

Analog

SCIENCE
Fact & Fiction



May 1961 • 50 Cents

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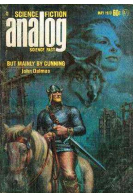
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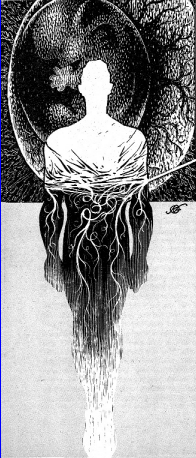
"Resident Witch"

Published in *Analog Science Fiction* → *Science Fact*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (May 1970), though this version is taken from *TnT: Telzey & Trigger* (2000) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



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JAMES H. SCHMITZ
Illustrated by Kelly Freas

*Kyth Interstellar, a detective agency,
had a problem that not even their highly skilled operatives
could handle—without Tetzey, their Resident Witch!*

resident witch

Telzey checked in at the Morrahall Hotel in Orado City that evening, had an early dinner, and thereupon locked herself into her room. The impression she'd left at Pehanron College was that she would be spending the night with her family. Her parents, on the other hand, naturally assumed she was at the college. She'd programmed the ComWeb to have calls coming in at the college, at home, or to her car, transferred to the hotel room—if the caller, having been informed that she was busy and much preferred not to be disturbed before morning, felt there was justification enough for intruding on her privacy.

The semifinals of the annual robochess district championship series had begun, and she was still well up among the players. There should be two or three crucial games tonight, very little sleep. She wanted *all* the seclusion she could get.

She got into a casual outfit, settled down at the set, dialed herself into the series. Five minutes later, she was fed an opening move, an easy-looking one. She countered breezily. Six moves on, she was perspiring and trying to squirm out of an internally ingenious trap. Out of it, though not unscathed, just ahead of deadline, she half closed a rather nasty little trap of her own.

Time passed in blissful absorption.

Then the ComWeb rang.

Telzey started, frowned, glanced at the instrument. It rang again. She pushed the Time Out button on the set, looked at her watch, switched on the ComWeb. "Yes?" she said.

"A caller requests override, Miss Amberdon," the ComWeb told her.

"Who is it?"

"The name is Wellan Dasinger."

"All right." Telzey clicked in nonvisual send, and Dasinger's lean tanned face appeared in the screen. "I'm here," she said. "Hello, Dasinger."

"Hello, Telzey. Are we private?"

"As private as we can be," she assured him. Dasinger was the head of Kyth Interstellar, a detective agency to which she'd given some assistance during the past year, and which in turn was on occasion very useful to her.

"I need information," he said. "Quite urgently—in your special study area. I'd like to come out to Pehanron and talk to you. Immediately, if possible." This was no reference to her law studies. Dasinger knew she was a psi; but neither he nor she referred to psi matters directly on a ComWeb. He added, "I realize it can't be the most convenient hour for you."

Dasinger wasn't given to overstatement. If he said a matter was quite urgent, it was as urgent as matters could get. Telzey depressed the Concede button on the robochess set, thereby taking herself out of the year's series. The set clicked off. "The hour's convenient, Dasinger," she said. "So is the location."

"Eh?"

"I'm not at the college. I took a room at the Morrahall for the night. You're at the agency?"

"I am." The Kyth offices were four city block complexes away. "Can I send someone over for you?"

"I'll be down at the desk in five minutes," Telzey told him.

She slipped into sportswear, fitted on a beret, slung her bag from her shoulder, and left the room.

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There were three of them presently in Dasinger's private conference room. The third one was a Kyth operator Telzey hadn't met before, a big blond man named Corvin Wergard.

"What we want," Dasinger was saying, "is a telepath, a mind-reader—the real thing. Someone absolutely dependable. Someone who will do a fast, precise job for a high fee, and won't be too fussy about the exact legality of what he's involved in or a reasonable amount of physical risk. Can you put us in contact with somebody like that? Some acquaintance?"

Telzey said hesitantly, "I don't know. It wouldn't be an acquaintance; but I *may* be able to find somebody like that for you."

"We've tried the listed professionals," Wergard told her. "Along with some unlisted ones who were recommended to us. Mind-readers; people with telepathic devices. None of them would be any good here."

Telzey nodded. No one like that was likely to be much good anywhere. The good ones stayed out of sight. She said, "It might depend on exactly what you want the telepath to do, why you want him to do it. I know it won't be anything unethical, but he'll want to be told more than that."

Dasinger said, "It may concern a murder already carried out, or a murder that's still to come. If it's the last, we want to prevent it. Unfortunately, there's very little time. Would you like to see the file on the case? It's a short one."

Telzey would. It was brought to her.

The file was headed: *Selk Marine Equipment*. Which was a company registered on Cobril, the water world eighteen hours from Orado. The brothers Noal and Larien Selk owned the company, Larien having been involved in it for only the past six years. For the past four years, however, he alone had been active in the management. Noal, who'd founded the company, had been traveling about the Hub during that time, maintaining a casual connection with the business.

A week ago, Noal had contacted the Kyth Agency's branch on Cobril. He'd returned unexpectedly, found indications that Larien was siphoning off company funds, and apparently investing them in underworld enterprises on Orado. He wanted the agency to start tracing the money on Orado, stated he would arrive there in a few days with the evidence he'd accumulated.

He hadn't arrived. Two days ago, Hishee Selk, Larien's wife, appeared at the agency's Cobril branch. She said Larien had implied to her that Noal had tried to make trouble for him and would pay for it. From his hints, she believed Larien had arranged to have Noal kidnapped and intended to murder him. She wanted the agency to find Noal in time to save his life.

The Selk file ended there. Visual and voice recordings of the three principals were included. Telzey studied the images, listened to the voices. There wasn't much obvious physical resemblance between

the brothers. Larien was young, athletically built, strikingly handsome, had an engaging smile. Noal, evidently the older by a good many years, seemed a washed-out personality—slight, stooped, colorless. Hishee was a slender blonde with slanted black eyes and a cowed look. Her voice matched the look; it was low and uncertain. Telzey went through that recording again, ignoring Hishee's words, absorbing the voice tones.

She closed the file then. "Where's the rest of it?"

"The rest of it," said Dasinger, "is officially none of the Kyth Agency's business at the moment. Hence it isn't in the agency files."

"Oh?"

"You know a place called Joca Village, near Great Alzar?"

She nodded. "I've been there."

"Larien Selk acquired an estate in the Village three months ago," Dasinger said. "It's at the northeast end, an isolated cliffside section overlooking the sea. We know Larien is there at present. And we've found out that Noal Selk was in fact kidnapped by professionals and turned over to Larien's people. The probability is that he's now in Larien's place in Joca Village. If they try to move him out of there, he'll be in our hands. But that's the only good prospect of getting him back alive we have so far. Larien has been given no reason to believe anyone is looking for his brother, or that anyone but Hishee has begun to suspect Noal is missing. That's our immediate advantage. We can't afford to give it up."

Telzey nodded, beginning to understand. Joca Village was an ultraexclusive residential area, heavily guarded. If you weren't a resident or hadn't been issued a pass by a resident, you didn't get in. Passes were carefully checked at the single entrance, had to be confirmed. Overhead screens barred an aerial approach. She said, "And you can't go to the authorities until you have him back."

"No," Dasinger said. "If we did, we'd never get him back. We might be able to pin murder on Larien Selk later, though that's by no means certain. In any case, it isn't what we're after." He hesitated, said questioningly after a moment, "Telzey?"

Telzey blinked languidly.

"Telzey—" Dasinger broke off, watching her. Wergard glanced at him. Dasinger made a quick negating motion with his hand. Wergard shifted his attention back to Telzey.

"I heard you," Telzey said some seconds later. "You have Hishee Selk here in the agency, don't you?"

Wergard looked startled. Dasinger said, "Yes, we do."

"It was her voice mainly," Telzey said. "I picked her up on that." She looked at Wergard. "Wergard can't really believe this kind of thing is real."

"I'm trying to suspend my doubts," Wergard said. "Bringing in a mind-reader wasn't my idea. But we could use one only too well here."

Dasinger said, "All right to go on now, Telzey?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I was gone for only a moment. Now I'm making contact, and Hishee looks wide open. She's very easy!" She straightened up in her chair. "Just what do you want your mind-reader to do?"

Dasinger said to Wergard, "What Telzey means is that, having seen what Hishee Selk looks like, and having heard her voice, she gained

in impression around here, found a connection to the personality associated with it, and is now feeling her way into Hishee's mind. Approximately correct, Telzey?"

"Very close." For a nonpsi, Dasinger did, in fact, have a good understanding of psi processes.

"Now as to your question," he went on. "When Larien Selk bought the place in Joca Village, he had it equipped with security devices, installed by Banance Protective Systems, a very good outfit. During the past week, Banance added a few touches—mainly a Brisell pack and its handler. At the same time, the Colmer Detective Agency in Great Alzar was employed to provide round-the-clock guards, five to a shift, stationed directly at the house, behind the pack. However, we've obtained copies of the Banance security diagrams which show the setup on the grounds. And, of course, there are various ways of handling guards."

"You mean you can get into Joca Village and into the house?"

"Very likely. One of the residents is an agency client and has supplied us with Village passes. Getting in the Selk estate and into the house without alerting security presents problems, but shouldn't be too difficult. Everything is set up to do it now, two or three hours after nightfall at Joca Village. It's after we're inside the house that the matter becomes really ticklish."

Wergard said, "It's a one-shot operation. If we start it, it has to come off. We can't back away, and try again. Either Noal will be safe before his brother realizes somebody is trying to rescue him, or he'll have disappeared for good."

Telzey considered. It was easy enough to dispose of a human being instantly and tracelessly. "And you don't *know* Noal's in the house?" she said.

"No," Dasinger said. "There's a strong probability he's there. If we can't do better, we'll have to act on that probability tonight, because every hour of delay puts his life—if he's still alive—in greater danger. If he isn't there, Larien is the one person in the house who's sure to know where he is. But picking up Larien isn't likely to do Noal any good. He's bound to have taken precautions against that, and again Noal, wherever he is, will simply vanish, along with any evidence pointing to him. So we come back to the mind-reader—somebody who can tell us from Larien's mind exactly where Noal is and what we can do about it, before Larien knows we're in the house."

"Yes; I see," Telzey said. "But there're a number of things I *don't* understand here. Why does Larien—" She broke off, looked reflective a moment, nodded. "I can get that faster from Hishee now! It's all she's thinking about."

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Larien Selk, legally and biologically Noal's junior by twenty-five years, was, in the actual chronology of events, the older brother. He'd been conceived first by three years. The parents were engaged in building up a business and didn't want to be burdened with progeny taxes. The Larien-to-be went to an embryonic suspense vault. When Noal was conceived, the family could more readily afford a child, and the mother decided she preferred giving natural birth to one.

So Noal was born. His parents had no real wish for a second child. They kept postponing a decision about the nameless embryo they'd

stared away, and in the end seemed almost to have forgotten it. It wasn't until they'd died that Noal, going through old records, found a reference to his abandoned sibling. Somewhat shocked by his parents' indifference, he had Larien brought to term. When his brother grew old enough to understand the situation, Noal explained how he'd come to take his place.

Larien never forgave him. Noal, a shrewd enough man in other respects, remained unaware of the fact. He saw to it that Larien had the best of everything—very nearly whatever Larien wanted. When he came of age, Noal made him a partner in the company he'd founded and developed. Which put Larien in a position to begin moving against his brother.

Hishee was his first move. Hishee was to have married Noal. She was very young, but she was fond of him and a formal agreement wasn't far away. Then Larien turned his attention on Hishee, and the formal agreement was never reached. Hishee fell violently in love.

Noal accepted it. He loved them both; they were near the same age. But he found it necessary to detach himself from them. He waited until they married, then turned the effective management of the company over to Larien, and began traveling.

Larien set out casually to break Hishee. He did an unhurried thorough job of it, gradually, over the months, eroding her self-esteem and courage in a considered variety of ways. He brought her to heel, continued to reduce her. By the time Noal Selk came back to Cobril, Hishee was too afraid of Larien, too shaken in herself, to give her brother-in-law any indication of what had happened.

But Noal saw it. Larien had wanted him to see it, which was a mistake. Larien wasn't quite as well covered in his manipulation of the company's assets as he'd believed.

Noal, alerted to Larien's qualities, became also aware of that. He made a quiet investigation. It led him presently to the Kyth detective agency.

Then he disappeared.

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Dasinger said dryly, "We'd put you on the Kyth payroll any time, Telzey! It took us some hours to extract half that information from Hishee. The rest of it checks. If Larien thinks it's safe, he'll see Noal broken completely before he dies. No doubt he's made ingenious arrangements for that. He's an ingenious young man. But the time we have for action remains narrowly limited."

"He doesn't know Hishee's gone?" Telzey asked.

"Not yet. We have that well covered. We had to take her out of the situation; she'd be in immediate danger now. But it's an additional reason for avoiding delay. If Larien begins to suspect she had courage enough left to try to save Noal, he'll destroy the evidence. He should be able to get away with it legally, and he knows it."

Telzey was silent a moment. There were some obscure old laws against witchcraft, left deliberately unchanged, very rarely applied. Aside from that, the Federation was officially unaware of the existence of psis; a psi's testimony was meaningless. Legally then, it was probable enough that Larien Selk could get away with the murder of his brother. She doubted he'd survive Noal long; the private agencies had their own cold rules. But, as Dasinger had said, that wasn't what they were after.

She said, "Why do you want to plant the telepath in the house? If he's

good enough, he should be able to tap Larien's mind from somewhere outside Joca Village, though it probably would take a little longer."

Wergard said, "One of the Banance security devices is what's known technically as a psi-block. It covers the outer walls of the house. Larien shares some of the public superstitions about the prevalence of efficient mind-reading instruments. Presumably the block would also stop a human telepath."

She nodded. "Yes, they do."

"When he's outside one of his psi-blocked structures, he wears a mind shield," Wergard said. "A detachable type. If we'd known about this a little earlier, we might have had an opportunity to pick him up and relieve him of it. But it's too late now."

"Definitely too late," Dasinger agreed. "If you think you can find us a telepath who's more than a hit-and-miss operator, we'd take a chance on waiting another day, if necessary, to bring him in on it. But it would be taking a chance. If you can't get one, we'll select a different approach and move tonight."

Telzey said, "A telepath wouldn't be much good to you if Larien happens to be probe-immune. About one in eight people are."

"Seven to one are good odds in the circumstances," Dasinger said. "Very good odds. We'll risk that."

"They're better than seven to one," Telzey told him. "Probe-immunes usually don't know that's what they are, but they usually don't worry about having their minds read either. They feel safe." She rubbed her nose, frowning. "A Psychology Service psi could do the job for you, and I can try getting one. But I don't think they'll help. They won't lift a finger in ordinary crime cases."

Dasinger shook his head. "I can't risk becoming involved with them here anyway. Technically it's an illegal operation. The Kyth Agency won't be conducting it unless we come up with evidence that justified the illegality. I resigned yesterday, and Wergard and some others got fired. We'll be acting as private citizens. But that's also only a technicality, and the Service is unpredictable. I don't know what view they'd take of it. We might have them blocking us instead of helping. Can you find someone else?"

She nodded. "I can get you a telepath. Just one. The other psis I know won't touch it. They don't need the fee, and they don't want to reveal themselves--particularly not in something that's illegal."

"Who's the one?" Wergard asked.

"I am, of course."

They looked at her a moment. Wergard said, "That isn't what we had in mind. We want a pro who'll take his chances for the money he's getting. We needed information from you, but no more than that."

Telzey said, "It looks like it's turned into more than that."

Wergard said to Dasinger, "We can't get her involved."

"Corvin Wergard," Telzey said.

He looked back at her. "Yes?"

"I'm not reading your thoughts," she said. "I don't have to. You've been told who I am, and that I'm sixteen years old. So I'm a child. A child who comes of a very good family and has been very carefully raised. Somebody really too nice to get shot tonight, if something goes wrong, by a Colmer guard or Joca Security people, or ripped up by Brisells. Right?"

Wergard studied her a long moment. "I may have had such notions," he said then. "Perhaps I've been wrong about you."

"You've definitely been wrong about me," Telzey told him. "You didn't know enough. I've been a psi, a practicing psi, for almost a year. I can go through a human life in an hour and know more about it than the man or woman who's living it. I've gone through quite a few lives, not only human ones. I do other things that I don't talk about. I don't know what it all exactly makes me now, but I'm not a child. Of course, I am sixteen years old and haven't been that very long. But it might even be that sometimes people like you and Wellan Dasinger look a little like children to me. Do you understand?"

"I'm not sure," Wergard said. He shook his head. "I believe I'm beginning to."

"That's good. We should have an understanding of each other if we're to work together. The agency would save the fee, too," Telzey said. "I don't need it. Of course, there may come a time when I'll ask you to stick your neck out for something I'd like to have done."

Wergard asked Dasinger, "Has that been the arrangement?"

Dasinger nodded. "We exchange assistance in various matters." He added, "I still don't want you in this, Telzey. There will be risks. Not unreasonable ones; but our people are trained to look out for themselves in ways you're not. You're too valuable a person to be jeopardized on an operation of this kind."

"Then I can't help you help Noal Selk," she said. "I'd like to. But the only way I can do it is by going along with you tonight. It would take more time than you have to hunt around for somebody else."

Dasinger shook his head. "We'll use a different approach then. With a little luck, we can still save Noal. He isn't your problem."

"How do you know?" Telzey said. "He mightn't be if he were someone I'd only heard about. If I helped everybody I could help because I happen to be a psi, I'd have no time for anything else the rest of my life. There isn't a minute in the day I couldn't find someone somewhere who needs the kind of help I can give. I'd keep busy, wouldn't I? And, of course, everything I did still wouldn't make any real difference. There'd always be more people needing help."

"There would be, of course," Dasinger agreed.

She smiled. "It gave me a bad conscience for a while, but I decided I wasn't going to get caught in that. I'll do something, now and then. Now, here I've been in Hishee Selk's mind. I'm still in her mind. I know her, and Noal and Larien as she knows them—perhaps better than most people know the members of their family. So I can't say their problem isn't my problem. It wouldn't be true. I simply know them too well."

Dasinger nodded. "Yes, I see now."

"And I," said Wergard, "made a large mistake."

Dasinger looked at his watch. "Well, let's not waste time. The plan goes into operation in thirty minutes. Telzey, you're going high style—Joca Village level. Wergard, take her along, have her outfitted. Scratch Woni. We won't need her."

The only entry to the secluded Selk estate in Joca Village was a narrow road winding between sheer cliff walls. Two hundred yards along the road was a gate; and the gate was guarded by Selk employees.

Up this road came a great gleaming limousine, preceded by a cry of golden horns. It stopped near the gate, and Larien Selk's three guards moved forward, weapons in their hands, to instruct the intruders to turn back. But they came prepared to give the instruction in as courteous a manner as possible. It was unwise to offer unnecessary offense to people who went about in that kind of limousine.

Its doors had opened meanwhile; and, gaily and noisily, out came Wergard in a Space Admiral's resplendent and heavily decorated uniform; Dasinger with jeweled face mask, a Great Alzar dandy; Telzey, finally, slender and black-gowned, wearing intricate silver headgear. From the headgear blazed the breath-stopping beauty of two great star hyacinths, proclaiming her at once to be the pampered darling of one who looked on ordinary millionaires as such millionaires might look on the lowest of bondsmen.

Weapons most tactfully lowered, the guards attempted to explain to these people—still noisily good-natured, but dangerous in their vast arrogance and wealth and doubly unpredictable now because they were obviously high on something—that a mistake had been made, that, yes, of course, their passes must be honored, but this simply didn't happen to be a route to the estate of the Askab Odarch. In the midst of these respectful explanations, an odd paralysis and confusion came to the guards. They offered no objection when men stepped out from behind the limousine, gently took their weapons and led them toward the small building beside the gate, where Wergard already was studying the gate controls. The study was a brief one; the gate's energy barrier, reaching up to blend into the defense shield of Joca Village above, winked out of existence a minute later and the great steel frames slid silently back into the rock walls on either side. The instruments which normally announced the opening of the gate to scanners in the Selk house remained inactive.

The limousine drifted through and settled to the ground beside the road. The gate closed again, and the vehicle was out of sight. Joca Village security patrols would check this gate, as they did the gates of all Village residents, several times during the night, and leaving the limousine outside would have caused questions. Whether suspicions were aroused otherwise depended mainly on whether someone began to wonder why Larien Selk's three gate guards were men who hadn't been seen here before. Measures had been taken to meet that contingency, but they were measures Dasinger preferred not to bring into play at present. The goal was to get Telzey into the house quickly, find out where Noal Selk was, pick him up if he was here and get back out with him, with no more time lost than could be helped. Whether or not his brother came along would be determined by what they discovered. With luck in either case, they'd be out of Joca Village again, mission accomplished, before the next patrol reached the Selk estate.

Only Dasinger, Wergard, and Telzey had gone through with the limousine. They emerged from it quickly again, now in fitted dark coveralls, caps and gloves, difficult to make out in the nighttime half-dark of the cliff road, and with more sophisticated qualities which were of value to burglars seeking entry into a well-defended residence. They moved silently along the road in the thick-soled sound-absorbing boots which went with the coveralls, Wergard carrying a sack. The road led around a turn of the cliffs; and a hundred yards beyond the turn, Dasinger said, "You might give them the first blast from here."

They stopped. The rock wall on the left was lower at this point, continued to slope downward along the stretch of road ahead.

Wergard opened the sack and took out a tube a foot long and about three inches in diameter. He lifted the tube, sighting along it to a point above the cliffs on the left, pressed a trigger button. Something flicked silently out of the mouth of the tube and vanished in the dark air. They went on fifty yards, stopped again, and Wergard repeated the performance. The next time they stopped, the cliff on the left had dwindled to a rocky embankment not much more than twelve feet high. Larien Selk's big house stood in its gardens beyond the embankment, not visible from here.

They stood listening.

"It's got them," Wergard said then, low-voiced. "If it hadn't, they'd be aware of us by now, and we'd hear them moving around."

"Might as well give them a third dose, to be sure," Dasinger remarked.

"Why not?" Wergard agreed. He took a third tube from the sack, adjusted its settings, squinting through the dusk, then discharged its contents up across the embankment. The copies of the diagrams, briefly borrowed from the files of Balance Protective Systems, had showed that beyond the fence above the embankment was the area patrolled by a dozen Brisell dogs, dependable man-killers with acute senses. The three canisters Wergard had fired into the area were designed to put them out of action. They contained a charge stunning canine olfactory centers, approximately equivalent, Telzey had gathered, to the effect which might have been achieved by combining the most violent odors obtainable in their heaviest possible concentration, and releasing the mix in a flash of time. The canine mind thus treated went into prolonged dazed shock.

"Getting anything so far?" Dasinger asked her.

She nodded. "There is a psi-blocked area around. It seems to be where the house is. If Noal and Larien are here, they're in that area."

She'd kept bringing up impressions of both Selk brothers on the way from Orado City—things she knew about them from Hishee Selk's recalls and reflections, and from the visual and auditory recordings her own senses had registered. After they'd passed through the gate, she'd been searching mentally for anything which might relate to those impressions, blocking off her awareness of Wergard and Dasinger. There'd been occasional faint washes of human mind activities hereabouts, but they carried unfamiliar patterns. She'd fastened on the most definite of those and was developing the contact when Dasinger addressed her.

She mentioned this now, added, "It's one of the Colmer guards outside the house. Nobody's expecting trouble there. I can't tell yet what he's thinking, but nothing's worrying him."

Dasinger smiled. "Good! Keep your inner ears tuned to the boy! That could be useful. Let's move on—starting from here, as ghosts."

He reached under his collar as he spoke, abruptly became a bulkier smoky figure, features distorted though still vaguely distinguishable. There was a visual dispersion effect connected with the coverall suits, increasing with distance. Wergard and Telzey joined him in apparent insubstantiality. They went around the embankment, came to the fence.

It was more than a fence. Closely spaced along the rails topping it, twenty feet above, were concealed pickup devices which registered within the house. The diagrams had listed and described them. Now reasonable caution and the equipment in the suits of the three trespassers should give the devices nothing to register.

They moved slowly along the fence, twelve feet apart, not speaking here though they carried distorters which smothered voice tones

within the distance of a few feet, until Wergard, in the lead, reached a closed gate where the road they'd been following turned through the fence. His wavering contours stopped there; and Telzey and Dasinger also stopped where they were. Wergard was the burglary expert; his job was now to get them through the gate. It was locked, of course. The relays which opened the lock were in the house, and the lock itself was a death trap for anyone attempting to tamper with it. However, nobody had seemed concerned about those details, and Telzey decided not to worry either. Wergard was doing something, but she couldn't determine what. His foggy shape blurred out a quarter of the gate. Which wasn't bothering Wergard; the effect wasn't a subjective one. Telzey could see a faint haze about herself, which moved as she did. But it didn't interfere with her vision or blur her view of herself. She looked over at the house, still more than half hidden here by intervening trees.

It was a large windowless structure. A pale glow bathed the lower section of the front wall. That came from a lit area they'd have to cross. Closer to them, on this side of the trees, the ground was shadowy, heavily dotted with sizable shrubs, through which she could make out the outlines of a high hedge. This was where the Brisell pack prowled. She thought she could distinguish something moving slowly on the ground between two shrubs. It might be one of the dogs. Otherwise there was no sign of them.

A voice suddenly said something.

Telzey didn't move. She hadn't heard those words through her ears but through the ears of her contact. He was replying now, the sound of his own voice less distinct, a heavy rumble. She blinked, pushing probes out quickly into newly accessible mind areas, orienting herself. The contact was opening up nicely....

A hand tapped her shoulder. She looked up at Dasinger beside her. He indicated the gate, where Wergard had stepped back and stood waiting for them. The gate was open.

The thing she'd thought she'd seen moving occasionally on the ground between two shrub clusters was one of the Brisells. He was lying on his side as they came up, and, except for jerking his hind legs slightly, he wasn't moving just then. Two other dogs, not far from him, had been out of sight behind the shrubs. One turned in slow circles, with short, staggering steps. The other sat with drooping head, tongue lolling far down, shaking himself every few seconds. They were powerful animals with thick necks, huge heads and jaws, torsos protected by flexible corselets. None of them paid the slightest attention to the human ghost shapes.



Dasinger beckoned Telzey and Wergard to him, said softly, "They'll be no good for an hour or two. But we don't know that our business here will be over in an hour or two. We'll get their handler in the shelter now. Then it should be worth a few minutes finding the rest of the pack and putting them out till tomorrow with stun charges."

Wergard nodded; and Dasinger said to Telzey, "Stay here near those three so we don't lose you."

"All right."

She watched them hold their guns briefly to the heads of the dogs. Then the blurred shapes moved soundlessly off, becoming more apparitional with each step. In moments, she couldn't see them at all. The dogs lay unmoving now, and nothing else stirred nearby. She went back to her contact. Human thought whispers which came from other minds were reaching her from time to time, but she didn't try to develop those touches. The man she'd started working on was in charge of the Colmer Agency group and stationed near the entry of the house, directly beyond the lit area. She should get the best results here by concentrating attention on him.

His superficial thoughts could be picked up readily by now. It was the thinking of a bored, not very intelligent man, but a dangerous and well-trained one. A human Brisell. He and his group were in the second hour of an eight-hour stint of guard duty. He was looking forward to being relieved. Telzey gave the vague flow of thoughts prods here and there, turning them into new directions. She got a self-identification: his name was Sommard. He and the other Colmer guards knew nothing of what went on inside the home, and weren't interested. On arrival, they'd been admonished to constant alertness by a Mr. Costian. Sommard figured Mr. Costian for a nervous nut; the place obviously was well protected without them. But that wasn't his business, and he was doing his duty, however perfunctorily. His attention never wandered far. Two other guards stood to his right and left some fifty yards away, at the corners of the house. The remaining two were at the rear of the building where there was a service entry... That checked with what the Kyth Agency had established about the defense arrangements.

There was a sudden wash of mental brightness. It steadied, and Telzey was looking out of Sommard's eyes into the wide illuminated court below the house where the estate road terminated. Keeping watch on that open area, up to the fence on the far side and the locked road gate in the fence, was his immediate responsibility. If anyone not previously authorized by Mr. Costian to be there appeared in the court, there'd be no challenge. He'd give his companions and the people in the house a silent alert, and shoot the intruder. Of course, no one would appear there! He yawned.

Telzey let the view of the court go, made some preparations, reduced contact, and glanced at her watch. It had been four and a half minutes since the Kyth men left her. She began looking about for them, presently saw a haziness some twenty feet away, condensing slightly and separating into two shapes as it drew closer. A genuine pair of ghosts couldn't have moved more quietly. "The section's taken care of," Dasinger was saying then. "Anything to report?"

Telzey told them what she'd learned. Dasinger nodded. "Costian's been Larien Selk's underworld contact on Orado. It's probable that the pros delivered Noal to him." He scratched his chin. "Now what's the best way to take the agency guards out gently? We have no dispute with Colmer."

Wergard said, "Going through the gate's still possible, but it'll call for fast moving once we're through or we'd risk disturbance. The long way around past the cliffs seems safer to me."

Telzey shook her head.

"That won't be necessary," she said.

* * *

Sommard presently shut his eyes for no particular reason except that he felt like it. The road gate across the court opened slightly, stayed open a few seconds, closed quietly again. Sommard then roused himself, looked briskly about. He glanced at his two colleagues, stationed at the corners of the house on either side of him. They stood unmoving, as bored as he was. All was well. He scratched his chest, yawned again.

Thirty feet from him, invisible as far as he was concerned, Telzey settled herself on the low balustrade above the court, looked at him, reached back into his mind. She waited. Something like a minute passed. The guard at the corner to Sommard's left took two stumbling steps to the side and fell backward.

Sommard's awareness blanked out in the same instant. His knees buckled; he slid down along the wall against which he had been leaning, went over on his side and lay still.

Telzey looked around at the guard at the other house corner. He was down and out, too, and Wergard and Dasinger were now on their way along the sides of the house to take care of the two guards at the rear. She stood up and went over to Sommard. What she'd done to him was a little more complicated than using a stun gun, a good deal gentler than a stun gun's jolt. The overall effect, however, was the same. He'd go on sleeping quietly till morning.

She stayed beside him to make it easier for Dasinger to find her when he came to take her to the back of the house. There was an entry there which led to the servants' quarters below ground level. They would use that way to get into the house. There should be only three men in the servants' quarters tonight--Larien Selk's second gate guard team. They might be asleep at present. The estate's normal staff had been transferred to other properties during the past week. In the upper house were Costian, Larien Selk, probably Noal Selk, and two technicians who kept alternate watch on the instruments of the protective system. That was all.

Getting into the house wasn't likely to be much of a problem now. But the night's work might have only begun.

4

"I'm getting traces of Larien," Telzey said.

"And Noal?" Dasinger asked.

"I'm not sure. There was something for a moment--but--" Her voice trailed off unsteadily.

"Take your time." Dasinger, leaning against a table ten feet away, watching her in the dim glow of a ceiling light, had spoken quietly. They'd turned off the visual distorters; the ghost haze brought few advantages indoors. Wergard had found the three off-duty gate guards asleep, left them sleeping more soundly. He'd gone off again about some other matter. Telzey and Dasinger were to stay on the underground level until she'd made her contacts, established what the situation here was.

She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, sighed. There was silence then. Dasinger didn't stir. Telzey's face was pale, intent. After

while, her breathing grew ragged. Her lips twisted slowly. It might have been a laborious mouthing of words heard in her mind. Her fingers plucked fitfully at the material of the coveralls. Then she grew quiet. Wergard returned soundlessly, remained standing outside the door.

Telzey opened her eyes, looked at Dasinger and away from him, straightened up in the chair, and passed her tongue over her lips.

"It's no use," she said in a flat, drained voice.

"You couldn't contact Noal?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps I could. I don't know. You'll have to get the psi block shut off, and I'll try. He's not in the house." She began crying suddenly, stopped as suddenly. A valve had opened; had been twisted shut. "But we can't help him," she said. "He's dying."

"Where is he?"

"In the sea."

"In the sea? Go ahead."

She shrugged. "That's it! In the sea, more or less east of Joca Village. It might be a hundred miles from here, or two thousand. I don't know; nobody knows. Larien didn't want anybody to know, not even himself."

Wergard had come into the room. She looked over at him, back at Dasinger. "It's a bubble for deep water work. Something the Selks made on Cobril. Marine equipment. Larien had it brought in from Cobril. This one has no operating controls. It was just dropped off, somewhere."

An automated carrier had been dispatched, set on random course. For eight hours it moved about the sea east of the mainland; then it disintegrated and sank. At some randomly selected moment during those eight hours, relays had closed, and the bubble containing Noal Selk began drifting down through the sea.

She told them that.

