gurgled and sighed, correcting the balance of existence that the flood of words had thrown into strain.

"I warn you, Farway: I can smash you and your precious stepmother as easily as I can snap my fingers. And it would not make more than a tiny ripple on my empire if I so decide. Think on it before you carry out your threat. Wise-part is dead. Nothing can alter that fact, but I can tear down you and ten thousand like you.

"Now . . . get out of here . . . leave me . . . to my pillory."

XVIII

ALICIA FARWAY had the deepest misgivings when Max had announced, during the afternoon, that he intended visiting the Harkrider Tower.

The Law Squads had come, taken their statements, and departed. Max Farway had been quiet and introspective after Heininger's visit; he brooded on some inner puzzle, and then departed in a quiet, determined mood that was completely out of character.

Now, it was late evening; the city daylight had long since faded into darkness, and only the garishness of the night illumined the scene beyond the hotel windows. Pavanne City—in this guise—might have been any Terran city on any continent on Earth. Fleetinglly, Alicia wondered why men should cross parsecs of space merely to recreate their own environment.

Magnus had long since given up their joint vigil. He had gone to his own part of the suite tired and worried by the events of the day.

"He'll be back, Alicia. You worry too much." The art dealer had gestured vaguely with his hands. "After all, his life has been—shall we say, ascetic, these past weeks."

"No." Alicia knew that he was wrong. "He is seeing shadows, Willem, shadows which seem to have a disconcerting way of coming to life. He's looking for trouble, and finding it."

"Go to bed, Alicia; he'll be all right."

But sleep hadn't called to her, and now it was close to midnight. She heard the whisper of the outer door as it opened and closed.

"Is that you, Max?" she called, and even as she spoke the stunted, twisted figure limped into the room. "Are you all right?"

As she looked at him she knew that the question need not have been answered; indeed it need not even have been asked. He was as white as death, his eyes large and deep sunk—black pools of anguish above a bitter, twisted mouth that seemed to have no lips so tight were they closed.

"Max, what's happened?"

He limped across the room toward his own, and turned on her in the entrance. "Go to bed, Alicia. My worries are my own." His voice was rasping, a tremulous whisper that struck apprehension even deeper than did his appearance; and then he was gone, with the door closed to shut him away from her.

She sat down on a chair uncertain what to do. His arrival had been a momentary relief, but that relief had been shattered by the realization that here was a man who had looked upon some unimagined horror and found it unbearable. Something had happened to him during the past few hours. . . .

Abruptly, she rose and crossed to his door as a sound caught her ears. She stood listening for several long seconds, and then turned away. She walked toward the room that Magnus occupied and knocked. Then she went straight in without waiting for his call.

The room lights came on as she entered, and the tousled, sleepy figure of the art dealer gaped at her owlshly from the large bed.

"Alicia—what . . . ?"

"Max has come back, Willem."

"I told you there was nothing to worry about."

"Something has happened. He—he's gone straight to his room."

"Well, what's so odd about that?"

"He—" Her voice broke a little. "He's in there alone, crying like a child."

Magnus sat up slowly. "I don't see—"

"Willem, Willem, he needs help. Come in with me. Perhaps we can do something."

Magnus sighed, shrugged resignedly. "I tell you, you worry too much, Alicia. He is not as other men. You can't treat him as other men."

"Perhaps there is something wrong."

"All right, all right." He waved his hands despairingly. "If it is what you want. Give me a minute."

She went back to the outer lounge, and he followed her seconds later tugging at the fastenings of his night robe. Together they crossed to Farway's door, and Alicia went straight through without knocking.

He lay face down on his bed, the crooked hump of his back jutting like an obscene hillock and trembling under the force of his sobbing.

"Max, what's the matter?" asked Alicia.

The sobbing broke momentarily. He lay still for a second and then jerked upright. "What are you doing here?" His face was still white, but now it was streaked with tears that seemed to have carved further lines down the hollow cheeks. It was a face ravaged and scarred by more than physical discomfort. "I don't want you here. You can do nothing."

"Max, Max." She crossed to him and sat down on the bed beside him. "We are here together. Can't you get it into that stupid head that your troubles affect us all? Won't you realize that all I want is to help you—if I can?"

Farway stood up slowly and turned his back on them. "You're too good for this life, Alicia. You can't take the troubles of the world upon your shoulders. There's nothing you can do."

"You don't deserve her worry," said Magnus sharply. "Nor mine, for that matter. I offer it because of her."

"Damn you, Magnus." Farway turned back on them, and sat down again. He snuffled like a child for whom tears are not far away. "I don't need your help—either of you."

"All right." Alicia stood up, her face pale and drawn. "It seems we aren't wanted, Willem." She walked toward the door and Magnus turned to follow.

"Alicia . . . no!" It was a plea wrenched from a tortured mouth, and as she turned back she saw Farway's lip writhing

in an agony of emotion. "No, don't go! God, I need someone." The words were lost in the tortured sobs that shook his frail, twisted body. "I . . . need . . . you, Alicia."

Magnus looked at her as she turned back. She was a woman torn apart, yet holding herself together by a supreme effort of will, as she turned back and sat down gently beside him. She put a hand on his shoulder. "What happened when you saw Harkrider?"

He lifted his face from his hands.

"I—I'm being stretched on a rack!"

"Just tell me about it."

"I can't."

"It'll be easy once you start."

His whole body trembled under her hand; a violent shivering seized him as he whispered, "That horrible, disgusting old man."

"Go on. Tell it all."

By degrees it came from him. Slowly, with infinite patience, she cajoled him, drew him, coaxed him, until, at last, the words came tumbling out. His tortured soul unburdened itself with a flood of words—a verbal dam broken down by her sympathy and her gentle probing.

Alicia sat like a statue, unmoving, as the story grew and flowed and expanded. Magnus sat down in a chair on the far side of the room, fascinated and horrified by what the artist told them as he spoke in a voice that trembled at first, and then became stronger as his poet's sense took over and the words flowed from him, telling the story that shocked them into grim-faced silence.

He told it simply, quoting Harkrider's words with the minimum of invective, allowing the tale to state its own horror, without embellishment from the teller. And in the telling Farway's own emotion dried up; only his voice reflected, at the end, his own disillusion.

When it was done all three of them sat quietly. Alicia and Magnus were stunned by the revelation, and it was left to Magnus to break the spell as he stirred in his seat and asked, shakily, "Do you believe all this, Max?"

Farway stood up and turned his back on them, standing with his head bowed. "Yes. Yes, I believe him. Nothing like this could ever be invented."

"Max!" Alicia bent her head and looked at the floor before her. "Max. It's a horrible story—that old man, sitting up there pulling at his puppet strings . . . but—tell me if I'm wrong—does it really matter?"

"Matter?" Farway sprang back from them, his face drawn, the eyes wide and stark. "Matter? Alicia, can't you see? Why do you think I've been wandering around the city these last hours? Of course it matters. That creature up there in his foul, stinking little room—he could control the Terran dominated worlds and no one would know about it. He's a spider in the center of an invisible web, and my father was one of his puppets."

"Is that so important?"

"God, can't you see?" His voice was trembling once again. "I live as I do because of that. The world of man is a mirror image of his obscenity. All the depravity, the filth, the corruption—"

"You can't visit the sins of mankind upon one person, no matter how evil he may seem," said Magnus sharply. "You read too much into this, Max."

"If he and his forebears have accomplished this much in two centuries, what will his descendants or successors do in the next two centuries?" Farway shook his head. "If something is to be done then I am the one to do it. And yet—how can I?"

"If you have thought it through, how can you not?" Alicia countered gently. "You must do what must be done, Max. That is the only way. You, of all people, should know that."

"And what of you?"

"Me?" She stared at him in surprise. "I am only one person among thousands of millions."

"But I shall destroy you. Oh, it may take time, but it will mean the end of the Farway Foundation."

