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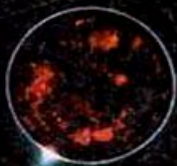
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THE OUTPOSTER
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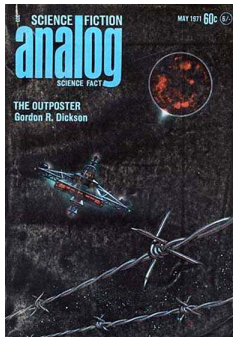
Company Planet



"Company Planet"

James Schmitz

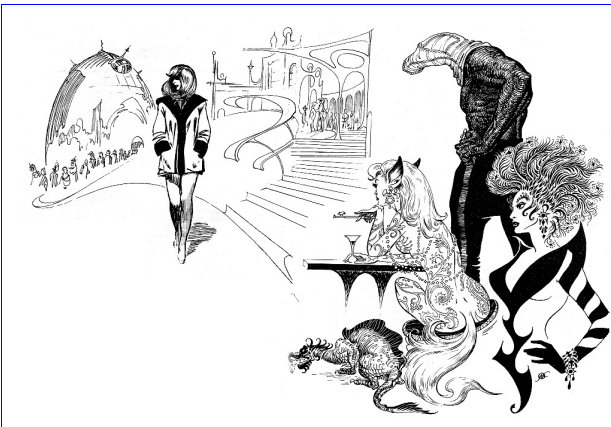
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Contents

[Chapter 1](#) [Chapter 3](#) [Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 2](#) [Chapter 4](#) [Chapter 6](#)



Telzey was generally competent enough to take care of herself--
and her enemies for that matter!
But this time she was up against a very stacked deck indeed!

Fermilaur was famous both as the leading body remodeling center of the Hub and as a luxurious resort world which offered relaxation and scenery along with entertainment to fit every taste, from the loftiest to the most depraved. It was only three hours from Orado, and most of Telzey's friends had been there. But she'd never happened to get around to it until one day she received a distress call from Fermilaur.

It came from the mother of Gikkes Orm. Telzey learned that Gikkes, endowed by nature with a pair of perfectly sound and handsome legs, had decided those limbs needed to be lengthened and reshaped by Fermilaur's eminent cosmetic surgeons if she was ever to find true happiness. Her parents, who, in Telzey's opinion, had even less good sense than Gikkes, had let her go ahead with it, and her mother had accompanied her to Fermilaur. With the legs remodeled according to specification, Gikkes had discovered that everything else about her now appeared out of proportion. Unable to make up her mind what to do, she became greatly upset. Her mother, equally upset, equally helpless, put in an interstellar call to Telzey.

Having known Gikkes for around two years, Telzey wasn't surprised. Gikkes didn't quite rate as a full friend, but she wasn't a bad sort even if she did get herself periodically into problem situations from which somebody else had to extricate her. Telzey decided she wouldn't mind doing it again. While about it, she should have time for a look at a few of Fermilaur's unique restructuring institutions and other attractions.

Somewhat past the middle of the night for that locality, she checked in at a tourist tower not far from the cosmetic center where the Orms were housed. She'd heard that Fermilaur used resort personnel to advertise its remodeling skills, the general note being that having oneself done over was light-hearted fashion fun and that there was nothing to worry about because almost any cosmetic modification could be reversed if the client wished it. The staff of the tower's reception lobby confirmed the report. They were works of art, testimonials to the daring inventiveness of Fermilaur's beauty surgeons. Telzey's room reservation was checked by a slender goddess with green-velvet skin, slanted golden eyes without detectable pupils, and a shaped scalp crest of soft golden feathers which shifted dancingly with each head motion. She smiled at Telzey, said, "May I suggest the services of a guide, Miss Amberdon?"

Telzey nodded. "Yes, I'll want one." There were no cities, no townships here. The permanent population was small, mostly involved with the tourist trade and cosmetic institutions, and its maintenance systems were underground, out of sight. Much of the surface had been transformed into an endlessly flowing series of parks in which residential towers and resort and remodeling centers stood in scenic isolation. Traffic was by air, and inexperienced visitors who didn't prefer to drift about more or less at random were advised to employ guides.

The goddess beckoned to somebody behind Telzey's back.

"Uspurul is an accredited cos Services guide and thoroughly familiar with our quadrant," she informed Telzey. "I'm sure you'll find her very satisfactory."

Uspurul was a quite small person, some four inches shorter than Telzey, slender in proportion. Like the receptionist, she looked like something cos Services might have conjured up out of exotic mythologies. Her pointed ears were as expressively mobile as a terrier's; a silver horse's tail swished about with languid grace behind her. The triangular face with its huge dark eyes and small delicate nose was unquestionably beautiful but wasn't human. It wasn't intended to be. She might have been a charming toy, brought to life.

Which was all very well, as far as Telzey was concerned. More important seemed a shadowy swirl of feeling she'd sensed as Uspurul came up to the reception desk--a feeling which didn't match in the least the engaging friendliness of the toy woman's smile. It wasn't exactly malice. More something like calculating cold interest, rather predatory. Telzey took note of nuances in the brief conversation that followed, decided the two were, in fact, more anxious to make sure she'd employ Uspurul as guide than one should expect.

Somewhere else, that could have been a danger signal. A sixteen-year-old with a wealthy family made a tempting target for the criminally inclined. The resort world, however, had the reputation of being almost free of professional crime. And, in any case, it shouldn't be difficult to find out what this was about--she'd discovered during the talk that Uspurul's mind appeared to be wide open to telepathic probing.

"Why not have breakfast with me in my room tomorrow?" she said to the guide. "We can set up a schedule then." And she could ferret out at her leisure the nature of the interest the remodeled myths seemed to take in her.

They settled on the time, and Telzey was escorted to her room. She put in a call to Mrs. Orm from there, learned that Gikkies would be in treatment at the main center of Hute Beauticians during the early part of the morning and was anxious to see Telzey and get her opinion of the situation immediately afterward. Mrs. Orm, having succeeded in transferring the responsibility for decisions to somebody else, appeared much less distraught.

Telzey opened one of her suitcases, got out a traveler's lock and attached it to the door of the room, which in effect welded the door to the adjoining wall. The only thing anyone trying to get in without her cooperation could accomplish was to wake up half the tower level. She continued unpacking reflectively.

Fermilaur didn't have a planetary government in the usual sense. It was the leasehold of cos, the association of cosmetologists which

ran the planet. Its citizen-owners, set up in a tax-free luxury resort and getting paid for it, had reason to be happy with the arrangement, and could have few inducements to dabble in crime. The Hub's underworld reputedly had its own dealings with cos—bodies, of course, could be restructured for assorted illegal purposes. But the underworld didn't try to introduce its usual practices here. cos never denied reports that criminal pros found attempting to set up shop on the leasehold vanished into its experimental centers. Apparently, not many cared to test the validity of the reports.

Hence, no crime, or almost no crime. And crime of the ordinary sort hardly could be involved in the situation. The receptionist and the elfin guide never had seen her before. But they did seem to have recognized her by name, to have been waiting, in fact, for her to show up.

Telzey sat down on the edge of the bed.

The two were cos employees. If anyone had an interest in her here, it should be cos.

The tower reservation had been made in her name five hours ago on Orado. Five hours was plenty of time for a good information service to provide inquirers with the general background of the average Federation citizen. Quite probably, cos had its own service, and obtained such information on every first-time visitor to Fermilaur. It could be useful in a variety of ways.

The question was what might look interesting enough in her background to draw cos's attention to her. It wasn't that the Amberdon family had money. Almost everybody who came here would meet that qualification. There were, Telzey decided, chewing meditatively on her lower lip, only two possible points of interest she could think of at the moment. And both looked a little improbable.

Her mother was a member of the Overgovernment. Conceivably, that could be of significance to cos. At present, it was difficult to see why it should be.

The other possibility seemed even more remote. Information services had yet to dig up the fact that Telzey Amberdon was a telepath, a mind reader, a psi, competent and practicing. She knew that, because if they ever did dig it up, she'd be the first to hear. She had herself supplied regularly with any datum added to her available dossiers. Of the people who were aware she was a psi, only a very few could be regarded as not being completely dependable. Unfortunately, there were those few. It was possible, though barely so, that the item somehow had got into cos's files.