Dasinger said, "You said he's dying...."

She nodded. "He's being eaten. Some organism—it tries to keep the animals it feeds on alive as long as it can. It's very careful ... I don't know what it is."

"I know what it is," Dasinger said. "When was it injected?"

"Two days ago."

Dasinger looked at Wergard. Wergard shrugged, said, "You might find something still clinically alive in the bubble five days from now. If you want to save Noal Selk, you'd better do it in hours."

"It's worth trying!" Dasinger turned to Telzey. "Telzey, what arrangements has Larien made in case the thing got away from him?"

"It isn't getting away from him," she said. "The bubble's got nondetectable coating. And if somebody tried to open it, it would blow up. There's a switch in the house that will blow it up any time. Larien's sitting two feet from the switch right now. But he can't touch it."

"Why not?" Wergard asked.

Telzey glanced at him. "He can't move. He can't even think. Not till I let him again."

Dasinger said, "The destruct switch isn't good enough. Isn't there something else in the house, something material, we can use immediately as evidence of criminal purpose?"

Telzey's eyes widened. "Evidence?" For a moment, she seemed about to laugh. "Goodness, yes, Dasinger! There's all the evidence in the world. He's got Noal on screen, two-way contact. He was talking to Noal when I started to pick him up. That's why--"

"Anyone besides Costian and the two techs around?" Dasinger asked Wergard.

"No."

"Put them away somewhere," Dasinger said. "Telzey and I will be with Larien Selk."

• • •

They weren't going to find the bubble. And if some accident had revealed its location, they wouldn't have got Noal Selk out of it alive.

They hadn't given up. Dasinger was speaking to the Kyth Agency by pocket transmitter within a minute after he'd entered Larien's suite with Telzey, and the agency promptly unsheathed its claws. Operators, who'd come drifting into Joca Village during the evening, showing valid passes, converged at the entry to the Selk estate, set up some lethal equipment, and informed Village Security the section was sealed. Village Security took a long, thoughtful look at what confronted it in the gate road, and decided to wait for developments.

Dasinger remained busy with the transmitter, while Wergard recorded what Larien's two-way screen showed. Telzey, only half following the talk, spoke only when Dasinger asked questions. She reported patiently then what he wanted to know, information she drew without much difficulty from Larien's paralyzed mind--the type of nondetectable material coating the deep water device; who had applied it; the name of the Cobril firm which installed the detonating system. They were attacking the problem from every possible angle, getting the help of researchers from around the planet. On Cobril, there was related activity by now. Authorities who would be involved in a sea search here had been alerted, were prepared to act if called on. The Kyth Agency had plenty of pull and was using it.

The fact remained that Larien Selk had considered the possibilities. It had taken careful investigation, but no special knowledge. He'd wanted a nondetectable coating material and a tamper-proof self-destruct system for his deep water device. Both were available; and that was that. Larien had accomplished his final purpose. The brother who'd cheated him out of his birthright, for whom he'd been left in a vault, ignored, forgotten, incomplete, had been detached from humanity and enclosed in another vault where he was now being reduced piecemeal, and from which he would never emerge. As the minutes passed, it became increasingly clear that what Dasinger needed to change the situation was an on-the-spot scientific miracle. Nothing suggested there were miracles forthcoming. Lacking that, they could watch Noal Selk die, or, if they chose, speed his death.

Telzey bit at her lip, gaze fastened on Larien, who lay on a couch a dozen feet from her. They'd secured his hands behind his back, which wasn't necessary; she'd left her controls on him, and he was caught in unawareness which would end when she let it end. That strong, vital organism was helpless now, along with the mind that had wasted itself in calculating hatred for so many years.

There was something here she hadn't wanted to see....

psi mentality needed strong shutoffs. It had them, developed them quickly, or collapsed into incoherence. The flow of energies which reached nonpsis in insignificant tricklings must be channeled, directed, employed—or sealed away. Shutoffs were necessary. But they could be misapplied. Too easily, too thoroughly, by a mind that had learned to make purposeful use of them.

There was something she'd blocked out of awareness not long ago. For a while, she'd succeeded in forgetting she'd done it. She knew now that she had done it, but it was difficult to hold her attention on the fact. Her mind drew back from such thoughts, kept sliding away, trying to distract itself, trying to blur the act in renewed forgetfulness.

She didn't want to find out what it was she'd shut away. By that, she knew it was no small matter. There was fear involved.

Of what was she afraid?

She glanced uneasily over at the screen showing the brightly lit metallic interior of the bubble. Wergard stood before it, working occasionally at his recordings. She hadn't looked at the screen for more than a few seconds since coming into the room. It could be turned to a dozen views, showing the same object from different angles and distances. The object was a human body which wasn't quite paralyzed because it sometimes stirred jerkily, and its head moved. The eyes were sometimes open, sometimes shut. It looked unevenly shrunken, partly defleshed by what seemed a random process, skin lying loosely on bone here and there, inches from the swell of muscle. However, the process wasn't a random one; the alien organism within the body patched up systematically behind itself as it made its selective harvest. Outside tubes were attached to the host. The body wouldn't die of dehydration or starvation; it was being nourished. It would die when not enough of it was left to bind life to itself, or earlier if the feeding organism misjudged what it was doing. Dasinger had said its instincts were less reliable with humans because they weren't among its natural food animals.

Or Noal Selk would die when it was decided he couldn't be saved, and somebody's hand reached for the destruct switch.

In any case, he would die. What the screen showed were the beginnings of his death, whatever turn it took in the end. There was no reason for her to watch that. Noal, lost in the dark sea, in his small bright-lit tomb unknown miles from here, was beyond her help, beyond all help now.

Her eyes shifted back to Larien. It happened, she decided, at some point after she'd moved into his mind, discovered what he had done, and, shocked, was casting about for further information, for ways to undo this atrocity. Almost now, but not quite, she could remember the line of reflections she'd followed, increasingly disturbed reflections they seemed to be. Then—then she'd been past that point. Something flashed up, some horrid awareness; instantly she'd buried it, sealed it away, sealed away that entire area of recall.

She shook her head slightly. It remained buried! She remembered doing it now, and she wouldn't forget that again. But she didn't remember what she had buried, or why. Perhaps if she began searching in Larien Selk's mind...

At the screen, Wergard exclaimed something. Telzey looked up quickly. Dasinger had turned away from the table where he'd been sitting, was starting toward the screen. Sounds began to come from the screen. She felt the blood drain from her face.

• • •

Something was howling in her mind—wordless expression of a

terrible need. It went on for seconds, weakened abruptly and was gone. Other things remained.

She stood up, walked unsteadily to the screen. The two men glanced around as she came up. An enlarged view of Noal Selk's head filled the screen. There were indications that the feeder had been selectively at work here, too; but there wasn't much change in the features. The eyes were wide open, staring up past the pickup. The mouth was lax and trembling; only wet, shaky breathing sounds came from it now.

Wergard said, "For some moments, he seemed fully conscious. He seemed to see us. He--well, the speaking apparatus isn't essential to life, of course. Most of that may be gone. But I think he was trying to speak to us."

Telzey, standing between them, looking at the screen, said, "He saw you. He was trying to ask you to kill him. Larien let him know it could be done any time."

Dasinger said carefully, "You *know* he was trying to ask us to kill him?"

"Yes, I know," Telzey said. "Be quiet, Dasinger. I have to think now."

She blinked slowly at the screen. Her diaphragm made a sudden, violent contraction as a pain surge reached her. Pain shutoff went on; the feeling dimmed. Full contact here.

Her mouth twisted. She hadn't wanted it! Not after what she'd learned. That was what she hadn't allowed to come into consciousness. She'd told herself it wasn't possible to reach Noal where he was, even after they'd shut off the psi block in the walls of the house. She'd convinced herself it was impossible. But she'd made the contact, and it had developed, perhaps as much through Noal's frenzied need as through anything she'd done; and now she'd been blazingly close to his mind and body torment--

She brushed her hand slowly over her forehead. She felt clammy with sweat.

"Telzey, is something wrong with you?" Dasinger asked.

She looked up at their watchful faces.

"No, not really. Dasinger, you know you can't save him, don't you?"

His expression didn't change. "I suppose I do," he acknowledged. "I suppose we all do. But we'll have to go on trying for a while, before we simply put him to death."

She nodded, eyes absent. "There's something I can try," she told them. "I didn't think of it before."

"Something *you* can try?" Wergard said, astonished. His head indicated the screen. "To save him *there*?"

"Yes. Perhaps."

Dasinger cleared his throat. "I don't see ... what do you have in mind?"

She shook her head. "I can't explain that. It's psi. I'll try to explain as I go along, but I probably won't be able to explain much. It may work, that's all. I've done something like it before."

"But you can't--" Wergard broke off, was silent.

Dasinger said, "You know what you're doing?"

"Yes, I know." Telzey looked up at them again. "You mustn't let

anyone in here. There mustn't be any disturbance or interference, or everything might go wrong. And it will take time. I don't know how much time."

Neither of them said anything for some seconds. Then Dasinger nodded slowly.

"Whatever it is," he said, "you'll have all the time you need. Nobody will come in here. Nobody will be allowed on the estate before you've finished and give the word."

Telzey nodded. "Then this is what we'll have to do."

5

She had done something like this, or something nearly like this, before....

Here and there was a psi mind with whom one could exchange the ultimate compliment of using no mental safeguards, none whatever. It was with one of those rare, relaxing companions that she'd done almost what she'd be doing now. The notion had come up in the course of a psi practice session. One was in Orado City, one at the tip of the Southern Mainland at the time. They'd got together at the thought level, and were trying out various things, improving techniques and methods.

"I'll lend you what I see if you'll lend me what you see," one of them had said.

That was easy enough. Each looked suddenly at what the other had looked at a moment ago. It wasn't the same as tapping the sensory impressions of a controlled mind. Small sections of individual awareness, of personality, appeared to have shifted from body to body.

It went on from there. Soon each was using the other's muscles, breathing with the other's lungs, speaking with the other's voice. They'd got caught up in it, and more subtle transfers continued in a swift double flow, unchecked: likes and dislikes, acquired knowledge, emotional patterns. Memories disintegrated here, built up there; vanished, were newly complete--and now quite different memories. Only the awareness of self remained--that probably couldn't be exchanged, or could it?

Then: "Shall we?"

They'd hesitated, looking at each other, with a quarter of the globe between them, each seeing the other clearly, in their exchanged bodies, exchanged personalities. One threadlike link was left for each to sever, and each would become the other, with no connection then to what she had been.

"Of course, we can change right back--"

Yes, but could they? Could they? Something would be different, would have shifted; they would be in some other and unknown pattern--and suddenly, quickly, they were sliding past each other again, memories, senses, controls, personality particles, swirling by in a giddy two-way stream, reassembling, restoring themselves, each to what was truly hers. They were laughing, but a little breathlessly, really a little frightened now by what they'd almost done.

They'd never tried it again. They'd talked about it. They were almost certain it could be done, oh, quite safely! They'd be two telepaths still, two psis. It should be a perfectly simple matter to reverse the

process at any time.

It should be. But even to those who were psis, and in psi, much more remained unknown about psi than was known. Anyone who gained any awareness at all understood there were limits beyond which one couldn't go, or didn't try to go. Limits beyond which things went oddly wrong.

The question was whether they would have passed such a limit in detaching themselves from their personality, acquiring that of another. It remained unanswered.

* * *

What she had in mind now was less drastic in one respect, seemed more so in another. She would find out whether she could do it. She didn't know what the final result would be if she couldn't.

She dissolved her contact with Noal. It would be a distraction, and she could restore it later.

Larien Selk was fastened securely to his couch. Dasinger and Wergard then fastened Telzey as securely to the armchair in which she sat. She'd told them there might be a good deal of commotion here presently, produced both by herself and by Larien. It would be a meaningless commotion, something to be ignored. They wouldn't know what they were doing. They had to be tied down so they wouldn't get hurt.

The two men asked no questions. She reached into a section of her brain, touched it with paralysis, slid to Larien Selk's mind. In his brain, too, a selected small section went numb. Then the controls she'd placed on him were flicked away.

He woke up. He had to be awake and aware for much of this, or her work would be immeasurably, perhaps impossibly, increased. But his wakefulness did result in considerable commotion, though much less than there would have been if Larien had been able to use his voice—or, by and by, Telzey's. She'd silenced both for the time being. He couldn't do more than go through the motions of screaming. Nor could he move around much, though he tried very hard.

For Larien, it was a terrifying situation. One moment, he'd been sitting before the screen, considering whether to nudge the console button which would cause a stimulant to be injected into Noal and bring him back to consciousness again for an hour or two. He enjoyed talking to Noal.

Then, with no discernible lapse in time, he sensed he was lying on his back, arms and legs stretched out, tied down. Simultaneously, however, he looked up from some point in midair at two tense-faced men who stood between him and the screen that peered into Noal's bubble.

Larien concluded he'd gone insane. In the next few minutes, he nearly did. Telzey was working rapidly. It wasn't nearly as easy work as it had been with a cooperating psi; but Larien lacked the understanding and ability to interfere with her, as a psi who wasn't cooperating would have done. There was, of course, no question of a complete personality exchange here. But point by point, sense by sense, function by function, she was detaching Larien from all conscious contacts with his body. His bewildered attempts to retain each contact brought him into a corresponding one with hers—and that particular exchange had been made.

The process was swift. It was Larien's body that struggled violently at first, tried to scream, strained against its fastenings. Telzey's remained almost quiescent. Then both twisted about. Then his, by

egrees, relaxed. The other body continued to twist and tug, eyes staring, mouth working desperately.

Telzey surveyed what had been done, decided enough had been done at this level. Her personality, her consciousness, were grafted to the body of Larien Selk. His consciousness was grafted to her body. The unconscious flows had followed the conscious ones.

She sealed the access routes to memory storage in the Telzey brain. The mind retained memory without the body's help for a while. For how long a while was something she hadn't yet established.

Time for the next step. She withdrew her contact with Larien's mind, dissolved it. Then she cut her last mind links to her body. It vanished from her awareness. She lay in Larien Selk's body, breathing with its lungs. She cleared its throat, lifted the paralysis she'd placed on the use of its voice.

"Dasinger!" the voice said hoarsely. "Wergard!"

Footsteps came hurrying over.

"Yes, *he's* over *there*. I'm here ... for now. I wanted you to understand so you wouldn't worry too much."

They didn't say anything, but their faces didn't look reassured. Telzey added, "I've got his--its voice cut off. Over there, I mean."

What else should she tell them? She couldn't think of anything; and she had a driving impatience now to get on with this horrid business, to get it done, if she could get it done. To be able to tell herself it was over.

"It'll be a while before I can talk to you again," Larien Selk's voice told Wergard and Dasinger.

Then they vanished from her sight. Larien's eyes--no longer in use--closed. Telzey had gone back to work. Clearing the traces of Larien's memories and reaction patterns from his brain took time because she was very thorough and careful about it. She wanted none of that left; neither did she want to damage the brain. The marks of occupancy faded gradually, cleaned out, erased, delicately annihilated; and presently she'd finished. She sent out a search thought then to recontact the mind of Noal Selk in the brightly lit hell of his bubble, picked up the pattern almost at once, and moved over into his mind.

He was unconscious, but something else here was conscious in a dim and limited way. Telzey turned her attention briefly to the organism which had been implanted in Noal. A psi creature, as she'd thought. The ability to differentiate so precisely between what was and was not immediately fatal to a creature not ordinarily its prey had implied the use of psi. The organism wasn't cruel; it had no concept of cruelty. It was making a thrifty use of the food supply available to it, following its life purpose.

She eased into the body awareness from which Noal had withdrawn, dimming the pain sensations which flared up in her. It was immediately obvious that very extensive damage had been done. But a kind of functional balance lingered in what was left. The body lived as a body.

And the mind still lived as a mind, sustaining itself by turning away from the terrible realities about it as often as Noal could escape from pain into unconsciousness. She considered that mind, shifting about it and through it, knowing she was confronting the difficulty she'd expected. Noal wouldn't cling to this body; in intention, he already was detached from it. But that was the problem. He was trying, in effect, to become disembodied and remain that way.

He had a strong motivation. She should be able to modify it, nullify it eventually; but it seemed dangerous to tamper with Noal any more than she could help. There wasn't enough left of him, physically or mentally, for that. He had to want to attach himself fully and consciously to a body again, or this wasn't going to work. She could arouse him, bring him awake....

He would resist it, she thought.

But she might give him something he wouldn't resist.

• • •

Noal dreamed.

It was a relaxed dream, universes away from pain, fear, savage treachery. He remembered nothing of Larien. He was on Cobril, walking along with a firm, quick stride in warm sunlight. He was agreeably aware of the strength and health of his body.

Something tugged at him.

Vision blurred startlingly. Sound faded. The knowledge came that the thing that tugged at him was trying to drag him wholly away from his senses, out of himself, into unfeeling nothingness.

Terrified, he fought to retain sight and sound, to cling to his body.

Telzey kept plucking him away, taking his place progressively in the still functional wreckage left by the organism, barring him more and more from it. But simultaneously she made corresponding physical anchorages available for him elsewhere; and Noal, still dreaming, not knowing the difference, clung to each point gained with frantic determination. She had all the cooperation she could use. The transfer seemed accomplished in moments.

She told him soothingly then to go on sleeping, go on dreaming pleasantly. Presently, agitations subsiding, he was doing it.

And Telzey opened Noal Selk's gummily inflamed and bloodshot eyes with difficulty, looked out into the metallic glittering of the bubble, closed the eyes again. She was very much here--too much so. Her pain shutoffs were operating as far as she could allow them to operate without hampering other activities, but it wasn't enough. A sudden fresh set of twinges gave her a thought then; and she put the busy psi organism to sleep. At least, that part of it shouldn't get any worse.

But she'd have to stay here a while. In this body's brain was the physical storehouse of Noal's memories, the basis of his personality. It was a vast mass of material; getting it all transferred in exact detail to the brain she'd cleared out to receive it was out of the question. It probably could be done, but it would take hours. She didn't have hours to spare.

The essentials, however, that which made Noal what he was, should be transplanted in exact detail. She started doing it. It wasn't difficult work. She'd doctored memories before this, and it was essentially the same process.

It was simply a question of how much she could get done before she had to stop. The physical discomforts that kept filtering into her awareness weren't too serious a distraction. But there was something else that frightened her--an occasional sense of vagueness about herself, a feeling as if she might be growing flimsy, shadowy. It always passed quickly, but it seemed a warning that too much time was passing, perhaps already had passed, since she'd cut herself off from her own brain and body and the physical basis of

memory and personality.

She paused finally. It should do. It would have to do. Her mind could absorb the remaining pertinent contents of this body's brain in a few minutes, retain it until she had an opportunity to feed back to Noal whatever else he might need. It would be secondhand memory, neither exact nor complete. But he wouldn't be aware of the difference, and no one who had known him would be able to tell there was a difference. She couldn't risk further delay. There was a sense of something that had been in balance beginning to shift dangerously, though she didn't yet know what it was.

She began the absorption process. Completed it. Went drifting slowly off, then through nothing, through nowhere... . Peered out presently again through puzzled sore eyes into the gleaming of the bubble.

Hot terror jolted through her--

* * *

"Dasinger!"

Dasinger turned from the couch on which the Larien body lay, came quickly across the room. "Yes?"

Wergard indicated the other figure in the armchair.

"This one seems to be coming awake again!"

Dasinger looked at the figure. It was slumped back as far as the padded fastenings which held its arms clamped against the sides of the chair permitted. The head lolled to the left, eyes slitted, blood-smeared mouth half open. "What makes you think so?" he asked.

The figure's shoulders jerked briefly almost as he spoke.

"That," Wergard said. "It's begun to stir."

They watched, but the figure remained quiet now. Wergard looked at the screen. "Some slight change there, too!" he remarked. "Its eyes were open for a while. A minute ago, they closed."

"Coinciding with the first indication of activity here?" Dasinger asked.

"Very nearly. What about the one on the couch?"

Dasinger shrugged. "Snoring! Seems to smile now and then. Nobody could be more obviously asleep."

Wergard said, after a moment, "So it must be between these two now?"

"If she's been doing what we think, it should be... . There!"

The figure in the chair sucked in a hissing breath, head slamming up against the backrest. The neck arched, strained, tendons protruding like tight-drawn wires. Dasinger moved quickly. One hand clamped about the jaw; the other gripped the top of the skull. "Get something back in her mouth!"

Wergard already was there with a folded wet piece of cloth, wedged it in between bared teeth, jerked his fingers back with a grunt of pain. Dasinger moved his thumb up, holding the cloth in place. The figure was in spasmodic violent motion now, dragging against the fastenings. Wergard placed his palms above its knees, pressed down hard, felt himself still being shifted about. He heard shuddering gasps, glanced up once and saw blue eyes glaring unfocused in the

contorted face.

"Beginning to subside!" Dasinger said then.

Wergard didn't reply. The legs he was holding down had relaxed, gone limp, a moment before. Howling sounds came from the screen, turned into a strangled choking, went silent. He straightened, saw Dasinger take the cloth from Telzey's mouth. She looked at them in turn, moved her puffed lips, grimaced uncomfortably.

"You put your teeth through your lower lip a while ago," Dasinger explained. He added, "That wasn't you, I suppose. You *are* back with us finally, aren't you?"

She was still breathing raggedly. She whispered, "Not quite ... almost. Moments!"

Animal sounds blared from the screen again. Their heads turned toward it. Wergard went over, cut off the noise, looked at the twisting face that had belonged to Noal Selk. He came back then and helped Dasinger free Telzey from the chair. She sat up and touched her mouth tentatively, reminding Wergard of his bitten finger. He looked at it.

Telzey followed his glance. "Did I do that, too?"

"Somebody did," Wergard said shortly. He reached for one of the cloths they'd used to keep her mouth propped open, wrapped it around the double gash. "How do you feel, Telzey?"

She shifted her shoulders, moved her legs. "Sore," she said. "Very sore. But I don't seem to have pulled anything."

"You're back all the way?"

She drew a long breath. "Yes."

Wergard nodded. "Then let's get this straight. Over there on the couch, asleep—that's now Noal Selk?"

"Yes," Telzey said. "I'll have to do a little more work on him because he doesn't have all his memory yet. But it's Noal—in everything that counts, anyway."

"He doesn't have all his memory yet," Wergard repeated. "But it's Noal!" He stared at her. "All right. And you're you again." He jerked his thumb at the screen. "So the one who's down in the bubble now is Larien Selk?"

She nodded.

"Well—" Wergard shrugged. "I was watching it," he said. He looked at Dasinger. "It happened, that's all!"

He went to the screen console, unlocked the destruct switch, and turned it over. The screen went blank.

The three of them remained silent for some seconds then, considering the same thought. Wergard finally voiced it. "This is going to take a remarkable amount of explaining!"

"I guess it will," Telzey said. "But we won't have to do it."

"Eh?" said Dasinger.

"I know some experts," she told him. She climbed stiffly out of the chair. "I'd better get to work on Noal now, so we'll have that out of the way."

* * *

The Operator on Duty at the Psychology Service Center in Orado City lifted his eyebrows when he saw Telzey walking toward his desk in the Entry Hall. They'd met before. He pretended not to notice her then until she stopped before the desk.

He looked up. "Oh, it's you," he said indifferently.

"Yes, it's me," said Telzey. They regarded each other with marked lack of approval.

"Specifically," asked the Operator, "why are you here? I'll take it for granted it has to do with your general penchant for getting into trouble."

"I wouldn't call it that," Telzey said. "I may have broken a few Federation laws last night, but that's beside the point. I'm here to see Klayung. Where do I find him?"

The Operator on Duty leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers.

"Klayung's rather busy," he remarked. "In any case, before we bother him you might explain the matter of breaking a few Federation laws. We're not in that much of a hurry, are we?"

Telzey considered him reflectively.

"I've had a sort of rough night," she said then. "So, yes—we're in exactly that much of a hurry. Unless your shields are a good deal more solid now than they were last time."

His eyelids flickered. "You wouldn't be foolish enough to—"

"I'll count to two," Telzey said. "One."

• • •

Klayung presently laid Telzey's report sheets down again, sat scratching his chin. His old eyes were thoughtful. "Where is he at present?" he asked.

"Outside the Center, in a Kyth ambulance," Telzey told him. "We brought Hishee along, too. Asleep, of course."

Klayung nodded. "Yes, she should have almost equally careful treatment. This is a difficult case."

"You can handle it?" Telzey asked.

"Oh, yes, we can handle it. We'll handle everything. We'll have to now. This could have been a really terrible breach of secrecy, Telzey! We can't have miracles, you know!"

"Yes, I know," Telzey said. "Of course, the Kyth people are all right."

"Yes, they're all right. But otherwise—"

"Well, I know it's going to be a lot of trouble for you," she said. "And I'm sorry I caused it. But there really wasn't anything else I could do."

"No, it seems there really wasn't," Klayung agreed. "Nevertheless—well, that's something I wouldn't recommend you try very frequently!"

Telzey was silent a moment.

"I'm not sure I'd try it again for any reason," she admitted. "At the end there, I nearly didn't get back."

Klayung nodded. "There was a distinct possibility you wouldn't get

back."

"Were you thinking of having Noal go on as Noal?" Telzey inquired.

"That should be the simplest approach," Klayung said. "We'll see what the Makeup Department says. I doubt it would involve excessive structural modifications... . You don't agree?"

Telzey said, "Oh, it would be simplest, all right. But--well, you see, Noal was just nothing physically. He's got a great body now. It would be a shame to turn him back to being a nothing again."

Klayung looked at her a moment.

"Those two have had a very bad time," Telzey continued. "Due to Larien. It seems sort of fair, doesn't it?"

"If he's to become Larien Selk officially," Klayung remarked, "there'll be a great many more complications to straighten out."

"Yes, I realize that."

"Besides," Klayung went on, "neither Noal nor Hishee might want him to look in the least like Larien."

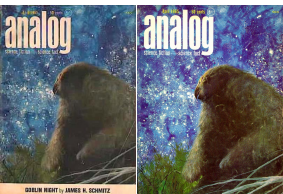
"Well, they wouldn't now, of course," Telzey agreed. "But after your therapists have cleared up all the bad things Larien's done to them, it might be a different matter."

Klayung's sigh was almost imperceptible. "All right. Supposing we get the emotional and mental difficulties resolved first, and then let the principals decide for themselves in what guise Noal is to resume his existence. Would that be satisfactory?"

Telzey smiled. "Thanks, Klayung!" she said. "Yes, very satisfactory!"

"Goblin Night"

Published in *Analog Science Fiction* → *Science Fact*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (April 1965), though this version is taken from *Telzey Amberdon* (2000) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.



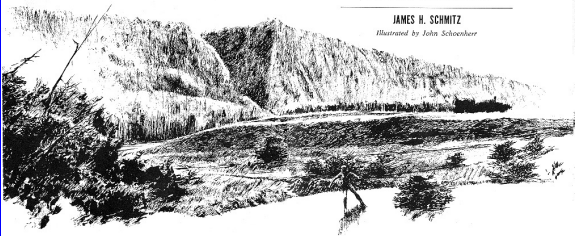
Covers for the novel, just for relevance.

Goblin Night

One of the most interesting points Schmitz makes in this one is, I think, that Nature can produce killers—but it takes Man to produce the ultra-super in the way of killers!

JAMES H. SCHMITZ

Illustrated by John Schoenherr



There was a quivering of psi force. Then a sudden, vivid sense of running and hiding, in horrible fear of a pursuer from whom there was no escape—

Telzey's breath caught in her throat. A psi screen had flicked into instant existence about her mind, blocking out incoming impulses. The mental picture, the feeling of pursuit, already was gone, had touched her only a moment; but she stayed motionless seconds longer, eyes shut, pulses hammering out a roll of primitive alarms. She'd been dozing uneasily for the past hour, aware in a vague way of the mind-traces of a multitude of wildlife activities in the miles of parkland around. And perhaps she'd simply fallen asleep, begun to dream... .

Perhaps, she thought—but it wasn't very likely. She hadn't been relaxed enough to be touching the fringes of sleep and dream-stuff. The probability was that, for an instant, she'd picked up the reflection of a real event, that somebody not very far from here had encountered death in some grisly form at that moment.

She hesitated, then thinned the blocking screen to let her awareness spread again through the area, simultaneously extended a quick, probing thread of thought with a memory-replica of the pattern she'd caught. If it touched the mind that had produced the pattern originally, it might bring a momentary flash of echoing details and further information ... assuming the mind was still alive, still capable of responding.

She didn't really believe it would still be alive. The impression she'd had in that instant was that death was only seconds away.

The general murmur of mind-noise began to grow up about her again, a varying pulse of life and psi energies, diminishing gradually with distance, arising from her companions, from animals on plain

and mountain, an undermole of the dimmer emanations of plants. But no suggestion came now of the vividly disturbing sensations of a moment ago.

• • •

Telzey opened her eyes, glanced around at the others sitting about the campfire in the mouth of Cil Chasm. There were eleven of them, a group of third and fourth year students of Pehanron College who had decided to spend the fall holidays in Melna Park. The oldest was twenty-two; she herself was the youngest—Telzey Amberdon, age fifteen. There was also a huge white dog named Chomir, not in view at the moment, the property of one of her friends who had preferred to go on a spacecruise with a very special date over the holidays. Chomir would have been a little in the way in an ip cruiser, so Telzey had brought him along to the park instead.

In the early part of the evening, they had built their fire where the great Cil canyon opened on the rolling plain below. The canyon walls rose to either side of the camp, smothered with evergreen growth; and the Cil River, a quick, nervous stream, spilled over a series of rocky ledges a hundred feet away. The boys had set up a translucent green tent canopy, and sleeping bags were arranged beneath it. But Gikkas and two of the other girls already had announced that when they got ready to sleep, they were going to take up one of the aircars and settle down in it for the night a good thirty feet above the ground.

The park rangers had assured them such measures weren't necessary. Melna Park was full of Orado's native wildlife—that, after all, was why it had been established—but none of the animals were at all likely to become aggressive towards visitors. As for human marauders, the park was safer than the planet's cities. Overflights weren't permitted; visitors came in at ground level through one of the various entrance stations where their aircars were equipped with sealed engine locks, limiting them to contour altitudes of a hundred and fifty feet and to a speed of thirty miles an hour. Only the rangers' cars were not restricted, and only the rangers carried weapons.

It made Melna Park sound like an oasis of sylvan tranquility. But as it turned towards evening, the stars of the great cluster about Orado brightened to awesomely burning splendor in the sky. Some of them, like Gikkas, weren't used to the starblaze, had rarely spent a night outside the cities where night-screens came on gradually at the end of the day to meet the old racial preference for a dark sleep period.

Here night remained at an uncertain twilight stage until a wind began moaning up in the canyon and black storm clouds started to drift over the mountains and out across the plain. Now there were quick shifts between twilight and darkness, and eyes began to wander uneasily. There was the restless chatter of the river nearby. The wind made odd sounds in the canyon; they could hear sudden cracklings in bushes and trees, occasional animal voices.

• • •

"You get the feeling," Gikkas remarked, twisting her neck around to stare up Cil Chasm, "that something like a lulbear or spook might come trotting out of there any minute!"

Some of the others laughed uncertainly. Valia said, "Don't be silly! There haven't been animals like that in Melna Park for fifty years." She looked over at the group about Telzey. "Isn't that right, Pollard?"

Pollard was the oldest boy here. He was majoring in biology, which might make him Valia's authority on the subject of lulbears and spooks. He nodded, said, "You can still find them in the bigger game

reserves up north. But naturally they don't keep anything in public parks that makes a practice of chewing up the public. Anything you meet around here, Gikkas, will be as ready to run from you as you are from it."

"That's saying a lot!" Rish added cheerfully. The others laughed again, and Gikkas looked annoyed.

Telzey had been giving only part of her attention to the talk. She felt shut down, temporarily detached from her companions. It had taken all afternoon to come across the wooded plains from the entrance station, winding slowly above the rolling ground in the three aircars which had brought them here. Then, after they reached Cil Chasm where they intended to stay, she and Rish and Dunker, two charter members of her personal fan club at Pehanron, had spent an hour fishing along the little river, up into the canyon and back down again. They had a great deal of excitement and caught enough to provide supper for everyone; but it involved arduous scrambling over slippery rocks, wading in cold, rushing water, and occasional tumbles, in one of which Telzey knocked her wrist-talker out of commission for the duration of the trip.

Drowsiness wasn't surprising after all the exercise. The surprising part was that, in spite of it, she didn't seem able to relax completely. As a rule, she felt at home wherever she happened to be outdoors. But something about this place was beginning to bother her. She hadn't noticed it at first, she had laughed at Gikkas with the others when Gikkas began to express apprehensions. But when she settled down after supper, feeling a comfortable muscular fatigue begin to claim her, she grew aware of a vague disturbance. The atmosphere of Melna Park seemed to change slowly. A hint of cruelty and savagery crept into it, of hidden terrors. Mentally, Telzey felt herself glancing over her shoulder towards dark places under the trees, as if something like a lulbear or spook actually was lurking there.