"It'll mean more to you than to me, Max," she told him gently. "I am not a poor woman, you know, whatever may happen to the Foundation. But you! Max, you could end up without anything."

Magnus said, "You told me once that I had the soul of a thief, Max. Perhaps that is because I never had money until I entered the world of art. Do you see, now, what money can mean? Without it would you be half the artist that you are at this moment? Is that what is tearing you apart?"

Alicia flashed a warning look at Magnus. The art dealer sounded bitter and angry, as if he could read Farway's indecision and the motives behind it. Was he right? she wondered. But Farway didn't respond as he might have done. There was no flash of temper, no masochistic urge to hurt himself as well as others around him; he merely stood

with his head bowed and allowed Magnus to state his own thoughts.

"If I bring the Wisepart business into the open," Farway said softly, "something would happen, because by bringing that into the light of day I would stir up such a sound of wrath that Harkrider could never survive it. And at the same time I could denounce his economic power and the secrecy which guards it." He shook his head. "I could destroy him, but in his own destruction would lie the end of thousands—perhaps—millions—of innocent people like you, Alicia." He looked at her, his face stark and pale. "Which is the greater sin? To allow him to continue? Or to drag others down with him?"

"There is another thing," added Magnus. "Without the Foundation, how will you paint the Pictures of Pavanne? How will you achieve your immortality?"

Farway smiled at him, but it was the smile of the lips, not of the eyes or of the heart.

"You read me too well, Willem." He gestured briefly. "The problem is mine. I don't think sleep will touch me tonight. And tomorrow is the Day of the Blue Sun. Strange how all the climaxes of one's life are crammed into so small a space." He limped to the door and opened it. "Leave me, both of you. I feel better for sharing what I know, but—in the end—the problem is mine, and I alone must decide what shall be done."

XIX

AFTER THEY HAD left him, Farway lay for a long time on his bed. He dimmed the lights but he didn't undress. He lay propped awkwardly against the cushions and pillows that gave necessary aid to his twisted body, and he wondered what he should do.

All the implications of the situation were now only coming home to him. If nothing else the forcible entry of Alicia and Magnus had at least crystallized some of the less obvious facets. He realized with a dull wonder that Alicia had some affection for him; he tried, objectively, to seek

justification—but couldn't. He thought of the scenes to which he had subjected her: the scorn, the ill temper, the tantrums; and he swore at himself feebly and helplessly in the darkness, damning his accursed body and his more accursed soul. Farway knew too well that he was his own product, and at times like these he didn't admire his creation.

Magnus? At least the art dealer had the courage to say what he thought; and perhaps that, too, was born of his reluctance to put up with Farway's ill humor any longer.

Why had he come to this damned world? Farway rubbed a hand wearily across his face and moved into a sitting position. Above all why had he pursued his ridiculous clairvoyance about Wisepart? Always he had enjoyed reading other people's minds, seeing in their faces the things that they wanted to hide from him. He had taken a subtle, masochistic delight in revealing to them that he knew what they were thinking. They wore their embarrassment with shame and anger, and his emotions fed on the emotions of others like a vampire, growing strong and pulsing through him like fire. Sometimes there was revulsion; sometimes there was pity; occasionally, so very occasionally, there was understanding.

And where had all this got him?

It had made him taunt Heininger; it had made him press the mental buttons that made Heininger's face react like a puppet on a string; and out of all that had come the knowledge of Wisepart and what had happened to him. If only he had left it there. If only . . . !

He slept at last, still in his day clothes, and when he awoke the Day of the Blue Sun had dawned and the City of Pavanne was alive and humming with the wonder of it.

He showered, changed into a fresh suit and joined the others at breakfast.

Alicia watched him apprehensively as he came into the room, but he seemed relaxed and calm so that she too could relax a little.

Farway sat down and said, "I shouldn't have troubled you with all that last night. I'm sorry."

"I'm glad you did," she told him. "At least you were able to shed a little of the burden. Have you decided what to do?"

"Yes." He poured himself some coffee, and helped himself to the fruit salad. "I am going to enjoy this day, Alicia, because it is unique and wonderful and an opportunity

I shall not see again for sixteen years." He shrugged. "And who knows, in sixteen years I may not be able to."

"What of Harkrider?" asked Magnus.

"The devil with Harkrider—at least, for today."

Farway's sentiment was being echoed by Heininger in his penthouse apartment, with far more vehemence and without the limitation of time put on the curse by the cripple.

The night had been a long one for Heininger, and though he had slept at last it had been an uneasy rest that was broken as soon as the artificial dawn began to spread light and color beneath the city dome. He lay and watched it, striving to repress the nerves that jumped within him, tingling his stomach, drying his throat and mouth with anticipation. For on this day he would be free; this morning would see his last visit to the stinking, sweating room that was all Harkrider's visible empire. Strange that a man like him could cover the Galaxy with his tentacles, and yet be shut in a cell as securely as any medieval prisoner in his dungeon. And today would be the last time that he need endure the taunts and insults of Harkrider's evil brood. The twins could pursue their vices and flaunt their depravity, and he would be light-years away from them.

Anticipation calmed his nerves.

Inability to sleep made him rise earlier than usual, but he took a leisurely shower and dressed before eating a meager breakfast. Then he packed a few personal items in a small case and laid it ready on a table. Outside the peace and stillness of his apartment Heininger knew that the city would be alive, buzzing with a new and vigorous excitement. Today would be the carnival day to end all carnivals as the tourist ships headed out with their live cargoes to take their preordained orbits from whence the mystic brilliance of the Blue Sun would fire the Pictures with new and coruscating life.

And Harkrider would garner more wealth for his overflowing coffers.

Heininger didn't make the mistake of breaking his routine in the slightest degree. He went from his suite to his office at exactly the same time as he would have on any normal day. There were things to be done, people to see, to talk with, to listen to; there were reports to be summarized, figures to be checked. The running of Harkrider's empire

went on in the same manner as it had for at least eight years.

At eleven o'clock Heininger rose from his desk and tucked the folder containing the daily report under his arm. He stood for a few seconds, irresolute; there was a feeling of history, an eagerness that he had never known before. Always in the past he had dreaded this moment, for he knew that the next hour might threaten his existence, might ruin his ambitions, or destroy his carefully laid plans. Now, this morning, this instant, everything was changed. Harkrider might snap and snarl, threaten or abuse. He, Rudolph Heininger, was all but safe. Irresolution was replaced by exultation. Timing had always been important to him, and his unconscious sense of timing had brought him properly and correctly to just the right point at just the right time. The consciousness of climax was almost a personal triumph.

He went out of the office and took the grav-shaft up toward Harkrider's aerie. Outside the door to the hot, steamy room he paused for a second and gathered himself with an effort to his normal composure. This was no time to lapse from normalcy.

The door opened and he stepped inside, and instantly he knew there was a strangeness that should not have been. At this time of day he should have walked into the center of a Terran scene as the simulator created the desires of its operator. In the mornings Harkrider was always nostalgic for the lost scenes of Earth, the open brilliance of sunlight and shadow, the rustle of tree forests, the sounds of birds, the green of grass and growing things. Or else there would be the clean, cool sweep of mountains topped with snow, the sighing of high winds, the brilliance of clear, ice blue skies. Each of them Heininger knew and expected.

This morning he walked into the center of an orgy from pre-atomic America.

The sounds were turned low, but still the revulsion boiled within him born of shock and the knowledge that this wasn't right. Today, of all days, Harkrider had changed the pattern.

Heininger crossed toward the great chair, walking into the very center of the erotic fantasy that stimulated Harkrider's dying emotions. The moist, glistening eyes swiveled toward him and an expression of anger disturbed the lust.

"What do you want?" demanded Harkrider.

"The daily report," Heininger replied quietly.