She could have a problem then. The kind of people who ran cos had to be practical and hardheaded. Hardheaded, practical people, luckily, were inclined to consider stories about psis to be at least ninety-nine percent superstitious nonsense. However, the ones who didn't share that belief sometimes reacted undesirably. They might reflect that a real psi, competent, practicing, could be eminently useful to them.

Or they might decide such a psi was too dangerous to have around.

She'd walk rather warily tomorrow until she made out what was going on here! One thing, though, seemed reasonably certain--cos, whatever ideas it might have, wasn't going to try to break through the door to get at her tonight. She could use a few hours of rest.

She climbed into bed, turned over, and settled down. A minute or two later, she was asleep.

II

After breakfast, Telzey set off with Uspurul on a leisurely aircar tour of the area. She'd explained she'd be visiting an acquaintance undergoing treatment at Hute Beauticians later on, and then have lunch with another friend who'd come out from Orado with her. In the afternoon, she might get down finally to serious sightseeing.

With Uspurul handling the car and gossiping merrily away, Telzey could give her attention to opening connections to the guide's mind. As she'd judged, it was an easy mind to enter, unprotected and insensitive to telepathic probing. One fact was promptly established then, since it was pervasively present in Uspurul's thoughts. cos did, in fact, take a special interest in Telzey, but it wasn't limited to her. She had plenty of company.

The reason for the interest wasn't apparent. Uspurul hadn't wanted to know about it, hardly thought of it. The little female was a complex personality. She was twenty-two, had become a bondswoman four years earlier, selling her first contract to cos Services for the standard five-year short-term period. People who adopted bondservant status did it for a wide range of reasons. Uspurul's was that a profitable career could be built on bond contracts by one who went about it intelligently.

She'd chosen her masters after careful deliberation. On a world which sold luxury, those who served also lived in relative luxury, and as a cos guide she was in contact with influential and wealthy people who might be used for her further advancement. Her next contract owner wouldn't be cos. She was circumspect in her behavior.

More was done on Fermilaur than cultivating an exclusive tourist trade and cosmetic clientele, and it wasn't advisable to appear inquisitive about the other things. cos didn't mind rumors about various barely legal or quite illegal activities in which it supposedly engaged; they titillated public interest and were good for business. But underlings who became too knowledgeable about such obscure matters could find it difficult to quit.

Uspurul intended to remain free to quit when her contract period ended. For the past year, she'd been on the fringes of something obscure enough. It had brought her a string of satisfactory bonuses, and there was nothing obviously illegal about what she did or cos Services did. As long as she avoided any indication of curiosity it seemed safe.

She still acted as guide. But she was assigned now only to female

tourists who appeared to have no interest in making use of the remodeling facilities. Uspurul's assignment was to get them to change their minds without being obvious about it. She was skillful at that, usually succeeded. On a number of occasions when she hadn't succeeded, she'd been instructed to make sure the person in question would be at a certain place at a certain time. She'd almost always been able to arrange it.

Now she was using the morning's comfortable schedule to keep up a flow of the light general chatter through which she could most readily plant the right notions in a hesitant visitor's mind.

"I was thinking I might have a little remodeling myself while I was here," Telzey remarked, by and by. She took out a small mirror, looked into it critically, arching her brows. "Nothing very important really! But I could have my brows moved higher, maybe get the eyes enlarged." She clicked the mirror to an angle view, pushed back her hair on the left side. "And the ears, you see, could be set a little lower--and the least bit farther back." She studied the ear a moment. "What do you think of their shape?"

"Oh, I wouldn't have them change the *shape*!" said Uspurul, thinking cheerfully that here came an easy bonus! "But they might be a tiny bit lower. You're right about that."

Telzey nodded, put the mirror away. "Well, no rush about it. I'll be looking around a few days first."

"Someone like you doesn't really need remodeling, of course," Uspurul said. "But it is fun having yourself turned into exactly what you'd like to be! And, of course, it's always reversible."

"Hmmm," said Telzey. "They did a beautiful job on you. Did you pick it out for yourself?"

Uspurul twitched an ear, grinned impishly.

"I've wanted to do *that* since I was a child!" she confessed. "But, no--this was cos Services' idea. I advertise for the centers, you see. A

twenty-two thousand credit job, if I had to pay for it. It'd be a little extreme for the Hub generally, of course. But it's reversible, and when I leave they'll give me any other modification I want within a four thousand credit range. That's part of my contract."

She burred on. Telzey didn't have the slightest intention of getting remodeled, but she wanted Uspurul and cos Services to think she did until she was ready to ship out. It would keep the situation more relaxed.

It remained a curious situation. The people to whom Uspurul reported were satisfied if a visitor signed up for any kind of remodeling at all, even the most insignificant of modifications. That hardly looked like a simple matter of drumming up new business for the centers, while the special attention given some of those who remained disinterested was downright on the sinister side. The places to which Uspurul steered such tourists were always resort spots where there were a good many other people around, coming and going places—in other words, where somebody could easily brush close by the tourist without attracting attention.

What happened there? Something perhaps in the nature of a hypno spray? Uspurul never saw what happened and didn't try to. When she parted company with the tourist that day, there'd been no noticeable effects. But next day she'd be given a different assignment.

Of course, those people weren't disappearing. It wasn't *that* kind of situation. They weren't, by and large, the kind of people who could be made to vanish quietly. Presumably they'd been persuaded by some not too legal method to make a remodeling appointment, and afterward went on home like Uspurul's other clients. They might all go home conditioned to keep returning to Fermilaur for more extensive and expensive treatments; at the moment, that seemed the most probable explanation. But whatever the cos Services' operation was, Telzey reflected, she'd simply make sure she didn't get included in it. With Uspurul's mind open to her, that shouldn't be too difficult. Back on Orado then, she'd bring the matter to the attention of Federation authorities. Meanwhile she might run across a few other open minds around here who could tell her more than Uspurul knew.

The man she was meeting for lunch--a relative on her mother's side--was an investigative reporter for one of the newscast systems. Keth had his sharp nose into many matters, and exposing rackets was one of his specialties. He might be able to say what this was about, but the difficulty would be to explain how she'd come by her information without mentioning telepathy. Keth didn't know she was a psi. Nor could she do her kind of mental research on him--she'd discovered on another occasion that he was equipped with a good solid commercial mind shield. Keth doubted that anyone could really see what was in another person's mind, but he took precautions anyway.

• • •

The remodeling counselors at the Hute Beauticians center had told Gikkas Orm quite candidly that if she was to be equipped with the leg type she wanted, overall body modifications were indicated to maintain an aesthetic balance. Gikkas hadn't believed it. But now the cosmetic surgeons had given her a pair of long, exquisitely molded legs, and it seemed the counselors were right.

The rest of her didn't fit.

"Just look at those shoulders!" she cried, indicating one of two life-sized models which stood against the far wall of the room. They showed suggested sets of physical modifications which might be performed on Gikkas. "I love the legs! But--"

"Well, you might be a little, uh, statuesque," Telzey acknowledged. She studied the other model. Sinuous was the word for that one. A dancer's body. "But, Gikkas, you'd look great either way, really! Especially as the slinky character!"

"It wouldn't be *me*!" Gikkas wailed. "And how much work do you think I'd have to put in to *stay* slinky then? You know I'm not the athletic type."

"No, I guess you're not," Telzey said. "When did you first get the idea that you wanted your legs changed?"

It appeared Gikkas had been playing around with the notion for several years, but it was only quite recently that it had begun to seem vital to her. It was her own idea, however—not an obsession planted on a previous trip to Fermilaur. Telzey had been wondering about that. The solution shouldn't be too difficult. Off and on for some while, Telzey had made use of suitable occasions to nudge Gikkas in the general direction of rationality. It had to be done with care because Gikkas wasn't too stable. But she had basic intelligence and, with some unnoticed guidance, was really able to handle most of her problems herself and benefit from doing it. Telzey picked up the familiar overall mind patterns now, eased a probe into the unhappy thought muddle of the moment, and presently began her nudging. Gikkas went on talking.

Twenty minutes later, she said ruefully, "So I guess the whole remodeling idea was a silly mistake! The thing to do, of course, is to have them put me back exactly as I was."

"From all you've told me," Telzey agreed, "that does make sense."