And then, in that uneasy, half-awake condition, there suddenly had been this other thing, like a dream-flash in which somebody desperately ran and hid from a mocking pursuer. To the terrified human quarry, the pursuer appeared as a glimpsed animalic shape in the twilight, big and moving swiftly, but showing no other details.

And there had been the flickering of psi energy about the scene....

• • •

Telzey shifted uncomfortably, running her tongue tip over her lips. The experience had been chillingly vivid; but if something of the sort really had occurred, the victim had died moments later. In that respect, there was no reason to force herself to quick decisions now. And it might, after all, have been a dream, drifting up in her mind, created by the mood of the place. She realized she would like to believe it was a dream.

But in that case, what was creating the mood of the place?

Gikkas? It wasn't impossible. She had decided some time ago that personal acquaintances should be off limits to telepathic prowling, but when someone was around at all frequently, scraps of information were likely to filter through. So she knew Gikkas also had much more extensively developed telepathic awareness than the average person. Gikkas didn't know it and couldn't have put it to use anyway. In her, it was an erratic, unreliable quality which might have kept her in a badly confused state of mind if she had been more conscious of its effects.

But the general uneasiness Telzey had sensed and that brief psi surge—if that was what it was—fragmentary but carrying a complete

horrid little story with it, could have come to her from Gikkes. Most people, even when they thought they were wide awake, appeared to be manufacturing dreams much of the time in an area of their minds they didn't know about; and Gikkes seemed nervous enough this evening to be manufacturing unconscious nightmares and broadcasting them.

But again--what made Gikkes so nervous here? The unfamiliar environment, the frozen beauty of the starblaze overhanging the sloping plain like a tent of fire, might account for it. But it didn't rule out a more specific source of disturbance.

She could make sure, Telzey thought, by probing into Gikkes's mind and finding out what was going on in there. Gikkes wouldn't know it was happening. But it took many hours, as a rule, to develop adequate contact unless the other mind was also that of a functioning telepath. Gikkes was borderline--a telepath, but not functional, or only partly so--and if she began probing around in those complexities without the experience to tell her just how to go about it, she might wind up doing Gikkes some harm.

She looked over at Gikkes. Gikkes met her eyes, said, "Shouldn't you start worrying about that dog of Gornwil's? He hasn't been in sight for the past half-hour."

"Chomir's all right," Telzey said. "He's still checking over the area."

Chomir was, in fact, only a few hundred yards away, moving along the Cil River up in the canyon. She'd been touching the big dog's mind lightly from time to time during the evening to see what he was doing. Gikkes couldn't know that, of course--nobody in this group suspected Telzey of psionic talents. But she had done a great deal of experimenting with Chomir, and nowadays she could, if she liked, almost see with his eyes, smell with his nose, and listen through his ears. At this instant, he was watching half a dozen animals large enough to have alarmed Gikkes acutely. Chomir's interest in Melna Park's wildlife didn't go beyond casual curiosity. He was an Askanam hound, a breed developed to fight man or beast in pit and arena, too big and powerful to be apprehensive about other creatures and not inclined to chase strange animals about without purpose as a lesser dog might do.

"Well," Gikkes said, "if I were responsible for somebody else's dog, if I'd brought him here, I'd be making sure he didn't run off and get lost--"

• • •

Telzey didn't answer. It took no mind-reading to know that Gikkes was annoyed because Pollard had attached himself to Telzey's fan club after supper and settled down beside her. Gikkes had invited Pollard to come along on the outing; he was president of various organizations and generally important at Pehanron College. Gikkes, the glamour girl, didn't like it at all that he'd drifted over to Telzey's group, and while Telzey had no designs on him, she couldn't very well inform Gikkes of that without ruffling her further.

"I," Gikkes concluded, "would go look for him."

Pollard stood up. "It would be too bad if he strayed off, wouldn't it?" he agreed. He gave Telzey a lazy smile. "Why don't you and I look around a little together?"

Well, that was not exactly what Gikkes had intended. Rish and Dunker didn't think much of it either. They were already climbing to their feet, gazing sternly at Pollard.

Telzey glanced at them, checked the watch Dunker had loaned her

after she smashed the one in her wrist-talker on the fishing excursion.

"Let's wait another five minutes," she suggested. "If he isn't back by then, we can all start looking."

As they settled down again, she sent a come-here thought to Chomir. She didn't yet know what steps she might have to take in the other matter, but she didn't want to be distracted by problems with Gikkies and the boys.

She felt Chomir's response. He turned, got his bearings instantly with nose, ears, and—though he wasn't aware of that—by the direct touch of their minds, went bounding down into the river, and splashed noisily through the shallow water. He was taking what seemed to him a short cut to the camp. But that route would lead him high up the opposite bank of the twisting Cil, to the far side of the canyon.

"Not that way, stupid!" Telzey thought, verbalizing it for emphasis. "Turn around—go back!"

And then, as she felt the dog pause comprehendingly, a voice, edged with the shock of surprise—perhaps of fear—exclaimed in her mind, "*Who are you? Who said that?*"

. . .

There had been a number of occasions since she became aware of her abilities when she'd picked up the thought-forms of another telepath. She hadn't tried to develop such contacts, feeling in no hurry to strike up an acquaintanceship on the psionic level. That was part of a world with laws and conditions of its own which should be studied thoroughly if she was to avoid creating problems for herself and others, and at present she simply didn't have the time for thorough study.

Even with the tentative exploration she'd been doing, problems arose. One became aware of a situation of which others weren't aware, and then it wasn't always possible to ignore the situation, to act as if it didn't exist. But depending on circumstances, it could be extremely difficult to do something effective about it, particularly when one didn't care to announce publicly that one was a psi.

The thing that appeared to have happened in Melna Park tonight had seemed likely to present just such problems. Then this voice spoke to her suddenly, coming out of the night, out of nowhere. Another telepath was in the area, to whom the encounter was as unexpected as it was to her. There was no immediate way of knowing whether that was going to help with the problem or complicate it further, but she had no inclination to reply at once. Whoever the stranger was, the fact that he—there had been a strong male tinge to the thoughts—was also a psi didn't necessarily make him a brother. She knew he was human; alien minds had other flavors. His questions had come in the sharply defined forms of a verbalization; he might have been speaking aloud in addressing her. There was something else about them she hadn't noticed in previous telepathic contacts—an odd, filtered quality as though his thoughts passed through a distorting medium before reaching her.

She waited, wondering about it. While she wasn't strongly drawn to this stranger, she felt no particular concern about him. He had picked up her own verbalized instructions to Chomir, had been startled by them, and, therefore, hadn't been aware of anything she was thinking previously. She'd now tightened the veil of psi energy about her mind a little, enough to dampen out the drifting threads of subconscious thought by which an unguarded mind was most easily found and reached. Tightened further, as it could be in an instant, it had stopped genuine experts in mind-probing in their tracks. This psi

has no expert; an expert wouldn't have flung surprised questions at her. She didn't verbalize her thinking as a rule, and wouldn't do it now until she felt like it. And she wouldn't reach out for him. She decided the situation was sufficiently in hand.

The silence between them lengthened. He might be equally wary now, regretting his brief outburst.

Telzey relaxed her screen, flicked out a search-thought to Chomir, felt him approaching the camp in his easy, loping run, closed the screen again. She waited a few seconds. There was no indication of interest apparently, even when he had his attention on her, he was able to sense only her verbalized thoughts. That simplified the matter.

She lightened the screen again. "Who *are* you?" she asked.

The reply came instantly. "So I wasn't dreaming! For a moment, I thought... Are there two of you?"

"No. I was talking to my dog." There was something odd about the quality of his thoughts. He might be using a shield or screen of some kind, not of the same type as hers but perhaps equally effective.

"Your dog? I see. It's been over a year," the voice said, "since I've spoken to others like this." It paused. "You're a woman ... young ... a girl..."

There was no reason to tell him she was fifteen. What Telzey wanted to know just now was whether he also had been aware of a disturbance in Melna Park. She asked, "Where are you?"

He didn't hesitate. "At my home. Twelve miles south of Cil Chasm across the plain, at the edge of the forest. The house is easy to see from the air."

He might be a park official. They'd noticed such a house on their way here this afternoon and speculated about who could be living there. Permission to make one's residence in a Federation Park was supposedly almost impossible to obtain.

"Does that tell you anything?" the voice went on.

"Yes," Telzey said. "I'm in the park with some friends. I think I've seen your house."

"My name," the bodiless voice told her, "is Robane. You're being careful. I don't blame you. There are certain risks connected with being a psi, as you seem to understand. If we were in a city, I'm not sure I would reveal myself. But out here... Somebody built a fire this evening where the Cil River leaves the Chasm. I'm a cripple and spend much of my time studying the park with scanners. Is that your fire?"

Telzey hesitated a moment. "Yes."

"Your friends," Robane's voice went on, "they're aware you and I ... they know you're a telepath?"

"No."

"Would you be able to come to see me for a while without letting them know where you're going?"

"Why should I do that?" Telzey asked.

"Can't you imagine? I'd like to talk to a psi again."

"We *are* talking," she said.

Silence for a moment.

. . .

"Let me tell you a little about myself," Robane said then. "I'm approaching middle age—from your point I might even seem rather old. I live here alone except for a well-meaning but rather stupid housekeeper named Feddler. Feddler seems old from my point of view. Four years ago, I was employed in one of the Federation's science departments. I am ... was ... considered to be among the best in my line of work. It wasn't very dangerous work so long as certain precautions were observed. But one day a fool made a mistake. His mistake killed two of my colleagues. It didn't quite kill me, but since that day I've been intimately associated with a machine which has the responsibility of keeping me alive from minute to minute. I'd die almost immediately if I were removed from it.

"So my working days are over. And I no longer want to live in cities. There are too many foolish people there to remind me of the one particular fool I'd prefer to forget. Because of the position I'd held and the work I'd done, the Federation permitted me to make my home in Melna Park where I could be by myself... ."

The voice stopped abruptly but Telzey had the impression Robane was still talking, unaware that something had dimmed the thread of psi between them. His own screen perhaps? She waited, alert and quiet. It might be deliberate interference, the manifestation of another active psionic field in the area—a disturbing and malicious one.

"... On the whole, I like it here." Robane's voice suddenly was back, and it was evident he didn't realize there had been an interruption. "A psi need never be really bored, and I've installed instruments to offset the disadvantages of being a cripple. I watch the park through scanners and study the minds of animals.... . Do you like animal minds?"

That, Telzey thought, hadn't been at all a casual question. "Sometimes," she told Robane carefully. "Some of them."

"Sometimes? Some of them? I wonder.... . Solitude on occasion appears to invite the uncanny. One may notice things that seem out of place, that are disquieting. This evening ... during the past hour perhaps, have you ... were there suggestions of activities.... ." He paused. "I find I don't quite know how to say this."

"There was something," she said. "For a moment, I wasn't sure I wasn't dreaming."

"You mean something ugly.... ."

"Yes."

"Fear," Robane's voice said in her mind. "Fear, pain, death. Savage cruelty. So you caught it, too. Very strange! Perhaps an echo from the past touched our minds in that moment, from the time when creatures who hated man still haunted this country."

"But—well, this is one of the rare occasions when I feel lonely here. And then to hear another psi, you see.... . Perhaps I'm even a little afraid to be alone in the night just now. I'd like to speak to you, but not in this way—not in any great detail. One can never be sure who else is listening.... . I think there are many things two psis might discuss to their advantage."

The voice ended on that. He'd expressed himself guardedly, and apparently he didn't expect an immediate reply to his invitation. Telzey bit her lip. Chomir had come trotting up, had been welcomed by her and settled down. Gikkas was making cooing sounds and snapping her fingers at him. Chomir ignored the overtures.

Ordinarily, Gikkies claimed to find him alarming; but here in Meha Park at night, the idea of having an oversized dog near her evidently had acquired a sudden appeal--

So Robane, too, had received the impression of unusual and unpleasant events this evening ... events he didn't care to discuss openly. The indication that he felt frightened probably needn't be taken too seriously. He was in his house, after all; and so isolated a house must have guard-screens. The house of a crippled, wealthy recluse, who was avoiding the ordinary run of humanity, would have very effective guard-screens. If something did try to get at Robane, he could put in a call to the nearest park station and have an armed ranger car hovering about his roof in a matter of minutes. That suggestion had been intended to arouse her sympathy for a shut-in fellow psi, help coax her over to the house.

But he had noticed something. Something, to judge from his cautious description, quite similar to what she had felt. Telzey looked at Chomir, stretched out on the sandy ground between her and the fire, at the big, wolfish head, the wedge of powerful jaws. Chomir was not exactly an intellectual giant but he had the excellent sensory equipment and alertness of a breed of fighting animals. If there had been a disturbance of that nature in the immediate vicinity, he would have known about it, and she would have known about it through him.

The disturbance, however, might very well have occurred somewhere along the twelve-mile stretch between the point where Cil Chasm split the mountains and Robane's house across the plain. Her impression had been that it was uncomfortably close to her. Robane appeared to have sensed it as uncomfortably close to him. He had showed no inclination to do anything about it, and there was, as a matter of fact, no easy way to handle the matter. Robane clearly was no more anxious than she was to reveal himself as a psi; and, in any case, the park authorities would be understandably reluctant to launch a search for a vicious but not otherwise identified man-hunting beast on no better evidence than reported telepathic impressions--at least, until somebody was reported missing.

It didn't seem a good idea to wait for that. For one thing, Telzey thought, the killer might show up at their fire before morning...

She grimaced uneasily, sent a troubled glance around the group. She hadn't been willing to admit it but she'd really known for minutes now that she was going to have to go look for the creature. In an aircar, she thought, even an aircar throttled down to thirty miles an hour and a contour altitude of a hundred and fifty feet, she would be in no danger from an animal on the ground if she didn't take very stupid chances. The flavor of psi about the event she didn't like. That was still unexplained. But she was a psi herself, and she would be careful.

She ran over the possibilities in her mind. The best approach should be to start out towards Robane's house and scout the surrounding wildlands mentally along that route. If she picked up traces of the killer-thing, she could pinpoint its position, call the park rangers from the car, and give them a story that would get them there in a hurry. They could do the rest. If she found nothing, she could consult with Robane about the next moves to make. Even if he didn't want to take a direct part in the search, he might be willing to give her some help with it.

Chomir would remain here as sentinel. She'd plant a trace of uneasiness in his mind, just enough to make sure he remained extremely vigilant while she was gone. At the first hint from him that anything dangerous was approaching the area, she'd use the car's communicator to have everybody pile into the other two aircars and get off the ground. Gikkies was putting them in the right frame of mind to respond very promptly if they were given a real alarm.

telzey hesitated a moment longer but there seemed to be nothing wrong with the plan. She told herself she'd better start at once. If she waited, the situation, whatever it was, conceivably could take an immediately dangerous turn. Besides, the longer she debated about it, the more unpleasant the prospect was going to look.

She glanced down at Dunker's watch on her wrist.

"Robane?" she asked in her mind.

The response came quickly. "Yes?"

"I'll start over to your house now," Telzey said. "Would you watch for my car? If there is something around that doesn't like people, I'd sooner not be standing outside your door."

"The door will be open the instant you come down," Robane's voice assured her. "Until then, I'm keeping it locked. I've turned on the scanners and will be waiting...." A moment's pause. "Do you have additional reason to believe—"

"Not so far," Telzey said. "But there are some things I'd like to talk about—after I get there...." She didn't really intend to go walking into Robane's house until she had more information about him. There were too many uncertainties floating around in the night to be making social calls. But he'd be alert now, waiting for her to arrive, and might notice things she didn't.

The aircar was her own, a fast little Cloudsplitter. No one objected when she announced she was setting off for an hour's roam in the starblaze by herself. The fan club looked wistful but was well trained, and Pollard had allowed himself to be reclaimed by Gikkas. Gikkas clearly regarded Telzey's solo excursion as a fine idea....

She lifted the Cloudsplitter out of the mouth of Cil Chasm. At a hundred and fifty feet, as the sealed engine lock clicked in, the little car automatically stopped its ascent. Telzey turned to the right, along the forested walls of the mountain, then swung out across the plain.

It should take her about twenty minutes to get to Robane's house if she went there in a straight line; and if nothing else happened, she intended to go there in a straight line. What the park maps called a plain was a series of sloping plateaus, broken by low hills, descending gradually to the south. It was mainly brush country, dotted with small woods which blended here and there into patches of forest. Scattered herds of native animals moved about in the open ground, showing no interest in the aircar passing through the clusterlight overhead.

Everything looked peaceful enough. Robane had taken her hint and remained quiet. The intangible bubble of the psi screen about Telzey's mind thinned, opened wide. Her awareness went searching ahead, to all sides....

Man-killer, where are you?

• • •

Perhaps ten minutes passed before she picked up the first trace. By then, she could see a tiny, steady spark of orange light ahead against the dark line of the forest. That would be Robane's house, still five or six miles away.

Robane hadn't spoken again. There had been numerous fleeting contacts with animal minds savage enough in their own way, deadly to one another. But the thing that hunted man should have a special quality, one she would recognize when she touched it.

she touched it suddenly—a blur of alert malignance, gone almost at once. She was prepared for it, but it still sent a thrill of alarm through her. She moistened her lips, told herself again she was safe in the car. The creature definitely had not been far away. Telzey slipped over for a moment into Chomir's mind. The big dog stood a little beyond the circle of firelight, probing the land to the south. He was unquiet but no more than she had intended him to be. His senses had found nothing of unusual significance. The menace wasn't there.

It was around here, ahead, or to left or right. Telzey let the car move on slowly. After a while, she caught the blur for a moment again, lost it again...

She approached Robane's house gradually. Presently she could make it out well enough in the clusterlight, a sizable structure, set in a garden of its own which ended where the forest began. Part of the building was two-storied, with a balcony running around the upper story. The light came from there, dark-orange light glowing through screened windows.

The second fleeting pulse of that aura of malevolence had come from this general direction; she was sure of it. If the creature was in the forest back of the house, perhaps watching the house, Robane's apprehensions might have some cause, after all. She had brought the Cloudsplitter almost to a stop some five hundred yards north of the house; now she began moving to the left, then shifted in towards the forest, beginning to circle the house as she waited for another indication. Robane should be watching her through the telescanners, and she was grateful that he hadn't broken the silence. Perhaps he had realized what she was trying to do.

For long minutes now, she had been intensely keyed up, sharply aware of the infinite mingling of life detail below. It was as if the plain had come alight in all directions about her, a shifting glimmer of sparks, glowing emanations of life-force, printed in constant change on her awareness. To distinguish among it all the specific pattern which she had touched briefly twice might not be an easy matter. But then, within seconds, she made two significant discoveries.

She had brought the Cloudsplitter nearly to a stop again. She was now to the left of Robane's house, no more than two hundred yards from it. Close enough to see a flock of small, birdlike creatures flutter about indistinctly in the garden shrubbery. Physical vision seemed to overlap and blend with her inner awareness, and among the uncomplicated emanations of small animal life in the garden, there was now a center of mental emanation which was of more interest.

It was inside the house, and it was human. It seemed to Telzey it was Robane she was sensing. That was curious, because if his mind was screened as well as she'd believed, she should not be able to sense him in this manner. But, of course, it might not be. She had simply assumed he had developed measures against being read as adequate as her own.

Probably it was Robane. Then where, Telzey thought, was that elderly, rather stupid housekeeper named Feddler he'd told her about? Feddler's presence, her mind unscreened in any way, should be at least equally obvious now.

With the thought, she caught a second strong glow. That was not the mind of some stupid old woman, or of anything human. It was still blurred, but it was the mind for which she had been searching. The mind of some baleful, intelligent tiger-thing. And it was very close.

She checked again, carefully. Then she knew. It was not back in the forest, and not hidden somewhere on the plain nearby.

It was inside Robane's house.

For a moment, shock held her motionless. Then she swung the

cloudsplitter slowly to the left, started moving off along the edge of the forest.

"Where are you going?" Robane's voice asked in her mind.

Telzey didn't answer. The car already was gliding along at the thirty miles an hour its throttled-down engine allowed it to go. Her forefinger was flicking out the call number of Rish's aircar back at the camp on the Cloudsplitter's communicator.

There'd been a trap set for her here. She didn't yet know what kind of a trap, or whether she could get out of it by herself. But the best thing she could do at the moment was to let other people know immediately where she was—

A dragging, leaden heaviness sank through her. She saw her hand drop from the communicator dial, felt herself slump to the left, head sagging down on the side rest, face turned half up. She felt the Cloudsplitter's engines go dead. The trap had snapped shut.

• • •

The car was dropping, its forward momentum gone. Telzey made a straining effort to sit back up, lift her hands to the controls, and nothing happened. She realized then that nothing could have happened if she had reached the controls. If it hadn't been for the countergravity materials worked into its structure, the Cloudsplitter would have plunged to the ground like a rock. As it was, it settled gradually down through the air, swaying from side to side.

She watched the fiery night sky shift above with the swaying of the car, sickened by the conviction that she was dropping towards death, trying to keep the confusion of terror from exploding through her...

"I'm curious to know," Robane's voice said, "what made you decide at the last moment to decline my invitation and attempt to leave."

She wrenched her attention away from terror, reached for the voice and Robane.

There was the crackling of psi, open telepathic channels through which her awareness flowed in a flash. For an instant, she was inside his mind. Then psi static crashed, and she was away from it again. Her awareness dimmed, momentarily blurred out. She'd absorbed almost too much. It was as if she'd made a photograph of a section of Robane's mind—a pitiful and horrible mind.

She felt the car touch the ground, stop moving. The slight jolt tilted her over farther, her head lolling on the side rest. She was breathing; her eyelids blinked. But her conscious efforts weren't affecting a muscle of her body.

The dazed blurriness began to lift from her thoughts. She found herself still very much frightened but no longer accepting in the least that she would die here. She should have a chance against Robane. She discovered he was speaking again, utterly unaware of what had just occurred.

"I'm not a psi," his voice said. "But I'm a gadgeteer—and, you see, I happen to be highly intelligent. I've used my intelligence to provide myself with instruments which guard me and serve my wishes here. Some give me abilities equivalent to those of a psi. Others, as you've just experienced, can be used to neutralize power devices or to paralyze the human voluntary muscular system within as much as half a mile of this room.

"I was amused by your cautious hesitation and attempted flight just

ow. I'd already caught you. If I'd let you be the communicator, you would have found it dead. I shut it off as soon as your aircar was in range...."

Robane not a psi? For an instant, there was a burbling of lunatic, silent laughter in Telzey's head. In that moment of full contact between them, she'd sensed a telepathic system functional in every respect except that he wasn't aware of it. Psi energy flared about his words as he spoke. That came from one of the machines, but only a telepath could have operated such a machine.

Robane had never considered that possibility. If the machine static hadn't caught her off guard, broken the contact before she could secure it, he would be much more vulnerable in his unawareness now than an ordinary nonpsi human.

She'd reached for him again as he was speaking, along the verbalized thought-forms directed at her. But the words were projected through a machine. Following them back, she wound up at the machine and another jarring blast of psi static. She would have to wait for a moment when she found an opening to his mind again, when the machines didn't happen to be covering him. He was silent now. He intended to kill her as he had others before her, and he might very well be able to do it before an opening was there. But he would make no further moves until he felt certain she hadn't been able to summon help in a manner his machines hadn't detected. What he had done so far he could explain—he had forced an aircar prowling about his house to the ground without harming its occupant. There was no proof of anything else he had done except the proof in Telzey's mind, and Robane didn't know about that.

It gave her a few minutes to act without interference from him.

• • •

"What's the matter with that dog?" Gikkas asked nervously. "He's behaving like ... like he thinks there's something around."

The chatter stopped for a moment. Eyes swung over to Chomir. He stood looking out from the canyon ledge over the plain, making a rumbling noise in his throat.

"Don't be silly," Valia said. "He's just wondering where Telzey's gone." She looked at Rish. "How long has she been gone?"

"Twenty-seven minutes," Rish said.

"Well, that's nothing to worry about, is it?" Valia checked herself, added, "Now look at that, will you!" Chomir had swung around, moved over to Rish's aircar, stopped beside it, staring at them with yellow eyes. He made the rumbling noise again.

Gikkas said, watching him fascinatedly, "Maybe something's happened to Telzey."

"Don't talk like that," Valia said. "What could happen to her?"

Rish got to his feet. "Well—it can't hurt to give her a call... ." He grinned at Valia to show he wasn't in the least concerned, went to the aircar, opened the door.

Chomir moved silently past him into the car.

Rish frowned, glanced back at Valia and Dunker coming up behind him, started to say something, shook his head, slid into the car, and turned on the communicator.

Valia inquired, her eyes uneasily on Chomir, "Know her number?"

Uh-huh." They watched as he flicked the number out on the dial, then stood waiting.

Presently Valia cleared her throat. "She's probably got out of the car and is walking around somewhere."

"Of course she's walking," Rish said shortly.

"Keep buzzing anyway," Dunker said.

"I am." Rish glanced at Chomir again. "If she's anywhere near the car, she'll be answering in a moment..."

...

"Why don't you answer me?" Robane's voice asked, sharp with impatience. "It would be very foolish of you to make me angry."

Telzey made no response. Her eyes blinked slowly at the starblaze. Her awareness groped, prowled, patiently, like a hungry cat, for anything, the slightest wisp of escaping unconscious thought, emotion, that wasn't filtered through the blocking machines, that might give her another opening to the telepathic levels of Robane's mind. In the minutes she'd been lying paralyzed across the seat of the aircar, she had arranged and comprehended the multi-detailed glimpse she'd had of it. She understood Robane very thoroughly now.



The instrument room of the house was his living area. A big room centered about an island of immaculate precision machines. Robane rarely was away from it. She knew what he looked like, from mirror images, glimpses in shining instrument surfaces, his thoughts about himself. A half-man, enclosed from the waist down in a floating, mobile machine like a tiny aircar, which carried him and kept him alive. The little machine was efficient; the half-body protruding from it was vigorous and strong. Robane in his isolation gave fastidious attention to his appearance. The coat which covered him down to the machine was tailored to Orado City's latest fashion; his thick hair was carefully groomed.

He had led a full life as scientist, sportsman, and man of the world, before the disaster which left him bound to his machine. To make the

man responsible for the disaster pay for his blunder in full became Robane's obsession and he laid his plans with all the care of the trophy hunter he had been. His work for the Federation had been connected with the further development of devices permitting the direct transmission of sensations from one living brain to another and their adaptation to various new uses. In his retirement in Melna Park, Robane patiently refined such devices for his own purposes and succeeded beyond his expectations, never suspecting that the success was due in part to the latent psionic abilities he was stimulating with his experiments.

Meanwhile, he had prepared for the remaining moves in his plan, installed automatic machinery to take the place of his housekeeper, and dismissed the old woman from his service. A smuggling ring provided him with a specimen of a savage natural predator native to the continent for which he had set up quarters beneath the house. Robane trained the beast and himself, perfecting his skill in the use of the instruments, sent the conditioned animal out at night to hunt, brought it back after it had made the kill in which he had shared through its mind. There was sharper excitement in that alone than he had found in any previous hunting experience. There was further excitement in treating trapped animals with the drug that exposed their sensations to his instruments when he released them and set the killer on their trail. He could be hunter or hunted, alternately and simultaneously, following each chase to the end, withdrawing from the downed quarry only when its numbing death impulses began to reach him.

When it seemed he had no more to learn, he had his underworld connections deliver his enemy to the house. That night, he awakened the man from his stupor, told him what to expect, and turned him out under the starblaze to run for his life. An hour later, Robane and his savage deputy made a human kill, the instruments fingering the victim's drug-drenched nervous system throughout and faithfully transmitting his terrors and final torment.

With that, Robane had accomplished his revenge. But he had no intention now of giving up the exquisite excitements of the new sport he had developed in the process. He became almost completely absorbed by it, as absorbed as the beast he had formed into an extension of himself. They went out by night to stalk and harry, run down and kill. They grew alike in cunning, stealth, and savage audacity, were skillful enough to create no unusual disturbance among the park animals with their sport. By morning, they were back in Robane's house to spend most of the day in sleep. Unsuspecting human visitors who came through the area saw no traces of their nocturnal activities.

Robane barely noticed how completely he had slipped into this new way of living. Ordinarily, it was enough. But he had almost no fear of detection now, and sometimes he remembered there had been a special savor in driving a human being to his death. Then his contacts would bring another shipment of "supplies" to the house, and that night he hunted human game. Healthy young game which did its desperate best to escape but never got far. It was something humanity owed him.

For a while, there was one lingering concern. During his work for the Overgovernment, he'd had several contacts with a telepath called in to assist in a number of experiments. Robane had found out what he could about such people and believed his instruments would shield him against being detected and investigated by them. He was not entirely sure of it, but in the two years he had been pursuing his pleasures undisturbed in Melna Park his uneasiness on that point had almost faded away.

Telzey's voice, following closely on his latest human kill, startled him profoundly. But when he realized that it was a chance contact, that she was here by accident, it occurred to him that this was an

opportunity to find out whether a telepathic mind could be dangerous to him. She seemed young and inexperienced—he could handle her through his instruments with the slightest risk to himself.

• • •

Rish and Dunker were in Rish's aircar with Chomir, Telzey thought, and a third person, who seemed to be Valia, was sitting behind them. The car was aloft and moving, so they had started looking for her. It would be nice if they were feeling nervous enough to have the park rangers looking for her, too; but that was very unlikely. She had to handle Chomir with great caution here. If he'd sensed any fear in her, he would have raced off immediately in her general direction to protect her, which would have been of no use at all.

As it was, he was following instructions he didn't know he was getting. He was aware which way the car should go, and he would make that quite clear to Rish and the others if it turned off in any other direction. Since they had no idea where to look for her themselves, they would probably decide to rely on Chomir's intuition.

That would bring them presently to this area. If she was outside the half-mile range of Robane's energy shut-off device by then, they could pick her up safely. If she wasn't, she'd have to turn them away through Chomir again or she'd simply be drawing them into danger with her. Robane, however, wouldn't attempt to harm them unless he was forced to it. Telzey's disappearance in the wildlands of the park could be put down as an unexplained accident; he wasn't risking much there. But a very intensive investigation would get under way if three other students of Peharon College vanished simultaneously along with a large dog. Robane couldn't afford that.

"Why don't you answer?"

There was an edge of frustrated rage in Robane's projected voice. The paralysis field which immobilized her also made her unreachable to him. He was like an animal balked for the moment by a glass wall. He'd said he had a weapon trained on her which could kill her in an instant as she lay in the car, and Telzey knew it was true from what she had seen in his mind. For that matter, he probably only had to change the setting of the paralysis field to stop her heartbeat or her breathing.

But such actions wouldn't answer the questions he had about psis. She'd frightened him tonight; and now he had to run her to her death, terrified and helpless as any other human quarry, before he could feel secure again.

"Do you think I'm afraid to kill you?" he asked, seeming almost plaintively puzzled. "Believe me, if I pull the trigger my finger is touching, I won't even be questioned about your disappearance. The park authorities have been instructed by our grateful government to show me every consideration, in view of my past invaluable contributions to humanity, and in view of my present disability. No one would think to disturb me here because some foolish girl is reported lost in Melna Park... "

The thought-voice went on, its fury and bafflement filtered through a machine, sometimes oddly suggestive even of a ranting, angry machine. Now and then it blurred out completely, like a bad connection, resumed seconds later. Telzey drew her attention away from it. It was a distraction in her waiting for another open subconscious bridge to Robane's mind. Attempts to reach him more directly remained worse than useless. The machines also handled mind-stuff, but mechanically channeled, focused, and projected; the result was a shifting, flickering, nightmarish distortion of emanations in which Robane and his instruments seemed to blend in constantly

changing patterns. She'd tried to force through it, had drawn back quickly, dazed and jolted again...

Every minute she gained here had improved her chances of escape, but she thought she wouldn't be able to stall him much longer. The possibility that a ranger patrol or somebody else might happen by just now, see her Cloudsplitter parked near the house, and come over to investigate, was probably slight, but Robane wouldn't be happy about it. If she seemed to remain intractable, he'd decide at some point to dispose of her at once.

So she mustn't seem too intractable. Since she wasn't replying, he would try something else to find out if she could be controlled. When he did, she would act frightened silly—which she was in a way, except that it didn't seem to affect her ability to think now—and do whatever he said except for one thing. After he turned off the paralysis field, he would order her to come to the house. She couldn't do that. Behind the entry door was a lock chamber. If she stepped inside, the door would close; and with the next breath she took she would have absorbed a full dose of the drug that let Robane's mind-instruments settle into contact with her. She didn't know what effect that would have. It might nullify her ability to maintain her psi screen and reveal her thoughts to Robane. If he knew what she had in mind, he would kill her on the spot. Or the drug might distort her on the telepathic level and end her chances of getting him under control.