A stick-thin finger jabbed at a button in the arm of the

chair, and the scenes faded, died; the room returned to its normal stifling quietude. The right hand continued to pass food to the ever-receptive mouth.

"The Day of the Blue Sun, my Rudolph," Harkrider passed a morsel to the raven. "Are you going to view the passage?"

"I might. If you can spare me."

Harkrider cackled with delight. "That's right, that's right! Show me the proper humility, my Rudolph, and then perhaps I'll let you go. After all"—he giggled wickedly—"you won't have another chance for sixteen years, will you?"

Heininger said nothing. He recognized these moments and he knew how to treat them.

"I saw it once many years ago," Harkrider brooded. "And I wanted to see it again and again. But now I can't. I have to sit here while others take pleasure and see the delights of the Pictures." He glowered at Heininger beneath lowered hairless brows. "Have you made the arrangements for my daughters?"

"Yes. The vessel will take them out at fifteen hundred."

"Good, good. See that they are on it. I won't put it past them to disobey me if they could. Now, get the report over quickly, and get out of here."

By noon it was over.

Heininger walked from the evil sanctum of Jason Harkrider; the door closed after him; he didn't look back. His own office was quiet; there had been no messages, no queries, no decisions to be made, for today was the Day of the Blue Sun and everybody had something else to do.

He spent almost half an hour putting into motion the decisions and the orders that Harkrider had made. This was the last link in the chain that would cover his disappearance; nothing must seem to be wrong until he was aboard ship and outside the influence of the Planet of Pavanne. At twelve-thirty he went back to his penthouse suite, and ate a frugal snack from the dri-store, washing the food down with a large whisky. He decided to give himself an additional few minutes in case of holdups, and he left the apartment again at five minutes before thirteen hundred. The mid-speed band of the roller road was only thinly used; the fast center bands were almost deserted, and that was most unusual at this time of day.

Heininger knew that most people who could manage it were already bound off-world toward the orbits from which

they could view the passage of the Blue Sun, but he had not really envisaged a situation wherein he might be conspicuous. The small case in his hand seemed to stand out like a large, red notice that said, "Look, I am running away from Jason Harkrider." Heininger cursed his apprehension. There was nothing for him to worry about.

He walked the last few hundred yards to the main lock after leaving the roller road. It was a broad, straight avenue, and it carried the tourist parties in ground cars toward the main takeoff areas for the vessels outward bound to view the Pictures. Heininger would have to take a smaller hired car for himself, but he wasn't too worried. There would be plenty of people from among the residents of Pavanne City who would be taking the same route; accommodation in such vehicles would be easily accessible.

The giant inner doors of the lock were closed as he approached, and through the semiopacity he could see the bulk of a great passenger vehicle waiting for the lock to be bled of air so that the outer doors could be opened to allow it passage into the dead wastes beyond. Behind it was a line of other vehicles of varying size. The time was thirteen-twenty. He was right on schedule.

Heininger crossed toward the parking area to one side of the lock and approached one of the small private vessels standing there. The pilot, a short, thin young man with narrow eyes, got out of his cabin as Heininger drew near.

"I want passage out to the Earthbound vessel," said Heininger. "Departure number four-one-eight."

The man consulted a sheet that he took from an inner pocket, and then looked curiously at Heininger. "Not staying for the fun, sir?"

Heininger knew well that the city developed a massive carnival air immediately after each passage, be it by the Blue or the Yellow Sun. The one tomorrow promised to be a carnival to end all carnivals. He shook his head with mock sadness. "No, I have to go straight to Earth."

"All right. Get aboard. We'll just make it."

Heininger moved toward the cabin door, and as he did so a voice, quite close to him, said, "Heininger!"

His heart leaped within him, and he turned his head to see Bodella looking at him from a few feet away, his hands folded carefully behind his back.

"Going off-world, Heininger?"

"Of course. I'm going to view the Passage. Why?"

Bodella smiled sadly and shook his head. "Not this trip, you're not."

It had been too easy, Heininger realized. He'd been lulled into thinking that this would be simple. He struggled to put a brave face on his surprise. "What on earth . . . ? What the devil are you talking about, Bodella?"

"Direct orders from Harkrider." Bodella shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I can't do anything about it. You are not to be allowed to view the Passage of the Blue Sun."

"But—but this is ridiculous." Fear had taken him by the scruff of the neck and was shaking him to pieces. "I appeal to you; is it reasonable—"

"Sorry. I can't cross Harkrider, and you know it."

"But he'll never know."

"Don't be a damned fool. Of course he'll know. He knows everything that happens on this blasted planet. Now, go back to your office and ask him nicely. Perhaps he'll relent."

Heininger turned away and back toward the roller road. He was seething with rage and frustration; an emotional dam had burst under this last terrible ignominy.

XX

AFTER THEIR breakfast together Alicia and Magnus saw nothing more of Farway until lunch. He went back to his room to paint.

Magnus went out to make sure of their reservations for the flight that afternoon, and Alicia spent the morning hours sitting on the balcony of their suite and watching the milling crowds below. Gradually, they thinned out as the early ships took off with their tourist cargoes crammed aboard to spend several hours jockeying for position and orbit.

The later vessels would be more expensive and more luxurious; their passengers would spend relatively little time in orbit before the final supreme revelation of the Pictures of Pavanne was paraded before them.

At Magnus' suggestion they agreed to have lunch in the suite rather than in the vast hotel dining room. They could leisurely partake of their food in privacy and comfort, leave the hotel at fifteen hundred, and be in good time to join their flight which took off at fifteen-thirty.

As she watched the crowds Alicia wondered about Farway and his dilemma.

The problem is mine, and I alone must decide what shall be done. His words still rang in her mind. He had said them calmly and without evident emotion, as if he had already decided and was—at last—at peace with himself. If that was true then the clash with Harkrider had accomplished something which no other person and no other event had ever been within a hundred miles of accomplishing. To that extent, at least, the visit to Pavanne had been successful.

The sound of movement in the room behind her caught her attention, and she turned to see Farway pouring himself a drink.

"Max, bring me one, please," she called. "Is it time for lunch yet?"

"Another hour or so."

He joined her on the balcony and handed her the drink. "Viewing the passing scene? Don't you ever tire of watching your fellow beings, Alicia? Look at them. They're ants and they have as much significance."

"They're people, like you and I."

Farway laughed harshly as he sat down beside her. "Little people, but not like you or I." He pointed down at the now rapidly diminishing throng. "Sometimes I look at them, and I think to myself, thank God I'm not like them. They live their little lives; they are born, they work, enjoy themselves, breed children to bear their names into the future. And then they die. In six months or a year very few people remember them or what they have done. In ten years there isn't even a ripple on the surface of civilization that can be traced back to any of them."

"Do you despise them so much?"

"No, I pity them, because not one in each ten million will be known or remembered fifty years from now. Not one in a hundred million will have his name talked of in a thousand years."

"Is that what you want for yourself?"

"You know it. Alicia, can you die and know that life has meant nothing?"

She thought about it for a moment and then nodded slowly.

"Yes, I think so. All I wish is to live in peace and harmony—to be happy, to laugh a little now and then, to die content. Max, I haven't your ambition for immortality."

"More likely you'll have it whether you want it or not because of me."

Was he really such an egotist? she wondered. She could hardly think that any man could be so sure of the future as Farway seemed to be. And yet she had seen the fire blazing within him, the white hot dedicated flame that his being should be remembered long after his twisted body was no more. Was it possible that she should be dragged along in the wake of his passing, to flutter like a moth in his bright incandescence?

"Oh, yes, I shall be remembered," he whispered. "Long after I am dead my name will be spoken about, if not for one thing then for something else."

There was something of premonition in her as she asked, "Does that mean you've decided what to do about Hark-rider?"

"Yes, I've decided. I lay awake and thought about it for most of the night, and I have thought about it again this morning." He paused and his long fingers intertwined, the knuckles whitening under the stress of the tensed muscles. "I shall expose him, crucify him, bring down his empire in ruins . . ."