Mrs. Orm was surprised but relieved when informed of her daughter's decision. The Hute staff wasn't surprised. Remodeling shock and reversal requests weren't infrequent. In this case, reversal was no problem. Gikkas' experiment in surgical cosmetology probably had reduced her life expectancy by an insignificant fraction, and the Orm family was out a good deal of money, which it could afford. Otherwise, things would be as before.

. . .

A level of the Hute center restaurant was on Keth Debol's private club circuit, which in itself guaranteed gourmet food. It was a quietly formal place where the employees weren't trying to look like anything but people. Keth's bony inquisitive face, familiar to newsmen over

a large section of the Hub, presumably didn't go unrecognized here, but nobody turned to stare. He deliberated over the menu, sandy brows lifting in abrupt interest now and then, and ordered for both of them, rubbing his palms together.

"You'll like it," he promised.

She always did like what Keth selected, but this time she barely tasted what she put in her mouth, as she chewed and swallowed. He'd mentioned that top cos executives patronized the place, and that he rather expected to be meeting someone before lunch was over.

She'd been wondering how she could get close enough to some top cos executive to start tapping his mind....

She was sliding out discreet probes before Keth had placed his order. After the food came, only a fraction of awareness remained in her physical surroundings. Keth would eat in leisurely silent absorption until the edge was off his appetite, and she might have her contact made by that time.

Several minds in the vicinity presently seemed as open to contact as Uspurul's. None of them happened to be a cos executive. Something else was in the vicinity—seven or eight mind shields. Unusual concentration of the gadgets! Her probes slipped over them, moved on, searching--

"You might get the opportunity," Keth's voice was saying. "Here comes a gentleman who could arrange it for you."

Awareness flowed swiftly back to the outer world as she reoriented herself between one moment and the next. Keth had reached the point where he didn't mind talking again, had asked--what? Ah, yes, had asked what plans she had for the day. She'd responded automatically, that she was hoping to get a look at some of Fermilaur's less publicized projects.... Who could arrange it?

She looked around. A handsome, tall, strong-faced man was coming toward their table. On his right shoulder perched a small creature

with blue and white fur, adorned with strings of tiny sparkling jewels. The man's dark eyes rested on Telzey as he approached. He nodded to her, smiled pleasantly, looked at Keth.

"Am I intruding?" It was a deep, soft-toned voice.

"Not at all," Keth told him. "We're almost finished--and I'd intended trying to get in touch with you during the afternoon. Telzey, this is Chan Osselin. He handles publicity for cos and incidentally owns Hute Beauticians.... Telzey Amberdon, an old friend. We came out from Orado together. If you have the time, join us."



Osselin drew a chair around and sat down. His scalp hair was short,

deep black, like soft animal fur. Telzey wondered whether it was a product of remodeling, felt rather certain then that it wasn't. The small animal on his shoulder stared at Telzey out of large pale eyes, yawned and scratched a rounded ear with a tiny clawed finger. The stringed jewels decorating it flashed flickering rainbows of fire.

"I heard of your arrival a few hours ago," Osselin said. "Here on Adacee business?"

Keth shrugged. "Always on Adacee business."

"Um. Something specific?"

"Not so far. Something new, unpublicized, sensational."

Osselin looked reflective. "Sensational in what way?"

"Questionable legality wouldn't have to be part of it," Keth said. "But it would help. Something with shock effect. None of your pretty things."

"So cos is to be exposed again?" Osselin seemed unruffled.

"With some new angle," said Keth. "On some new issue."

"Well," Osselin said, "I'm sure it can be arranged...."

Telzey, absently nibbling the last crumbs of her dessert, drew back her attention from what was being said. She'd known Chan Osselin's name as soon as she saw him. She'd seen him before as an image in Uspurul's mind. One of cos's top men. Uspurul wouldn't willingly have brought herself to the attention of someone like Osselin. People of that kind were to be avoided. They had too much power, were too accustomed to using it without hesitation or scruple.

There was no trace of the dead, psi-deadening, effect of a mind shield about Osselin--

Telzey reached out toward the deep sound of his voice, paying no attention to the words, groping cautiously for some wash of thought

which might be associated with the voice.

She had no warning of any kind. A psi hammer slammed down on her, blacking out her vision, leaving her shaken and stunned.



She drew in a slow, cautious breath. Her psi screens had locked belatedly into a hard shield; another assault of that kind could have no great effect on her now. But none came. She realized she'd lowered her head in protective reflex. Her hair hid her face, and the voices of the men indicated they weren't aware that anything in particular had happened. Vision began to return. The section of the tabletop before her grew clear, seemed to sway about in short semicircles. A last wave of giddiness and nausea flowed over her and was gone. She'd be all right now. But that had been close--

She kept her face turned away as she reached for her bag. The makeup cassette showed she'd paled, but it wasn't too noticeable. Listening to a thin, angry whistling nearby, she touched herself up, put the cassette away, and finally raised her head.

The furry thing on Osselin's shoulder stared at her. Abruptly it produced its whistling sounds again, bobbing up and down. Osselin stroked it with a finger. It closed its eyes and subsided. He smiled at Telzey.

"It gets agitated now and then about strangers," he remarked.

She smiled back. "So it seems. What do you call it?"

"It's a yoli. A pet animal from Askanam. Rare even there, from what I've been told. This one came to me as a gift."

"Supposed to be a sort of living good luck charm, aren't they?" said

Keth.

"Something like that. Faithful guardians who protect their master from evil influences." Osselin's dark eyes crinkled genially at Telzey. "I can't vouch for their effectiveness—but I do seem to remain undisturbed by evil influences! Would you care to accompany us to a few of the specialized labs a little later, Miss Amberdon? You should find them interesting."

Keth was to be shown a few projects cos didn't talk about otherwise, which might give him the kind of story he wanted. They preferred that to having him dig around on Fermilaur on his own. She told Osselin she'd be delighted to go along.

The yoli appeared to be falling asleep, but she sensed its continuing awareness of her. A psi guard—against psis. Its intelligence seemed on the animal level. She couldn't make out much more about it, and didn't care to risk trying at present. It probably would react as violently to an attempted probe of its own mind as to one directed against its master.

And now she might be in personal danger. The number of shields she'd touched here suggested some sophistication in psi matters. Ordinarily it wouldn't disturb her too much. Mechanical anti-psi devices could hamper a telepath but weren't likely to lead to the detection of one who'd gained some experience, and other telepaths rarely were a problem. The yoli's psi senses, however, had been a new sort of trap; and she'd sprung it. She had to assume that Osselin knew of his pet's special quality and what its behavior just now signified. A man like that wasn't likely to be indifferent to the discovery that someone had tried to reach his mind. And the yoli had made it clear who it had been.

If she dropped the matter now, it wasn't likely that Osselin would drop it. And she wouldn't know what he intended to do then until it was too late....

Some time later, as the tour of the special labs began, there was an attention split. Telzey seemed aware of herself, or of part of herself, detached, a short distance away. That part gazed at the exhibits, smiled and spoke when it should, asked questions about projects, said the right things--a mental device she'd worked out and practiced to mask the sleepy blankness, the temporary unawareness of what was said and done, which could accompany excessive absorption on the psi side. On the psi side, meanwhile, she'd been carrying on a project of her own which had to do with Osselin's yoli.

The yoli was having a curious experience. Shortly after Telzey and Keth rejoined Osselin, it had begun to pick up momentary impressions of another yoli somewhere about. Greatly intrigued because it had been a long time since it last encountered or sensed one of its kind, it started searching mentally for the stranger, broadcasting its species' contact signals.

Presently the signals were being returned, though faintly and intermittently. The yoli's excitement grew. It probed farther and farther for the signals' source, forgetting now the telepath it had punished for trying to touch its master. And along those heedlessly extended tendrils of thought, Telzey reached delicately toward the yoli mind, touched it and melted into it, still unperceived.

It had taken time because she couldn't risk making the creature suspicious again. The rest wasn't too difficult. The yoli's intelligence was about that of a monkey. It had natural defenses against being controlled by another's psi holds, and Telzey didn't try to tamper with those. Its sensory centers were open to her, which was all she needed. Using its own impressions of how another yoli, a most desirable other yoli, would appear to it, she built up an illusion that it was in satisfying communication with such a one and left the image planted firmly in its mind along with a few other befuddling concepts. By that time, the yoli was no longer aware that she existed, much less of what she was up to.