"It's occurred to me," Robane's voice said, "that you may not be deliberately refusing to answer me. It's possible that you are unable to do it either because of the effect of the paralysis field or simply because of fear."

Telzey had been wondering when it would occur to him. She waited, new tensions growing up in her.

"I'll release you from the field in a moment," the voice went on. "What happens then depends on how well you carry out the instructions given you. If you try any tricks, little psi, you'll be dead. I'm quite aware you'll be able to move normally seconds after the field is off. Make no move you aren't told to make. Do exactly what you are told to do, and do it without hesitation. Remember those two things. Your life depends on them."

He paused, added, "The field is now off..."

Telzey felt a surge of strength and lightness all through her. Her heart began to race. She refrained carefully from stirring. After a moment, Robane's voice said, "Touch nothing in the car you don't need to touch. Keep your hands in sight. Get out of the car, walk twenty feet away from it, and stop. Then face the house."

Telzey climbed out of the car. She was shaky throughout; but it wasn't as bad as she'd thought it would be when she first moved again. It wasn't bad at all. She walked on to the left, stopped, and looked up at the orange-lit, screened windows in the upper part of the house.

"Watch your car," Robane's voice told her.

She looked over at the Cloudsplitter. He'd turned off the power neutralizer and the car was already moving. It lifted vertically from the ground, began gliding forward thirty feet up, headed in the direction of the forest beyond the house. It picked up speed, disappeared over the trees.

"It will begin to change course when it reaches the mountains," Robane's voice said. "It may start circling and still be within the park when it is found. More probably, it will be hundreds of miles away. Various explanations will be offered for your disappearance from it, apparently in midair, which needn't concern us now... . Raise your arms before you, little psi. Spread them farther apart. Stand still."

Telzey lifted her arms, stood waiting. After an instant, she gave a jerk of surprise. Her hands and arms, Dunker's watch on her wrist, the edges of the short sleeves of her shirt suddenly glowed white.

"Don't move!" Robane's voice said sharply. "This is a search-beam. It won't hurt you."

She stood still again, shifted her gaze downwards. What she saw of herself and her clothes and of a small patch of ground about her feet all showed the same cold, white glow, like fluorescing plastic. There was an eerie suggestion of translucence. She glanced back at her hands, saw the fine bones showing faintly as more definite lines of white in the glow. She felt nothing and the beam wasn't affecting her vision, but it was an efficient device. Sparks of heatless light began stabbing from her clothing here and there; within moments, Robane located half a dozen minor items in her pockets and instructed her to throw them away one by one, along with the watch. He wasn't taking chances on fashionably camouflaged communicators, perhaps suspected even this or that might be a weapon. Then the beam went off and he told her to lower her arms again.

"Now a reminder," his voice went on. "Perhaps you're unable to speak to me. And perhaps you could speak but think it's clever to remain silent in this situation. That isn't too important. But let me show you something. It will help you keep in mind that it isn't at all advisable to be too clever in dealing with me..."

Something suddenly was taking shape twenty yards away, between Telzey and the house; and fright flicked through her like fire and ice in the instant before she saw it was a projection placed a few inches above the ground. It was an image of Robane's killer, a big, bulky creature which looked bulkier because of the coat of fluffy, almost feathery fur covering most of it like a cloak. It was half crouched, a pair of powerful forelimbs stretched out through the cloak of fur. Ears like upturned horns projected from the sides of the head, and big, round, dark eyes, the eyes of a star-night hunter, were set in front above the sharply curved, serrated cutting beak.

The image faded within seconds. She knew what the creature was. The spooks had been, at one time, almost the dominant life form on this continent; the early human settlers hated and feared them for their unqualified liking for human flesh, made them a legend which haunted Orado's forests long after they had, in fact, been driven out of most of their territory. Even in captivity, from behind separating force fields, their flat, dark stares, their size, goblin appearance, and monkey quickness disturbed impressionable people.

"My hunting partner," Robane's voice said. "My other self. It is not pleasant, not at all pleasant, to know this is the shape that is following your trail at night in Melna Park. You had a suggestion of it this evening. Be careful not to make me angry again. Be quick to do what I tell you. Now come forward to the house."

Telzey saw the entry door in the garden slide open. Her heart began to beat heavily. She didn't move.

"Come to the house!" Robane repeated.

Something accompanied the words, a gush of heavy, subconscious excitement, somebody reaching for a craved drug ... but Robane's drug was death. As she touched the excitement, it vanished. It was what she had waited for, a line to the unguarded levels of his mind. If it came again and she could hold it even for seconds—

It didn't come again. There was a long pause before Robane spoke.

"This is curious," his voice said slowly. "You refuse. You know you are helpless. You know what I can do. Yet you refuse. I wonder..."

He went silent. He was suspicious now, very. For a moment, she

ould almost feel him finger the trigger of his weapon. But the drug was there, in his reach. She was cheating him out of some of it. He wouldn't let her cheat him out of everything...

"Very well," the voice said. "I'm tired of you. I was interested in seeing how a psi would act in such a situation. I've seen. You're so afraid you can barely think. So run along. Run as fast as you can, little psi. Because I'll soon be following."

Telzey stared up at the windows. Let him believe she could barely think.

"Run!"

She whipped around, as if shocked into motion by the command, and ran, away from Robane's house, back in the direction of the plain to the north.

...

"I'll give you a warning," Robane's voice said, seeming to move along with her. "Don't try to climb a tree. We catch the ones who do that immediately. We can climb better than you can, and if the tree is big enough we'll come up after you. If the tree's too light to hold us, or if you go out where the branches are too thin, we'll simply shake you down. So keep running."

She glanced back as she came up to the first group of trees. The orange windows of the house seemed to be staring after her. She went in among the trees, out the other side, and now the house was no longer in sight.

"Be clever now," Robane's voice said. "We like the clever ones. You have a chance, you know. Perhaps somebody will see you before you're caught. Or you may think of some way to throw us off your track. Perhaps you'll be the lucky one who gets away. We'll be very, very sorry then, won't we? So do your best, little psi. Do your best. Give us a good run."

She flicked out a search-thought, touched Chomir's mind briefly. The aircar was still coming, still on course, still too far away to do her any immediate good...

She ran. She was in as good condition as a fifteen-year-old who liked a large variety of sports and played hard at them was likely to get. But she had to cover five hundred yards to get beyond the range of Robane's house weapons, and on this broken ground it began to seem a long, long stretch. How much time would he give her? Some of those he'd hunted had been allowed a start of thirty minutes or more...

She began to count her steps. Robane remained silent. When she thought she was approaching the end of five hundred yards, there were trees ahead again. She remembered crossing over a small stream followed by a straggling line of trees as she came up to the house. That must be it. And in that case, she was beyond the five-hundred-yard boundary.

...

A hungry excitement swirled about her and was gone. She'd lashed at the feeling quickly, got nothing. Robane's voice was there an instant later.

"We're starting now..."

soon? She felt shocked. He wasn't giving her even the pretense of a chance to escape. Dismay sent a wave of weakness through her as she ran splashing down into the creek. Some large animals burst out of the water on the far side, crashed through the bushes along the bank, and pounded away. Telzey hardly noticed them. Turn to the left, downstream, she thought. It was a fast little stream. The spook must be following by scent and the running water should wipe out her trail before it got here....

But others it had followed would have decided to turn downstream when they reached the creek. If it didn't pick up the trail on the far bank and found no human scent in the water coming down, it only had to go along the bank to the left until it either heard her in the water or reached the place where she'd left it.

They'd expect her, she told herself, to leave the water on the far side of the creek, not to angle back in the direction of Robane's house. Or would they? It seemed the best thing to try.

She went downstream as quickly as she could, splashing, stumbling on slippery rock, careless of noise for the moment. It would be a greater danger to lose time trying to be quiet. A hundred yards on, stout tree branches swayed low over the water. She could catch them, swing up, scramble on up into the trees.

Others would have tried that, too. Robane and his beast knew such spots, would check each to make sure it wasn't what she had done.

She ducked, gasping, under the low-hanging branches, hurried on. Against the starblaze a considerable distance ahead, a thicker cluster of trees loomed darkly. It looked like a sizable little wood surrounding the watercourse. It might be a good place to hide.

Others, fighting for breath after the first hard run, legs beginning to falter, would have had that thought.

Robane's voice said abruptly in her mind, "So you've taken to the water. It was your best move...."

The voice stopped. Telzey felt the first stab of panic. The creek curved sharply ahead. The bank on the left was steep, not the best place to get out. She followed it with her eyes. Roots sprouted out of the bare earth a little ahead. She came up to them, jumped to catch them, pulled herself up, and scrambled over the edge of the bank. She climbed to her feet, hurried back in the general direction of Robane's house, dropped into a cluster of tall grass. Turning, flattened out on her stomach, she lifted her head to stare back in the direction of the creek. There was an opening in the bushes on the other bank, with the clusterlight of the skyline showing through it. She watched that, breathing as softly as she could. It occurred to her that if a breeze was moving the wrong way, the spook might catch her scent on the air. But she didn't feel any breeze.

Perhaps a minute passed—certainly no more. Then a dark silhouette passed lightly and swiftly through the opening in the bushes she was watching, went on downstream. It was larger than she'd thought it would be when she saw its projected image; and that something so big should move in so effortless a manner, seeming to drift along the ground, somehow was jolting in itself. For a moment, Telzey had distinguished, or imagined she had distinguished, the big, round head held high, the pointed ears like horns. *Goblin*, her nerves screamed. A feeling of heavy dread flowed through her, seemed to drain away her strength. This was how the others had felt when they ran and crouched in hiding, knowing there was no escape from such a pursuer....

She made herself count off a hundred seconds, got to her feet, and started back on a slant towards the creek, to a point a hundred yards above the one where she had climbed from it. If the thing returned along this side of the watercourse and picked up her trail, it might

decide she had tried to escape upstream. She got down quietly into the creek, turned downstream again, presently saw in the distance the wood which had looked like a good place to hide. The spook should be prowling among the trees there now, searching for her. She passed the curve where she had pulled herself up on the bank, waded on another hundred steps, trying to make no noise at all, almost certain from moment to moment she could hear or glimpse the spook on its way back. Then she climbed the bank on the right, pushed carefully through the hedges of bushes that lined it, and ran off into the open plain sloping up to the north.

• • •

After perhaps a hundred yards, her legs began to lose the rubbery weakness of held-in terror. She was breathing evenly. The aircar was closer again and in not too many more minutes she might find herself out of danger. She didn't look back. If the spook was coming up behind her, she couldn't outrun it, and it wouldn't help to feed her fears by watching for shadows on her trail.

She shifted her attention to signs from Robane. He might be growing concerned by now and resort to his telescaners to look for her and guide his creature after her. There was nothing she could do about that. Now and then she seemed to have a brief awareness of him, but there had been no definite contact since he had spoken.

She reached a rustling grove, walked and trotted through it. As she came out the other side, a herd of graceful deer-like animals turned from her and sped with shadowy quickness across the plain and out of her range of vision. She remembered suddenly having heard that hunted creatures sometimes covered their trail by mingling with other groups of animals...

A few minutes later, she wasn't sure how well that was working. Other herds were around; sometimes she saw shadowy motion ahead or to right or left; then there would be whistles of alarm, the stamp of hoofs, and they'd vanish like drifting smoke, leaving the section of plain about her empty again. This was Robane's hunting ground; the animals here might be more alert and nervous than in other sections of the park. And perhaps, Telzey thought, they sensed she was the quarry tonight and was drawing danger towards them. Whatever the reason, they kept well out of her way. But she'd heard fleeing herds cross behind her a number of times, so they might in fact be breaking up her trail enough to make it more difficult to follow. She kept scanning the skyline above the slope ahead, looking for the intermittent green flash of a moving aircar or the sweep of its search-beam along the ground. They couldn't be too far away.

She slowed to a walk again. Her legs and lungs hadn't given out, but she could tell she was tapping the final reserves of strength. She sent a thought to Chomir's mind, touched it instantly and, at the same moment, caught a glimpse of a pulsing green spark against the starblaze, crossing down through a dip in the slopes, disappearing beyond the wooded ground ahead of her. She went hot with hope, swung to the right, began running towards the point where the car should show again.

They'd arrived. Now to catch their attention...

"Here!" she said sharply in the dog's mind.

It meant: "Here I am! Look for me! Come to me!" No more than that. Chomir was keyed up enough without knowing why. Any actual suggestion that she was in trouble might throw him out of control.

She almost heard the deep, whining half-growl with which he responded. It should be enough. Chomir knew now she was

somewhere nearby, and Rish and the others would see it immediately in the way he behaved. When the aircar reappeared, its search-beam should be swinging about, fingering the ground to locate her.

Telzey jumped down into a little gully, felt, with a shock of surprise, her knees go soft with fatigue as she landed, and clambered shakily out the other side. She took a few running steps forward, came to a sudden complete stop.

Robane! She felt him about, a thick, ugly excitement. It seemed the chance moment of contact for which she'd been waiting, his mind open, unguarded.

She looked carefully around. Something lay beside a cluster of bushes thirty feet ahead. It appeared to be a big pile of wind-blown dry leaves and grass, but its surface stirred with a curious softness in the breeze. Then a wisp of acrid animal odor touched Telzey's nostrils and she felt the hot-ice surge of deep fright.

The spook lifted its head slowly out of its fluffed, mottled mane and looked at her. Then it moved from its crouched position ... a soundless shift a good fifteen feet to the right, light as the tumbling of a big ball of moss. It rose on its hind legs, the long fur settling loosely about it like a cloak, and made a chuckling sound of pleasure.

The plain seemed to explode about Telzey.

. . .

The explosion was in her mind. Tensions held too long, too hard, lashed back through her in seething confusion at a moment when too much needed to be done at once. Her physical vision went black; Robane's beast and the starlit slope vanished. She was sweeping through a topsy-turvy series of mental pictures and sensations. Rish's face appeared, wide-eyed, distorted with alarm, the aircar skimming almost at ground level along the top of a grassy rise, a wood suddenly ahead. "Now!" Telzey thought. Shouts, and the car swerved up again. Then a brief, thudding, jarring sensation underfoot... .

That was done.

She swung about to Robane's waiting excitement, slipped through it into his mind. In an instant, her awareness poured through a net of subconscious psi channels that became half familiar as she touched them. Machine static clattered, too late to dislodge her. She was there. Robane, unsuspecting, looked out through his creature's eyes at her shape on the plain, hands locked hard on the instruments through which he lived, experienced, murdered.

In minutes, Telzey thought, in minutes, if she was alive minutes from now, she would have this mind—unaware, unresistant, wide open to her—under control. But she wasn't certain she could check the spook then through Robane. He had never attempted to hold it back moments away from its kill.

Vision cleared. She stood on the slope, tight tendrils of thought still linking her to every significant section of Robane's mind. The spook stared, hook-beak lifted above its gaping mouth, showing the thick, twisting tongue inside. Still upright, it began to move, seemed to glide across the ground towards her. One of its forelimbs came through the thick cloak of fur, four-fingered paw raised, slashing retractile claws extended, reaching out almost playfully.

Telzey backed slowly off from the advancing goblin shape. For an instant, another picture slipped through her thoughts ... a blur of motion. She gave it no attention. There was nothing she could do

here now.

The goblin dropped lightly to a crouch. Telzey saw it begin its spring as she turned and ran.

She heard the gurgling chuckle a few feet behind her, but no other sound. She ran headlong up the slope with all the strength she had left. In another world, on another level of existence, she moved quickly through Robane's mind, tracing out the control lines, gathering them in. But her thoughts were beginning to blur with fatigue. Bushy shrubbery dotted the slope ahead. She could see nothing else.

The spook passed her like something blown by the wind through the grass. It swung around before her, twenty feet ahead; and as she turned to the right, it was suddenly behind her again, coming up quickly, went by. Something nicked the back of her calf as it passed—a scratch, not much deeper than a dozen or so she'd picked up pushing through thorny growth tonight. But this hadn't been a thorn. She turned left, and it followed, herding her; dodged right, and it was there, going past. Its touch seemed the lightest flick again, but an instant later there was a hot, wet line of pain down her arm. She felt panic gather in her throat as it came up behind her once more. She stopped, turning to face it.

It stopped in the same instant, fifteen feet away, rose slowly to its full height, dark eyes staring, hooked beak open as if in silent laughter. Telzey watched it, gasping for breath. Streaks of foggy darkness seemed to float between them. Robane felt far away, beginning to slip from her reach. If she took another step, she thought, she would stumble and fall; then the thing would be on her.

The spook's head swung about. Its beak closed with a clack. The horn-ears went erect.

The white shape racing silently down the slope seemed unreal for a moment, something she imagined. She knew Chomir was approaching; she hadn't realized he was so near. She couldn't see the aircar's lights in the starblaze above, but it might be there. If they had followed the dog after he plunged out of the car, if they hadn't lost...

Chomir could circle Robane's beast, threaten it, perhaps draw it away from her, keep it occupied for minutes. She drove a command at him—another, quickly and anxiously, because he hadn't checked in the least; tried to slip into his mind and knew suddenly that Chomir, coming in silent fury, wasn't going to be checked or slowed or controlled by anything she did. The goblin uttered a monstrous, squalling scream of astounded rage as the strange white animal closed the last twenty yards between them; then it leaped aside with its horrid ease. Sick with dismay, Telzey saw the great forelimb flash from the cloak, strike with spread talons. The thudding blow caught Chomir, spun him around, sent him rolling over the ground. The spook sprang again to come down on its reckless assailant. But the dog was on his feet and away.

It was Chomir's first serious fight. But he came of generations of ancestors who had fought one another and other animals and armed men in the arenas of Askanam. Their battle cunning was stamped into his genes. He had made one mistake, a very nearly fatal one, in hurtling in at a dead run on an unknown opponent. Almost within seconds, it became apparent that he was making no further mistakes.

Telzey saw it through a shifting blur of exhaustion. As big a dog as Chomir was, the squalling goblin must weigh nearly five times as much, looked ten times larger with its fur-mane bristling about it. Its kind had been forest horrors to the early settlers. Its forelimbs were tipped with claws longer than her hands and the curved beak could

hear through muscle and bone like a sword. Its uncanny speed...

Now somehow it seemed slow. As it sprang, slashing down, something white and low flowed around and about it with silent purpose. Telzey understood it then. The spook was a natural killer, developed by nature to deal efficiently with its prey. Chomir's breed were killers developed by man to deal efficiently with other killers.

He seemed locked to the beast for an instant, high on its shoulder, and she saw the wide, dark stain on his flank where the spook's talons had struck. He shook himself savagely. There was an ugly, snapping sound. The spook screeched like a huge bird. She saw the two animals locked together again, then the spook rolling over the ground, the white shape rolling with it, slipping away, slipping back. There was another screech. The spook rolled into a cluster of bushes. Chomir followed it in.

A white circle of light settled on the thrashing vegetation, shifted over to her. She looked up, saw Rish's car gliding down through the air, heard voices calling her name--

She followed her contact thoughts back to Robane's mind, spread out through it, sensing at once the frantic grip of his hands on the instrument controls. For Robane, time was running out quickly. He had been trying to turn his beast away from the dog, force it to destroy the human being who could expose him. He had been unable to do it. He was in terrible fear. But he could accomplish no more through the spook. She felt his sudden decision to break mind-contact with the animal to avoid the one experience he had always shunned--going down with another mind into the shuddering agony of death.

His right hand released the control it was clutching, reached towards a switch.

"No," Telzey said softly to the reaching hand.

It dropped to the instrument board. After a moment, it knotted, twisted about, began to lift again.

"No."

Now it lay still. She considered. There was time enough.

Robane believed he would die with the spook if he couldn't get away from it in time. She thought he might be right; she wouldn't want to be in his mind when it happened, if it came to that.

There were things she needed to learn from Robane. The identity of the gang which had supplied him with human game was one; she wanted that very much. Then she should look at the telepathic level of his mind in detail, find out what was wrong in there, why he hadn't been able to use it ... some day, she might be able to do something with a half-psi like Gikkas. And the mind-machines--if Robane had been able to work with them, not really understanding what he did, she should be able to employ similar devices much more effectively. Yes, she had to carefully study his machines--

She released Robane's hand. It leaped to the switch, pulled it back. He gave a great gasp of relief.

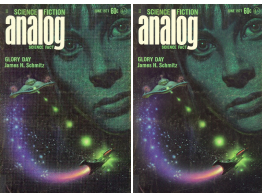
For a moment, Telzey was busy. A needle of psi energy flicked knowingly up and down channels, touching here, there, shriveling, cutting, blocking... Then it was done. Robane, half his mind gone in an instant, unaware of it, smiled blankly at the instrument panel in front of him. He'd live on here, dimmed and harmless, cared for by machines, unwitting custodian of other machines, of memories that had to be investigated, of a talent he'd never known he had.

"I'll be back," Telzey told the smiling, dull thing, and left it.

She found herself standing on the slope. It had taken only a moment, after all. Dunker and Valia were running towards her. Rish had just climbed out of the aircar settled forty feet away, its search-beam fixed on the thicket where the spook's body jerked back and forth as Chomir, jaws locked on its crushed neck, shook the last vestiges of life from it with methodical fury.

"Glory Day"

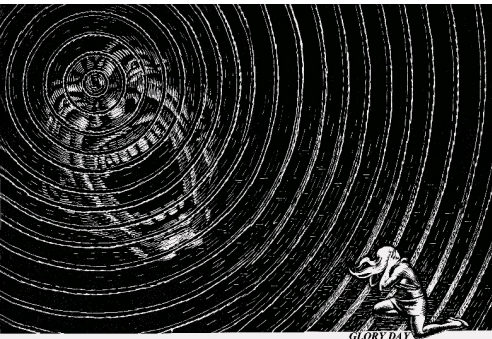
Published in *Analog Science Fiction* → *Science Fact*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (June 1971).



Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.

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Telzey was in a spot,

but she wasn't the type to howl about that.
She got someone else to do that for her.

I

The last thing she remembered feeling was a horrid, raging, topsy-turvy confusion. Her mind seemed simultaneously ripped apart and squeezed to a pulp. She hadn't been able to begin to think. Then there'd been nothing.

Now there was something again. The confusion was gone. She found herself here, and thinking--

Lying on her back on some soft surface, dressed. There was light beyond her eyelids which she wasn't going to open just yet. The attack on Casmard's space yacht hadn't killed her, or injured her physically. What about the others?

Her mind screens opened cautiously.

Trigger was close by, probably in the same room, asleep. Sleeping comfortably. There were no immediate indications of Casmard, which wasn't surprising since she'd never tried to touch his mind before. She didn't start searching for him. If neither she nor Trigger had been harmed in the attack on the yacht, he should be all right, too, at the moment.

But there'd been a fourth person on the yacht--a man named Kewen, Casmard's navigator in the Husna Regatta. Telzey did want to know immediately about him.

She put out search thoughts designed to awaken a response in the subconscious levels of Kewen's mind if they touched it. Eventually, one of them did. Telzey followed it up, and eased herself very gently into that mind. Kewen also was placidly asleep. She studied his mental patterns carefully for a time, secured a number of controls on them. Before she was done, she was picking up occasional washes of faint thought from other sources. There were minds of psi type about, apparently unscreened, apparently non-telepathic.

That should be significant; in any case, it could produce immediate information. Finished with Kewen, Telzey waited for the next wisp of other-thought, touched it when it came, blended awareness with it, moved toward an unguarded psi mind and ghosted inquiringly around there.

She gained information--and what she learned increased her caution. She withdrew from the psi as imperceptibly as she'd approached.

Then at last, almost an hour after she'd first come awake, she opened her eyes.

* * *

There was diffused light glow on the ceiling, barely required here. Daylight coming through a large shuttered window on the right made a pattern of bright lines on the carpet. She was lying on a couch, and Trigger lay on a couch across the room from her, red-bronze hair spilling over her face. They were dressed in the clothes they'd worn on Casmard's yacht before the attack. Arranged along the floor in the center of the room was the luggage they'd had on the yacht.

Telzey gave Trigger's half-shielded mind a nudge, and Trigger woke up. She'd been close to awaking for some while. She lifted her head, looked over at Telzey, came up on an elbow and looked around. Her glance held on the row of luggage. She sat up, put a cautioning finger to her lips, got off the couch and went over to the luggage. She opened one of the suitcases.

Telzey joined her there. Trigger was unsealing a secret compartment in the suitcase. She brought out a cosmetics purse which she set aside, then a small bag which she opened. There were a number of rings in it. Trigger selected two, gave one to Telzey, put the other on her finger, returned the bag to the compartment, and closed that and the suitcase.

She put the cosmetics purse in her jacket pocket and watched Telzey very carefully fit on the second ring.

"That on-and-off husband of mine," Trigger said then in a normal voice, "is a security gadget nut. He insists I carry what he calls the minimum line around with me when we're not together. Every so often it turns out to be a good idea. We're distorted and scrambled now, so I guess we can talk. What's happened?"

"I've found out a few things," Telzey said. "Better get your O.G. shield closed tight, and keep it tight."

"Done," said Trigger. "Psi stuff around, eh?"

Telzey nodded. "Quite a lot of it! I don't know what that means yet, but it could mean trouble. About what happened to us--somebody seems to have turned a stun beam on the yacht and knocked us out before they grappled and boarded."

"A rough beam that was!" Trigger said.

"What did it feel like to you?"

"Well ... let's say as if my head turned into a drum half the size of the universe and somebody was pounding on it with clubs. But I'm all right now. Do you know who did it, where we are, and what's happened to the Askab and the navigator?"

"More or less, I do," Telzey said. "We're on Askanam, in the Balak of Tamandun--Casmard's balak. More specifically, we're in a section of a palace which belongs to the man who's been Regent of Tamandun in Casmard's absence. He was presumably responsible for the attack on the yacht."

"To have Casmard kidnapped?"

"Apparently. I'm pretty sure Casmard's somewhere in the palace, and I know Kewen is. We're here because we happened to be on the yacht with Casmard."

Trigger said, after a moment, "From what I've heard of Askanam politics, that doesn't look too good."

"I'm afraid it isn't good," Telzey agreed. "When we're missed, all anyone will know is that Casmard's yacht appears to have vanished in interstellar space with all aboard."

"How does the psi business fit in?"

"I don't know yet. There're a number of psis of assorted types not very far from us. Anywhere up to two dozen of them. One had an unguarded mind and I tapped it. But I discovered then that some of the others were screened telepaths. I could have been detected at any moment, so I pulled out before I got as much information as I wanted. I'm not sure why they're here. There was something about a Glory Day--a big annual holiday in Tamandun--coming up. Something else about arena games connected with Glory Day

activities." Telzey shook her head. "Those psis aren't Askanam people. At least, the one I was tapping isn't. She's a Federation citizen."

"They might be helpful then," Trigger suggested.

"They might. But I'd want to find out more about them before I let them know I'm also a Federation psi who's probably in a jam. And I'll have to be careful about that because of the telepaths."

Trigger nodded. "Sounds like you're right! You'd better stay our secret weapon for a while. Particularly—are the psis in the building, too?"

"No, I'm sure they're not in the building. They're close to us, but not that close."

"But there's a connection between them and Casmard's Regent?"

"I'm almost sure of that."

"Well—" Trigger shrugged. "Let's freshen up and change our clothes before we have visitors. What do you wear on Askanam in the palace of a Regent who might be thinking of featuring you in the upcoming arena games?"

"Something quietly conservative, I suppose," Telzey said.

"All right. Just so it goes with my purse." The cosmetics purse didn't contain cosmetics but Trigger's favorite gun, and was equipped with an instant ejection mechanism. Conceivably, it could act as their other secret weapon here. "The door on the left looks like it should open on a refresher—"

II

In certain confidential Overgovernment files, Askanam was listed among the Hub's experimental worlds. Officially, it was a world which retained a number of unusual privileges in return for acknowledging the Federation's basic authority and accepting a few balancing restrictions. Most of its surface was taken up by the balaks of the ruling Askabs, ranging in size from something not much larger than a township to great states with teeming populations. It was a colorful world of pomp and splendor, romance, violence, superstition and individualism. The traditionally warlike activities of the Askabs were limited by Federation regulations, which kept Askanam pretty much as it was though individual balaks not infrequently changed hands. Otherwise Federation law didn't extend to the balaks. Hub citizens applying for entry were advised that they were going into areas where they would receive no Federation protection.

Telzey was aware that the arrangement served several purposes for the Overgovernment. Askanam was populated largely by people who liked that kind of life, since nothing prevented them from leaving. They were attracted to it, in fact, from all over the Hub. Since they were a kind of people whose romantic notions could cause problems otherwise, the Overgovernment was glad to see them there. Askanam was one of its laboratories, and its population's ways were more closely studied than they knew.

For individuals, of course, that romantic setup could turn into a dangerous trap.

Telzey discovered an intercom while Trigger was freshening up, and after they were dressed again, they used it. They were connected with someone who said he was the Regent Toru's secretary,

extended the Regent's welcome to the Askab Casmard's yacht guests, trusted they were well rested, and inquired whether they would be pleased to join the Askab and his cousin for breakfast.

They would, and were guided through a wing of the palace to a room where a table was set for four. The Askab Perial Casmard waited there, smiling and, to all appearances, at ease. Three other men were with him, and he introduced them. The Regent Toru, tall, bony and dark. Lord Ormota, with a bristling red beard, Servant of the Stone. Finally a young, strongly built man with a boyishly handsome face, who was Lord Vallain.

The Regent said, "I waited only to meet you and to express my regrets if any inconvenience has been caused you. I hope your visit to the Balak of Tamandun will be very pleasant otherwise. Political considerations made it necessary to bring you here, as the Askab will explain." He added to Casmard, "Your taste in guests is impeccable, dear cousin!" Then he bowed to Telzey and Trigger and left the room, accompanied by Lord Ormota.

They took their seats, and breakfast was served. When the waiters had left, Casmard said, "I regret deeply that you two are involved in this matter! We can speak freely, by the way. I'm using a distorter, and Toru, in any case, would have no interest in what we have to say. He's certain there's nothing we can do."

"Is it a very bad situation?" Trigger asked.

"Yes, quite bad!" Casmard hesitated, then shook his head. "I would be both insulting you and treating you unfairly by offering you false reassurances. The fact is then that Toru undoubtedly intends to have all four of us killed. He believes you're my women and that he can put additional pressure on me because of it."

"Pressure to do what?" asked Telzey.

"To renounce my right to the title of Askab of Tamandun, abdicate publicly in his favor. The reasoning is that my interests are no longer here. That's perfectly true, of course. It's been eight years since I last set foot on Askanam. For more than half my life, I've been a Federation citizen in all but legal fact. I've built up a personal fortune which makes me independent of the revenues of Tamandun. To act as the Balak's Askab in practice is something I'd find dull, indeed!"

Trigger said, "Then why not simply abdicate?"

"For two reasons," Casmard told her. "One is that, while I've intended to do it for some time, I also intended to wait another year and then make Vallain, who is my cousin as is Toru, my successor. He would have been of suitable age to become Askab then. He doesn't share my dislike for the role, and, as Askabs go, he would make a far better ruler for Tamandun than Toru. I still feel some slight responsibility toward the Balak."

"Which is why I've joined you on Toru's death list," Vallain informed Telzey and Trigger. He didn't appear greatly disturbed by the fact. "Very many people would prefer me to the Regent."

• • •

"Well, and there you have my second reason," Casmard went on. "After my formal abdication has been obtained and announced and Toru has himself installed as Askab, he'll lose no time in terminating my existence. If any of you are still alive at that time, you'll die with me."

Trigger cleared her throat. "You mean he might kill us first?"

perial Casmard looked distressed. "Unfortunately, that's quite possible. You three are in more immediate danger than I am. Since I've never given evidence of the blood-thirstiness which is supposed to distinguish a proper Askab, Toru feels that fear is a tool which can be used to influence me. He may decide to make object lessons of you."

"Casmard," said Vallain, "what difference does it really make? We can't get off the palace grounds. We can't get out a message. We're not even being watched. The Regent is so sure of us that he can afford to treat us as guests until we die. He'll become the Askab of Tamandun on Glory Day, and none of us will survive that day. Since it's inevitable, don't let it upset you."

"When's Glory Day?" Telzey asked.

Vallain looked at her. "Why, tomorrow! I thought you knew."

Telzey pushed her chair back, stood up.

"Trigger and I saw some beautiful gardens from a window on our way here," she said. "Since the Regent doesn't seem to mind, I think we'll walk around there and admire them a while." She smiled. "My appetite might be better a little later!"

Casmard said uneasily, "I believe you would be safer if you stayed with me."

"How much safer?" Telzey said.