"And will that be your immortality? The destruction of another?"

"Not that alone. When it's done I'll have to paint to live. It'll be the one thing left in my life when the Farway Foundation is no more. Alicia, I thought about Florian and his years in the wilderness, drawing those damned tourist portraits so that he could stay here, on Pavanne, to create the one thing that mattered in his life. He did it because he had to. I want to do it because I have to, and yet how can I when there is no incentive? Florian put his finger on the right spot when he told me that I didn't have to perform the penance of spending sixteen years away from my home world as he was forced to do. And yet, without that penance I doubt if he would have created anything half so wonderful. I doubt if I shall be able to do it unless I have the same poverty that is his, or the same dedication which was forced upon him."

Alicia looked dully at the panorama before her, the lifting spires and the wide, straight roads; the moving bands of the roller strips; the crowds, the color, the light; the majesty of the City of Pavanne.

"Is that the real reason?" she asked. "I can't believe that you would do this for no other reason than to accomplish

your own poverty. It doesn't make sense. You're looking for the ascetism of a monk, the masochism of a flagellant, and to find it you need to destroy someone else." She stood up suddenly. "I've thought about this as well, Max. I've thought about all the millions of people who will be thrown down with this man, Harkrider. There will be a decade of chaos and it might well be completely unnecessary."

"Rubbish. It has to be done. . . ."

"No, listen. He is an old man; he can't live forever. From what we know his daughters are incapable of anything save their own pleasures. The Harkrider empire will fade gradually from the scene simply because there will be no one left to hold it together." She turned and looked down at him. "Wouldn't that be preferable to the chaos that you are planning?"

Farway was shaking his head in desperate denial. "No, no, no! It must come down—all of it. I want it that way."

"Ah, and this is the real reason." She seized on his words. "You want it that way! You want it that way! Max, I thought last night that you had begun to change, but I can see that you haven't. You've merely shifted your position to make it more comfortable. This way your immortality is certain, isn't it? Because even if you fail to paint the Pictures you will still have this destruction to carry your name into the future. If you cannot survive on creation alone then you will survive on chaos." Her voice trembled with emotion. "I thought that I was getting through to you, Max. I thought that, one day, I might create someone of whom your father would have been proud. I hoped . . ." She faltered and stopped speaking for a long minute. "Never mind what I hoped. Max, after today I'm going back to Earth. I'm going alone and I never want to see you again."

The wall clock showed fourteen hundred as Heinger got back to his apartment. The black numerals seemed to taunt him with wordless mockery, and the red rage that had begun out at the main airlock was deeper and more murderous than ever. He threw the small case across the ante-room and stormed out of the suite again, heading toward the Harkrider Tower. There were few people about.

He took the grav-shaft directly to Harkrider's aerie, and he paused outside the plain, unlettered door for a few seconds to gather himself into some semblance of order. One thing he would not do was to let Harkrider see how

disturbed he really was, for that would only accomplish Harkrider's greater pleasure.

The door slid open before him and he walked through into the center of chaos.

The noise was overwhelming; there was wild music that assailed the senses like a drug; there was a bacchanalian screeching as of a hundred people lost in the overwhelming holocaust of emotional trauma. Heininger's dazed sight brought realization that this was another of Harkrider's orgy scenes, but it was magnified a dozen times in sound and effect by the frenetic objectivity of the simulator. Music wailed and blared, light and color shifted and moved to add to the confusion; it was a terrible picture taken straight from the mythology of hell.

Heininger paused for a few seconds to allow his senses to recover. At the back of the chair the great raven sat, hunched and evil, black and bowed down by the tumult around it. The fury that Heininger had tried to control welled up in a fierce burst of passion. Heininger took six steps across the room and jabbed a finger at the button which he knew controlled the simulator. The scenes faded and died; the noise drifted, fell into a silence that seemed alive as Harkrider blinked in stunned, openmouthed surprise. His lips worked moistly, yet no words came forth.

Heininger waited for the storm.

It came after almost a minute of near apoplexy; the words tumbled from the drooling mouth, obscene curses, foul deprecations, and all of them only served to calm Heininger. For he knew what his moment of frenzy meant. He had committed the one unforgivable sin; he had dared to interfere with Harkrider's pleasures, and in doing so he had shown that he could no longer be used or tormented or cowed.

He cut across the old man's half hysterical tirade as he demanded, "Why did you stop me from viewing the Passage, Harkrider?"

The tumult of words stopped, and the breath whistled feebly from the ancient mouth. His anger seemed to die a little and into the small, brilliant eyes came a look that Heininger knew all too well. It was the cunning pleasure of a man who has accomplished another's downfall, and Heininger had seen it too often in the past to mistake it now.

"Why?" he repeated. "Why prevent me from such a little pleasure?"

"Pleasure? Pleasure?" The words hissed from Harkrider. He drew deep gasping breaths to reinforce his power of speech. "Don't play with me, my Rudolph. I know you too well. I know every move you make, every plan you contrive. Pleasure, indeed! You think you can run out on me like that? Now, when I have more need of you than ever before. Well, I tell you now; you can't. You leave here when I say so, when I allow you to leave. Oh, yes!" He read the apprehension in Heininger's face. "I know where you were going, my Rudolph, but I don't think you're ready for Earth just yet."

The fire left Heininger. He felt old, weighed down by the futility. He should have known that Harkrider would be one step ahead of him. He should have known . . . but he had blunted his own knowledge by the desire to be free.

"Damn you. You can't keep me here forever."

"I don't want to. Only just as long as you are useful."

"I'm no use to you now. No use at all."

"Oh, but you are." Harkrider's eyes were knowing and he giggled slightly. "You have one more function to perform, one more service to render."

"How did you know?" whispered Heininger. "How could you know?"

"I know everything about you, my Rudolph. Oh, you'd be surprised. I knew about your Estelle, didn't I? I know about your desk and the little compartment in it." He laughed in hideous glee as he saw the growing horror on Heininger's face. "And I tell you that you are not yet ready for Earth."

"I'm ready for anywhere that is away from Pavanne. I've given you eight years of my life. . . ."

"But without money, without means of support, how can you leave? Ah, that's the question, my Rudolph. How can you leave?"

Heininger was about to blurt that he had more money than he would need in his lifetime; something stopped him. The giggling insanity, the knowing delight; he was forewarned and the knowledge was like a ton weight upon him.

"What have you done? Harkrider, damn you. What have you done to me?"

"You have nothing!" The words were spat at him with a terrible vehemence. "I knew you from the start, my Rudolph; I knew what you were doing, how you were planning for the day when you could walk out and leave me. Well, no one leaves me until I am ready for them to go. Go on; buy a ticket away from Pavanne. Wait until

you get to Earth, and then try and collect what you have salted away. Oh, I know all about it. I know all the shares, the bonds, the notes, the nominees. I know how you salted away all the money you cheated from me—”

“You can’t!”

“Can’t? There’s no such word. Shall I tell you of the forced liquidations, the bankrupt companies, the shares which have been wiped out overnight? Shall I talk of the cheap takeovers, the revoked stock options? Don’t tell me that I can’t do it, because it is done and you are as big a pauper now as you were on the day you first set foot in this room.”

Heininger collapsed into a chair. Never in his wildest nightmares had he envisaged such an appalling catastrophe. Not for an instant did he doubt that what Harkrider said was true; he had seen him operate before; he had witnessed the elaborate machinations of this evil, wizened creature for too long to know that what he wished to do was done. Besides, those few sentences had shown him just how much Harkrider knew about his affairs. And yet, he had been so careful; there had never been a step taken unless he had been absolutely certain that it was a safe one. Now he was here, at the end of eight years, exactly where he had started. The anger was gone from him, drained by the terrible heartbreak of despair.