Then finally she was able to turn her attention again to Osselin.

Caution remained required, and she suspected she might be running short of time. But she could make a start.

• • •

The aircar floated three thousand feet above foggy valley lands--Fermilaur wilderness, tamed just enough to be safe for the tourist trade. Tongue tip between lips, Telzey blinked at the clouds, pondering a thoroughly ugly situation. There was a sparse dotting of other cars against the sky. One of them was trailing her; she didn't know which. It didn't matter.

She glanced impatiently over at the comm grille. Keth Deboll was in conference somewhere with Osselin. She'd left a message for him at his residential tower to call her car's number as soon as he showed up. She'd left word at her own tower to have calls from him transferred to the car. In one way or the other, she'd be in contact with him presently. Meanwhile she had to wait, and waiting wasn't easy in the circumstances.

Chan Osselin couldn't sense a telepathic probe. Except for that, she might have been defeated and probably soon dead. She'd found him otherwise a difficult mental type to handle. His flow of conscious thoughts formed a natural barrier; it had been like trying to swim against a current which was a little too strong. She kept getting pushed back while Osselin went on thinking whatever he was thinking, unaware of her efforts. She could follow his reflections but hadn't been able to get past them to the inner mind in the time she had available.... And then she'd been courteously but definitely dismissed. The guided tour was over, and the men had private business to discuss. Shortly after she left them, she'd lost her contact with Osselin.

She'd absorbed a good deal of scattered information by then, could begin fitting it together. As she did, the picture, looking bad enough to start with, got progressively worse--

Normally, even people who accepted that there might be an occasional mind reader around had the impression that telepathy couldn't pick up enough specific and dependable information to be a significant threat to their privacy. That might have been the attitude of the top men in cos up to a year ago. Unfortunately, very unfortunately for her, they'd had a genuine psi scare then. They spotted the psi and killed him, but when they realized how much he'd learned, that they almost hadn't found him out in time, they were shaken. Mind shields and other protective devices were promptly introduced. Osselin hated shields; like many others he found them as uncomfortable as a tight shoe. When an Askab lady provided him with a guard yoli, he'd felt it was safe to do without a shield.

He still felt safe personally. That wasn't the problem. cos had something going, a really important operation. Telzey had caught worried flashes about it, no more and not enough. The Big Deal was how Osselin thought of it. They couldn't afford the chance of having the Big Deal uncovered. Keth Deboll was a notoriously persistent and successful snoop; a telepathic partner would make him twice as dangerous. The fact that the two had appeared on Fermilaur together might have no connection with the Big Deal, but who could tell? cos was checking on both at present. If they couldn't be cleared, they'd have to be killed. Risky, but it could be arranged. It would be less risky, less suspicious, than carrying out a double mind-wipe and dumping them on some other world, which might have been an alternative in different circumstances.

And that was it! Telzey wet her lips, felt a chill quivering again through her nerves, a sense of death edging into the situation. She didn't see how they could be cleared. Neither did Osselin, but something might turn up which would make it unnecessary to dispose of them. The Amberdon girl's demise or disappearance shouldn't cause too much trouble, but Deboll was another matter. Too many people would start wondering whether he hadn't been on the trail of something hot on Fermilaur, what it could be. This would have to be very carefully handled! Meanwhile cos was taking no chances. Neither of the two would be allowed to leave the planet or get near an interstellar transmitter. If they made the attempt, they'd get picked up at once. Otherwise, they could remain at large, under surveillance, until the

final decision was made. That should turn up any confederate they might have here.

The final decision was still some hours away. How many, Telzey didn't know. Osselin hadn't known it yet. But not very many, in any case....

Osselin himself might be the only way out of this. Their information on psis was limited; they thought of her only as a telepath, like the other one, and didn't suspect she could have further abilities which might endanger them. She had that advantage at present. Given enough time, she should be able to get Osselin under control. She'd considered trying to restore mental contact with him at long range, wherever he happened to be. But she wasn't at all certain she could do it, and the yoli made it too risky. Its hallucinations should be self-sustaining for some hours to come if nothing happened to disturb it seriously. She had to avoid disturbing it in resuming contact with Osselin, which meant working with complete precision. A fumble at long range could jolt the creature out of its dreams and into another defensive reaction.

She didn't know what effect that would have on Osselin, but at the very least it might give him the idea to equip himself with a mind shield as a further safeguard until they'd dealt with the telepath. She'd be stopped then.

She had to be *there*, with Osselin, to be sure of what she was doing. If she got in touch with him and told him she'd like to talk to him privately, he'd probably want to hear what she had to say. But he'd be suspicious, on guard. It would be easier for Keth to find a plausible reason for another meeting, easier if Keth was around to keep some of Osselin's attention away from her.... The comm grille burred. She gave a gasp of relief as her hand flicked out to switch it on.

Keth took a little convincing then. He'd set their aircar down on a grassy hillside, and they'd moved off until it was a hundred yards below them. He'd turned on this and that antisnoop device. From eight feet away, their voices were an indistinguishable muddle of sound, their features blurred out.

"We can talk," he'd said.

Telzey talked. He listened, intent blue eyes blinking, face expressionless. Twice he seemed about to interject something, then let her go on. Finally he said, "Telzey, you're obviously not joking, and I don't believe you've suddenly become deranged. Did you ever try to read my mind?"

She nodded.

"Yes, once. Half a year ago. I thought you were up to something and wanted to find out what it was."

"Oh? What did you find?"

"That you use a mind shield, of course. I didn't waste any more time."

Keth grunted. "All right! You're a telepath. If the situation is what it looks like, we have a problem. The check on me won't tell cos anything. Adacee isn't leakproof, but all they'll learn there is what I told Osselin. I came to Fermilaur to get a good story. Nothing specific. Any story as long as it's good enough. Can they find anything in your background to confirm that you're a mind reader?"

Telzey shrugged, shook her head. "I've been careful. What there was has been pretty well covered up. It's very unlikely they'll find anything. The trouble is Osselin's already pretty well convinced of it—he goes by the yoli's psi sense. And, of course, they can't prove that I'm *not* one."

"No. Not without linking you into a lie detector system. If they go that far, they'll already have decided to go all the way with us. At any rate, they haven't made up their minds yet. I parted from Osselin on

apparently friendly terms. If the verdict's favorable, nothing at all will have happened."

"Unless we try to reach a spaceport," Telzey said. "Or to get in touch with somebody somewhere else."

"Yes, they wouldn't allow that. And, of course, they can seal off the planet as far as we're concerned. In effect, they own it." Keth considered. "There's a man I might contact here, but that would only pull him into the trouble. How about other, uh, functional telepaths?"

Telzey shook her head.

"Starting cold, it probably would be hours before I located one. We don't have that much time. They mightn't want to help anyway. It could cost them *their* cover."

Keth rubbed his chin. "If it gets to the point of running, a space yacht might get us off."

"cos Services handles the yacht rentals," Telzey reminded him.

"Not what I was thinking of," Keth said. "Plenty of people come here in private yachts. Last year, I got out of a somewhat similar situation that way. It shouldn't be impossible to borrow one, but it probably wouldn't be easy." He reflected. "That Big Deal of cos--the story they *think* we might be snooping around here for? You got no clue from Osselin what that might be?"

She shook her head. "There's an awful lot of money involved, and there's something illegal about it. They'll protect it, whatever it takes. They think you might have picked up some clues to it somewhere and brought me to Fermilaur to help dig up more. But that's all I can say. Everything else connected with it was too blurred to make out."

"Finance, politics, business--the big money areas," Keth said, watching her. "Nothing about some secret Hub-wide system to gather hot inside information at top levels there."

Telzey stared at him. "Oh, my!" she said after a long moment.

Keth said, "You went white, Telzey. What is it?"

"That guide I had this morning! Uspurul." Telzey put her hand to her mouth. "I was reading *her* mind. There was something odd going on. I didn't think there was any connection, but I wanted to check with Uspurul again to be sure. I tried to get in touch with her an hour ago. cos Services said she was on another assignment, couldn't be reached."

"You don't think she's on another assignment?"