Vallain laughed. "She's right, Cousin! Let them go. The gardens are beautiful, and so is the morning. Let them enjoy the time they have left." He added to Telzey and Trigger, "I would ask your permission to accompany you, but in view of the situation, there are some matters I should take care of. However, I'll show you down to the gardens."

Casmard stood up.

"Then be so good as to wait for them here a few minutes," he told Vallain. "There's something I'd like them to have."

He led the way from the room, turned presently into another one and shut the door after Telzey and Trigger had entered.

"All things may be the tools of politics," he remarked. "On Askanam, the superstitions of the people are a tool in general use by those who seek or hold power--and they themselves often aren't free of superstition. When I was a child, my father, the Askab, made me promise to keep certain small talismans he'd had our court adept fashion for me on my person at all times. They were to protect me from tricks of wizardry. I've kept them as souvenirs throughout the years--and now I want to give one to each of you, for somewhat the same reason my father had."

He took two star-shaped splinters of jewelry no larger than his thumbnail from a pocket, gave one to Telzey and the other to Trigger.

"Well, thanks very much, Casmard!" Trigger said. "They're certainly very beautiful." She hesitated. "Do you--"

Casmard said, "You're thinking of course, that the danger we're in is affecting my mind. However, I can assure you from personal knowledge that superstitions, on occasion, may cloak something quite real. I'm not speaking of technological fakery which is much employed here. You've heard of psis, of course. Sophisticated people in the Federation tend to believe that the various stories told about them are again mainly superstition. But having made a study of the subject, I've concluded that many of those stories have a foundation in fact. My parents' court adept, for example, while he

professed to deal in magic and to control supernatural entities, evidently was a psi. And I'm sure that a considerable number of psis are active on Askanam to an extent they couldn't be elsewhere. The general belief in sorcery covers their activities—is simply reinforced by them.

"I don't know whether Toru has an adept working for him at present. But it's possible. It's also possible that he feels it would be an effective move to have you two appear to be the victims of sorcery. Frankly, I have no way of knowing whether the talismans actually offer protection against psi forces—but, at least, they can do you no harm. So will you keep them on your persons as a favor to me? I feel we should take every possible precaution available at present."

He left them at the door to the breakfast room, and Vallain showed them the way down to the gardens and told them how to find him, or Casmard, later when they felt like it. A number of other buildings were visible on the palace grounds, and Telzey asked a few questions about them. Then Vallain excused himself pleasantly and went away.

• • •

"If I were Toru," Trigger remarked as they started off along a path, "I wouldn't trust our Lord Vallain without a guard."

Telzey nodded. "He's planning something. That's why he didn't want us to be around this morning. I'm not sure about Perial Casmard either. He's really a tough character."

"What are you planning?" Trigger asked.

"I want to locate that group of psis as soon as possible—they should be in one of the buildings on the grounds. If I can get close to them, I can start doing some precision scanning. It's not too likely they'd notice that. Until we know something about them, it's hard to figure out what we can do."

"The telepaths could spot you if you went to work directly on the Regent?"

"Well, they might. Especially with a number of them around. We don't know how the group would react to that." Telzey shook her head. "But Toru could be too tough a job anyway in the time we have left! He and that Servant of the Stone don't seem to have any illusions about Askanam adepts either—they've imported good solid Federation mind shields of a chemical type and are using them. We might get better results if I don't waste time trying to work through that stuff. At any rate, we have to find out how the psis fit in first."

"Do Casmard's talismans do anything?"

Telzey shrugged. "They could make someone who believes in them feel more secure, of course. But that's all they can do."

III

The palace grounds were very extensive and beautifully tended—a varied succession of terraced gardens, large and small. There wasn't a human being in sight anywhere. They followed curving paths in and out of tree groves, around artificial lakes, up and down terrace stairs of polished and tinted stone. Trigger inquired presently, "Are you working?"

Telzey shook her head. "Just waiting for some indication from the psis at the moment. So far there hasn't been a sign. What did you want to talk about?"

"Two things," said Trigger. "I had a notion about aircars—but it seems to me now that aircars aren't permitted in the balaks."

"That's right. No sort of powered flight is," Telzey said. "They use gliders in some places, and I remember Casmard saying a few Askabs have tried importing a flying animal that's big enough to carry a man. They're not very manageable though."

Trigger nodded. "That kills the notion! I doubt gliders or flying animals would do us much good if we could find them. But then, you know—I'm wondering why no one else seems to be in the gardens at present... "

"I've wondered a little about that too," Telzey acknowledged. She added, "Did you hear something a moment ago?"

Trigger glanced at her. "Just the general sort of creature sounds we've been hearing right along."

"This was a spitting noise."

Telzey broke off, and both of them came to a stop. They'd been approaching a stand of shade trees and, about sixty feet away, an animal suddenly had come out from the trees on the path they were following.

It stood staring at them. It was a short-legged animal some twelve feet long, tawny on top and white below, with a snaky neck and sharp snout. The alert eyes were bright green. It was a beautiful creature and an extremely efficient-looking one.

Trigger said very softly, "It may not be dangerous, but we'd better not count on that. If we move slowly off to the left, away from it--"

The animal bared large white teeth and made the spitting noise Telzey had heard. This time it was quite audible. Then, in an instant, it was coming straight at them. It moved with amazing speed, short legs hurling it along the path like a projectile, head held high above the body. Trigger slapped the side of the cosmetics purse at her belt, and the gun it concealed seemed to leap simultaneously into her hand. She turned sideways, right arm stretched straight out.

The animal made a blaring sound as the green eyes vanished in momentary scarlet flashes of light. The long body knotted and twisted, rolled off the path. The sound ended abruptly. The animal went limp. Trigger lowered the gun, stood watching it a few seconds.

"Five head shots," she said quietly then. "That's a tough creature, Telzey! Any idea what it is?"

"Probably something they use in arenas." Telzey's breath was unsteady. "It certainly wasn't a garden pet!"

"No. And I suppose," Trigger said, "somebody was watching to see what would happen, and is still watching. We pretend we think it was an accident, eh?"

"We might as well. It wouldn't do much good to complain. They know about your gun now."

"Yes, that's too bad. It couldn't be helped."

They walked closer to the creature. From fifteen feet away, Trigger put another bolt into the center of its body. It didn't stir. They went up to it, looked at the blood-stained great teeth.

"At a guess," Trigger said, "the Regent wanted a couple of mangled

bodies to shock Casmard with. Let's see if we can find out where it came from."

They followed the path in among the trees. A metal box stood there, open at one end, large enough to have contained the animal. There was no one in sight.

"They brought it up in a car and let it out when we were close enough," Telzey said. "If it had done the job, they would have knocked it out with stun guns and taken it away again. So it was Toru."

"You were thinking it might have been the psis?"

"It might have been. But if they were controlling it, it would have been moving about under its own power. And they--"

"What's that?" The gun was in Trigger's hand again.

"Psi stuff," Telzey said after a moment. "Don't do anything--it can't hurt us!"

Long green tentacles had lifted abruptly out of the earth, enclosing them and the metal box in a writhing ring. The tentacles looked material enough, and there were slapping, slithering sounds when they touched one another.

There came another sound. It might have been a sighing of the air, a stirring in the tree tops above them. At the same time, it seemed to be a voice.

"Don't move!" it seemed to be saying. "Don't move at all! Stay exactly where you are until Dovari tells you what to do... "

Trigger moistened her lips. "All illusions, eh?"

"Uh-huh--illusions."

Someone knew they were here and was manipulating the visual and auditory centers of their brains. Very deftly, too! Telzey held her attention on the thought projections, drifted with them, reached the projecting mind.

Unscreened, unprotected mind, concentrated on what it was doing, expecting no trouble. She reflected, sent a measured jolt through it. Its awareness abruptly went dim; the illusions were gone.

Trigger was looking at her. "What did you do?"

"Knocked out the sender for a little while."

"And now?"

"I don't know. The psis have discovered us and are taking an interest in us. I've let them know I'm a psi who doesn't want to play games, but I didn't do their illusionist any real harm when I could have done it. Let's go on the way we were going. We'll see what they try next. Better keep that shield good and tight!"

"It's tight as it can get," Trigger assured her. She had no developed psi talents; but she'd been equipped by a psi mind with a shield which was flatly impenetrable when she wanted it that way. They seemed adequately covered for the moment.

* * *

They continued along the path they'd been following. Trigger remained silent, watching the area about them, hand never far from the gun purse. Another sudden onslaught by a loosed arena killer

didn't seem too likely; but the palace grounds almost might have been designed to let danger lurk about unseen.

Telzey said presently, "They're probing at us now. Carefully, so far, but I'm picking up a few things."

She, too, was being careful. There were at least half a dozen screened telepathic minds involved here—perhaps a few more. They seemed experienced and skilled. The best they weren't, Telzey thought; they shouldn't have been quite so readily detectable—though it was possible, of course, that they didn't much care whether she detected them or not. There was one psi mind around, at any rate, from which she could catch no thought flickering at all, but only the faintest suggestion of a tight shield with a watchful awareness behind it, unnoticeable if she hadn't been fully alert for just such suggestions.

That mind seemed highly capable. She concentrated on it, ignoring the others more or less at the moment, prowled lightly about the shielding. Then, for an instant, she caught an impression of the personality it concealed. Her eyes flickered in surprise. That personality was no stranger! Here—on Askanam? But she knew she hadn't been mistaken.

She directed a thought at the shield, self-identification accompanying it. "Sams! Sams Larking!"

A moment's startled pause, then:

"Telzey! You're the one old Toru was trying to do in?"

"That's what it looks like." She gave him a mental picture of the short-legged animal. Quick thought flow returned. Confirmation—a short while ago, on the Regent's orders, a cheola from the arena pens had been transported to the palace grounds. One of the telepaths had been curious to see what Toru intended with the dangerous creature, and entered the mind of the vehicle's driver. When he reported that the cheola apparently had been killed by its intended victims, the group became interested.

"At that point, we didn't know there was a psi involved," Sams concluded. "Come on over and see us! They all want to meet you."

Telzey hesitated. The probing attempts of the others had stopped meanwhile. "Where are you?"

"You've been moving in the right direction. When you come into the open again, it's the building ahead and to your left. The Old Palace. We're the only ones quartered here at present. I'll meet you at the door. Toru doesn't have any other surprises prepared for you in the gardens, by the way. We've been checking, and will cover for you."

"All right."

Thought contact broke off. Telzey told Trigger what had happened. Trigger studied her face. "You don't seem delighted," she observed. "Isn't your acquaintance going to help us?"

"Well ... I'm not at all sure. It might depend on why he and the others are here. Sams tends to look out for his own interests first."

"I see. So we stay on our toes and keep shields tight... ."

"I think we'd better."

I've been arranging this for a year," Sams Larking said. "Toru is stingy, but he knows he has to come up with the best in arena games on Glory Day--particularly on the Glory Day he plans to be announced as Tamandun's new Askab to the multitudes. I offered him the best the Hub could provide at a price that delighted his shriveled soul. We've brought in the greatest consignment of fighters and performers, human and animal, in Tamandun's history! Hatzel"--he nodded at a chunky man with a round expressionless face on the other side of the big room--"will be sitting in the Regent's box with Toru, as Lord of the Games tomorrow. We've arranged the whole show. Toru keeps purring over the schedule. He feels he'll be the envy of Askanam."

Trigger said, "From what I've heard, more than half of the people you brought in for the arena should be dead before the games are over."

"Considerably less than half in this case," Sams told her. "We picked the best, as I mentioned. Local fighters aren't in their class!" He studied her a moment. "You disapprove? They all know the odds. They also know that the ones who survive the games will be heroes in Tamandun--wealthy heroes. Some will have a good chance of making it to the nobility. They know that more than one Askanam arena favorite wound up among the Askabs. They're playing for high stakes. I feel that's their business."

Telzey glanced around the room. Eighteen in all, half of them telepaths, the others an assortment of talents. In effective potential among non-psi it was an army. Dovari, the illusionist, had regained consciousness before they reached the building. She was a slender woman with a beautiful and, at present, thoroughly sullen face.

"What are you people playing for?" Telzey asked. "You can hardly be making a profit on your deal with the Regent."

Sams shook his head. "That's not what we're after. You've heard of the Stone of Wirolla?"

Telzey nodded. "Casmard's mentioned it. Some old war relic with supposedly magical qualities. They used to sacrifice people to it by cutting out their hearts."

"The Regent's revived that practice," Sams said. "It's a form of execution now, reserved for criminals of note and for special occasions. The Stone then indicates its satisfaction with both offering and occasion through supernatural manifestations in the Grand Arena. The manifestations have been on the feeble side--Toru's too miserly to have had equipment for anything really spectacular installed. But it's traditional. The people love it."

"And?" Telzey said.

"This Glory Day, the manifestations will be spectacular. We have the talent for it assembled in this room. I'm grateful you didn't do more than tap Dovari because she'll be responsible for much of it. But we aren't confining ourselves to illusions, by any means! It's going to be a terrible shock to Toru when he sees his miracle gadgets producing effects he knows they can't possibly produce--all in honor of the new Askab showing how highly the Stone of Wirolla approves of him! As it happens, that won't be Toru. At the end of Glory Day, I'll be Askab of Tamandun!"

He added, "And you see around you Tamandun's new top nobles--psi rulers of one of the wealthiest balaks of Askanam. You and Miss Argee are herewith invited to join their ranks! I've told the group of your ability, and they're ready to welcome you." He glanced at Dovari. "With the possible exception of our illusionist! However, she'll soon get over her irritation."

Telzey shook her head. "Sams, you're crazy!" She looked around the room. "All of you must be, to let him talk you into something like this."

Sams didn't lose his smile. "What makes you say that?"

"The Psychology Service, for one thing. You start playing around with psi stuff openly, they'll be here to investigate. You don't think they'll let you use it to control Tamandun, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Sams told her. "I checked out our Askanam maneuver with them. Anything too obvious that could be attributed to psi is out, of course. But there's no objection to goings-on that in Tamandun will have the flavor of the supernatural and at more sophisticated levels will be passed off as superstitious gullibility. We'll have to keep to our balak, but, with those restrictions, what we do here is our business."

"If they're letting you do it," Telzey said, "they've been letting other psis do it."

He nodded. "Oh, they have. I said I've been preparing this for some time. I've been around Askanam and I know that plenty of psis have established themselves in the culture here and are operating about as freely as they like. But almost all of that's on a minor level. We'll be the first group that really gets things organized."

"You might have been the first to get shuffled out here as a group," Telzey said.

Sams's eyes narrowed slightly. "Meaning?"

"Isn't it obvious? The Federation exempts Askanam from normal restrictions because it's a simple way to keep a specific class of lunatics corralled. The experiment's worked out, so it's being continued. The Service evidently has expanded it to include irresponsible psi independents. Put them where whatever they do can't really add much to the general mess! I wouldn't feel flattered if they told me I could make Tamandun my playground but was to make sure I stayed there. What kind of playground is it? Being little gods among some of the silliest people in the Hub is going to bore you to death—or you're lunatics!"

"I have no liking," Dovari remarked, "for the girl's insults."

The man called Hatzel said, "There could be a difference of opinion about the opportunities waiting for us in Tamandun. But the point is, Sams, that you seem to be mistaken in believing Miss Amberdun would be interested in lending her talents to the group's goals."

"I still hope to be able to persuade her," Sams told him.

"Why not try it, Telzey? It may not be at all what you think. You can always pull out, of course, if you find you don't like the life."

"If I thought I might like it," Telzey said, "there'd still be the fact that Tamandun already has an Askab."

Hatzel said, "For the moment only. That's Toru's affair, not ours. As Lord of the Games, I'll be attending the Regent's ceremonial Glory Day dinner in the House of Wirolla tonight. So, I understand, will the Askab Casmard and his guests. Before the evening's over, Casmard will have abdicated formally. The vacancy will be filled at the end of Glory Day."

"Casmard's an old friend of my family," Telzey said. "If you're determined to set yourselves up in Tamandun, you could make an arrangement with him. He isn't much interested in remaining Askab. I'd see to it that he didn't remember afterwards there'd been psis involved in the matter."

Sams shook his head. "I'm afraid we can't do that. It's too late for it. We're prepared to deal with Toru and the Servant of the Stone tomorrow. The manifestations we've scheduled will make it easy to do and we'll have enthusiastic public approval. But it needs exact timing. We've made Toru's plans for Casmard part of our plan. If Casmard were still alive and still Askab on Glory Day, everything would have to be revised. At best, we'd wind up with something less effective."

"Aside from not interfering ourselves," Hatzel added, "we must also, of course, make sure that no one else does—in any way! And while we know Miss Amberdon's a telepath, it hasn't yet been established what Miss Argee's special abilities are."

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"I have no special psi abilities," Trigger said shortly.

"Now that," one of the other men remarked, "is an interesting lie. I've been attempting to probe that young woman's shield since she entered the room. I can vouch for the fact that it's an extraordinary psi structure—unanalyzable and of extreme resistive power."

Trigger shrugged. "Somebody else developed the shield for me. I couldn't have done it. Not that it makes any difference."

Sams smiled at her. "I agree! And I'm sure you both realize that we can't run the risk of letting you upset our plans. Once Glory Day's over, it doesn't matter what you do. We'll be glad to see you safely off Askanam then, assuming Toru's let you remain alive, which might seem rather doubtful if you won't join forces with us. Until that time, at any rate you will have to allow the group to control what you say and do. It's really the only safe way, isn't it?"

"Forget it, Sams!" Telzey said. "Our screens stay tight."

"Will they?" Sams said mildly. "I don't like to put pressure on you, but we still have too much work to get done today to waste more time over this..."

The room went quiet. Then a wave of heat washed over Telzey. It ebbed, returned, and intensified. Trigger gave her a quick, startled glance. Telzey shifted her shoulders.

"So you have a pyrotic with you," she remarked.

Sams smiled. "We have several. Their range is excellent! Even if we allowed you to leave this room and building—though we won't—you couldn't get away from the effect. You don't want your blood to start boiling, do you? Or find your hair and clothes catching fire—as a start?"

Trigger, sweat beginning to run down her face, looked at Telzey. "Do you know who's doing it?"

Telzey nodded across the room.

"The tall thin man two seats left of Dovari."

Trigger's hand went to her cosmetics purse, and the gun made its abrupt appearance.

She said to the thin man, "I won't kill you if this doesn't stop immediately. But I'll stun you so solidly you won't have begun to come awake by the end of Glory Day. And it'll be two weeks after that before your nerves stop jumping."

The heat faded away. The group sat staring at Trigger. She jerked,

made a choked sound of surprise, looked down at her hand. The gun had vanished from it.

Sams and a few of the others were laughing. Sams said, "Neat enough, Hatzel! Ladies, let's stop this nonsense. Since you can't win, why not give up gracefully? Telzey, you at least are aware you can both be killed in an instant as you're sitting there."

Telzey nodded. "Oh, I do know that, Sams. But I haven't just been sitting here. I've found out Hatzel's shielded, and, of course, all you telepaths have your psi shields. But six of your most valuable people aren't shielded at all, and apparently couldn't operate if they were. Six psi minds--wide open! It would take an instant to kill us, and you can be quite sure that in that instant you'd lose those six. So I don't think you'll try it."

Sams stared at her. The others were silent a moment. Then one of the women said sharply, "Sams, she's bluffing! You said she's good, but between us all we certainly can block her as she strikes out. Then we can handle both of them as we wish."

Sams shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't care to count on it."

Dovari said in a strained voice, "Nor I! And I don't want to die while you're finding out whether you can, or can't, block her. Let them go, Sams! If they try to interfere, you can still deal with them in some other manner."

V

Trigger glanced back at the closed building door behind them. She looked both furious and relieved. "What do we do now?" she muttered.

"Keep walking," Telzey said. "Back to the Regent's palace. And we walk rather fast until we reach those trees ahead. I've still got my contacts back there. Some talk going on ... Hatzel seems to be second in command to Sams. So he's a teleport--" She glanced at Trigger. "Too bad you lost your gun."

"That's not all I lost."

"Eh?"

"My underpants went with the gun."

"Well," Telzey said after a moment, "a minor demonstration, as Sams would say. A teleport at Hatzel's level is a very dangerous person. He didn't have to do that, of course. They were trying to make us feel helpless."

Trigger nodded. "And it worked just fine with me! I've never felt more helpless in my life." She looked over at Telzey. "Touch and go for a moment, wasn't it? I didn't think you were bluffing!"

"I wasn't. A bluff like that wouldn't have got past Sams."

"What makes them that kind of people?" Trigger said. "With everything they can do--"

"That's partly it. Most of that group are bored psis. They've used their abilities to make things too easy for themselves. It's stupid but some do it. Now they've run out of fun and are looking for something new--almost anything that seems new."

They'd reached the trees, were hurrying along a path leading through

he grove. Trigger suddenly, glanced down at the cosmetics purse. She slapped it. The gun popped into her hand.

"Well!" she said. "I felt the weight in the purse just now." She reached into the purse, pulled out a silky garment, shoved it into a pocket. "Briefs returned with the gun." She bit her lip. "Perhaps I should feel grateful. Somehow I don't!"

"Come on!" Telzey turned away, broke into a trot. "They did that to show you your gun doesn't impress them at all. But now you have it back, you might get a chance to express your lack of appreciation to Hatzel. We'll have to hurry!"

"What do you mean?"

"Can you set it to stun somebody for just a short time—a few minutes?"

"That's a bit tricky, but, yes, I can. Five minutes, say."

"Fine. Hatzel's been called to the palace to talk to the Regent. He'll be coming through the gardens on a scooter. If we get far enough ahead, we may be able to spot him and cut him off."

"All right. And I stun him. Then?"

"That's no telepath's shield he's using. It's a gadget. And if the gadget's the kind I think it is, I can open it and get to his mind before he comes around. Sams or somebody might realize what's happening, of course. That's a risk we'd better take. The quicker we get it over with, the less likely we are to be noticed."

They crouched presently at the edge of a terrace, winded and hot from the run, shrubbery about them. "He might still turn off on another route," Telzey remarked. "But it looks like he'll be coming by here now, doesn't it?"

Trigger nodded. "Seems to be heading this way."

"That break in the bushes is the place to take him. How far will we have to work down to it?"

"We won't. Right here is fine. He's just chugging along."

"That's a good fifty yards, Trigger," Telzey said doubtfully.

"And I'm a good fifty yards marksman. Some day I'll have to teach you how to use a gun."

"Perhaps you should. I never warmed up to guns. When I've had to use one, I just blasted away."

"What are your contacts doing?"

"Back to rehearsing their Glory Day surprises. They're not thinking about us at the moment. Sams might be, now and then. It's hard to be sure about him. But we should be able to get away with this."

• • •



Hatzel's scooter came chugging up shortly. Trigger touched the gun's firing stud, and Hatzel was sagging sideways off the scooter as the machine went out of sight behind bushes again. They worked their way hurriedly down to the path through the shrubs, found the scooter on its side, turning in slow circles. Trigger shut it off while Telzey went over to Hatzel who lay on his back a dozen yards away.

She knelt quickly beside him, lifted his head. Trigger joined her.

"Should be at the base of the skull, under a skin patch," Telzey said. "Here it is!"

She peeled off the tiny device, blinked absently at Hatzel's face. "Open psi mind--yes, I can do it." She was silent then.

Trigger glanced presently at her watch, said, "Four minutes plus gone, Telzey. He could start coming around any moment now. Shall I tap him again?"

"No, I've got him. He won't come around till I'm ready."

"I'll go plant the rock then," Trigger said.

She went a dozen yards back up the terrace where ornamental rockwork enclosed a flower bed, returned with a sizable rock which she placed on the path ten feet from where Hatzel was lying.

"I'd think it was a little peculiar I hadn't noticed that rock," she observed. "But I suppose you're taking care of that?"

"Yes. He'll wake up with a small headache from having banged his skull. He'll see the rock lying there and be irritated, but that will explain it, and he won't want to tell anyone he wasn't looking where he was going." Telzey replaced the shield which wasn't operative at the moment, smoothed in the skin patch, stood up and brushed sand from her knees. "Finished. Let's move!"

They restarted the scooter, left it lying on its side, pushing itself awkwardly about in the grass, went quickly back up to the terrace and along it through the shrubbery, until they reached a grove of trees and came to another path.

Hatzel, still unconscious, reached into a pocket and switched his mind shield back on. He awoke then, sat up with a muttered curse, felt his head, looked around, saw the rock on the path and the struggling scooter in the grass. He nodded in annoyed comprehension, and got to his feet.

He couldn't be left unshielded because one of the telepaths would have been bound to notice it. Every five minutes, however, Hatzel now would switch the shield off for a moment, unaware of what he did. If there was reason to take him under active control, Telzey would make use of such a moment. They had a glimpse of him

presently on the network of paths ahead of them, hearing the Regent's palace.

"Reacting just as he's supposed to, isn't he?" Trigger said.

Telzey nodded. "Uh-huh! It was a stupid accident, and that's all. He's got more important things to think about." She added, "I'd like to give Casmard some idea of what's going on, but there's no way I can keep them from looking into his mind or Vallain's, and anything we told him they'd soon know. We'll have to work out this side of it strictly by ourselves."

VI

As they were approaching the palace entrance by which they'd left, a tall, splendidly uniformed man emerged from it and came toward them.

He introduced himself as Colonel Euran, head of the Regent's Palace Guard. "It's come to my attention," he said, "that you weren't informed of a security regulation requiring guests to surrender personal weapons for the period of their visit in the palace. I thought I should correct the oversight, to save you possible embarrassment. It's merely a formality, of course—but do you happen to have weapons in your room or on your persons?"

Since they'd known their encounter with the cheola had been observed, they weren't surprised. Trigger took the cosmetics purse from her belt and handed it to him.

"There's a Denton inside," she said. "Take good care of it, Colonel. It's an old friend."

He bowed. "Indeed, I will."

Telzey said, "Could there be other regulations we don't know about?"

Colonel Euran smiled pleasantly. "It's no regulation. But the Regent Toru told me to suggest that you remain within the palace itself until he has the pleasure of meeting you again at dinner tonight. He's concerned about your safety."

"You mean the Regent's own gardens aren't safe?" Trigger asked.

"No, not always during the periods of arena games. There are subterranean levels here where beasts and criminals who've been condemned to the arena are kept. And it happens on occasion that some very dangerous creature eludes its keepers and appears unexpectedly in the palace grounds."

They thanked him for the warning, went inside. Following the directions given them by Vallain, they presently located the suite of Perial Casmard and announced themselves at the door. He opened it immediately.

"Come in! Come in!" he said, drawing them into the room and closing the door again. He looked at them, shook his head. "I'm very glad to see you," he said. "I wasn't at all sure you were still alive! Shortly after you'd left, Toru hinted in his pleasant manner that he had some particularly brutal end prepared for you. I went down to the gardens to find you, but no one could tell me where you'd gone."

They told him about the cheola. Telzey said, "We went on then and met some Federation people who've organized the Glory Day games for Toru this year. We thought we might be able to talk them into smuggling us out, but they weren't interested in getting involved

an intrigue against the Regent."

Casmard said he couldn't blame them too much. "If Toru found out about it, they might become more intimately involved in the games than any sensible man would wish to be."

"And we're confined to the palace now," Trigger said.

"That's good—since it probably means that Toru is planning no further immediate steps against you. But the situation remains extremely difficult. Have you eaten?"

"Not since breakfast," Telzey said, "and we didn't eat much then. Now that you've mentioned it, I notice I'm very hungry."

Casmard had lunch for them brought to the suite. He watched pensively while they ate, said at last, "There was an explosion a while ago on the Regent's living level. Not badly timed—he'd entered the level shortly before the device went off. However, only one of his guard dogs was killed. Toru escaped injury."

They looked at him expectantly. He shrugged. "Vallain's now confined to his quarters. Toru rarely acts hastily. He'll wait for the pre-Glory Day dinner in the House of Wirolla tonight before pursuing the matter."

When they'd finished lunch, he said, "I'm reasonably certain the Regent also will hold his hand now as far as you two are concerned. However, it would be best if you went to your room and stayed there, so as to bring yourselves as little as possible to his attention."

Telzey said, "You still don't see how we can get out of this?"

"Oh, I'm not entirely at the end of my resources," Casmard told her. "I shall meet the Regent again during the afternoon and may be able to persuade him to accept less drastic arrangements than the one he has in mind."

• • •

They left to go to their apartment. Trigger inquired reflectively, "You had the impression Casmard wanted us out of the way?"

"Yes, he does want us out of the way," Telzey said.

Trigger glanced at her. "Picked up things over lunch, huh?"

"Yes. Something about an elderly character in the palace who used to act as poisoner for Casmard's mother, and seems to have kept his hand in. Casmard's promised him a high spot in the nobility if he can get to Toru before dinner, and the old boy's game to try it."

Trigger shook her head. "Life expectancies would be awkward to calculate around here! Does Casmard think it will work?"

"Not really. He's getting desperate. If he did get rid of Toru, there'd still be a serious problem with the Servant of the Stone—Lord Ormota."

"How does he fit in?"

"After Toru, he's apparently the most powerful man in Tamandun. If Toru died, he'd have a great deal more power here in the Regent's palace than Casmard and Vallain combined could bring up. So he'd probably simply become the next Askab, with no other change in the proceedings."

"The Stone he's the Servant of is presumably the Stone of Wirolla, where they cut out people's hearts?"

"Yes."

"And the House of Wirolla, where they'll be holding the ceremonial dinner we're supposed to attend—that's where the Stone is?"

"Yes," Telzey said. "I got that from Hatzel. Big black hall. The Regent's table stands right across from the Stone."

"Should be a great dinner party for ghouls!" Trigger said after a moment.

"Well, it all seems part of their local religion or whatever you want to call it."

In a closet of their room they found games, provided for the entertainment of guests. They were unfamiliar and looked complicated enough to be interesting. They set up one designed for two players. It was cover—Telzey would be mentally active on other levels.

Hatzel's shield had been opening regularly on schedule. She'd caught the opening a few times, checked him out briefly. There was nothing of interest there at present. She'd dropped her contacts with the unprotected minds in Sams's group. They had no immediate value.

She spent a little time hunting around for traces of the navigator of Casmard's space yacht, located him finally and told Trigger, "Kewen's not in the palace any more. He's been transferred to the place they keep the criminals they'll start feeding into the arena games tomorrow. That's what's scheduled for him."

Trigger looked startled. "Does he know it?"

"He knows, but I sort of tranquilized him this morning after I picked him up. It isn't bothering him."

"It bothers me," Trigger said. "Of course, he might last longer than the rest of us, at that."

"Yes. And if we get out of it, we should be able to get him out."

A palace courier had announced himself discreetly at the door half an hour after they'd returned to their room, and handed them a formal invitation from the Regent. They would be sitting at his table during dinner in the House of Wirolla that night.

Telzey spent the remaining hours scanning the minds in the palace and its vicinity. There were many she could have entered without much trouble, but finding minds that would be useful in the present situation was more difficult. Colonel Euran of the Palace Guard had been a primary target but turned out to be as thoroughly mind-shielded as the Regent and the Servant of the Stone. Telzey wasn't too disappointed. Toru hardly would want someone in that position to be subject to hostile psychic influences.

She developed some selected contacts presently. There were others she would have preferred, but they couldn't be made available to her quickly enough.

Then it was time to prepare themselves to be taken to the House of Wirolla. It was one of the buildings on the Palace grounds, serving both as a personal palace for the Servant and as a temple for the Stone.

The ceremonial hall in the House of Wirolla lived up to Trigger's expectation that it might have made a good place for the festivities of ghouls. Walls, ceiling and floor were of black stone. On the lower level, the only light was provided by torches flaring sullenly from the walls and along the tables, where the top rank of Tamandun's nobility and dignitaries dined tonight. It was separated from the upper level by a flight of low stairs, running the width of the hall.

On the upper level, there was light. The curved table of the Regent stood there by itself, the Regent's honor guests seated along the outer edge of the curve. The arrangement provided them with a good view of the Stone of Wirolla on the far side of the hall. The Stone was huge and seemed almost formless, while somehow suggesting a hunkered shape which could have been human as much as Wirollan. It was gray-green, and there was an indication of scales over parts of its surface. A thick hollowed projection near the lower end might represent a pair of cupped and waiting hands. Supposedly, the Stone had been in the Hub for some centuries, having been found on the destroyed flagship of a Wirollan war fleet. But the early part of its history was uncertain.

Nowadays, at any rate, it represented a deity, or demon, who periodically indicated an appetite for human sacrifices. Traditionally, it should indicate that appetite tonight. The circumstances didn't make for light-hearted dinner conversation, but most of those who sat along the curving table, Casmard and Vallain among them, hadn't seemed much affected. Hatzel, three seats from Telzey, ate in stolid silence. From the lower level came an indistinct sound of voices. Glory Day music washed through the air, incongruously bright and brisk.