“Well, my Rudolph?”

He wanted to curse and revile the old man, but the words would not come; they were too poor to express all that he felt at that moment. And then, as he sat there, Heininger was aware of an even greater horror growing within him. What had Harkrider said? What had he babbled in his moment of triumph?

“I know about your desk and the little compartment in it.”

He looked across the short distance at the gloating, shrunken figure. The hands were moving like automata, pushing food into the mouth while the eyes fixed unblinking upon Heininger.

“You knew about Keeley,” Heininger whispered. “You had him killed.”

The triumph faded and there was sudden worry to tinge the ancient eyes.

The worry confirmed his suspicions.

“Why was Wisepart killed, Harkrider?” Sudden jubilation rose within him. “You said too much just now, didn’t you,

about my desk and that secret compartment? Yes, you said more than you should have done, Harkrider. You told me that Keeley was killed on your instructions, and that means that Wisepart was killed in the same way because you were afraid of him." Heininger rose and took a step toward Harkrider. "Oh, but my memory of you is good, and I remember how terrified you were a year ago. The terror only left you when Wisepart was dead, and yet it returned again when the Farway family came here. I've got you, Harkrider, right where I want you."

"Money," sobbed Harkrider. "I'll replace all you've lost . . . I'll double it. Rudolph, you'll have luxury you never dreamed of. Stay here for a little while. Forget about Wisepart. I'll see you never regret it. Forget Keeley, too. They don't matter; they're dead men and you can't help them."

"Your promises are too easy," Heininger snapped. He was in control of himself again, and the sick despair was conquered. "Why did Wisepart have to die?"

Harkrider whimpered, a nauseous sound that was good to hear. The raven moved uncertainly on the chair back, as if the sounds from its master disturbed it. Heininger sat down again and tried to piece together the new portions of the puzzle, and Harkrider watched him fearfully. If he probed a little deeper . . .

Aloud, Heininger said, "I remember your fear until Wisepart was dead. He knew something that frightened you, and you had him done away with. And then Keeley started digging, and he was killed as well. You knew I was at the back of Keeley's probing and yet you did nothing. Keeley was killed because he got too close, and I was spared because I knew nothing." The fear in the old eyes was plain to see. "And I was too valuable to you."

How could he get more knowledge from the old man that he could use?

"I'll tell Farway about it."

Harkrider let forth an obscene chuckle of laughter that had an edge of hysteria about it.

"When he gets back from the Passage of the Blue Sun I'll tell him what I've learned, and then we'll see what happens. Harkrider, you sowed the hatred in me all these years; now you can reap the harvest of my own detestation for you."

"Too late, too late," cackled Harkrider. "Farway is in my possession. I own him body and soul. He can do nothing."

Another piece fell into position. So—Farway was in it somehow, and was useless to him.

Heininger rose slowly, aware that the brilliant eyes were watching his every move. There were other buttons to be pressed, other reactions that he had to draw from the old man; his brain worked overtime seeking a path that would lead to the end he desired.

“Wisepart was a mathematician. He was studying the Pictures.”

The reaction of fear was there again.

Heininger crossed to the chair and stood directly in front of Harkrider.

“He learned something about them, and he told you, and you had him killed.”

Again, but stronger now. He was touching a nerve that was red raw.

“Now, what could he find out that would force you to take such action?” Heininger leaned forward so that his face was bare inches away from Harkrider. There was sweat on the old man’s brow, and he cowered back in the chair, the breath hissing and wheezing from him. “Something that would affect your power, Harkrider. Something that threatened your position. Now, let us think what that might be.”

Harkrider moved so suddenly that Heininger never had a chance to duck. His left hand whipped with astounding agility from the table beside his chair, and he threw a handful of moist, sloppy food straight into Heininger’s face to the accompaniment of a shout that was unintelligible.

Heininger staggered back half-blinded and choking as some of the pap found its way into his mouth. He heard a strange, ecstatic croaking and felt wings battering around his head.

The raven!

With sudden horror he knew what had happened to Wisepart and to Keeley. He threw himself frantically to the floor, burying his face in his hands as he did so. There was pain at the back of his head, and something sharp beat him, probing and gnawing. The wings fluttered like flags of doom around his head.

And then the panic left him to be replaced by a desire to get up and fight Harkrider at his own game. He lashed out and back with one hand, and felt his fist make solid contact with a soft, feathered body. The raven cawed and he hit it again, harder now that he had the range; the pain lifted from his head and the weight from his shoulders;

wings fluttered and then subsided. Heininger rose slowly, wiping his face clean with one hand, his whole being alert for the return of the raven. It squatted on the back of its master's chair, its feathers ruffled, mewing softly in defeat. Heininger took one step toward it and noticed, with some satisfaction, how it backed off around the other side of the chair.

He thanked his stars that he had damaged it on that other occasion so long ago; otherwise it might have pressed home its attack with more deliberation and success.

Harkrider mouthed imprecations at him from the depths of the obscene chair.

"So now we know for sure what happened to Wisepart and Keeley." Heininger panted slightly. "You damned murderer! Now, we go back to the questions again, and this time I want your answers. If I don't get them . . ." He reached out to the table and scooped a handful of mushy food from it. It squelched in his grasp but he was long past caring about niceties. There was only the dreadful need to know what lay at the back of Harkrider's fear.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I wonder if your raven will respect its master as it respects me." He lifted the handful of food in a menacing fashion. "Shall we put it to the test? Eh, Harkrider?"

"No, no!"

"Then tell me about Wisepart."

"I—I forget."

He's visibly falling apart, Heininger thought. Just how close is he to complete dissolution? I've got to know.

Savagely, he said, "Then remember—and quickly."

"He was studying the Pictures—yes, that's it. He was studying the Pictures. . . ."

"Stop babbling," Heininger broke in. "I know what he was doing, and I know that he was a mathematician. What did he find, Harkrider? That's the important thing." He lifted his hand a couple of inches.

"No, wait. *Wait!*" The voice was a terrified squeal of anguish, as if Harkrider could see once again the horrible scenes of the raven attacking Wisepart and Keeley. The ancient hands began to scabble in a pocket at the side of the chair.

"I've got it here . . . yes, I have it all here. I knew . . . one day . . . someone would want it. . . I kept it safe . . . see, Rudolph, see. . . ." He drew forth with shaking hands several tattered, folded sheets of paper. They were crinkled

and ragged at the edges. "It's all here . . . all of it . . . take it."

Heininger took them.

There were several sheets, and they were crumpled, dirty, stained. Clearly, they had been read over and over again by Harkrider during the past year; equally clearly he had been seeking comfort from them that was not to be found.

XXI

FARWAY DIDN'T join Alicia and Magnus for lunch. He stayed in his room and tried to paint, but the effort was futile. The scene with Alicia had left him sick and depressed, but it was hard for him to admit that her threat to have nothing more to do with him was anything to do with his state of mind.

He worked fast, striving for the effects of emotion rather than of technique; depression and a rising anger contributed as much to his work as did memory and skill.

Confusion and unhappiness were things not new in his life, but Farway had always—in the past—eradicated them by the self-stimulation of other emotions. Mental sadism was a phrase he would not have voiced, but embarrassment in others was a balm to his own soul. Now—with Alicia . . .

What could he gain by alienating her? In the final analysis hurt for her was hurt for him, and he felt sick with the realization of it. There stirred within him thoughts and emotions that trod upon alien soil, and Max Farway was torn apart by things that he didn't understand, and by emotions that were contrary and entirely contradictory to anything in his previous experience.

Movement and voices in the outer room disturbed him; Alicia and Magnus had ended their lunch, and as he looked at his watch he saw that it was just after two. He hadn't eaten since breakfast but hunger didn't seem to touch him. Slowly, he laid aside his paints; he cleaned his brushes, washed his hands, and put on his jerkin; then he went quietly through to join them.