"Uh-uh! No. She didn't know it, but she's connected with their Big Deal! Hot inside information-- When they started checking this afternoon on what I've been doing here since I landed, they'd have picked her up to see what a telepath could have got from her."

Keth said, "The kind of lie detector that pushes unconscious material to view.... So just what did you learn from her?"

Telzey recounted the essentials. Keth nodded slowly. He'd paled somewhat himself.

"That will have tipped the fat into the fire!" he said.

A secret Hub-wide information gathering system on the distaff side.... Wives, mistresses, daughters of the Federation's greats streamed in to Fermilaur. Were tagged on arrival, maneuvered into making a remodeling appointment if that hadn't been their intention.

"Anesthesia, unconsciousness, in-depth interrogation," Keth said. "Anything they know of significance is filed immediately. The ones who can be typed as foolproof cos agents and have sufficiently valuable connections go home under a set of heavy compulsions, go to work. When their work's done, they come back, get debriefed. Leaving no trace of what's happened, in case of subsequent checks. Yes, a big setup! cos's capital investment program should be spectacularly successful!"

Now and then suspicion might turn on an unwitting agent. When it

happened, the agent appeared to go into amnesiac withdrawal and committed suicide at the first opportunity. It wasn't something the people involved would want to talk about. But there'd been such a case among Keth's acquaintances, and he'd learned of another very similar one, discovered both women had gone through remodeling centers on Fermilaur in recent months. It seemed worth following up. He'd come to Fermilaur to do it.

"I dislike turning my back on a story before it's in the bag," he said. "But I can pick this up at the other end now. We'd better get set to run while we can, Telzey! The decision they'll reach is to do us in. From their viewpoint, there won't be much choice."

"A yacht?" she said.

"Yes. Noticed a few boat parks while I was moving around this morning, and--"

"Keth, how much chance would we have of getting away?"

He hesitated, grimaced.

"It depends. Even odds perhaps, if we act now. Less if we wait."

She shook her head. "We can do better! Chan Osselin's really top man in cos, isn't he?"

Keth looked at her. "Yes. Barrand's president of the association. I've heard Osselin could have the job any time he wants. What he says pretty well goes anyway. Why?"

"You've got to think of some reason to see him again immediately, with me. I need more time to work on him, to really get into his mind."

"What will that do for us?"

"If I get through to him, Osselin will get us off Fermilaur," Telzey said. "He's in a better position to do it than anyone else."

Keth considered her.

"It seems you're something more than a telepath," he remarked.

"They don't know it."

"All right. How much time would you need?"

She shook her head.

"An hour--thirty minutes--twenty minutes--two hours ... I don't know. It's always different, and Osselin isn't easy. But we'll have much better than even odds there!"

"Well, there's no need to arrange for a meeting," Keth said. He looked at his watch. "We've got a dinner appointment at Osselin's house two and a half hours from now, our local time. He emphasized that I was to bring my charming young friend along. Two people want to meet us. One's Barrand, the cos president I mentioned. The other's Nelt, vice-president and executive officer. They and Osselin are the trio that runs cos. Presumably the decision on what to do about us will be made at that time."

"Yes, probably," Telzey said. "But let's get there early, Keth."

"By about half an hour? I'm sure Osselin won't object. I've thought of further details about the projects he showed me that I'd like to discuss with him." He added as they turned back to the aircar, "But we're not scratching the space yacht idea just yet!"

"We're not?"

"No. cos *might* decide to lower the boom before we have a chance to sit down to dinner this evening. And you see, there're three special yacht types. Racing boats...."

The three yacht types had one thing in common: an identical means of emergency entry. It was designed for use in space but could be operated when the vessel was parked if one knew how. Keth did, though it wasn't general knowledge. "It's quick," he said. "We can do it from the car. Since we haven't spotted the people who are trailing us, they're doing it at a discreet distance. The chances are we'll be

inside and going up before they realize what we're thinking about. So let's put in the next hour looking around for yachts like that! If the situation looks favorable, we'll snatch one."

Telzey agreed. Keth was an expert yachtsman.

It appeared, however, that no yachts in that category happened to be in the general area that day. After an hour, Telzey transferred her belongings to the residential tower where Keth was registered. It seemed better not to become separated now. They settled down to wait together until it would be time to go to Osselin's residence.

V

Osselin's yoli was still in timeless communion with the yoli of its dreams but beginning to show indications of uneasiness. The imagery had become static and patchy here and there. Telzey freshened it up. The yoli murmured blissfully, and was lost again.

Since their last meeting, Osselin had added a piece of pertinent equipment to his attire—a psi recorder, disguised as a watch and fastened by a strap to his brawny wrist. Its complex energies registered as a very faint burring along Telzey's nerves. She'd come across that particular type of instrument before. It was expensive, highly touted in deluxe gambling establishments and the like. It did, in fact, indicate any of the cruder manipulations of psi energy, which had earned it a reputation for reliability. One of its drawbacks was that it announced itself to sufficiently sensitive psis, a point of which the customers weren't aware. And here it was no real threat to Telzey. The psi flows she used in investigative work were well below such a device's registration levels.

Barrand and Nelt had showed up presently, bringing two stunning young women with them. The girls, to Telzey's satisfaction, were gaily talkative creatures. Barrand was short, powerfully built. Nelt was

short and wiry. Both had mind shields. Both wore psi recorders of the same type as Osselin's, though theirs weren't in sight. And like Osselin they were waiting for the tactile vibrations from the recorders which would tell them that psi was being used.

So they weren't really sure about her.

She'd split her attention again. Keth knew about that now, knew what to do to alert her if she didn't seem to be behaving in a perfectly normal manner. With suspicious observers on hand, that had seemed an advisable precaution. Keth and the ladies carried most of the conversation--the ladies perhaps putting up unwitting verbal screens for their escorts, as Keth was maintaining one to give Telzey as much freedom for her other activities as possible. Now and then she was aware that the cos chiefs studied her obliquely, somewhat as one might watch a trapped but not entirely predictable animal. The psi recorders remained inactive. She made progress along expanding lines with Osselin, sampled a series of dishes with evident appreciation, joined occasionally in the talk--realized dinner was over.

"Of course, I want to see Sorem!" she heard herself say. "But what in the world is a guilt-smeller?"

Nelt's lovely companion made fluttering motions with tapered white hands. "I'll keep my eyes closed until he's gone again!" she said apprehensively. "I looked at him *once* with his helmet off! I had nightmares for a month."

The others laughed. Osselin reached around for the yoli, perched at the moment on the back of his chair. He placed it on his lap. "I'll keep my pet's eyes closed, too, while he's in the room," he said, smiling at Telzey. "It isn't easily frightened, but for some reason it's in deathly fear of Sorem. Guilt-smeller ... well, Sorem supposedly has the ability to pick anyone with a strong feeling of guilty apprehension out of a group." He shrugged.

"He's unnatural," Nelt's lady told Telzey earnestly. "I don't care what they say--Sorem never was human! He couldn't have been."

"I might let him know your opinion of him," Barrand rumbled.

The girl paled in genuine fright. "Don't! I don't want him to notice me at all."

Barrand grinned. "You're in no danger--unless, of course, you have something to hide."

"Everybody has *something* to hide!" she protested. "I--" She broke off.

Faces turned to Telzey's right. Sorem, summoned unnoticed by Barrand, had come into the room. She looked around.

Sorem wore black uniform trousers and boots; a gun was fastened to his belt. The upper torso was that of a powerful man, narrow at the waist, wide in the shoulders, with massively muscled arms and chest. It was naked, hairless, a lusterless solid black, looking like sculptured rock. The head was completely enclosed by a large snouted helmet without visible eye slits.

This figure came walking toward the table, helmet already turning slowly in Telzey's direction. In Osselin's mind, she had looked at the head inside the helmet. Black and hairless like the body, the head of an animal, of a huge dog, yellow-eyed and savage. Barrand's bodyguard--a man who'd liked the idea of becoming a shape of fear enough to undergo considerable risks in having himself transformed into one. The great animal jaws were quite functional. Sorem was a triumph of the restructuring artists' skills.