Weapons weren't allowed in the hall. But guns pointed through concealed openings in the three walls of the upper level; and the Palace Guards who held them had every section of both levels under observation in scanners.

Three of those Palace Guards and their guns were now Telzey's. The Regent's guard dog, a great arena hound standing twelve feet back of its master's chair, was nearly hers. It was, at any rate, no longer the Regent's.

It wasn't till dinner drew near its end that tensions began to be noticeable. At last, Telzey became aware of a faint tremor in the stone floor under her feet, in the chair on which she sat. It continued only a moment; but when it stopped, all talk had ended and the music had faded away.

Now the tremor returned, grew stronger, swelled into an earthquake shuddering. Again it lasted only a few seconds. By then, no one near Telzey was stirring. She found herself holding her breath, released it. A third time it came, accompanied by a distant roaring sound, suggesting a blurred giant voice. As that stopped, a low black table was rising out of the floor before the Stone of Wirolla. Two gray-clothed men, gray masks covering their faces, came out from behind the Stone on either side and stopped at the ends of the table, ropes held in their hands.

• • •

Lord Ormota, Servant of the Stone, got to his feet and strode out in front of the Regent's table. He raised his arms, and his amplified voice sounded deeply through the hall.

"The Stone of Wirolla will take two hearts tonight!"

Ormota paused, bearded face turned up in an attitude of listening. The roaring sound came again; the black hall shook, and grew still.

Ormota turned toward the Regent.

"Two traitors to Tamandun sit with the Regent Toru tonight, believing themselves unknown! The Stone of Wirolla will point them out and receive their hearts."

Two traitors? Vallain, whose face had paled at last, must be one. The other? Telzey had seen in Casmard's mind that while his poisoner had found no opportunity to practice his arts on the Regent, he'd at least aroused no suspicions. But perhaps Casmard was mistaken in that. Or perhaps--

Telzey's thoughts broke off. Out of the hollowed projection on the Stone a black object like a cane or wand floated up into sight. It lifted swiftly into the air, impelled by a mechanism which Ormota presumably controlled. It hung quivering for a moment in the center of the upper level of the hall. Then, emitting a high singing note, it drifted down toward the Regent's table, swinging left and right like a compass needle. No one moved at the table; but there was an expectant stirring on the lower level, as diners shifted about to have a better view at the instant the Stone's device would indicate the night's sacrifices.

It came closer, still swinging back and forth along the curve of the table. Then, the singing note surging shrilly upward, it halted, pointed at Hatzel.

Telzey felt the shock of utter surprise in Hatzel's mind, saw for an instant a look of incredulous consternation on Ormota's face.

The wand vanished.

There was a crystal shattering against the face of the Stone. Black shards clattered down into the hollow below. The Regent Toru staggered half up out of his chair, eyes and mouth grotesquely distended, made a groaning sound and went over backward with the chair. Ormota clutched his chest, looked for a moment as if he were trying to scream, collapsed in turn.

One of the gray-clothed men uttered a high-pitched yell of horror. His shaking hand pointed at the hollowed projection of the Stone.

Two human hearts thumped and thudded bloodily about in it. A din of screaming arose in the black hall.

* * *

"Your Askab showed such extraordinary presence of mind in taking charge of the situation that I'm convinced you're controlling him," Hatzel told Telzey and Trigger in hurried undertones. "However, that was, in fact, the best immediate way of handling this unexpected turn of events. Toru obviously intended treachery against our group. I had to make him and the Servant appear to be the Stone's intended sacrifices or allow myself to be butchered."

He added, "I'll have to let Larking know about this at once—but first I want to warn you. Your lives and those of Casmard and Vallain are no longer endangered, so be satisfied with that! Don't try to make use of what's happened to interfere with our plans. They remain essentially unchanged, though details must be modified now. Sams Larking, in other words, will still be the new Askab of Tamandun at the end of Glory Day. Casmard and you two will be seen to a Federation spaceport, and if you're wise you won't lose too much time then getting off the planet!"

A bleak smile touched his face.

"This should in fact improve our future position," he remarked. "The

discovery that Toru's and Ormola's bodies showed no outward sign of injury after the Stone had taken their hearts has made many new believers in the supernatural tonight." He turned away, concluding, "Remember what I've told you!" and walked off.

They looked after him. Unaware that he was doing it, Hatzel reached into a pocket and switched his mind shield back on. It would stay on now.

Trigger said thoughtfully, "No way those telepaths can find out you had him point the Stone's wand or whatever it was at himself?"

"No," Telzey said. "I released my controls on him just a moment ago. Sams is naturally suspicious, but if he looks over Hatzel's mind, it will seem everything happened exactly as Hatzel thinks it did."

VIII

The Glory Day games began. The Grand Arena's spectator sections were astir with rumors, curiosity, and interest. Word had spread of great and strange events in the House of Wirolla the night before--the Regent Toru and the Servant of the Stone had been revealed as traitors and slain by the Stone itself, and the long-absent Askab Perial Casmard again ruled Tamandun, supported unanimously by the nobility. The general expectation was that there would be omens and signs to make this year's Glory Day one to be long remembered.

Five sat in what previously had been the Regent's box--the Askab Casmard, Lord Vallain, Telzey, Trigger, and Hatzel, Lord of the Games. Casmard and Vallain were in an undisturbed state of mind. They were undisturbed because they knew that the occurrence in the House of Wirolla, horrifying--though very fortunate--as it had appeared at the time had been the work of a friendly psi. They knew it because the friendly psi had told each of them so mentally; and they'd compared notes. They didn't know who the psi was and had been instructed not to try to find out. They wouldn't. Casmard intended to announce his abdication in favor of Lord Vallain at the end of the day's games--

Sams Larking and his group were aware that Telzey was controlling Casmard and Vallain, but there was no reason for them to object. The two had needed support and guidance in a critical situation, and she was supporting and guiding them in a way which avoided problems for Sams. Hatzel, when he appeared in the arena box, had murmured to Telzey and Trigger, "Larking tells me you're cooperating nicely. That's fine! Let's be sure it stays that way." He'd smiled gently at them. He had no doubt it would stay that way. He'd demonstrated his potential for instant deadliness, if there'd been any question about it. And one of Sams's telepaths was remaining in good enough contact with Casmard and Vallain to catch any suspicious maneuvers Telzey might attempt through them. If she attempted any, Hatzel would be informed at once and was to take whatever steps seemed required. The group was playing for keeps and had made the fact clear.

There was another mind on which Telzey was keeping tabs--that of the yacht navigator. Kewen had been released from the arena pens to which he'd been transferred; and it occurred to Casmard then that a fine seat at the Glory Day games should compensate the poor fellow in part for his unnerving experiences. He wasn't far from the Askab's box. One of the telepaths had checked him and found Kewen had been in a state of shock and was coming gradually out of it, held under calming control by Telzey.

As far as the psi group was concerned, that took care of Telzey.

he'd been neutralized. She mightn't like what they were doing, but it didn't matter. They each had their work to handle now, playing out rehearsed roles in the ascending series of thrills and marvels which would wind up with Sams Larking being roared into office as the new Askab by the people of Tamandun.

The opening events of the games were brisk and colorful enough, but still tame stuff by Tamandun's standards--mere preludes to what the day should bring. The crowds watched in tolerant appreciation for the most part, details of the action being shown in enlarging screens above each arena section.

Then what seemed to be happening in the arena was no longer what was shown to be happening in the screens. Dovari's illusions were putting in an appearance. The spectators realized it gradually, grew still, fascinated--the Stone of Wirolla was manifesting in ways it hadn't manifested before! The illusions weren't disturbing in themselves. But uncanniness was touching that area of Tamandun.

Dovari was an excellent illusionist, Telzey thought. And now it seemed to be time. She gave Trigger the signal they'd agreed on. Trigger smiled in response, slipped a knockout pill into her mouth, swallowed it.

Ten seconds later, a shock of fright jolted through Kewen's drowsy complacency. And Kewen responded. Telzey erased her shielding screens in that instant, brought all personal psi activity to an abrupt stop.

Hatzel, sitting behind Casmard, jerked violently, and disappeared. Trigger slumped limply back in her seat, eyes closed. The illusions in the arena whirled in a wild, chaotically ugly turmoil.

Shock waves of alarm could almost be sensed rising from the spectator sections. Perial Casmard calmly switched on the amplifying system before him. His calm voice spoke throughout the Grand Arena, telling his subjects that what they were witnessing wasn't merely another manifestation but one which, by its very violence, must be regarded as an augury of an approaching great period in Tamandun's history....

It was a rehearsed speech, but Casmard didn't know it. And it was effective. There was no general panic.

"There's one type of psi," Telzey had told Trigger some hours before, "no other psi wants to run into. They call him the howler. A howler has just one talent--he can kick up such a hurricane of psi static that the abilities of any other psis in his range fly out of control and start working every which way. That's pretty horrible for those psis, especially for the ones with plenty of equipment. The more they can do, the more's gone suddenly wrong--and the harder they try to hang on to control, the worse the matter gets!"

"You and I got hit by a howler when Casmard's yacht was attacked. It was our navigator. Kewen didn't know he was doing it; he doesn't know he's a psi. But when he gets frightened, he howls. It's an unconscious defensive reaction with him. He was frightened then--and your shield began to batter itself with psi energy instead of repelling it. You felt as if your head were being pounded with clubs. I can't really say how I felt! I went crazy instantly in several different ways. Fortunately, it was just a few seconds before the stun beam they used knocked us and Kewen out--"

This time, Kewen was going to stay frightened for something like three minutes. That, Telzey thought, certainly should be enough. Then his fears would shut off automatically. She'd arranged for that.

Trigger would be unconscious meanwhile, oblivious to the fact that her shield was drawing torrents of hammering energy on itself. While Telzey, awake and unshielded, would have divorced herself from anything remotely resembling an ability to handle psi until the howler had gone out of action again.

IX

Some four hours after the official conclusion of Glory Day in Tamandun, Telzey and Trigger were sitting in a lounge of an Orado-bound liner. Sams Larking walked in, glanced around and came over to their table.

"Why, hello, Sams!" Telzey said. "We didn't know you were aboard."

"I know you didn't," Sams said. His eyes seemed slightly glazed. He sat down, ordered a drink through the table speaker, sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not in the best of condition," he said. "But I didn't feel I needed to be hospitalized. I came on just before takeoff, rather expecting to find you around somewhere."

"How are the rest of them doing?" Telzey asked. It had taken a while to locate the members of Sams's group individually and get them under sedation; but they'd all been rounded up at last and transferred to the Federation's base hospital on Askanam.

Sams shrugged. "They're not well people, but they'll recover. They're shipping out on a hospital boat tomorrow. None of them felt like hanging around Askanam any longer than they had to." He shook his head. "So you ran in a psi howler on us!"

Telzey lifted her eyebrows. "I did?"

"Since you two are in fine shape, yes. There aren't that many howlers around. It wasn't a coincidence that brought one to the Grand Arena, and set him off just as we were going into action. How long did he go on blasting?"

"Three minutes, more or less."

"It seemed a lifetime," Sams said darkly. "A hideous, insane lifetime!" His drink came; he emptied it, reordered. "Ah, now!" he said. "That's a little better. It was rougher on the special talents, you know. Dovari was still running waking nightmares when I left—and those are pretty badly singed pyrotics!"

"Hatzel and the other teleport should have got only a touch," Telzey said.

Sams nodded. "And that's what shook them up so completely. Only a touch—and Hatzel found he'd flipped himself halfway around Askanam! The other one didn't go quite that far, of course; but neither had done that kind of thing before, and neither wants to do it again. They can't remember how they did it. And they keep thinking of the various gruesome things that can happen to a teleport at the end of a blind flip—those two are very, very scared."

His second drink came. He took a swallow, set it down, smacked his lips. "Beginning to feel more like myself!" He gave them a brief grin.

Trigger said, "Are you going to try any more operations on Askanam?"

Sams shook his head.

"Too much bother. I'd have to build up a new gang. Besides, I decided Telzey was right—I'd get bored to death in a year playing games like that. Who's Askab in Tamandun now, by the way?"

"Vallain," Telzey said. "Casmard abdicated publicly in his favor at the end of Glory Day. A popular decision, apparently. Casmard doesn't intend to go back to Askanam again either."

"He's on board?"

"Uh-huh."

Trigger said, "He was telling us in confidence a short while ago that he and Vallain had personal proof there'd been a mysterious but well-intentioned psi involved in the downfall of Toru and Ormota and the various other strange Glory Day events. He said it was something that shouldn't be discussed, at the psi's special request."

"Well, there's been no significant breach of secrecy then," Sams said. "The Service might have got stuffy on that point." He reflected, grinned. "I was sure Toru and Ormota would be taken out one way or another after you two ambushed Hatzel in the gardens."

"You knew about that, eh?" Telzey said.

"Knowing you," said Sams, "I didn't expect you to pass up any opportunities. It wasn't a surprise."

"Why didn't you try to do something about it?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I figured I could spot you Hatzel and still win the game. And if you hadn't come up with the howler, I'd have done it."

Telzey smiled. "Perhaps you would, Sams—perhaps you would!"

"Planet of Forgetting"

Published in *Galaxy Magazine*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (February 1965), with illustrations by Jack Gaughan, though this version is taken from *Original Edition of edited Schmitz Stories* (2005). Eric Flint and Guy Gordon, who edited Schmitz's work for the Baen reissues, rewrote this story into "Forget It" in order to make it fit the Federation of the Hub series, but I don't count the result as a Schmitz work and so ignore it.



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At best, Major Wade Colgrave decided, giving his mud-caked boot tips a brooding scowl, amnesia would be an annoying experience. But to find oneself, as he had just done, sitting on the rocky hillside of an unfamiliar world which showed no sign of human habitation, with one's think-tank seemingly in good general working order but with no idea of how one had got there, was more than annoying. It could be fatal.

The immediate situation didn't look too dangerous. He might have picked up some appalling local disease which would presently manifest itself, but it wasn't likely. A foreign-duty agent of Earth's military intelligence was immunized early in his career against almost every possible form of infection.

Otherwise, there was a variety of strange lifeforms in sight, each going about its business. Some looked big enough to make a meal of a human being--and might, if they noticed him. But the gun on Colgrave's hip should be adequate to knock such ideas out of predators who came too close.

He'd checked the gun over automatically on discovering a few minutes before that he had one. It was a standard military type, manufactured by upward of a dozen Terran colonies and ex-colonies. There were no markings to indicate its origin; but more important at the moment was the fact that the ammocounter indicated that it contained a full charge.

What could have happened to get him into this position?

The amnesia, however he'd acquired it, took a peculiar form. He had

questions about his identity. He knew who he was. Further, up to a point—in fact, practically up to a specific second of his life—his memory seemed normal. He'd been on Earth, had been told to report at once to the office of Jerry Redman, his immediate superior. And he was walking along a hall on the eighteenth floor of the headquarters building, not more than thirty feet from the door of Redman's office, when his memory simply stopped. He couldn't recall a thing between that moment and the one when he'd found himself sitting there.

Presumably Redman had prepared a new assignment for him; and presumably he'd been briefed on it and had set off. If he could extend his memory even thirty minutes beyond the instant of approaching the door, he might have a whole fistful of clues to what had gone on during the interval. But not a thing would come to mind. It wasn't a matter of many years being wiped out; if he'd aged at all, he couldn't detect it. Some months, however, might easily have vanished, or even as much as two or three years....

Had somebody given him a partially effective memory wipeout and left him marooned here? Not at all likely. A rather large number of people unquestionably would be glad to see Intelligence deprived of his talents, but they wouldn't resort to such roundabout methods. A bullet through his head, and the job would have been done.

The thought that he'd been on a spaceship which had cracked up in attempting a landing on this planet, knocking him out in the process, seemed more probable. He might have been the only survivor and staggered away from the wreck, his wits somewhat scrambled. If that was it, it had happened very recently.

He was thirsty, hungry, dirty, and needed a shave. But neither he nor his clothing suggested he had been an addled castaway on a wild planet for any significant length of time. The clothes were stained with mud and vegetable matter but in good general condition. He might have stumbled into a mud hole in the swamps which began at the foot of the hills below him and stretched away to the right, then climbed up here and sat down until he dried off. There was, in fact, a blurred impression that he'd been sitting in this spot an hour or so, blinking foggily at the landscape, before he'd suddenly grown aware of himself and his surroundings.

Colgrave's gaze shifted slowly about the panorama before him, searching for the glitter of a downed ship or any signs of human activity. There was no immediate point in moving until he could decide in which direction he should go. It was a remarkable view of a rather unremarkable world. The yellow sun disk had somewhat more than Sol's diameter. Glancing at it, he had a feeling it had been higher above the horizon when he'd noticed it first, which would make it afternoon in this area. It was warm but not disagreeably so; and, now that he thought of it, his body was making no complaints about atmospheric conditions and gravity.

He saw nothing that was of direct interest to him. Ahead and to the left a parched plain extended from the base of the hills to the horizon. In the low marshland on the right, pools of dark, stagnant water showed occasionally through thick vegetation. Higher up, lichen-gray trees formed a dense forest sweeping along the crests of the hills to within a quarter-mile of where Colgrave sat. The rock-clustered hillside about him bore only patches of bushy growth.

The fairly abundant animal life view was of assorted sizes and shapes and, to Colgrave's eyes, rather ungainly in appearance. Down at the edge of the marshes, herds of several species mingled peacefully, devoting themselves to chomping up the vegetation. An odd, green, bulky creature, something like a walking vegetable and about the height of a man, moved about slowly on stubby hind legs. It was using paired upper limbs to stuff leaves and whole plants into its lump of a head. Most of the other animals were quadrupeds. Only

one of the carnivorous types was active ... a dog-sized beast with a narrow rod for a body and a long, weaving neck tipped by a round cat head. A pack of them quartered the tall grass between marsh and plain in a purposeful manner, evidently intent on small game.

The other predators Colgrave could see might be waiting for nightfall before they did something about dinner. Half a dozen heavy leonine brutes lay about companionable on the open plain, evidently taking a sunbath. Something much larger and dark squatted in the shade of a tree on the far side of the marsh, watching the browsing herds but making no move to approach them.

The only lifeforms above the size of a lizard on the slopes near Colgrave were a smallish gray hopper, which moved with nervous jerkiness from one clump of shrubs to another. They seemed to be young specimens of the green biped in the marsh. There was a fair number of those downhill on the slopes, ranging between one and three feet in height. They were more active than their elders; now and then about two or three would go gamboling clumsily around a bush together, like fat puppies at play. After returning to the business of stripping clumps of leaves from the shrubbery they would stuff them into the mouth-slits of their otherwise featureless heads. One of them, eating steadily away, was about twenty feet below him. It showed no interest whatever in the visitor from Earth.

However he considered the matter, he couldn't have been stumbling around by himself on this world for more than fifteen hours. And he could imagine no circumstances under which he might have been abandoned here deliberately. Therefore there should be, within a fifteen-hour hike at the outside, something--ship, camp, intelligence post, settlement--from which he had started out.

If it was a ship, it might be a broken wreck. But even a wreck would provide shelter, food, perhaps a means of sending an sos call into space. There might be somebody else still alive on it. If there wasn't, studying the ship itself should give him many indications of what had occurred, and why he was here.

Whatever he would find, he had to get back to his starting point--

Colgrave stiffened. Then he swore, relaxed slightly, sat still. There was a look of intense concentration on his face.

Quietly, unnoticed, while his attention had been fixed on the immediate problem, a part of his lost memories had returned. They picked up at the instant he was walking along the hall toward Redman's office, ran on for a number of months, ended again in the same complete, uncompromising manner as before.

He still didn't know why he was on this world. But he felt he was close to the answer now--perhaps very close indeed.

II

The Lom Worlds, Imperial Rala--the Sigma File--

Imperial Rala, the trouble maker, two centuries ago the most remote of the scattered early Earth colonies, now a compact heavy-industry civilization which had indicated for some time that it intended to supplant Earth as the leading interstellar power. It had absorbed a number of other ex-colonies of minor status, turned its attention then on the nearby Lom Worlds as its first important target of conquest. Colgrave had been assigned to the Lom Worlds some years previously. At that time the Lomese had been attempting to placate Rala and had refused all assistance to Earth's intelligence agencies.

Redman had called him to the office that day to inform him there had been a basic shift in Lornese policies. He was being sent back. A full-scale invasion by Imperial Rala was in the making, and the Lorn Worlds had asked for support. Earth's military forces could not be redeployed in sufficient strength to meet a massive thrust in that distant area of space in time to check the expected invasion. When it came, the Lorn Worlds would fight a delaying action, giving ground as slowly as possible until help arrived. Until it did arrive, they would remain sealed off from Earth almost completely by superior Ralan strength.

Colgrave worked with Lornese intelligence men for almost three months, setting up the Sigma File. It contained in code every scrap of previously withheld information they could give against Rala. For decades the Lornese had been concerned almost exclusively with the activities of their menacing neighbor and with their own defensive plans. The file would be of immense importance in determining Earth's immediate strategy. For Rala, its possession would be of equal importance.

Colgrave set off with it finally in a Lornese naval courier to make the return run to Earth. The courier was a very fast small ship which could rely on its speed alone to avoid interception. As an additional precaution, it would follow a route designed to keep it well beyond the established range of Ralan patrols.

A week later, something happened to it. Just what, Colgrave didn't yet know.

Besides himself there had been three men on board: the two pilot-navigators and an engineering officer. They were picked men and Colgrave had no doubt of their competence. He didn't know whether they had been told the nature of his mission; the matter was not brought up. It should have been an uneventful, speedy voyage home.

When one of the Lornese pilots summoned Colgrave to the control room to tell him the courier was being tracked by another ship, the man showed no serious concern. Their pursuer could be identified on the screen, it was a Ralan raider of the *Talada* class, ten times the courier's tonnage but still a rather small ship. More importantly, a *Talada* could produce nothing like the courier's speed.

Nevertheless, Colgrave didn't like the situation in the least. He had been assured that the odds against encountering Ralan vessels in this area of space were improbably high. By nature and training he trusted coincidences. However, the matter was out of his hands. The pilots already were preparing to shift to emergency speed and, plainly, there was nothing to be done at the moment.

He settled down to watch the operation. One of the pilots was speaking to the engineering officer over the intercom; the other handled the controls.

It was this second man who suddenly gave a startled shout.

In almost the same instant, the ship seemed to be wrenched violently to the left. Colgrave was hurled out of his seat, realized there was nothing he could do to keep from smashing into the bulkhead on his right....

At that precise point, his memories shut off again.

• • •

"Fleegle!" something was crying shrilly. "Fleegle! Fleegle! Fleegle!"

Colgrave started, looked around. The small green biped nearest him downhill was uttering the cries. It had turned and was facing him

outside. Presumably it had just become aware of him and was expressing alarm. It waved its stubby forelimbs excitedly up and down. Farther down the slope several of its companions joined in with "Fleegle!" pipings of their own. Others stood watchfully still. They probably had eyes of a sort somewhere in the wrinkled balls of their heads, at any rate, they all seemed to be staring up at him.

"Fleegle! Fleegle! Fleegle!"

The whole hillside below suddenly seemed alive with the shrilling voices and waving green forelimbs. Colgrave twisted half around, glanced up the slope behind him.

He was sliding the gun out of its holster as he came quietly to his feet, completing the turn. The thing that had been coming down toward him stopped in midstride, not much more than forty feet away.

It was also a biped, of a very different kind, splotchy gray-black in color and of singularly unpleasant appearance. About eight feet tall, it had long, lean talon-tipped limbs and a comparatively small body like a bloated sack. The round, black head above the body looked almost fleshless, sharp bone-white teeth as completely exposed as those of a skull. Two circular yellow eyes a few inches above the teeth stared steadily at Colgrave.

He felt a shiver of distaste. The creature obviously was a carnivore and could have become dangerous to him if he hadn't been alerted by the clamor of the fleegle pack. In spite of its scrawny, gangling look, it should weigh around two hundred and fifty pounds, and the teeth and talons would make it a formidable attacker. Perhaps it had come skulking down from the forest to pick up one of the browsing fleegles and hadn't noticed Colgrave until he arose. But he had its full attention now.

He waited, unmoving, gun in hand, not too seriously concerned—a couple of blasts should be enough to rip that pulpy body to shreds—but hoping it would decide to leave him alone. The creature was a walking nightmare, and tangling with unknown lifeforms always involved a certain amount of risk. He would prefer to have nothing to do with it.

The fleegle racket had abated somewhat. But now the toothy biped took a long, gliding step forward and the din immediately set up again. Perhaps it didn't like the noise, or else it was interested primarily in Colgrave; at any rate, it opened its mouth as if it were snarling annoyedly and drew off to the right, moving horizontally along the slope with long, unhurried spider strides, round yellow eyes still fixed on Colgrave. The fleegle cries tapered off again as the enemy withdrew. By the time it had reached a point around sixty feet away, the slopes were quiet.



Now the biped started downhill, threading its way deliberately among the boulders like a long-legged, ungainly bird. But Colgrave knew by then it was after him, and those long legs might hurl it forward with startling speed when it decided to attack. He thumbed the safety off the gun.

With the fleegles silent, he could hear the rasping sounds the thing made when it opened its mouth in what seemed to be its version of a snarl ... working up its courage, Colgrave thought, to tackle the unfamiliar creature it had chanced upon.

As it came level with him on the hillside, it was snarling almost incessantly. It turned to face him then, lifted its clawed forelegs into a position oddly like that of a human boxer, hesitated an instant and came on swiftly.

A shrill storm of fleegle pipings burst out along the slope behind Colgrave as he raised the gun. He'd let the thing cut the distance between them in half, he decided, then blow it apart...

Almost with the thought, he saw the big biped stumble awkwardly across a rock. It made a startled, bawling noise, its forelimbs flinging out to help it catch its balance; then it went flat on its face with a thump.

There was instant stillness on the hillside. The fleegles apparently were watching as intently as Colgrave was. The biped sat up slowly. It seemed dazed. It shook its ugly head and whimpered complainingly, glancing this way and that about the slope. Then the yellow eyes found Colgrave.

Instantly, the biped leaped to its feet, and Colgrave hurriedly brought the gun up again. But the thing wasn't resuming its charge. It wheeled, went plunging away up the slope, now and then uttering the bawling sound it had made as it stumbled. It appeared completely panicked.

Staring after it, Colgrave scratched his chin reflectively with his free hand. After a moment, he resafetied the gun, shoved it back into the holster. He felt relieved but puzzled.

The biped, plainly, was not a timid sort of brute. It must possess a certain amount of innate ferocity to have felt impelled to attack a

reature of whose fighting ability it knew nothing. Then why this sudden, almost ludicrous flight? It might be convinced he had knocked it down in some manner as it had come at him, but still—

Colgrave shrugged. It was unimportant, after all. The biped had almost reached the top of the slope by now, was angling to the left to reach the lichen-gray forest a few hundred yards away. Its pace hadn't lessened noticeably. He was rid of it.

Then, as Colgrave's gaze shifted along the boulder-studded top of the hill, something like a half-remembered fact seemed to nudge his mind. He stared, scowling abstractedly. Was there something familiar about that skyline? Something he should... He made a shocked sound.

An instant later, he was climbing hurriedly, in something like a panic of his own, up the rocky slope.

Beyond that crest, he remembered now, the ground dropped away into a shallow valley. And in that valley—how many hours ago?—he had landed the Ralan *Talada's* lifeboat, with the Sigma File on board. Every minute he had spent wandering dazedly about the area since then had brought him closer to certain recapture—

III

He had been slammed against the bulkhead on the Lornese courier with enough violence to stun him. When he awoke, he was a prisoner under guard on the *Talada*, lying on a bunk to which he was secured in a manner designed to make him as comfortable as possible. The cabin's furnishings indicated it belonged to one of the ship's officers.

It told Colgrave among other things that they knew who he was. Raiders of the *Talada* class had a liquid-filled compartment in their holds into which several hundred human beings could be packed at a time, layered like so many sardines, and kept alive and semiconscious until the ship returned to port. An ordinary prisoner would simply have been dumped into that vat.

His suspicions were soon confirmed. A swarthy gentleman, who addressed Colgrave by name and introduced himself as Colonel Ajoran, an intelligence agent of Imperial Rala, came into the cabin. He waved out the attendant guard, offered Colgrave a cigarette, outlined his situation briefly to him.

Rala had obtained information of his mission on the Lorn Worlds and arranged to have the courier which would take him back to Earth with the Sigma File intercepted along any of the alternate routes it might take. The courier's engineering officer was a Ralan agent who had jammed the emergency drive to block their escape, then, as an additional measure, released a paralysis gas to keep Colgrave and the Lornese pilots helpless until the courier could be boarded. Colgrave already had been knocked out by the jolt given the ship by the jammed drive, but the pilots had had some seconds left in which to act.

One of them had shot himself in preference to becoming a Ralan prisoner. The other had shot the engineering officer, had been captured with Colgrave and was at present being tortured to death in retribution for his ill-considered slaying of a Ralan agent.

Colonel Ajoran offered Colgrave another cigarette, made a few philosophical remarks about the fortunes of war, and came out with his proposition.

He wanted Colgrave's help in decoding and transcribing the Sigma File immediately. In return he would see to it that when they reached Imperial Rala, Colgrave would be treated as a reasonable man who understood that the only course open to him was to serve Ralan interests as effectively as he previously had served those of Earth. In that event, he would find, Ajanor assured him, that Rala was generous to those who served it well.

Implying that their discussion would be continued after dinner, the colonel then excused himself, called the guard back in and left the cabin.

* * *

During the next hour Colgrave put in some heavy thinking. He had made one observation which presently might be of use to him. At the moment, of course, he could do nothing but wait. Colonel Ajanor's plan was a bold one but made sense. Evidently he held a position fairly high up in the echelons of Ralan intelligence. Knowing the contents of the Sigma File in detail, he immediately would become an important man to rival government groups to whom the information otherwise would not be readily available. He could improve his standing by many degrees at one stroke.

At the end of the hour, dinner was served to Colgrave in his cabin by a woman who was perhaps as beautiful, in an unusual way, as any he had seen. She was very slender. Her skin seemed almost as pure a white as her close-cropped hair, and her eyes were so light a blue that in any other type they would have appeared completely colorless. She gave, nevertheless, an immediate impression of vitality and contained energy. She told Colgrave her name was Hace, that she was Ajanor's lady, and that she had been instructed to see to it that he was provided with every reasonable comfort while he considered Ajanor's proposal.

She went on chatting agreeably until Colgrave had finished his dinner in the bunk. The colonel then joined them for coffee. The discussion remained a very indirect one, but Colgrave presently had the impression that he was being offered an alliance by Ajanor. He was one of Earth's top military agents, possessed unique information which the colonel could put to extremely good use on Rala. Colgrave would, in effect, remain on Ajanor's staff and receive every consideration due a valuable associate. He gathered that one of the immediate shipboard considerations being proffered for his cooperation was the colonel's lady.

When the pair left him, Ajanor observing that the *Talada's* sleep period had begun, the thing had been made clear enough. Neither of the two guards assigned to Colgrave reappeared in the cabin—which he had learned was a section of Ajanor's own shipboard suite—and the door remained closed. Presumably he was to be left undisturbed to his reflections for the next seven hours.

Colgrave did not stay awake long. He had a professional's appreciation of the value of rest when under stress; and he already had appraised his situation here as thoroughly as was necessary.

He had a minimum goal—the destruction of the Sigma File—and he had observed something which indicated the goal might be achieved if he waited for circumstances to favor him. Beyond that, he had an ascending series of goals with an ascending level of improbability. They also had been sufficiently considered. There was nothing else he cared to think about at the moment. He stretched out and fell asleep almost at once.

When he awoke some time later with the hairs prickling at the base of his skull, he believed for a moment he was dreaming of the thing

He had not cared to think about. There was light on his right and the shreds of a voice ... ghastly whispered exhalations from a throat which had lost the strength to scream. Colgrave turned his head to the right, knowing what he would see.

Part of the wall to one side of the door showed now as a vision screen; the light and the whispers came from there. Colgrave told himself he was seeing a recording, that the Lomese pilot captured with him had been dead for hours. Colonel Ajan was a practical man who would have brought this part of the matter to an end without unreasonable delay so that he could devote himself fully to his far more important dealings with Colgrave, and the details shown in the screen indicated the pilot could not be many minutes from death.

The screen slowly went dark again and the whispers ended. Colgrave wiped sweat from his face and turned on his side. There was nothing at all he could have done for the pilot. He had simply been shown the other side of Ajan's proposition.

A few minutes later, he was asleep again.

* * *

When he awoke the next time, the cabin was lit. His two guards were there, one of them arranging Colgrave's breakfast on a wall table across from the bunk. The other simply stood with his back to the door, a nerve gun in his hand, his eyes on Colgrave. Fresh clothes, which Colgrave recognized as his own, brought over from the courier, had been placed on a chair. The section of wall which ordinarily covered the small adjoining bathroom was withdrawn.