They stopped speaking as he entered, and Alicia said, "Max, you've not eaten. You can't—"

"I'll have something on the flight out," he interrupted. "Alicia," he began, and then hesitated. The words would sound strange from his lips, but then—to Farway—they were strange in his mind and in his mouth; they were hard to utter. He sat down opposite them and looked at the floor between his feet. "Alicia, I've had too long to think since this morning, and my thoughts haven't been exactly reassuring."

He was aware of them looking at him, their faces oddly curious and without the promise that he sought. Torment grew within him, but he forced himself to go on because he had to.

"You were right in what you said—I was seeking my destiny in other ways. Things never work out the way one hopes." He waved one hand in a small gesture of futility. "I—of all people—should know that. My whole life has been riddled with disappointments . . . men, women, places, things . . . but that's no matter. You see, I know that if I destroy Harkrider I shall destroy myself. Oh, not in the way you think, Magnus. Money, power—they don't mean a great deal whatever importance a poor man may place upon them. All my life, as long as I live, I'd know that my reputation as a man would rest upon the doubtful fame of being the person who destroyed the Harkrider empire."

He looked directly at Alicia.

"Knowing that, could I ever be sure . . . really sure . . . that my work, my paintings, would be famous for themselves alone?" He smiled thinly. "I'd never know just where the line was drawn. Remember, Alicia, I told you once how it would feel to lie in bed and know that death is close?"

She nodded, her face drawn and pale.

"That day will come, and when it does I still wouldn't know where my destiny would lie."

He paused, aware that there was within him a peace that he had never known before. The decision had been made, and what was more important he had made it aloud and to others.

"You've found your soul, Max. Is that it?" asked Magnus.

"My soul?" Farway shook his head. "No, Willem, my soul is damned from here through all eternity. All I have is the flame that burns within my heart, and I have a recurrent fear that one day it will go out, leaving me with nothing."

"Will you come back to Earth with us?" asked Alicia.

"Yes, for a while. I owe it to my father to set straight his affairs. I owe it to you—"

"You owe me nothing."

"Oh, yes! I owe you more than you can ever know."

"What of the Pictures?" asked Magnus.

Farway shrugged. "I shall be able to work on them from what I shall see today. There will be months and years of planning and experiment." He laughed ironically. "After all, I won't be able to repeat today's experience for another sixteen years. I shall have plenty of time."

Alicia rose and crossed to him. "Max, I'm glad," she told him simply. "You've got time to get something to eat, you know. We don't need to leave the hotel just yet."

"I don't want anything," he said. "Anyway, I doubt if there will be any people left to serve me. Most of them will be on the last tourist ships to leave."

"Ours is the last," Magnus commented dryly, "and the most expensive. I doubt if there will be many hotel employees on it."

"Then we must be thankful for Heininger's gift." Farway rose awkwardly, his muscles protesting at the effort needed to stand upright. "I'll be ready to leave when you are. Just call me." Farway was aware of their eyes upon him as he limped back to his room.

The door shut him off from them, and he dropped face forward upon the bed, burying his head in the pillow. His thankfulness knew no bounds now that the deed was accomplished. Those sentences had been wrung from him like drops of water from an almost dry rag of cloth, and each lessened as the words flowed from him to ease the tension and bring a relief that was blessed. *Admissions cleanse the soul*, he thought, *yet they batter the emotions beyond comprehension.*

Alicia wouldn't leave him now.

"Max!" Even as he thought of her she called to him from beyond the door.

He sat up, leaning on one elbow. "What is it?"

"There's a visi-call for you. It's Rudolph Heininger."

"What?" His surprise echoed in his own ears. "All right. Tell him I'll be there."

He crossed to the closet and hurriedly sluiced his face in cold water to remove the tears that he knew were there. Were his eyes too red? Well, it couldn't be helped. He went through into the lounge and crossed to the desk on which stood the gray box of the visiphone. Heininger's face was a miniature in shades of black and gray and white upon the screen.

"Heininger. Aren't you going to view the Passage?" Max asked.

"Of course I am," Heininger told him. There was a nervous twitch to his voice that Farway didn't miss. "In fact, Farway, that's the reason I called you."

"Well, we're going to use the discs you so kindly gave us. Is there anything wrong?"

"No, no. Of course not. You are most welcome. I—" He ran his tongue over his lips and exhibited all the tensions of a man under some considerable strain. "The fact is, I wondered if you would prefer to join me. Harkrider has placed his own private vessel at my disposal, and I would hate to waste the extra space. I've no doubt your reservations on the other ship will be easily disposed of if you let them know."

Farway felt a prickle of unease. The invitation was too pat, and too late; last minute things of this nature just didn't happen like this. Heininger was a troubled man.

"I don't know," he temporized. "Our plans are already made—"

"Nonsense. They can be unmade," interrupted Heininger. "Look, I'll call the tourist bureau for you as soon as I finish this call. You make yourselves ready and meet me at Harkrider's private airlock."

Farway glanced at Alicia, who stood on the other side of the desk. She read his expression and nodded her reassurance. She said, "I think that is most kind of you, Mr. Heininger. We shall be happy to join you."

"Fine, fine." The relief in his voice was clear and the lines of strain seemed to lift from his face even as Farway looked at him. "I'll give you the directions and you can meet me there as soon as you can manage it."

Farway wrote down what Heininger told him, but the words registered only dimly on his brain, and he needed to read over what he had written once the call was broken. His normally acute senses were not deceiving this time, of that he was sure. Heininger had shown very definite signs of considerable mental stress.

"Why should he do this?" Magnus voiced his own thoughts as well as those of Farway.

Farway shook his head and put the single sheet of paper bearing the directions in his jerkin pocket. "I'm worried. Alicia, you shouldn't have accepted just like that. You didn't see Heininger's face."

"I heard his voice," she replied calmly. "Heininger is a

man who needs our help, Max. That's why he called. I don't know how we can help, but I expect he'll tell us—in his own good time."

"He said we should meet him as soon as possible," said Magnus. "We'd better leave at once."

It was almost fourteen-forty as they took the grav-shaft down to the lobby of the hotel. The last groups of tourists were being marshaled ready to join their ship, and Farway led them through the rapidly thinning throng and out into the open. They headed east along the main roller band for almost fifteen minutes before leaving it at a point that was barely fifty yards from the wall of the dome. Farway studied the paper bearing the directions and headed through the narrow pedestrian ways toward the opaque wall which glowed golden in the light of the city day. Not too far distant rose the bulk of the Harkrider Tower, and Farway guessed that Heininger would be waiting for them when they reached the lock.

They turned the final corner and he saw that he was right. The gaunt figure of Rudolph Heininger was striding up and down over a few short yards, exhibiting much the same nervous disturbance as he had done on the visiscreen. He hurried toward them as they approached, and the delight on his face was but another danger signal as far as Farway was concerned.

"I'm so glad you could come." Heininger shook hands with excessive vigor. "I'm sure you'll enjoy this much more than being crammed up in a tourist ship."

"It was most kind of you to invite us." Alicia smiled at him.

Farway refrained from commenting that they would have had a private suite, exquisite food served, plus a detailed commentary—the thought of the food alone was upsetting for he realized that hunger was catching up with him. Even he could not long survive on emotion alone.

"Come; I have a ground car waiting." Heininger led the way toward a small vehicle that stood to one side of the lock. The driver helped Alicia into the small passenger cabin, and the three men followed her. Heininger talked with a nervous animation that was going to pall on them before too long. The more he saw of the man the more Farway knew that there was something very wrong indeed; his intuition told him that Heininger was a man sitting on a bomb that was shortly about to explode. He hoped that

they weren't doing anything which would give them cause for later regret.

He needs our help, Max, Alicia had said, and for that reason alone they had come. On earlier occasions Farway would have grown angry at the thought that he was acting because of her pity; now he accepted it.