The recorders had indicated no stir of psi throughout dinner. But they thought that perhaps she simply was being cautious now. Sorem was to frighten her, throw her off guard, jolt her into some revealing psi response. So she would show fear--which mightn't be too difficult. Sorem's mind was equipped with a shield like his employer's, but a brutish mirth and cruelty washed through it as he made it plain his attention was on her. Telzey glanced quickly, nervously, around the table, looked back at him. Keth's face was intent; he didn't know what would happen, whether it wasn't their executioner who had been

called into the room. Sorem came up, steps slowing, a stalking beast. Telzey stopped breathing, went motionless, staring up at him. Abruptly, the helmet was swept away; the dog head appeared, snarling jaws half open. The eyes glared into Telzey's.

The yoli squealed desperately, struggling under Osselin's hand.

There were violent surges of psi energy then. The yoli wasn't fully aware of what was happening, but a nightmare shape had loomed up in its dreams, and it wanted to get away. Telzey couldn't afford to let it wake up now, and didn't. The three psi recorders remained active for perhaps forty-five seconds. Then she'd wiped the fright impressions from the yoli's mind, made it forget why it had been frightened....

"It must have recognized your creature by his scent," Osselin was saying. "I had its eyes covered."

He stroked the yoli's furry head. It still whimpered faintly but was becoming reabsorbed by its fantasies. Sorem had turned away, was striding out of the room. Telzey watched him go, aware of Barrand's and Nelt's speculating eyes on her.

"If I'd been able to breathe," she gasped suddenly, "I'd have made more noise than that little animal!"

The beautiful cos dolls tried to smile at her.

. . .

"Their recorders couldn't distinguish whether those psi jolts came from the yoli or from me," Telzey said. "And with the racket the yoli was making, it really was more likely it was doing it."

"So the final decision still is being postponed?" Keth said.

"Only on how to go about it, of course. The other two want to know whether I'm a psi or not, what we've learned, whether we were after

the Big Deal in the first place. Osselin thinks that's no longer so important. He wants to get rid of us in a way that's safe, and take his chances on everything else. He's giving Barrand and Nelt a few more hours to come up with a good enough reason against his plan—but that's the way it's to be."

Keth shook his head. "He thinks that?"

"Yes, he thinks that."

"And at the same time he's to make sure that it's *not* the way it's to be? Isn't he aware of the contradiction?"

"He's controlled," Telzey said. "He's aware of what I let him be aware. It just doesn't occur to him that there is a contradiction. I don't know how else to explain that."

"Perhaps I get the idea," Keth said.

They were in Osselin's house. Barrand and Nelt and their retinue had left shortly after the incident with Sorem and the yoli, having plans for the evening. Osselin had asked Keth and Telzey to stay on for a while.

The difference of opinion among the cos chiefs was based on the fact that Osselin was less willing to risk a subsequent investigation than his colleagues. The forcing lie detector probes Barrand and Nelt wanted would involve traceable drugs or telltale physical damage if the subjects turned out to be as intractable as he suspected these subjects might be. A gentle anesthesia quiz wasn't likely to accomplish much here. It would be necessary to get rid of the bodies afterward. And the abrupt disappearance of Keth Debol and a companion on Fermilaur was bound to lead to rather stringent investigations even as a staged accident. Osselin intended to have them killed in a manner which could leave no doubt about the accidental manner of their death. A tragic disaster.

"What kind of disaster?" Keth asked.

"He's got engineers working on that, and it's probably already set

up," Telzey said. "We'll be seen walking in good health into the ground level of our tower. Depending on the time we get there, there'll be fifty to a hundred other people around. There's an eruption of gas-equipment failure. A moment later, we're all dead together. Automatic safeguards confine the gas to that level until it can be handled, so nobody else gets hurt."

Keth grunted. "Considerate of him."

Objectively considered, it was a sound plan. The tourist tower was full of important people; various top-level cliques congregated there. There'd be then a substantial sprinkling of important victims on the ground level. Even if sabotage was suspected, nothing would suggest that Keth and Telzey had been its specific targets.

. . .

On a subterranean level of Osselin's house was a vault area, and he was in it now. They hadn't accompanied him because anyone else's body pattern would bring the vault defenses into violent action. Telzey remained in mental contact; she hadn't quite finished her work on Osselin, though there wasn't much left to do. He was sewed up as tightly as she'd ever sewed anyone up. But he remained a tough-minded individual, and she wanted to take no chances whatever tonight. Things seemed under control and moving smoothly. But she wouldn't breathe easily again until Fermilaur vanished in space behind them.

In one respect, things had gone better than they'd had any reason to expect. "Will you settle for a complete file on the Big Deal?" she'd asked Keth. "The whole inside information gathering program? The file goes back almost three years, which was when it started. Names, dates, the information they got, what they did with it...."

Osselin kept duplicate copies of the file in the vault. She'd told him to bring up one copy for Keth and forget he'd had that copy then. After that, it would be a question of getting off Fermilaur--not too easy

even with Osselin's cooperation. He couldn't simply escort them to a spaceport and see that they were let through. They were under cos surveillance, would be trailed again when they left the house. cos police waited at the ports. If anything began to look at all suspicious, Barrand and Nelt would hear about it at once, and act at once.

Osselin obviously was the one best qualified to find a way out of the problem, and Telzey had instructed him to work on it. He came back up from the vault presently, laid two small objects on a table, said matter-of-factly, "I have some calls to make on the other matter," and left the room again.

Keth shook his head. "He seems so normal!"

"Of course, he seems normal," Telzey said. "He feels normal. We don't want anybody to start wondering about him."

"And this is the cos file?" Keth had moved over to the table.

"That's it."

The objects were a pair of half-inch microcubes. Keth smiled lovingly at them, took out a card case, opened it, ran his thumbnail along a section of its inner surface. The material parted. "Shrink section," he remarked. He dropped the cubes inside, sealed the slit with the ball of his thumb. The case was flat again and he returned it to an inner pocket.

Telzey brushed her hair back from her face. The room wasn't excessively warm, but she was sweating. Unresolved tensions.... She swore mentally at herself. It was no time to get nervous. "How small are they now?" she asked.

"Dust motes. I get searched occasionally. You drop the whole thing into an enlarger before you open it again, or you're likely to lose whatever you've shrunk." He glanced at his watch. "How far has he got on that other matter?"

"I haven't been giving much attention to it. I'm making sure I have him completely tied up--I'll probably have to break contact with him again

before we're off Fermilaur."

"You still can't control him at a distance?"

"Oh, I might. But I wouldn't want to depend on that. He seems to have the details pretty well worked out. He'll tell us when he gets back."

. . .

"The pattern will be," said Osselin, "that you've decided to go out on the resorts. What you do immediately after you leave the house doesn't matter. Live it up, mildly, here and there, but work around toward Hallain Palace, and drop in there an hour and a half from now. If you don't know the place, you'll find its coordinates on your car controls."

"I can locate Hallain Palace," Keth said. "I left money enough there five years ago."

"Tonight you're not gambling," Osselin told him. "Go to the Tourist Shop, thirteenth level, where two lamps have been purchased against Miss Amberdon's gc account."

"Lamps?" repeated Keth.

"They're simply articles of the required size. You'll go to the store's shipping level with them to make sure they're properly packaged, for transportation to Orado. They're very valuable. You'll find someone waiting for you with two shipping boxes. You'll be helped into the boxes, which will then be closed, flown directly to Port Ligrit, passed through a freight gate under my seal, and put on board an Orado packet shortly before takeoff. In space, somebody will let you out of the boxes and give you your tickets." Osselin looked at Telzey. "Miss Orm and her mother are on their way to another port, accompanied by two Hute specialists who will complete Miss Orm's modeling reversion at her home. They'll arrive at the Orado City Terminal shortly after you do. You can contact them there."

. . .

"How far can you trust him?" Keth asked, as Osselin's house moved out of sight behind their car.

"Completely now," Telzey said. "Don't worry about that part! The way we're still likely to run into trouble is to do something at the last moment that looks suspicious to our snoopers."

"We'll avoid doing it then," said Keth.

Telzey withdrew from contact with Osselin. He considered the arrangements to be foolproof, providing they didn't deviate from the timetable, so they probably were foolproof. Tracer surveillance didn't extend into enclosed complexes like Hallain Palace, where entrances could be watched to pick them up again as they emerged. By the time anyone began to look through the Palace's sections for them, they'd have landed on Orado. There'd be nothing to indicate then what had happened. Osselin himself would have forgotten.