The first guard completed his arrangements and addressed Colgrave with an air of surly deference. Colonel Ajan extended his compliments, was waiting in the other section of the suite and would like to see Major Colgrave there after he had dressed and eaten. Having delivered the message, the guard came over to unfasten Colgrave from the bunk, his companion shifting to a position from which he could watch the prisoner during the process. That done, the two withdrew from the room, Colgrave's eyes following them reflectively.

He showered, shaved, dressed, and had an unhurried breakfast. He could assume that Ajan felt the time for indirect promises and threats was over, and that they would get down immediately now to the business on hand.

When Colgrave came out of the cabin, some thirty minutes after being released, he found his assumption confirmed. This section of the suite was considerably larger than the sleep cabin; the colonel and Haze were seated at the far right across the room, and a guard stood before a closed door a little left of the section's center line. The door presumably opened on one of the *Talada's* passages. The guard was again holding a nerve gun, and a second gun of the same kind lay on a small table beside Ajan. Haze sat at a recording apparatus just beyond the colonel. Evidently she doubled as his secretary when the occasion arose.

At the center of the room, on a table large enough to serve as a work desk, was writing material, a tape reader and, near the left side of the table, the unopened Sigma File.

Colgrave absorbed the implications of the situation as he came into the room. The three of them there were on edge, and the nerve guns showed his present status—they wouldn't injure him but could knot him up painfully in an instant and leave him helpless for minutes. He was being told his actions would have to demonstrate that he deserved Ajan's confidence.

Almost simultaneously, the realization came to him that the favorable circumstances for which he had decided to wait were at hand.

He went up to the table, looked curiously down at the Sigma File. It was about the size and shape of a briefcase set upright. Colgrave glancing over at Ajoran said, "I'm taking it for granted you've had the destruct charge removed."

Ajoran produced a thin smile.

"Since it could have no useful purpose now," he said, "I did, of course, have it removed."

Colgrave gave him an ironic bow. His left hand, brushing back, struck the Sigma File, sent it toppling toward the edge of the table.

He might as well have stuck a knife point into all three of them. A drop to the floor could not damage the file, but they were too keyed up to check their reactions. Ajoran started to his feet with a sharp exclamation; even Hace came half out of her chair. The guard moved more effectively. He leaped forward from the wall, bending down, still holding the nerve gun, caught the file with his wrist and free hand as it went off the table, turned to place it back on the table.

Colgrave stepped behind him. In the back of the jackets of both guards he had seen a lumpy bulge near the hip, indicating each carried a second gun, which could be assumed to be a standard energy type. His left hand caught the man by the shoulder, his right found the holstered gun under the jacket, twisted it upward and fired as he bent the guard over it. His left arm tingled—Ajoran had cut loose with the nerve gun, trying to reach him through the guard's body. Then Colgrave had the gun clear, saw Ajoran coming around on his right and snapped off two hissing shots, letting the guard slide to the floor. Ajoran stopped short, hauled open the sleep cabin door and was through it in an instant, slamming it shut behind him.

Across the room, Hace, almost at the other door, stopped, too, as Colgrave turned toward her. They looked at each other a moment, then Colgrave stepped around the guard and walked up to her, gun pointed. When he was three steps away, Hace closed her eyes and stood waiting, arms limp at her sides. His left fist smashed against the side of her jaw and she dropped like a rag doll.

Colgrave looked back. The guard was twisting contortedly about on the floor. His face showed he was dead, but it would be a minute or two before the nerve charge worked itself out of his body. The colonel's lady wouldn't stir for a while. Ajoran himself... Colgrave stared thoughtfully at the door of the sleep cabin.

Ajoran might be alerting the ship from in there at the moment, although there hadn't been any communication device in view. Or he could have picked up some weapon he fancied more than a nerve gun and was ready to come out again. The chances were good, however, that he'd stay locked in where he was until somebody came to inform him the berserk prisoner had been dealt with. It wasn't considered good form in Rala's upper echelons to take personal risks which could be delegated to subordinates.

Whatever happened, Colgrave told himself he could achieve his minimum goal any time he liked now. A single energy bolt through the Sigma File would ignite it explosively. And its destruction, getting it out of Ralan hands, had been as much as he reasonably could expect to accomplish in the situation.

He glanced at the closed door to the sleep cabin again, at the door which should open on one of the *Talada's* passages, and decided he didn't feel reasonable.

He took the Sigma File from the table, carried it over to the passage door and set it down against the wall. He'd expected to see the

second guard came bouncing in through the door as soon as the commotion began in here. The fact that he hadn't indicated either that he'd been sent away or that Ajoran's suite was soundproofed. Probably the latter... .

Colgrave raised the gun, grasped the door handle with his left hand, turned it suddenly, hauled the door open.

The second guard stood outside, but he wasn't given time to do much more than bulge his eyes at Colgrave.

Colgrave went quickly along the passage, the Sigma File in his left hand, the gun ready again in his right. Now that it was over he felt a little shaky. By the rules he should, in such circumstances, have been satisfied with his minimum goal and destroyed the file before he risked another encounter with an armed man. If he'd been killed just now, it would have been there intact for Rala to decode.

But the other goals looked at least possible now, and he couldn't quite bring himself to put a bolt through the file before it became clear that he'd done as much as he could.

He moved more cautiously as he approached the corner of the passage. This was officer's country, and his plans were based on a remembered general impression of the manner in which the *Talada* raiders were constructed. The passageway beyond the corner was three times the width of this one ... it might be the main passage he was looking for.

He glanced around the corner, drew back quickly. About thirty feet away in the other side of the passage was a wide doorspace, and two men in officer's uniform had been walking in through it at the moment he looked. Colgrave took a long, slow breath. His next goal suddenly seemed not at all far away.

He waited a few seconds, looked again. Now the passage was clear. Instantly he was around the corner, running down to the doorspace. As he stepped out before it, he saw his guess had been good. He was looking down a short flight of steps into the *Talada's* control room.

Looking and firing... . The gun in his hand hissed like an angry cat, but several seconds passed before any of the half-dozen men down there realized he was around. By then two of them were dead. They had happened to be in the gun's way. The drive control panels, the gun's target, were shattering from end to end. Colgrave swung the gun toward a big communicator in a corner. At that moment, somebody discovered him.

The man did the sensible thing. His hand darted out, throwing one of the switches before him.

A slab of battle-steel slid down across the doorspace, settling the control room away from the passage.

Colgrave sprinted on down the passage. The emergency siren came on.

The *Talada* howled monstrosly, like a wounded beast, as it rolled and bucked. Suddenly he was in another passage, heard shouts ahead, turned back, stumbled around a corner, went scrambling breathlessly up a steep, narrow stairway.

At its top, he saw ahead of him, like a wish-dream scene, the lit lock, two white-faced crewmen staggering on the heaving deck as they tried to lift a heavy boxed item into it.

Colgrave came roaring toward them, wild-eyed, waving the gun. They looked around at him, turned and ran as he leaped past them into the lock.

The man at the controls of the *Talada's* lifeboat died before he realized somebody was running up behind him. Colgrave dropped the Sigma File, hauled the body out of the seat, slid into it... .



He was several minutes' flight away from the disabled raider before he realized he was laughing like a lunatic.

He was clear. And now the odds, shifting all the way over, were decidedly in his favor. The question was how long it would take them to repair the damage and come after him. With enough of a start, they couldn't know which way he'd headed and the chance of being picked up before he got within range of the Earth patrols became negligible. But first there was the matter of getting the lifeboat fueled for the long run. It used iron, the standard medium, and he had, Colgrave calculated, enough for fifteen hours' flight on hand.

Which wasn't too bad. It would have been nicer if he could have given the two crewmen time to dump another few boxes of ingots on board before he had taken off. But a scan of the stellar neighborhood showed two planets respectively seven and eight hours away indicating conditions which should allow a man to stay a short time without serious damage or discomfort. The lifeboat had the standard iron location and refining equipment on board. A few hours on either of those worlds, and he'd be ready.

After dropping the body of the Ralan pilot into space, he decided the seven hour run gave him a slight advantage. Once the *Talada* got moving, it had speed enough to check over both worlds without losing a significant amount of time. They could figure out his fuel requirements as well as he. If they arrived before he was finished and gone, the raider's scanning devices were almost certain to spot the lifeboat wherever he tried to hide it.

The chances seemed very good that they simply wouldn't get there soon enough. But the minimum goal remained a factor. Colgrave decided to cache the Sigma File in some easily identifiable spot as soon as he touched ground, take the boat to another section of the planet to do his mining, come back for the file when he was prepared to leave. It would cut the risk of being surprised with it to almost nothing....

IV

How many hours had passed since then? Clawing his way up through the boulders and shrubbery, slipping in loose soil, Colgrave glanced back for a moment at the sun. It was noticeably lower in the sky again, appeared to be dropping almost visibly toward the horizon. But that told him nothing. He remembered the landing now; it had been daylight and he had come down to hide the Sigma File ... *had* hidden it, his memory corrected him suddenly. And then, for the next six or ten or fourteen hours, he appeared to have simply waited

round here, in some mental fog, for the *Talada* to come riding its fiery braking jets down from the sky.

The raider might arrive at any moment. Unless....

Colgrave blocked off the rest of that thought. The slope had begun to level off as he approached the top; he covered the last stretch in a rush, lungs sobbing for breath. He clambered on hastily through a jagged crack in the back of the ridge. For an instant, he saw the shallow dip of the valley beyond.

He dropped flat immediately. They were already here.

It was a shock, but one he realized he had half expected. After a few seconds, he crept up to the shelter of a rock from where he could look into the valley without exposing himself.

The *Talada* had set down about a hundred yards back of the lifeboat, perhaps no more than half an hour ago. The smaller vessel's lock stood open; a man came climbing out of it, followed by two others. The last of the three closed the lock and they started back toward the raider, from which other men were emerging. Ajoran had ordered the lifeboat searched first, to make sure the Sigma File wasn't concealed on it. Without that delay they should have caught him while he was still climbing up the slope.... The group coming out of the *Talada* now was a hunting party, most of them had quick-firing rifles slung across their backs.

They lined up beside the ship while a wedge-shaped device was maneuvered out of the lock. It remained floating a little above the ground near the head of the line, about twenty feet long, perhaps a dozen feet across at its point of greatest width. Colgrave had seen such devices before.

It was a man-tracker, a type used regularly in Ralan expeditions against settlements on other planets. Its power unit and instruments were packed into the narrow tip; most of its space was simply a container, enclosed and filled with the same kind of numbing liquid preservative as that in the prisoner vats in the *Talada* ships. It could be set either to hunt down specific individuals or any and all human beings within its range, and to either kill them as they were overtaken or pick them up with its grapplers and deposit them unharmed in the container. They could use it to follow him now, the clothing he had left on the ship would give it all the indications it needed to recognize and follow his trail.

More men had come out behind the machine, including one in a spacesuit. Colonel Ajoran apparently was assigning almost the entire complement of the *Talada* to the search for Colgrave and the Sigma File.

Colgrave decided he'd seen enough. If he had been observed on the hillside as the *Talada* was descending, they would have gone after him immediately. Instead, they would now follow their man-tracker over the ridge and down to the swamp where the herds of native animals were feeding. It gave him a little time.

He crawled backward a dozen feet into the narrow crevasse, rose and retraced his way through it to the other side of the ridge. Beyond the plain, the sun was almost touching the horizon. The gray forest into which the aggressive biped had retreated began a few hundred yards to his right. He'd have better shelter there than among the tumbled rocks of the ridge.

He went loping toward it, keeping below the crest-line. His eyes shifted once toward the swamp. One great tree stood there, towering a good hundred feet above the vegetation about it. The Sigma File was wedged deep among the giant's root, a few feet below the water. He'd seen the tree from the air, put the lifeboat down in the

little valley, hurried down the swamp on foot. Twenty minutes later the file had been buried and he'd started wading back out of the swamp. What had happened between that moment and the one when he found himself sitting on the hillside he still didn't know....

He reached the forest, came back among the trees over the top of the ridge until he saw the valley again. During the few minutes that had passed, the ridge's evening shadow had spread across half the lower ground. It had seemed possible that when they realized how close it was to nightfall here, the hunt for him would be put off till morning. But Ajan evidently wanted no delay. The man in the spacesuit still stood near the open lock of the ship, but the search party was coming across the valley behind their tracking machine. They headed for a point of the open ridge about a quarter-mile away from Colgrave. They'd have lights to continue on through the night if necessary.

The chase plan was simple but effective. If the man-tracker hadn't flushed him into view before morning, the *Talada* could take the lifeboat aboard, move after the search party and put down again. They could work on in relays throughout the following day, half of them resting at a time on the ship, until he was run down.

The Sigma File was safest where he'd left it. The tracker's scent perceptrors were acute enough to follow his trail through the stagnant swamp, getting signs from the vegetation he'd brushed against or grasped in passing, even from lingering traces in the water itself. And it might very well detect the file beneath the surface. But—ironically, considering Ajan's purpose—the discovery would be meaningless to the machine except as another indication that the man it was pursuing had been there. It would simply move on after him.

The worst thing he could attempt at the moment would be to get down to the swamp ahead of the searchers and destroy the file. He would almost certainly be sighted on the open slopes below the forest; and either the tracker or the man in the spacesuit could be overhead instants later.

Colgrave's gaze shifted back to the spacesuited figure. He would have to watch out for that one. His immediate role presumably was to act as liaison man between the ship and the hunters, supplementing the communicator reports Ajan would be getting on the progress of the search. But he was armed with a rifle; and if Colgrave was seen, he could spatter the area around the fugitive with stun-gas pellets while remaining beyond range of a hand weapon. He had floated back up to the *Talada's* lock for a moment, was now heading out to the ridge, drifting about fifty feet above the ground.

It wasn't a graceful operation. Maneuvering a suit designed for weightless service in space near the surface of a planet never was. But the fellow was handling himself fairly well, Colgrave thought. He came up to the ridge as the troop began filing across it, hovered above the line a few seconds, then swung to the left and moved off in a series of slow, awkward bounces above the hillside. He seemed to be holding something up to his helmet, and Colgrave guessed he was scanning the area with a pair of powerful glasses. After some minutes, he came back.

Colgrave had crossed over to the other side of the ridge to follow the progress of the column. It had swung to the right as it started down, was angling straight toward the swamp along the route he had taken with the file. He watched, chewing his lip. If the man-tracker happened to cross his return trail on the way, he might be in trouble almost immediately....



The man in the spacesuit drifted after the search party, passed above them some two hundred feet in the air, then remained suspended and almost unmoving. Colgrave glanced over at the horizon. The sun was nearly out of sight; its thin golden rim shrank and disappeared as he looked at it. Night should follow quickly here, but as yet he couldn't see any advantage the darkness would bring him.

The man in the spacesuit was coming back to the ridge. He hovered above it a moment, settled uncertainly toward the flat top of a boulder, made a stumbling landing and righted himself. He turned toward the plain and the swamp, lifting the object that seemed to be a pair of glasses to the front of his helmet again. Evidently he'd had enough of the suit's airborne eccentricities for a while.

Colgrave's throat worked. The man was less than two hundred yards away...

His eyes shifted toward a tuft of shrubs twenty feet beyond the edge of the forest growth.

Some seconds later, he was there, studying the stretch of ground ahead. Other shrubs and rocks big enough to crouch behind ... but they would give him no cover at all if for some reason the fellow decided to lift back into the air. The fading light wouldn't help then. Those were space glasses he was using, part of the suit, designed to provide clear vision even when only the gleam of distant stars was there for them to absorb.

But perhaps, Colgrave told himself, Spacesuit would not decide to lift back into the air. In any case, no other approach was possible. The far side of the ridge was controlled by the *Talada's* night-scanners, and they would be in use by now.

He moved, waited, gathered himself and moved again. Spacesuit was directing most of his attention downhill, but now and then he turned for a look along the ridge in both directions. Perhaps, as the air darkened, the closeness of the forest was getting on his nerves. Native sounds were drifting up from the plain, guttural bellowing and long-drawn ululations. The meat eaters were coming awake. Presently there was a series of short, savage roars from the general direction of the swamp; and Colgrave guessed the search party had

... into some big carnivore who had never heard about energy rifles. When the roaring stopped with a monstrous scream, he was sure of it.

He had reduced the distance between them by almost half when the spacesuit soared jerkily up from the boulder. Colgrave had a very bad moment. But it lifted no more than a dozen feet, then descended again at a slant which carried it behind the boulder. The man had merely changed his position. And the new position he had selected took them out of each other's sight.

Colgrave was instantly on his feet, running forward. Here the surface was rutted with weather fissures. He slipped into one of them, drawing out his gun, moved forward at a crouch. A moment later, he had reached the near side of the boulder on which Spacesuit had stood.

Where was he now? Colgrave listened, heard a burst of thin, crackling noises. They stopped for some seconds, came briefly again, stopped again. The suit communicator ... the man must have taken off the helmet, or the sound wouldn't have been audible. He couldn't be far away.

Colgrave went down on hands and knees, edged along the side of the boulder to the right. From here he could see down the hillside. On the plain, the night was gathering; the boundaries between the open land and the swamp had blurred. But the bobbing string of tiny light beams down there, switching nervously this way and that, must already be moving through the marsh.

The communicator noises came again, now from a point apparently no more than fifteen feet beyond the edge of the boulder ahead of Colgrave. It was as close as he could get. It was important that the man in the spacesuit should die instantly, which meant a head shot. Colgrave rose up, stepped out quietly around the boulder, gun pointed.

The man stood faced half away, the helmet tipped back on his shoulders. In the last instant, as Colgrave squeezed down on the trigger, sighting along the barrel, the head turned and he saw with considerable surprise that it was Colonel Ajan.

Then the gun made its spiteful hissing sound.

Ajan's head jerked slightly to the side and his eyes closed. The spacesuit held him upright for the second or two before he toppled. Colgrave already was there, reaching under the collar for one of the communicator's leads. He found it, gave it a sharp twist, felt it snap.

V

In the *Talada*, the man watching the night-scanners saw Colonel Ajan's spacesuit appear above the ridge and start back to the ship. He informed the control room and the lock attendant.

The outer lock door opened as the suit came to it. Colgrave made a skidding landing inside. His performance in the suit had been no improvement on Ajan's. He shut off the suit drive, clumped up to the inner door, left arm raised across the front of the helmet, hand fumbling with the oxygen hose. It would hide his face for a moment from whoever was on the other side of the door. His right hand rested on his gun.

The door opened. The attendant stood at rigid attention before the control panel six feet away, rifle grounded, eyes front. Mentally

blessing Ralan discipline. Colgrave stepped up beside him, drew out the gun and gave the back of the man's skull a solid thump with the barrel.

When the attendant opened his eyes again a few minutes later, his head ached and there was a gag in his mouth. His hands were tied behind him, and Colgrave was wearing his uniform.

Colgrave hauled him to his feet, poked a gun muzzle against his back.

"Lead the way to the control room," he said.

The attendant led the way. Colgrave followed, the uniform cap pulled down to conceal his face. Ajoran's handgun and a stunner he had taken from the attendant were stuck into his belt. The attendant's energy rifle and the one which had been strapped to the spacesuit were concealed in a closet near the lock. He had assembled quite an arsenal.

When they reached the wide main passage in the upper level of the ship, he halted the lock attendant. They retraced their steps to the last door they had passed. Colgrave opened it. An office of some kind ... he motioned the attendant in and followed him, closing the door.

He came out a few seconds later, shoved the stunner back under his belt, and stood listening. The *Talada* seemed almost eerily silent. Not very surprising, he thought. The number of men who had set out after him indicated that only those of the crew who were needed to coordinate the hunt and maintain the ship's planetary security measures had remained on board. That could be ten or twelve at most; and every one of them would be stationed at his post at the moment.

Colgrave went out into the main passage, walked quietly along it. Now he could hear an intermittent murmur of voices from the control room. One of them seemed to be that of a woman, but he wasn't sure. They were being silent again before he came close enough to distinguish what was being said.

There was nothing to be gained by hesitating at this point. The control room was the nerve center of the ship, but there couldn't be more than four or five of them in it. Colgrave had a gun in either hand as he reached the open doorspace. He turned through it, started unhurriedly down the carpeted stairs leading into the control room, eye and mind photographing the details of the scene below.

Ajoran's lady was nearest, seated at a small table, her attention on the man before the communicator set in a corner alcove on the left. This man's back was turned. A gun was belted to his waist. Farther down in the control room sat another man, facing the passage but bent over some instrument on the desk before him. The desk shielded him almost completely, which made him the most dangerous of the three at the moment. No one else was in view, but that didn't necessarily mean that no one else was here.

Hace became aware of him as he reached the foot of the stairs. Her head turned sharply; she seemed about to speak. Then her eyes went wide with shocked recognition.

He'd have to get the man at the desk the instant she screamed. But she didn't scream. Instead, her right hand went up, two fingers lifted and spread. She nodded fiercely at the communicator operator, next at the man behind the desk.

Only two of them? Well, that probably was true. But he'd better use the stunner on Hace before attempting to deal with the two armed men.

At that moment, the communicator operator looked around.

He was young and his reactions were as fast as Hace's. He threw himself sideways out of the chair with a shout of warning, hit the floor rolling over and clawing for his gun. The man behind the desk had no chance. As he jerked upright, startled, an energy bolt took him in the head. The operator had no real chance, either. Colgrave swung the gun to the left, saw for an instant eyes fixed on him, bright with hatred, and the other gun coming up, and fired again.

He waited a number of seconds, then, alert for further motion. But the control room remained quiet. So Ajan's lady hadn't lied. She stayed where she was, unstirring, until he turned toward her. Then she said quietly, her expression still incredulous, "It seemed like magic! How could you get into the ship?"

Colgrave looked at the dark, ugly bruise his fist had printed along the side of her jaw, said, "In Ajan's spacesuit, of course."

She hesitated. "He's dead?"

"Quite dead," Colgrave said thoughtfully.

"I wanted," Hace said, "to kill him myself. I would have done it finally, I believe...." She hesitated again. "It doesn't matter now. What can I do to help you? They're in trouble down in the swamp."

"What kind of trouble?"

"That isn't clear. It began two or three minutes ago, but we haven't been able to get an intelligible report from the two communicator men. They were excited, shouted, almost irrational."

Colgrave scowled. After a moment, he shook his head. "Let's clean up the ship first. How many on board?"

"Nine besides those two... and myself."

"The man in the lock's taken care of," Colgrave said. "Eight. On the lifeboat?"

"Nobody. Ajan had a trap prepared for you there, in case you came back before they caught you. You could have got inside, but you couldn't have started the engines, and you would have been unable to get out again."

Colgrave grunted. "Can you get the men in the ship to come individually to the control room?"

"I see. Yes, I think I can do that."

"I'll want to check you over for weapons first."

"Of course." Hace smiled slightly, stood up. "Why should you trust me?"

"I wouldn't know," Colgrave said.

They came in, unsuspecting, one by one; and, one by one, the stunner brought them down from behind. Shortly afterwards, a freight carrier floated into the *Talada's* vat room. Hace stood aside as Colgrave unlocked the cover of the drop hole in the deck and hauled it back. A heavy stench surged up from the vat. Colgrave looked down a moment at the oily black liquid eight feet below, then dragged the nine unconscious men in turn over from the carrier, dropped them in, and resealed the vat.

* * *

man's voice babbled and sobbed. Another man screamed in sudden fright; then there was a sound of rapid, panicky breathing mingled with the sobs.

Colgrave switched off the communicator, looked over at Hace. "Is this what it was like before?"

She moistened her lips. "No, this is insanity!" Her voice was unsteady. "They're both completely incapable of responding to us now. What could there be in that swamp at night to have terrified them to that extent? At least some of the others should have come back to the ship...." She paused. "Colgrave, why do we stay here? You know what they're like--why bother with them? You don't need any of them to handle the ship. One person can take it to Earth if necessary."

"I know," Colgrave said. He studied her, added, "I'm wondering a little why you're willing to help me get to Earth."

Anger showed for an instant in the pale, beautiful face.

"I'm no Ralan! I was picked up in a raid on Beristeen when I was twelve. I've never wanted to do anything but get away from Rala since that day."

Colgrave grunted, rubbed his chin. "I see... Well, we can't leave immediately. For one thing, I left the Sigma File in that swamp."

Hace stared at him. "You haven't destroyed it?"

"No. It never quite came to that point."

She laughed shortly. "Colgrave, you're rather wonderful! Ajoran was convinced the file was lost, and that his only chance of saving his own skin was to get you back alive so he could find out what you had learned on the Lorn Worlds... No, you can't leave the file behind, of course! I understand that. But why don't we lift the ship out of atmosphere until it's morning here?" She nodded at the communicator. "That disturbance--whatever they've aroused down there--should have settled out by then. The swamp will be quiet again. Then you can work out a way to get the file back without too much danger."

Colgrave shook his head, got to his feet. "No, that shouldn't be necessary. The man-tracker was being monitored from the ship, wasn't it? Where is the control set kept?"

Hace indicated the desk twenty feet behind her where the second man had sat when Colgrave had come into the control room.

"It's lying over there. That's what he was doing."

Colgrave said, "Let's take a look at it. I want the thing to return to the ship." He started toward the desk.

Hace stood up, went over to the desk with him. "I'm afraid I can't tell you how to operate it."

"I should be able to do it," Colgrave said. "I played around a few hours once with a captured man-tracker which had been shipped back to Earth. This appears to be a very similar model." He looked down at the moving dark blurs in the screen which formed the center of the control set, twisted a knob to one side of it. "Let's see what it's doing now before I have it return to the ship."

The screen cleared suddenly. The scene was still dark, but in the machine's night-vision details were distinct. A rippling weed bed was gliding slowly past below; a taller leafy thicket ahead moved closer. Then the thicket closed about the tracker.

Hace said, "The operator was trying to discover through the tracker

that was happening to the men down there, but it moved out of the range of their lights almost as soon as the disturbance began; Apparently the devices, once set, can't be turned around."

"Not unless you're riding them," Colgrave agreed. "Tele-monitoring starts them off and observes what they're doing. They either go on and finish their business, or get their sensors switched off and return to their starting point. It's still following my trail. Now...."

"What's that light?" Haze asked uneasily. "It looks like the reflection of a fire."

The tracker had emerged from the thicket, swung to the left, and was gliding low over an expanse of open water, almost touching it. There were pale orange glitters on the surface ahead of it.

Colgrave studied them, said, "At a guess, it simply means there's a moon in the sky." He pushed a stud on the set, and the scene vanished. "That wiped out the last instructions it was given. It will come back to the ship in a minute or two."

Haze looked at him. "What do you have in mind?"

"I'm riding it down to the swamp."

"Not now! In the morning you..."

"I don't think I'll be in any danger. Now let's find a place where I'm sure you'll stay locked up until I get back. As you said, one person can do all that's needed to lift this ship off the planet and head away..."

VI

Five hundred feet above the ground, the man-tracker's open saddle was not the most reassuring place to be in. But the machine was considerably easier to maneuver than the spacesuit had been and the direct route by air to the giant tree beneath which he'd concealed the Sigma File was the shortest and fastest. Colgrave was reasonably certain nothing had happened to the file, but he wouldn't know until he held it in his hands again.

The orange moon that had pushed above the horizon was a big one, the apparent diameter of its disk twice that of the vanished sun. Colgrave was holding the tracker's pace down. But no more than a few minutes passed before he could make out the big tree in the vague light, ahead and a little to his right. He guided the machine over to it, circled its crown slowly twice, looking down, then lowered the tracker down to a section of open water near the base of the tree, turned it and went gliding in toward the tangled root system of the giant. He turned the control set off, remained in the saddle a few moments, looking about and listening.

The swamp was full of sound, most of it of a minor nature ... chirps, twittering, soft hoots. Something whistled piercingly three times in the tree overhead. Behind him, not too far off, was a slow, heavy splashing which gradually moved away. At the very limit of his hearing was something else. It might have been human voices, faint with distance, or simply his imagination at work.

Nearby, nothing moved. Colgrave pulled the control set out of its saddle frame, slid down from the saddle, clinging to it with one hand, finally dropped a few inches into a layer of mud above the mass of tree roots. He climbed farther up on the roots, found a dry place under one of them where he shoved the control set in out of sight. Then he went climbing cautiously on around the great trunk, slipping

now and then on the slimy root tangs beneath the mud....

And here was where he had concealed the Sigma File. A little bay of water extended almost to the trunk itself, about five feet deep. Colgrave slipped down into it. There was firm footing here. He moved forward to the tip of the bay, took a deep breath and crouched down. The warm water closed over his head. He groped about among the root shelves before him, touched the file, gripped it by its handle and drew it out.

He clambered up out of the water, started back around the tree....

And there the thing stood.

• • •



Colgrave stopped short. This was almost an exact duplication of what happened after he'd brought the Sigma File down here and concealed it. It had been daylight then, and what he saw now as a bulky manlike shape in the shadow of the tree had been clearly visible. It was a green monstrosity, heavy as a gorilla, with a huge, round bobbing ball of a head which showed no features at all through its leafy appendages. It was bigger than it had looked at a distance from the hillside, standing almost eight feet tall.

The first time, it had been only a few yards away, moving toward him around the tree, when he had seen it. His instant reaction had been to haul out his gun....

Now he stayed still, looking at it. His heartbeat had speeded up noticeably. This was, he told himself, an essentially vegetarian creature. And it was peaceable because it had a completely effective means of defense. It could sense the impulse to attack in an approaching carnivore, and it could make the carnivore forget its purpose.

As often as was necessary.

Colgrave made himself start forward. He had no intention, his mind kept repeating, of harming this oversized fleegle, and it had no intention of harming him. It did not move out of his path as he came toward it, but turned slowly to keep facing him as he clambered past over the roots a few feet away.

Colgrave didn't look back at it and heard no movement behind him. He saw the man-tracker floating motionless above the mud ahead, put the file down and pulled the tracker's control set out from under the root where he had left it. A minute or two later, he was back in the machine's saddle, out in the moonlight away from the big tree, the Sigma File fastened to his belt.

He tapped a pattern of instructions into the control set, checked them very carefully, slid the set into the saddle frame and switched it on.

The man-tracker swung about purposefully, went gliding away

rough the swamp. A hundred yards on, it encountered three fleegles, somewhat smaller than the one under the tree, wading slowly leg-deep through the mud. They stopped as the machine appeared, and Colgrave thought friendly and admiring things about fleegles until they were well behind him again. Perhaps a minute later, the man-tracker stopped in the air above the first of the *Talada's* lost crew.

He had crawled into a thicket and was blubbering noisily to himself. When two of the machine's grapplers flicked down into the thicket and locked about him, he bawled in horror. Colgrave looked straight ahead, not particularly wanting to watch this. There was a click behind him as the preservative tank opened. For a moment, his nostrils were full of the stink of the liquid. Then there was a splash, and the bawling stopped abruptly. The tank clicked shut.

The man-tracker swung around on a new point, set off again. Its present instructions were to trail and collect every human being within the range of its sensory equipment, except its rider.

They'd been on edge to begin with here, Colgrave told himself. Their rifles already had brought down one brute which had come roaring monstrosly at them in the dusk; and presumably the rifles could handle anything else they might encounter. But they hadn't liked the look of the swamp the man-tracker was leading them into. Wading through pools, slipping in the mud, flashing their lights about at every menacing shadow, they followed the machine, mentally cursing the order that had sent them after the Earth intelligence agent as night was closing in.

And then a great green ogre was standing in one of the light beams....

Naturally, they tried to shoot it.

And as they made the decision, they began to forget.

Progressive waves of amnesia ... first, perhaps, only a touch. The men lifting rifles forgot they were lifting them. Until they saw the fleegle again--

The past few hours might be wiped out next. They stood in a swamp at night, not knowing how they'd got there or why they were there. But they had rifles in their hands, and an ogish shape was watching them.

Months forgotten now. The fleegle could keep it up.

About that point, they'd begun to stampede, scattered, ploughed this way and that through the swamp. But the fleegles were everywhere. And as often as a gun was lifted in panic, another chunk of memory would go. Until the last of the weapons was dropped.

The man-tracker wasn't rounding up men, but children in grown-up bodies, huddled in hiding on a wet, dark nightmare world, dazed and uncomprehending, unable to do more than wail wildly as the machine picked them up and placed them in its tank.

VII

Colgrave came out of the compartment where the man-tracker was housed, locked the door and turned off the control set.

"You haven't closed the vat yet," Haze said.

He nodded. "I know. Let's go back."

"I'm still not clear on just what did happen," she went on, walking beside him up the passage. "You say they lost their memories...?"

"Yes. It's a temporary thing. I had the same experience when I first got here, though I don't seem to have been hit as hard as most of them were. If they weren't floating around in that slop now, they'd start remembering within hours."