Beyond the lock the red deserts stretched away toward the horizon with only the low banks of eroded hills to break the monotony. It was cold, bleak and barren; the wild, alien beauty of it caught at the mind and the heart on first sight but later it became boring, monotonous and depressing. The whole scene was illumined by the combined light of the twin stars, and there was an eerie glow that Farway hadn't seen during his last trip outside the dome. He glanced at his watch. There was a little over an hour to the passage of the Blue Sun. And Heininger was sweating!

Harkrider's private field lay about two miles from the dome, and they could see the slim hull of a private cruiser as they approached over the smooth sands. A small dome stood to one side, and there were two other ground cars standing in the shadows. The vessel itself was cradled in a landing berth, with the slim tube of an airlock projecting out and down to the ground. From the small dome a suited form appeared, and Farway was thankful that he wouldn't have to suffer the indignity of forcing his crippled body into a suit for the transfer from ground car to ship.

The car drew to a halt and the driver jockeyed for position so that the vehicle's entrance was lined up with the airtube. In seconds the connection was made and they were able to leave the car and climb into the body of the cruiser.

Farway had expected sybaritic luxury within the small ship, and he wasn't disappointed. Everything was the last word in comfort and taste; one didn't expect taste where Harkrider was concerned, and then he knew that—most likely—Harkrider had never been inside the vessel. Harkrider was confined to a hot, stifling suite high in the Tower. The vessel represented an escape that he could never have.

Escapel

Farway glanced covertly at Heininger, and already he could see that the man was less tense. There was no perspiration on his brow; he was more relaxed; there was a definite air of relief about his whole attitude as he sat

down in one of the padded seats and adjusted the harness that would hold him secure during the takeoff.

As Farway sat and pondered another man entered the cabin. He was dressed in light gray coveralls, and the insignia of a cruiser captain gleamed at his left breast.

"Mr. Heininger."

Heininger turned his head. "Ah, Captain! Is everything in order?"

The man looked at Alicia and then at Farway. To Heininger he said, "I was told to expect the Harkrider twins. I've had no orders about anyone else."

Farway saw the glint of apprehension in Heininger's eyes, but it was masked immediately, and Heininger said, "They decided not to make the trip, after all. Silly of them, but you know what they're like. Anyway, Mr. Harkrider allowed me to bring my own party instead. This is Max Farway, the artist—he is a friend of the Harkrider family."

It was smoothly done, Farway had to admit, but then the officer wasn't looking for trouble. He hesitated a moment, and Heininger added nonchalantly, "You can check with the Tower if you like, Captain, but you know what Harkrider is like when his orders are questioned."

"Indeed I do." The officer nodded. "All right, Mr. Heininger. Your authority is good enough. We'll take off at once."

He left the cabin and Farway sat quietly and studied Heininger in his position a few feet ahead. The lies were too easy to recognize; Farway had seen them before and the signs were plain on Heininger's face and in the uneasy twitchy movements of his hands and shoulders.

The muted sound of the motors barely reached the cabin, but it was enough to know that they were there, and the takeoff was as smooth as any Farway had experienced. There was a gentle pressure against his twisted body and crippled limbs, but it wasn't unpleasant. He sat quietly and allowed his mind to dwell on the circumstances of Heininger's peculiar behavior. Why the late invitation? It could well be that the twins had decided not to make the trip at the last moment. Farway discarded that aspect—it wasn't important, and it didn't take into account Heininger's fear. Was the man worried because Harkrider didn't know what was going on? But then Harkrider would soon find out, and Heininger would have even more cause to worry. Now that they were safely aboard the cruiser Heininger wasn't nearly as

apprehensive as he had been, and since the takeoff he had worn an air of considerable relief upon his pale face.

The physical pressure on Farway's body eased and lifted; there was now only normal ship gravity to contend with, and he unfastened the harness which held him safe in his seat. He moved a little to ease his body and thought about the shock tactics he had used on previous occasions against Heinger. How could he shock him this time? Did he even need to produce an effect? For an instant he considered allowing the matter to drop; he could sit back and enjoy the luxury of the small vessel, and the Passage of the Blue Sun. And yet his mind nagged at him as it always did; he could no more put it aside than he could stop breathing. He wrestled with his thoughts for a few more seconds and then gave up the struggle.

"Heinger," he said softly.

"Yes?" The man turned his head, his brows raised in the arcs of question.

"Heinger, when you get back, Harkrider will have your hide for this. And yet you're not the least bit worried. I can't help but wonder why."

XXII

THE FLICKER in Heinger's eyes was enough, and then the man turned his blond head away. "I don't know what you mean."

"I don't know what I mean, either," Farway agreed equally. "I could tell the captain that you are lying, that he should call the Harkrider Tower. In fact, that might be the thing to do. . . ."

"No, no." Heinger turned back toward him, and now the fear was plain. "You can't—you mustn't."

Farway leaned forward and rested his face in his cupped hands, the elbows planted firmly on his knees. "Ah, and there we have it. Alicia, look! The sweat of fear is back upon his brow."

"Max, stop it," she told him sharply. "We came to help him. Remember?"

Farway sighed. "You see how lucky you are, Heininger. My stepmother has become my conscience. She speaks of help—and I listen. Now that is something new and fresh to me. Tell us how we can help you?"

There was, indeed, sweat upon Heininger's brow; his face was pale, and the eyes deep-set in black wells of agony as he looked at them.

"You can only help me by sitting quietly and waiting."

Farway considered him carefully. "By waiting you imply that there is more to wait for than the Passage of the Blue Sun. Tell me: is Harkrider dead?"

He might have pressed a button, so suddenly did Heininger collapse. He slumped in his chair and sobbed the deep, broken, body-shaking lamentation of a man in extremis. It was so rapid and so shocking that even Farway was stunned.

"God help me!"

"Why didn't the twins come on this trip? Are they dead too?"

"No, no! Not like that. Not like Harkrider. They're alive—I know they're alive because I heard them in Estelle's flat."

"Estelle?" Farway looked at Alicia in hopeless bewilderment. Too much was pouring from the unhappy mind of the broken man before him to be understood.

"Alicia, what on earth . . . ?"

She rescued him by saying, "Tell us about Estelle."

"I—I loved her." Heininger pressed the palms of his hands to his eyes and made a visible effort to gather himself. "Those bitches took her from me. I wanted her to leave Pavanne with me—now, on this trip. When I called her apartment she refused to come, and I heard them there—they were giggling in the background, and she wouldn't come with me."

"And is that why you asked us?" she said gently.

"No, I'd decided already that you must come in case there was a law man at the airlock. You were my passport to safety." He looked at them from red, unhappy eyes. "You see, Harkrider stopped me from going out to view the Passage. I was turned back when I went to take my place on an earlier flight. He made the Law Squads stop me."

"And this is your way of revenge." Alicia looked at Farway, and he could read the worry in her eyes.

"Heininger," he said, "that isn't all; is it? This is only a little. You haven't said why you wanted Estelle to join you."

You haven't told us why Harkrider wouldn't let you leave Pavanne." He hesitated fractionally. "You haven't said how Harkrider died."

"That filthy, evil old bastard!" The hatred stopped the tears, and anger took over as Heininger relived his eight wasted years. "I worked and saved. I sold myself body and soul for eight years. You know, Farway, I thought I was a wealthy man until an hour ago. And then I learned the truth."

"And what is the truth?" asked Farway.

Heininger's words weren't pretty; he used them to get rid of the hatred and the loathing, of the pent-up fury and frustration of eight long years; he used them as an antidote to the pain and the depression. Words and phrases poured from him as he told of his frustrated plans for leaving Pavanne and heading for Earth; he told of Harkrider's actions against him; of Harkrider's move away from his normal pattern of behavior; the onslaught of the orgy, the frenetic search for pleasure that was so far out of character.