They stopped briefly at a few tourist spots, circling in toward Hallain Palace, then went on to the Palace and reached it at the scheduled time. They strolled through one of the casinos, turned toward the Tourist Shop section. At the corner of a passage, three men in the uniform of the Fermilaur police stepped out in front of them.

There was a hissing sound. Telzey blacked out.

VI

Barrand said, "Oh, you'll talk, of course. You'll tell us everything we want to know. We can continue the interrogation for hours. You may lose your minds if you resist too stubbornly, and you may be

physically destroyed, but we'll have the truth from both of you before it gets that far."

It wasn't the escape plan that had gone wrong. Barrand and Nelt didn't know Osselin was under Telzey's control, or that she and Keth would have been off Fermilaur in less than an hour if they hadn't been picked up. They'd simply decided to override Osselin and handle the situation in their own way, without letting him know until it was too late to do anything about it. Presumably they counted on getting the support of the cos associates when they showed that the move had produced vital information.

Their approach wasn't a good one. Telzey had been fastened to a frame used in restructuring surgery, while Keth was fastened to a chair across the room. Frame and chair were attachments of a squat lie-detecting device which stood against one wall. A disinterested-looking cos surgeon and an angular female assistant sat at an instrument table beside Telzey. The surgeon had a round swelling in the center of his forehead, like a lump left by a blow. Apparently neither he nor the assistant cared to have the miracles of cosmetology applied to themselves.

They were the only two people in the room who weren't much concerned about what was going on. Telzey couldn't move her head very far and had caught only one glimpse of Nelt after she and Keth were brought awake. But Barrand remained within her range of vision, and his heavy features were sheened occasionally with a film of sweat. It was understandable. Barrand had to get results to justify his maneuver against Osselin. He might have regarded this as an opportunity to break down Osselin's prestige and following in the association. And so far Barrand could be certain of only one thing. He was, in fact, dealing with a psi.

He looked as if he almost wished he hadn't made the discovery.

From Telzey's point of view, it couldn't be avoided. Regaining contact with Osselin might be the only possible way to get them out of the situation, and she didn't know whether she could do it in time. The subtle approach was out now. While Keth, doing his part again,

argued angrily and futilely with Barrand and Nelt, she'd been driving out a full-sweep search probe, sensitized to Osselin's mind patterns. Barrand's expression when he stared at her told her his psi recorder was registering the probe. So, of course, was Nelt's, whose impatiently muttering voice Telzey could hear in the section of the room behind her. He was keeping it low, but it was fairly obvious that he was hurrying along preliminary briefing instructions to the lie detector as much as he could without confusing the device or giving it insufficient information to work with. They were anxious to have it get started on her.

She hadn't picked up a trace of Osselin yet. But almost as soon as she began reaching out for him, she'd run into a storm of distress signals from another familiar mind.

. . .

It had turned into a bad day for Uspurul. Shortly after noon, she was called in to cos Services' regional office. Something happened there. She didn't know what. A period of more than an hour appeared to have lapsed unnoticed, and nobody was offering any explanations. She'd heard of amnesia treatments, but why should they have given her one? It frightened her.

She pretended that everything seemed normal, and when she was told to go to her quarters and rest for a few hours because she might be given a night assignment, she was able to convince herself that the matter was over—she'd been brushed briefly by some secret cos business, put to some use of which she was to know nothing, and restored to her normal duties.

An hour ago then, she'd been told to check out an aircar for a night flight to the Ialgeris Islands, registering Miss Amberdon and a Mr. Deboll as her passengers. That looked all right. Amberdon was still her assignment. The Ialgeris tour, though a lengthy one, requiring an expert guide because it involved sporadic weather risks, was nothing unusual. She took the car to one of the Barrand centers

where she was to pick up the passengers. There she was conducted to a sublevel room and left alone behind a closed door. Misgivings awoke sharply again. There was no detectable way of opening the door from within the room.

Why should they lock her in? What was happening? Uspurul became suddenly, horribly, convinced that she'd been drawn deep into one of those dark cos activities she'd hardly even let herself think about. A fit of shaking came over her and it was some minutes then before she could control her muscles. Shortly afterward, the door opened. Uspurul stood up quickly, putting on a servile smile. The smile was wiped away by the shock of realizing that the man in the door was Nelt—one of the biggest of the cos big shots, one of the people she least wanted to see at present. Nelt beckoned her out into the passage.

Uspurul stepped out, legs beginning to shake again, glanced up the passage and felt she'd dropped into a nightmare. Barrand, the cos president, stood thirty feet away at an open door, speaking to a man in surgeon's uniform. Beside them was a float table, and on it lay two covered figures. Uspurul didn't doubt for an instant that they were those of her prospective passengers. Neither they nor she were to reach the Ialgeris Islands. Tomorrow the aircar would be reported lost in a sea storm, as a number were each year in spite of all precautions—

The surgeon moved the float table through the door, and Barrand followed it. Nelt turned away and walked along the passage toward the room, leaving Uspurul standing where she was. For a moment, hopes flickered wildly in her. She might be able to get out of the center unnoticed, find a place to hide—stay alive!

A great black-gloved hand came down on her shoulder. Uspurul made a choked screeching noise. Nelt didn't look around. He went on into the room and the door closed.

Sorem, whose black-uniformed tall figure Uspurul had seen once at a distance, Barrand's bodyguard, whose head was always covered in public by a large, disturbingly shaped helmet, unlocked the door to

an adjoining room, went in with Uspurul and shoved her down on a bench. She'd heard stories about Sorem. Half fainting, staring fascinatedly at him, she hoped he wouldn't take off the helmet.

But he did, and the yellow-eyed black dog head grinned down at her.

. . .

The lie detector was asking its patterned series of trap questions on the matters it had been instructed to investigate, and Telzey was answering them. It was nerve-stretching work. They'd stripped her before fastening her to the frame, and she'd been warned that if she refused to answer or the detector stated she wasn't telling the truth, the surgeon was ready to restructure one of her arms as a start.

She'd split her awareness again, differently, deeply. The detector's only contact was with a shadow mentality, ignorant of the split, memoryless, incapable of independent thought. A mechanism. When a question was asked, she fed the mechanism the answer she wanted it to give, along with the assurance that it was the truth. It usually was not the truth, but the mechanism believed it was. Psi sealed Telzey's mind away otherwise both from the detector's sensors and from crucial body contacts. There were no betraying physical reactions.

It took much more concentration than she liked—she'd still found no mental traces of Osselin, and a purposeful search probe absorbed concentration enough itself. But she needed time and was more likely to gain time if she kept their attention on her, away from Keth. He wasn't being questioned directly, but Telzey suspected the detector was picking up readings from him through the chair to which he was fastened and comparing them with the readings it got from her. There was a slight glassiness in Keth's look which indicated he'd gone into a self-induced trance as soon as the questions began, couldn't hear either questions or answers, hence wasn't affected by them. He'd said he could hold out against a lie detector by such means for a while. But a sophisticated detector had ways of

dealing with hypnotic effects, and the cos machine obviously was an advanced model. She should keep it working away at her as long as possible.

The questions ended abruptly. Telzey drew a long, slow breath.

She might have caught a touch of Chan Osselin's mind just then! She wasn't sure. The stress of maintaining her defense against the detector had begun to blur her sensitivity.

The lie detector's voice said, "Deboll does not respond to verbal stimuli at present. The cause can be analyzed if desired. Amberdon's response to each question registered individually as truthful. The overall question-response pattern, however, shows a slight but definite distortion."

"In other words," Barrand said from behind Telzey, "she's been lying."

"That is the probability. The truth registration on individual questions is not a machine error. It remains unexplained."

Barrand and Nelt moved into Telzey's range of vision, looked down at her. Nelt shook his head.

"I don't like that," he said uneasily.

"Nor I," said Barrand. "And we can't be sure of what else she's doing. Let's speed up the procedure! Have the detector get Deboll out of whatever state he's in and start questioning him immediately. Put on full pressure at the slightest hesitation. Take the girl off the machine for the time being." Barrand looked at the surgeon. "Get to work. To begin with, I want the left arm deboned to the wrist and extended."