"Harkrider was a creature of habit, and yet—today—he forgot his habit." He looked at Farway, his eyes red and tired. "Do you know how old he was? One hundred and eighty-seven years." He laughed and the edge of hysteria was clearly to be heard. "And when I forced him to give me those papers . . ." He shuddered and bent his head. "All I could think of was getting away and taking Estelle with me. God help me, I lost my reason. That old man—he didn't keep me there because he wanted me to miss the Passage, he kept me there because he was afraid to die alone. You see, he couldn't get off Pavanne. He was trapped in that hellish room, tied to a chair by his own age and infirmity. He had to be sure that there was someone with him. That's why he wanted me there; that's why he wanted the twins to make this trip." He looked at Farway from eyes that were stark with horror. "But they fooled him . . . they wouldn't do it . . . all they thought about was their own pleasure. And when I read the papers . . . Don't you see, that's why I did it . . . I couldn't help myself. I didn't mean it to happen."

"Did what?" rasped Farway. "Heininger, what did you do?"

"I . . . I pulled him . . . out of his chair." Heininger shuddered and sobbed. "It was horrible. All those pipes and tubes and . . . when I ran out of the room the raven was pecking at him . . . he was screaming. . . ."

Alicia moaned softly and buried her head in her hands.

Farway wondered if Heininger was out of his mind. But no one could have made up such horror who had not seen it and lived it and experienced it.

"The papers," he whispered. "What was in them, Heininger? They were Wisepart's; weren't they?"

Heininger nodded and snuffled slightly.

"And they had to do with the Passage of the Blue Sun." Again the affirmative nod.

Farway looked at the clock, and saw that the Passage was bare minutes away. He was reaching toward a climax that had the smell of disaster about it, and there was premonition coupled with that climax that made the day unreal—a ghost day that would pass as a nightmare passes. Farway knew it to be nothing more than illusion, for the nightmare was real, the situation was real, the climax was real; and he had moved along a path that had led here over many years. The trail lay clear and straight behind him, preordained by his own life and his own behavior; his tortured being and his twisted mind had dragged him to this point in time. He closed his eyes as a wave of sickness overwhelmed him, and he had to fight to stop himself from retching with emotion.

"What was in them, Heininger?" he asked, and the words were torn from him. "Have you got them with you—Wisepart's papers?"

Heininger reached into his pocket and fumbled for a badly crumpled sheaf of papers which he passed to Farway without even turning his head.

"The Passage, Max," said Magnus. "It's almost time. You can't afford to miss it. Leave this till after."

"I can't. I must know."

Farway unfolded the papers; there were figures and numbers, formulas and mathematics that meant nothing to him. "I can't understand this. . . ."

"The last page," Heininger whispered. "The last one. That's where it is."

The final sheet was dirtier than the others, as if it had been handled a great deal more. The writing was badly marred and stained, but it was still legible.

"He kept it in a pocket in that damnable chair," Heininger told them. "He was afraid of someone getting hold of it. He was frightened that he'd be left alone on Pavanne. I wish to God he had . . . he deserved to die like that, alone and afraid. Perhaps it would make up for all the fear and hatred he's bred in others."

Farway's eyes flew across the words in a panic to know

what was there and as he read, the panic grew within him to a horror of quite unmeasurable dimensions.

“ . . . and it is my conclusion, therefore, that the orbit of Alpha Pavanne (the Yellow Sun) has not been properly calculated so far as the next phase of Beta Pavanne (the Blue Sun) is concerned.

“It is known that, during the passage of the Blue Sun, its companion is only a few minutes off-center for a passage of its own across the Pictures. What is new as a result of my own calculations is the fact that the periodicity of the Alpha Sun in relation to that of the Beta Sun has been lessening by several microseconds over a long period of time. It is not possible to calculate with any accuracy the last time on which their two passages appeared simultaneously; past records are too incomplete for that. Proper equipment for a complete evaluation of the situation would be needed. What is certain, however, is that during the next passage of the Beta Sun, there will be a coincidental passage of the Alpha Sun. Measurements of the total light which will be reflected from the Pictures would seem to indicate that there will be a peculiar and hitherto unsuspected amount of activity which may well result in a release of power far beyond anything which has been measured heretofore.

“It is not part of my report to speculate on the reasons why the creators of the Pictures have so arranged this pattern, but it is my very definite conclusion that under present conditions the end result can have only one conclusion—that the Pictures of Pavanne represent a catastrophic threat to the planet and to the city. I have no hesitation in offering the opinion that complete evacuation of the planet should be undertaken without any delay. . . .”

The horror was a tangible thing that Farway could feel all around him; his whole sense of reality seemed distorted and twisted into something that was too alien to be recognized; and yet he knew that this was indeed reality.

“One minute to Passage.”

The soft words from the pilot's cabin didn't really register, and yet they drew him like a magnet so his eyes moved to the transparent walls of the cabin. There, the golden arc of the planet swam into view, shining by the reflected light of the twin stars. It gleamed and glistened like a great red pearl seen under a microscope, and beyond it was the giant backdrop of deep space wherein the beauty of the stars was put to shame by the planet; they showed only as weak pin-points of light against the greater brilliance of Pavanne.

"The Pictures," murmured Farway. He craned his neck as if, by so doing, he could hasten the steady downward roll of the ship which would place the viewport on the correct line of sight. Alicia and Magnus had turned toward the brilliant facade as it moved into view.

The papers in Farway's hand were forgotten under the impact of the scene before them.

It's wrong, thought Farway hysterically; *it has to be wrong!* The stars vanished as the loom of the planet cut them off, and then—suddenly—there were only the Pictures.

They were smaller than when last he had seen them, yet even so they dominated the screen and pushed the planet into a limbo of semi-existence. There was no planet! There were only the Pictures set in the center of a cosmic canvas.

Color flowed and moved, and Farway felt the tension within him rise to an unbearable pitch. The words from the papers of Wisepart revolved in his brain; they were cold, unemotional words, the phrases of a man who has merely discovered a small but interesting scientific phenomenon; they told the facts coldly and concisely, and the horror was provided by the minds of those that read them.

First, Harkrider; then Heininger; and now—Farway.

Blue light flooded over the Pictures to bring forth more light and other colors; there were lightning flashes deep within the kaleidoscopic maelstrom of the Pictures—a maelstrom which grew and swelled, lancing outwards in fantastic whirls and patterns. Upwards, into the heavens, shot a vast bolt of light that seemed to pierce the very fabric of space like a Terrestrial thunderbolt sent from hell. The blue deepened and the curtain of brilliance widened to an arc of flame so bright and so lustrous that even the backdrop of the planet faded from sight, and there was only the single eye to hold them—the vast coruscating flame that was the eye of God Himself—the Pictures of Pavannel!

"Too bright! Too bright!"

Farway heard the words through a dream, and knew that they came from his own lips, drawn there by a mounting wonder, a sheer disbelief, and a growing terror.

Alicia cried out, and for one terrible second the whole cabin was possessed by something that climbed upwards toward them on a column of fire ten miles long. The light was all around them, clutching at them, seeking to draw them into the holocaust below.

And then, suddenly—as suddenly as it had grown—it vanished.

Farway closed his eyes even as the hellish inferno died; his whole body was trembling and he cowered away from the knowledge of what he had seen, his hands covering his face in a futile gesture of protection.

"Max!" He heard Alicia's voice shaking even on that one syllable. "Max! What's wrong . . . what's happened? The—the Pictures. They're gone . . . there's nothing left!"

He buried his face deeper in his hands, and his body sank to the floor of the cabin. The carpet was soft against his flesh, and the darkness around him enveloped him like a mother-womb.

He didn't ever want to get up from the comfort of that floor; he didn't want to look at the horror that he knew awaited him if he looked at the scene below. While he lay there quietly nothing could touch him; there was only the darkness, the silence, and the peace. . . .