The surgeon's look of disinterest vanished. He drew back the sliding top of the instrument table. "A functional tentacle?"

Barrand grunted. "She's to stay alive and able to talk. Aside from that, keep her functional if you can, but it's not of primary importance.

Let her watch what's happening." He added to Telzey, "We'll stop this as soon as you demonstrate to our satisfaction that you're willing to cooperate."

All the energy she could handle was reaching for Osselin's mind now. But the trace, if it had been one, had vanished. The sculpting frame moved, bringing her down and around. The surgeon's face appeared above her. An arm of the frame rose behind him and she saw herself in the tilted mirror at its tip.

"Don't let her lose consciousness," Barrand was saying to the surgeon's assistant. "But keep the pain level high--close to tolerance."

The skin on the odd lump in the center of the surgeon's forehead quivered and drew back to either side. The lump was a large dark bulging eye. It glanced over at Telzey's face independently of the other two eyes, then appeared to align itself with them. Part of Telzey's mind reflected quite calmly that a surgeon might, of course, have use for an independent eye--say one which acted as a magnifying lens.

But this was getting too close. Barrand and the detector weren't giving her the time she'd hoped to have.

"*Chan Osselin!*" She blasted the direct summons out, waited for any flicker of reaction that could guide her back to him.

Nothing.

. . .

Uspurul had been in an entertainingly hysterical commotion for a few minutes, but then she'd simply collapsed. Sorem wasn't sure whether she was conscious or not. When he prodded her with a finger, she made a moaning noise, but that could have been an automatic response. Sullenly, he decided to leave her alone. If she happened to die of fright here, it wouldn't really matter, but Barrand would be

annoyed.

Sorem stood up from the bench on which he'd been sitting, hitched his gun belt around, looked down at the child-sized figure sprawled limply on the floor, eyes half shut. He nudged it with his boot. Uspurul whimpered. She still breathed at any rate. The black dog head yawned boredly. Sorem turned away toward the door, wondering how long it would be before they got what they wanted in the detector room.

Uspurul opened her eyes, looked for him, rolled up quietly on her feet.

Sorem had good reflexes, but not abnormally good ones; he was, after all, still quite human. And, at the moment, he was less than alert. He heard a faint, not immediately definable sound, felt almost simultaneously a violent jerk at his gun belt. He whirled, quickly enough now, saw for an instant a small face glare up at him, then saw and heard no more. The big gun Uspurul held gripped in both hands coughed again, but the first shot had torn the front of Sorem's skull away.

Telzey couldn't see the door opening into the lie detector room, but she was aware of it. For an instant, nobody else in the room was aware of it; and after that, it hardly mattered. Sorem had fancied a hair-triggered gun, and Uspurul was holding the trigger down as she ran toward Barrand and Nelt, swinging the gun muzzle about in short arcs in front of her. Most of the charges smashed into floor and wall, but quite enough reached the two cos chiefs. Nelt, already down, moments from death, managed to drag out his own gun and fire it blindly once. The side of Uspurul's scalp was laid open, but she didn't know it. Nelt died then. Barrand already was dead. Uspurul stopped shooting.

"Deboll," the lie detector's voice announced in the room's sudden silence, "is now ready for questioning."

Telzey said softly to the surgeon, "We don't exactly need you two, you know, but you won't get hurt if you do as I tell you. She'll do whatever I

want."

"She will?" the surgeon breathed. He watched Uspurul staring at him and his assistant from twelve feet away, gun pointed. They'd both frozen when the shooting started. "What are we to do?"

"Get me off this thing, of course!"

He hesitated. "I'd have to move my hands...."

"Go ahead," Telzey said impatiently. "She won't shoot if that's all you're doing."

The frame released her moments later. She sat up, slid off it to the floor. Across the room, Keth cleared his throat. "You," Telzey said to the bony assistant, "get *him* unfastened! And *don't* try to get out of the room!"

"I won't," the assistant said hoarsely.

. . .

"My impression," Keth remarked some hours later, "was that we were to try to stall them until you could restore your mental contact with Osselin and bring him to the rescue."

Telzey nodded. "That's what I wanted. It would have been safest. But, like I told you, that kind of thing isn't always possible. Barrand wouldn't let me have the time. So I had to use Uspurul, which I *didn't* like to do. Something could have gone wrong very easily!"

"Well, nothing did," said Keth. "She was your last resort, eh?"

"No," Telzey said. "There were a few other things I could have done, but not immediately. I wasn't sure any of them would work, and I didn't want to wait until they were carving around on me, or doped you to start talking. Uspurul I could use at once."

"Exactly how did you use her?" Keth asked.

Telzey looked at him. He said, "Relax! It's off the record. Everything's off the record. After all, nobody's ever likely to hear from me that it wasn't the famed Debolli ingenuity that broke the biggest racket on Fermilaur!"

"All right, I'll tell you," Telzey said. "I knew Uspurul was around almost as soon as we woke up. She's very easy psi material, so I made good contact with her again, just in case, took over her mind controls and shut subjective awareness down to near zero. Sorem thought she'd fainted, which would come to the same thing. Then when I had to use her, I triggered rage, homicidal fury, which shot her full of adrenaline. She needed it--she isn't normally very strong or very fast. That gun was really almost too heavy for her to hold up."

"So you simply told her to take the gun away from Barrand's monster, shoot him and come into the next room to shoot Barrand and Nelt?" Keth said.

Telzey shook her head.

"Uspurul couldn't have done it," she said. "She'd never touched a gun in her life. Even in a frenzy like that, she couldn't use violence effectively. She wouldn't know how. She didn't know what was going on until it was over. She wasn't really there."

Keth studied her a moment. "You?"

"Me, of course," Telzey said. "I needed a body that was ready to explode into action. Uspurul supplied that. I had to handle the action."

"You know, it's odd," Keth said after a moment. "I never would have considered you a violent person."

"I'm not," Telzey said. "I've learned to use violence." She reflected. "In a way, being a psi is like being an investigative reporter. Even when you're not trying very hard, you tend to find out things people don't want you to know. Quite a few people would like to do something about Keth Debolli, wouldn't they? He might talk about the wrong

thing any time. By now I've come across quite a few people who wanted to do something about me. I don't intend to let it happen."

"I wasn't blaming you," Keth said. "I'm all in favor of violence that keeps me alive."

They were on a liner, less than an hour from Orado. Once they were free, Telzey hadn't continued her efforts to contact Osselin mentally. They located a ComWeb instead, had him paged, and when he came on screen, she told him what to do. The story was that Sorem had gone berserk and killed Barrand and Nelt before being killed himself. Keth had made his own arrangements later from the liner. Adacee and various authorities would be ready to slam down on the secret cos project within a week.

Telzey's restrictions on Osselin should hold easily until then. The surgeon and his assistant had been given standard amnesia treatments to cover the evening. They could deduce from it that they'd been involved in a detector interrogation dealing with secret matters, but nothing else. It wasn't a new experience, and they weren't likely to be curious. Uspurul was aboard the liner.

"You know, I don't really have much use for a bondswoman," Keth remarked, thinking about that point.

"You won't be stuck with her contract for more than a year," Telzey said. "Keth, look. Don't you owe me something?"

He scratched his jaw. "Do I? You got us out of a mess, but I doubt I'd have been in the mess if it hadn't been for you."

"You wouldn't have had your cos story either."

Keth looked nettled.

"Don't be so sure! My own methods are reasonably effective."

"You'd have had the full story?"

"No, hardly that."

"Well, then!" Telzey said. "Uspurul's part of the story, so she can be your responsibility for a while. Fair enough? I'd take care of her myself if I didn't have my hands full."

"Why take care of her at all?"

"Because not everyone in cos is going to believe Osselin's version of what happened. They don't dare do anything about him, but there was enough to show Uspurul was involved somehow in what went on tonight. She's a rotten little creature in some ways, but I'd sooner not think of her being worked over by cos interrogation methods. They can break down amnesia treatments sometimes, so Osselin wanted to have her killed immediately to be on the safe side." Telzey added, "Uspurul's got a really good brain, and you'd be surprised at the things she's learned working for cos Services! Adacee should find her an asset. Give her half a chance, and she might make a great newscaster!"

"Adacee and I thank you," said Keth.