He opened the door to the vat room, motioned her inside. Hace wrinkled her nose in automatic distaste at the odor of the preservative, said, "It's very strange. How could any creature affect a human mind in that manner?"

"I don't know," Colgrave said. "But it isn't important now." He followed her in, closing the door behind him, went on, "Now this will be rather unpleasant, so let's get it over with."

She glanced back at him. "Get what over with, Colgrave?"

"You're getting the ride to Earth you said you wanted," Colgrave told her, "but you're riding along with the crew down there."

Hace whirled to face him, her eyes wild with fear.

"Ah--no! Colgrave ... I ... you couldn't...."

"I don't want you awake on the ship," he told her. "Though I might have thought of some other way of making sure you wouldn't be a problem if my pilot hadn't died as he did."

"What does that have to do with me?" Her voice was shrill. "Didn't I try to help you in the control room?"

"You played it smart in the control room," Colgrave said. "But you would have gone into the vat with the first group if I hadn't thought you might be useful in some way."

"But why? Am I to blame for what Ajan did?"

Colgrave shrugged. "I'm not sorry for what happened to Ajan. But I'm not stupid enough to think that a Ralan intelligence agent would go out in a spacesuit to help look for me, leaving the ship in charge of a couple of junior officers. Ajan went out because he was ordered to do it. And there were a few other things. What they add up to, lady, is that you were the senior agent in this operation. And it would suit you just fine to get back to Rala with the Sigma File, and no one left alive to tell how you almost let it get away from you."

Hace wet her lips, her eyes darting wildly about his face.

"Colgrave, I..." she started to plead.

"No," Colgrave said. He placed his hand flat against her chest, shoved hard. Hace went stumbling backward toward the open drop hole of the vat. There was a scream and a splash. He walked over and looked down. The oily surface was smooth again. He slammed the cover down over the drop hole, sealed it and left the room.

• • •

About two hours had passed. The *Talada* hung in space near the fringes of the solar system which contained the fleegle world. Colgrave had completed his studies of the ship's navigational system. It was a standard setup for long-range vessels, self-locating, self-focusing. Once he got the raider under way, there would be less for him to do than there would have been on the lifeboat.

But there was one more matter to take care of before he left. On the

planet, he hadn't dared let himself think about it.

The *Talada's* computers knew where the ship was but weren't registering the fact. For most navigational purposes, it was meaningless. You only had to know where you wanted to go. Carrying out a location check was a separate operation which would take him at least another hour.

The time wouldn't be wasted, Colgrave thought. Recording the ship's exact coordinates here might turn out to be as important as getting the Sigma File to Earth--more so...

It had been at the other end of the swamp, shortly before he returned to the ship, while the tracker was picking up a man who had got farther than most, that he suddenly had become aware of a glow of greenish luminescence on his left and turned in the saddle to look at it.

There was a wide opening in the forested hillside above the level of the swamp. Colgrave had stared at it with a feeling almost of superstitious fear. A group of fleegles was streaming slowly into it; a few others were emerging. There was a sense of something ordered and arranged stretching far back into the dim green light under the hill. The equivalent of human buildings, he had thought. And beyond them, taller than the structures, he could make out vague, green figures moving hugely about.

His skin was crawling when the tracker deposited its last captive in the tank, turned and went gliding back toward the center of the swamp. He had a strong conviction he should do nothing whatever to draw attention to himself here. But as the machine came up to a dense thicket which would have shut off his view, Colgrave looked back. The opening in the hill had vanished.

An underground civilization of some kind, and intelligence... In all the time man had been in space, there had been no previous recorded contact with another intelligent race.

Perhaps we've never taken the time to really look for them, Colgrave thought. *Our main business somehow always seems to be fighting among ourselves.*

As the coming war with Rala would prevent any immediate action being taken on the report he would make. But someday a scientific expedition would start out from Earth to settle down on the fleegle world and make contact--

Colgrave leaned forward in his chair, pulled the *Talada's* locator toward him, snapped it into the computing system, and placed his hand on the activating switch.

Then he went still, head raised, tilted sideways a little in an attitude of listening.

From somewhere, very far away, a huge, quiet voice was addressing him.

"Forget it," it said.

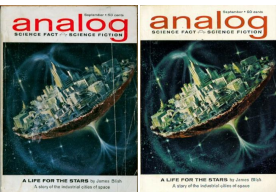
Colgrave gave the locator a puzzled look, pulled it out of the system, stood up and restored it to its casing.

He returned, studied the focal chart which contained Earth briefly once more, then reached out and cut in the main drive. The *Talada* began to move.

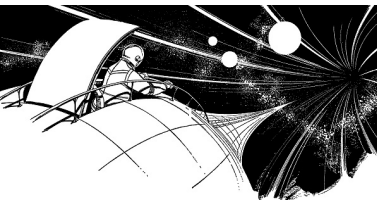
Colgrave settled back in his chair, watching a not very remarkable yellow sun slide slowly away from him in the screen. There was a momentary uneasy feeling that something else was also sliding away ... something very important that now would be forever lost. Then he

"The Winds of Time"

Published in *Analog Science Fiction* → *Science Fact*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (September 1962), with illustrations by Adolph E. Brotman.



Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.



He contracted for a charter trip--
but the man who hired his spacer wasn't quite a
man,
it turned out--and he wanted more than service!

Geffy Rammer came along the narrow passages between the *Silver Queen's* control compartment and the staterooms, trying to exchange the haggard look on his face for one of competent self-assurance. There was nothing to gain by letting his two passengers suspect that during the past few minutes their pilot, the owner of Rammer Spacelines, had been a bare step away from plain and fancy gibbering.

He opened the door to Mr. Maulbow's stateroom and went inside. Mr. Maulbow, face very pale, eyes closed, lay on his back on the couch, still unconscious. He'd been knocked out when some unknown forces suddenly started batting the *Silver Queen's* turnip-shape around as the *Queen* had never been batted before in her

nineteen years of spacefaring. Kerim Ruse, Maulbow's secretary, knelt beside her employer, checking his pulse. She looked anxiously up at Gefty.

"What did you find out?" she asked in a voice that was not very steady.

Gefty shrugged. "Nothing definite as yet. The ship hasn't been damaged—she's a tough tub. That's one good point. Otherwise ... well, I climbed into a suit and took a look out the escape hatch. And I saw the same thing there that the screens show. Whatever that is."

"You've no idea then of what's happened to us, or where we are?" Miss Ruse persisted. She was a rather small girl with large, beautiful gray eyes and thick blue-black hair. At the moment, she was barefoot and in a sleeping outfit which consisted of something soft wrapped around her top, soft and floppy trousers below. The black hair was tousled and she looked around fifteen. She'd been asleep in her stateroom when something smacked the *Queen*, and she was sensible enough then not to climb out of the bunk's safety field until the ship finally stopped shuddering and bucking about. That made her the only one of the three persons aboard who had collected no bruises. She was scared, of course, but taking the situation very well.

Gefty said carefully, "There're a number of possibilities. It's obvious that the *Queen* has been knocked out of normspace, and it may take some time to find out how to get her back there. But the main thing is that the ship's intact. So far, it doesn't look too bad."

Miss Ruse seemed somewhat reassured. Gefty could hardly have said the same for himself. He was a qualified normspace and subspace pilot. He had put in a hitch with the Federation Navy, and for the past eight years he'd been ferrying his own two ships about the Hub and not infrequently beyond the Federation's space territories, but he had never heard of a situation like this. What he saw in the viewscreens when the ship steadied enough to let him pick himself off the instrument room floor, and again, a few minutes later and with much more immediacy, from the escape hatch, made no sense—seemed simply to have no meaning. The pressure meters said there was a vacuum outside the *Queen's* skin. That vacuum was dark, even pitch-black but here and there came momentary suggestions of vague light and color. Occasional pinpricks of brightness showed and were gone. And there had been one startling phenomenon like a distant, giant explosion, a sudden pallid glare in the dark, which appeared far ahead of the *Queen* and, for the instant it remained in sight, seemed to be rushing directly towards them. It had given Gefty the feeling that the ship itself was plowing at high speed through this eerie medium. But he had cut the *Queen's* drives to the merest idling pulse as soon as he staggered back to the control console and got his first look at the screens, so it must have been the light that had moved.

But such details were best not discussed with a passenger. Kerim Ruse would be arriving at enough disquieting speculations on her own; the less he told her, the better. There was the matter of the ship's location instruments. The only set Gefty had been able to obtain any reading on were the direction indicators. And what they appeared to indicate was that the *Silver Queen* was turning on a new heading something like twenty times a second.

Gefty asked, "Has Mr. Maulbow shown any signs of waking up?"

Kerim shook his head. "His breathing and pulse seem all right, and that bump on his head doesn't look really bad, but he hasn't moved at all. Can you think of anything else we might do for him, Gefty?"

"Not at the moment," Gefty said. "He hasn't broken any bones. We'll see how he feels when he comes out of it." He was wondering about Mr. Maulbow and the fact that this charter had showed some unusual

atures from the beginning.

Kerim was a friendly sort of girl; they'd got to calling each other by their first names within a day or two after the trip started. But after that, she seemed to be avoiding him; and Gefty guessed that Maulbow had spoken to her, probably to make sure that Kerim didn't let any of her employer's secrets slip out.

Maulbow himself was as aloof and taciturn a client as Rammer Spacelines ever had picked up. A lean, blond character of indeterminate age, with pale eyes, hard mouth. Why he had selected a bulky semifreighter like the *Queen* for a mineralogical survey jaunt to a lifeless little sun system far beyond the outposts of civilization was a point he didn't discuss. Gefty, needing the charter money, had restrained his curiosity. If Maulbow wanted only a pilot and preferred to do all the rest of the work himself, that was certainly Maulbow's affair. And if he happened to be up to something illegal—though it was difficult to imagine what—Customs would nail him when they got back to the Hub.

But those facts looked a little different now.

• • •

Gefty scratched his chin, inquired, "Do you happen to know where Mr. Maulbow keeps the keys to the storage vault?"

Kerim looked startled. "Why, no! I couldn't permit you to take the keys anyway while he ... while he's unconscious! You know that."

Gefty grunted. "Any idea of what he has locked up in the vault?"

"You shouldn't ask me—" Her eyes widened. "Why, that couldn't possibly have anything to do with what's happened!"

He might, Gefty thought, have reassured her a little too much. He said, "I wouldn't know. But I don't want to just sit here and wonder about it until Maulbow wakes up. Until we're back in normspace, we'd better not miss any bets. Because one thing's sure—if this has happened to anybody else, they didn't turn up again to report it. You see?"

Kerim apparently did. She went pale, then said hesitantly, "Well ... the sealed cases Mr. Maulbow brought out from the Hub with him had some very expensive instruments in them. That's all I know. He's always trusted me not to pry into his business any more than my secretarial duties required, and of course I haven't."

"You don't know then what it was he brought up from that moon a few hours ago—those two big cases he stowed away in the vault?"

"No, I don't, Gefty. You see, he hasn't told me what the purpose of this trip is. I only know that it's a matter of great importance to him." Kerim paused, added, "From the careful manner Mr. Maulbow handled the cases with the cranes, I had the impression that whatever was inside them must be quite heavy."

"I noticed that," Gefty said. It wasn't much help. "Well, I'll tell you something now," he went on. "I let your boss keep both sets of keys to the storage vault because he insisted on it when he signed the charter. What I didn't tell him was that I could make up a duplicate set any time in around half an hour."

"Oh! Have you—?"

"Not yet. But I intend to take a look at what Mr. Maulbow's got in that vault now, with or without his consent. You'd better run along and get dressed while I take him up to the instrument room."

"Why move him?" Kerim asked.

"The instrument room's got an overall safety field. I've turned it on now, and if something starts banging us around again, the room will be the safest place on the ship. I'll bring his personal luggage up too, and you can start looking through it for the keys. You may find them before I get a new set made. Or he may wake up and tell us where they are."

Kerim Ruse gave her employer a dubious glance, then nodded, said, "I imagine you're right, Gefty," and pattered hurriedly out of the stateroom. A few minutes later, she arrived, fully dressed, in the instrument room. Gefty looked around from the table-shelf where he had laid out his tools, and said, "He hasn't stirred. His suitcases are over there. I've unlocked them."

Kerim gazed at what showed in the screens about the control console and shivered slightly. She said, "I was thinking, Gefty ... isn't there something they call Space Three?"

"Sure. Pseudospace. But that isn't where we are. There're some special-built Navy tubs that can operate in that stuff if they don't stay too long. A ship like the *Queen* ... well, you and I and everything else in here would be frozen solid by now if we'd got sucked somehow into Space Three."

"I see," Kerim said uncomfortably. Gefty heard her move over to the suitcases. After a moment, she asked, "What do the vault keys look like?"

"You can't miss them if he's just thrown them in there. They're over six inches long. What kind of a guy is this Maulbow? A scientist?"

"I couldn't say, Gefty. He's never referred to himself as a scientist. I've had this job a year and a half. Mr. Maulbow is a very considerate employer ... one of the nicest men I've known, really. But it was simply understood that I should ask no questions about the business beyond what I actually needed to know for my work."

"What's the business called?"

"Maulbow Engineering."

"Big help," Gefty observed, somewhat sourly. "Those instruments he brought along ... he build those himself?"

"No, but I think he designed some of them--probably most of them. The companies he had doing the actual work appeared to have a terrible time getting everything exactly the way Mr. Maulbow wanted it--There's nothing that looks like a set of keys in those first two suitcases, Gefty."

"Well," Gefty said, "if you don't find them in the others, you might start thumping around to see if he's got secret compartments in his luggage somewhere."

"I do wish," Kerim Ruse said uneasily, "that Mr. Maulbow would regain consciousness. It seems so ... so underhanded to be doing these things behind his back!"

Gefty grunted noncommittally. He wasn't at all certain by now that he wanted his secretive client to wake up before he'd checked on the contents of the *Queen's* storage vault.

. . .

Fifteen minutes later, Gefty Rammer was climbing down to the storage deck in the *Queen's* broad stern, the newly fashioned set of

mult keys clanking heavily in his coat pocket. Kerim had remained with her employer who was getting back his color but still hadn't opened his eyes. She hadn't found the original keys. Gefty wasn't sure she'd tried too hard, though she seemed to realize the seriousness of the situation now. But her loyalty to Mr. Maulbow could make no further difference, and she probably felt more comfortable for it.

Lights went on automatically in the wide passage leading from the cargo lock to the vault as Gefty turned into it. His steps echoed between the steel bulkheads on either side. He paused a moment before the big circular vault doors, listening to the purr of the *Queen's* idling engines in the next compartment. The familiar sound was somehow reassuring. He inserted the first key, turned it over twice, drew it out again and pressed one of the buttons in the control panel beside the door. The heavy slab of steel moved sideways with a soft, hissing sound, vanished into the wall. Gefty slid the other key into the lock of the inner door. A few seconds later, the vault entrance lay open before him.

He stood still again, wrinkling his nose. The area ahead was only dimly illuminated—the shaking-up the *Queen* had undergone had disturbed the lighting system here. And what was that odor? Rather sharp, unpleasant; it might have been spilled ammonia. Gefty stepped through the door into the wide, short entrance passage beyond it, turned to the right and peered about in the semidarkness of the vault.

Two great steel cases—the ones Maulbow had taken down to an airless moon surface, loaded up with something and brought back to the *Queen*—were jammed awkwardly into a corner, in a manner which suggested they'd slid into it when the ship was being knocked around. One of them was open and appeared to be empty. Gefty wasn't sure of the other. In the dimness beside them lay the loose coils of some very thick, dark cable—And standing near the center of the floor was a thing that at once riveted his attention on it completely. He sucked his breath in softly, feeling chilled.

He realized he hadn't really believed his own hunch. But, of course, if it hadn't been an unheard-of outside force that plucked the *Queen* out of normspace and threw her into this elsewhere, then it must be something Maulbow had put on board. And that something had to be a machine of some kind—

It was.

About it he could make out a thin gleaming of wires—a jury-rigged safety field. Within the flimsy-looking protective cage was a double bank of instruments, some of them alive with the flicker and glow of lights. Those must be the very expensive and difficult-to-build items Maulbow had brought out from the Hub. Beside them stood the machine, squat and ponderous. In the vague light, it looked misshaped and discolored. A piece of equipment that had taken a bad beating of some kind. But it was functioning. As he stared, intermittent bursts of clicking noises rose from it, like the staccato of irregular gunfire.

For a moment, questions raced in disorder through his mind. What was it? Why had it been on that moon? Part of another ship, wrecked now ... a ship that had been at home *here*? Was it some sort of drive?

Maulbow must know. He'd known enough to design the instruments required to bring the battered monster back to life. On the other hand, he had not foreseen in all detail what could happen once the thing was in operation, because the *Queen's* sudden buck-jumping act had surprised him and knocked him out.



The first step, in any event, was to get Maulbow awake now. To tamper with a device like this, before learning as much as one could about it, would be lunatic foolhardiness. It looked like too good a bet that the next serious mistake made by anybody would finish them all-

Perhaps it was only because Gefly's nerves were on edge that he grew aware at that point in his reflections of two minor signals from his senses. One was that the smell of ammonia, which he had almost stopped noticing, was becoming appreciably stronger. The other was the faintest of sounds—a whispering suggestion of motion somewhere behind him. But here in the storage vault nothing should have moved, and Gefly's muscles were tensing as his head came around. Almost in the same instant, he flung himself wildly to one side, stumbling and regaining his balance as something big and dark slapped heavily down on the floor at the point where he had stood. Then he was darting up through the entrance passage, turning, and knocking down the lock switches on the outside door panel.

It came flowing around the corner of the passage behind him as the vault doors began to slide together. He was aware mainly of swift, smooth, oiling motion like that of a big snake; then, for a fraction of a second, a strip of brighter light from the outside passage showed a long, heavy wedge of a head, a green metal-glint of staring eyes.

The doors closed silently into their frames and locked. The thing was inside. But it was almost a minute then before Gefly could control his shaking legs enough to start moving back towards the main deck. In the half-dark of the vault, it had looked like a big coiled cable lying next to the packing cases. Like Maulbow, it might have been battered around and knocked out during the recent disturbance; and when it recovered, it had found Gefly in the vault with it. But it might also have been awake all the while, waiting cunningly until Gefly's attention seemed fixed elsewhere before launching its attack. It was big enough to have flattened him and smashed every bone in his body if the stroke had landed.

Some kind of guard animal—a snakelike watchdog? What other connection could it have with the mystery machine? Perhaps Maulbow had intended to leave it confined in one of the cases, and it

had broken loose—

Too many questions by now, Gefty thought. But Maulbow had the answers.

• • •

He was hurrying up the main deck's central passage when Maulbow's voice addressed him sharply from a door he'd just passed.

"Stop right there, Rammer! Don't dare to move! I—"

The voice ended on a note of surprise. Gefty's reaction had not been too rational, but it was prompt. Maulbow's tone and phrasing implied he was armed. Gefty wasn't, but he kept a gun in the instrument room for emergencies. He'd been through a whole series of unnerving experiences, winding up with being shagged out of his storage vault by something that stank of ammonia and looked like a giant snake. To have one of the *Queen's* passengers order him to stand where he was topped it off. Every other consideration was swept aside by a great urge to get his hands on his gun.

He glanced back, saw Maulbow coming out of the half-opened door, something like a twenty-inch, thin, white rod in one hand. Then Gefty went bounding on along the passage, hunched forward and zigzagging from wall to wall to give Maulbow—if the thing he held was a weapon and he actually intended to use it—as small and erratic a target as possible. Maulbow shouted angrily behind him. Then, as Gefty came up to the next cross-passage, a line of white fire seared through the air across his shoulders and smashed off the passage wall.

With that, he was around the corner, and boiling mad. He had no great liking for gunfire, but it didn't shake him like the silently attacking beast in the dark storage had done. He reached the deserted instrument room not many seconds later, had his gun out and cocked, and was faced back towards the passage by which he had entered. Maulbow, if he had pursued without hesitation, should be arriving by now. But the passage stayed quiet. Gefty couldn't see into it from where he stood. He waited, trying to steady his breathing, wondering where Kerim Ruse was and what had got into Maulbow. After a moment, without taking his eyes from the passage entrance, he reached into the wall closet from which he had taken the gun and fished out another souvenir of his active service days, a thin-bladed knife in a slip-sheath. Gefty worked the fastenings of the sheath over his left wrist and up his forearm under his coat, tested the release to make sure it was functioning, and shook his coat sleeve back into place.

The passage was still quiet. Gefty moved softly over to one of the chairs, took a small cushion from it and pitched it out in front of the entrance.

There was a hiss. The cushion turned in midair into a puff of bright white fire. Gefty aimed his gun high at the far passage wall just beyond the entrance and pulled the trigger. It was a projectile gun. He heard the slug screech off the slick plastic bulkhead and go slamming down the passage. Somebody out there made a startled, incoherent noise. But not the kind of a noise a man makes when he's just been hit.

"If you come in here armed," Gefty called, "I'll blow your head off. Want to stop this nonsense now?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Maulbow's voice replied shakily from the passage. He seemed to be standing about twenty feet back from the room.

"If you'll end your thoughtless attempts at interference, Rammer," he said, "there will be no trouble." He was speaking with the restraint of a man who is in a state of cold fury. "You're endangering us all. You must realize that you have no understanding of what you are doing."

Well, the last could be true enough. "We'll talk about it," Gefty said without friendliness. "I haven't done anything yet, but I'm not just handing the ship over to you. And what have you done with Miss Ruse?"

Maulbow hesitated again. "She's in the map room," he said then. "I ... it was necessary to restrict her movements for a while. But you might as well let her out now. We must reach an agreement without loss of time."

Gefty glanced over his shoulder at the small closed door of the map room. There was no lock on the door, and he had heard no sound from inside; this might be some trick. But it wouldn't take long to find out. He backed up to the wall, pushed the door open and looked inside.

Kerim was there, sitting on a chair in one corner of the tiny room. The reason she hadn't made any noise became clear. She and the chair were covered by a rather closely fitting sack of transparent, glistening fabric. She stared out through it despairingly at Gefty, her lips moving urgently. But no sound came from the sack.

Gefty called angrily, "Maulbow--"

"Don't excite yourself, Rammer." There was a suggestion of what might be contempt in Maulbow's tone now. "The girl hasn't been harmed. She can breathe easily through the restrainer. And you can remove it by pulling at the material from outside."

Gefty's mouth tightened. "I'll keep my gun on the passage while I do it--"

Maulbow didn't answer. Gefty edged back into the map room, tentatively grasped the transparent stuff above Kerim's shoulder. To his surprise, it parted like wet tissue. He pulled sharply, and in a moment Kerim came peeling herself out of it, her face tear-stained, working desperately with hands, elbows and shoulders.

"Gefty," she gasped, "he ... Mr. Maulbow--"

"He's out in the passage there," Gefty said. "He can hear you." His glance shifted for an instant to the wall where a second of the shroudlike transparencies was hanging. And who could that have been intended for, he thought, but Gefty Rammer? He added, "We've had a little trouble."

"Oh!" She looked out of the room towards the passage, then at the gun in Gefty's hand, then up at his face.

"Maulbow," Gefty went on, speaking distinctly enough to make sure Maulbow heard, "has a gun, too. He'll stay there in the passage and we'll stay in the instrument room until we agree on what should be done. He's responsible for what's happened and seems to know where we are."

He looked at Kerim's frightened eyes, dropped his voice to a whisper. "Don't let this worry you too much. I haven't found out just what he's up to, but so far his tricks have pretty much backfired. He was counting on taking us both by surprise, for one thing. That didn't work, so now he'd like us to co-operate."

"Are you going to?"

Gefty shrugged. "Depends on what he has in mind. I'm just interested in getting us out of this alive. Let's hear what Maulbow has to say--"

Some minutes later Gefty was trying to decide whether it was taking a worse risk to believe what Maulbow said than to keep things stalled on the chance that he was lying.

Kerim Ruse, perched stiffly erect on the edge of a chair, eyes big and round, face almost colorless, apparently believed Maulbow and was wishing she didn't. There was, of course, some supporting evidence ... primarily the improbable appearance of their surroundings. The pencil-thin fire-spouter and the sleazy-looking "restrainer" had a sufficiently unfamiliar air to go with Maulbow's story, but as far as Gefty knew, either of them could have been manufactured in the Hub.

Then there was the janandra—the big, snakish thing in the storage which Maulbow had brought back up from the moon along with the battered machine. It had been, he said, his shipboard companion on another voyage. It wasn't ordinarily aggressive—Gefty's sudden appearance in the vault must have startled it into making an attack. It was not exactly a pet. There was a psychological relationship between it and Maulbow which Maulbow would not attempt to explain because Gefty and Kerim would be unable to grasp its significance. The janandra was essential, in this unexplained manner, to his well-being.

That item was almost curious enough to seem to substantiate his other statements; but it didn't really prove anything. The only point Gefty didn't question in the least was that they were in a bad spot which might be getting worse rapidly. His gaze shifted back to the screens. What he saw out there, surrounding the ship, was, according to Maulbow, an illusion of space created by the time flow in which they were moving.

Also according to Maulbow, there was a race of the future, human in appearance, with machines to sail the current of time through the universe—to run and tack with the winds of time, dipping in and out of the normspace of distant periods and galaxies as they chose. Maulbow, one of the explorers, had met disaster a million light-years from the home of his kind, centuries behind them, his vehicle wrecked on an airless moon with damaged control unit and shattered instruments. He had made his way to a human civilization to obtain the equipment he needed, and returned at last with the *Silver Queen* to where the time-sailer lay buried.

Gefty's lip curled. No, he wasn't buying all that just yet—but if Maulbow was *not* lying, then the unseen stars were racing past, the mass of the galaxy beginning to slide by, eventually to be lost forever beyond a black distance no space drive could span. The matter simply had to be settled quickly. But Maulbow was also strained and impatient, and if his impatience could be increased a little more, he might start telling the things that really mattered, the things Gefty had to know. Gefty asked slowly, as if hesitant to commit himself, "Why did you bring us along?"

The voice from the passage snapped, "Because my resources were nearly exhausted, Rammer! I couldn't obtain a new ship. Therefore I chartered yours; and you came with it. As for Miss Ruse—in spite of every precaution, my activities may have aroused suspicion and curiosity among your people. When I disappeared, Miss Ruse might have been questioned. I couldn't risk being followed to the wreck of the sailer, so I took her with me. And what does that mean against what I have offered you? The greatest adventure—followed, I give you my solemn word, by a safe return to your own place and time, and the most generous compensations for any inconvenience you may have suffered!"

Kerim, looking up at Gefly, shook her head violently. Gefly said, "We find it difficult to take you on trust now, Maulbow. Why do you want to get into the instrument room?"

Maulbow was silent for some seconds. Then he said, "As I told you, this ship would not have been buffeted about during the moments of transfer if the control unit were operating with complete efficiency. Certain adjustments will have to be made in the unit, and this should be done promptly."

* * *

"Where do the ship instruments come in?" Gefly asked.

"I can determine the nature of the problem from them. When I was ... stranded ... the unit was seriously damaged. My recent repairs were necessarily hasty. I--"

"What caused the crack-up?"

Maulbow said, tone taut with impatience, "Certain sections of the Great Current are infested with dangerous forces. I shall not attempt to describe them... ."

"I wouldn't get it?"

"I don't pretend to understand them very well myself, Rammer. They are not life but show characteristics of life—even of intelligent life. If you can imagine radiant energy being capable of conscious hostility... ."

There was a chill at the back of Gefly's neck. "A big, fast-moving light?"

"Yes!" Sharp concern showed suddenly in the voice from the passage. "You ... when did you see that?"

Gefly glanced at the screens. "Twice since you've been talking. And once before—immediately after we got tumbled around."

"Then we can waste no more time, Rammer. Those forces are sensitive to the fluctuations of the control unit. If they were close enough to be seen, they're aware the ship is here. They were attempting to locate it."

"What could they do?"

Maulbow said, "A single attack was enough to put the control unit out of operation in my sailer. The Great Current then rejected us instantly. A ship of this size might afford more protection, which is the reason I chose it. But if the control unit is not adjusted immediately to enable it to take us out of this section, the attacks will continue until the ship—and we—have been destroyed."

Gefly drew a deep breath. "There's another solution to that problem, Maulbow. Miss Ruse and I prefer it. And if you meant what you said—that you'd see to it we got back eventually—you shouldn't object either."

The voice asked sharply, "What do you mean?"

Gefly said, "Shut the control unit off. From what you were saying, that throws us automatically back into normspace, while we're still close enough to the Hub. You'll find plenty of people there who'll stake you to a trip to the future if they can go along and are convinced they'll return. Miss Ruse and I don't happen to be that adventurous."

There was silence from the passage. Gefly added, "Take your time

make up your mind about it, if you want to. I don't like the idea of those lights hitting us, but neither do you. And I think I can wait this out as well as you can..."

The silence stretched out. Presently Gefty said, "If you do accept, slide that fire-shooting device of yours into the room before you show up. We don't want accidents."

He paused again. Kerim was chewing her lips, hands clenched into small fists in her lap. Then Maulbow answered, voice flat and expressionless now.

"The worst thing we can do at present," he said, "is to prolong a dispute about possible courses of action. If I disarm, will you lay aside your gun?"

"Yes."

"Then I accept your conditions, disappointing as they are."

He was silent. After a moment, Gefty heard the white rod clatter lightly along the floor of the passage. It struck the passage wall, spun off it, and rolled into the instrument room, coming to rest a few feet away from him. Gefty hesitated, picked it up and laid it on the wall table. He placed his own gun beside it, moved a dozen steps away. Kerim's eyes followed him anxiously.

"Gefty," she whispered, "he might..."

Gefty looked at her, formed the words "It's all right" with his mouth and called, "Guns have been put aside, Maulbow. Come on in, and let's keep it peaceable."

He waited, arms hanging loosely at his side, heart beating heavily, as quick footsteps came up the passage. Maulbow appeared in the entrance, glanced at Gefty and Kerim, then about the room. His gaze rested for a moment on the wall table, shifted back to Gefty. Maulbow came on into the room, turning towards Gefty, mouth twisting.

He said softly, "It is not our practice, Rammer, to share the secrets of the Great Current with other races. I hadn't foreseen that you might become a dangerous nuisance. But now--"

His right hand began to lift, half closed about some small golden instrument. Gefty's left arm moved back and quickly forwards.

The service knife slid out of its sheath and up from his palm as an arrow of smoky blackness burst from the thing in Maulbow's hand. The blackness came racing with a thin, snarling noise across the floor towards Gefty's feet. The knife flashed above it, turning, and stood hilt-deep in Maulbow's chest.



Geffy returned a few minutes later from the forward cabin which served as the *Queen's* sick bay, and said to Kerim, "He's still alive, though I don't know why. He may even recover. He's full of anesthetic, and that should keep him quiet till we're back in normspace. Then I'll see what we can do for him."

Kerim had lost some of her white, shocked look while he was gone. "You knew he would try to kill you?" she asked shakily.

"Suspected he had it in mind—he gave in too quick. But I thought I'd have a chance to take any gadget he was hiding away from him first. I was wrong about that. Now we'd better move fast..."

He switched the emergency check panel back on, glanced over the familiar patterns of lights and numbers. A few minor damage spots were indicated, but the ship was still fully operational. One minor damage spot which did not appear on the panel was now to be found in the instrument room itself, in the corner on which the door of the map room opened. The door, the adjoining bulkheads and section of flooring were scarred, blackened, and as assortedly malodorous as burned things tend to become. That was where Gefly had stood when Maulbow entered the room, and if he had remained there an instant after letting go of the knife, he would have been in very much worse condition than the essentially fireproof furnishings.

Both Maulbow's weapons—the white rod lying innocently on the wall table and the round, golden device which had dropped from his hand spitting darts of smoking blackness—had blasted unnervingly away into that area for almost thirty seconds after Maulbow was down and twisting about on the floor. Then he went limp and the firing instantly stopped. Apparently, Maulbow's control of them had ended as he lost consciousness.

It seemed fortunate that the sick bay cabin's emergency treatment accessories, gentle as their action was, might have been designed for the specific purpose of keeping the most violent of prisoners immobilized—let alone one with a terrible knife wound in him. At the angle along which the knife had driven in and up below the ribs, an ordinary man would have been dead in seconds. But it was very evident now that Maulbow was no ordinary man, and even after the eerie weapons had been pitched out of the ship through the instrument room's disposal tube, Gefly couldn't rid himself of an

wouldn't be done with him, in fact, until one or the other of them was dead.

He said to Kerim, "I thought the machine Maulbow set up in the storage vault would turn out to be some drive engine, but apparently it has an entirely different function. He connected it with the instruments he had made in the Hub, and together they form what he calls a control unit. The emergency panel would show if the unit were drawing juice from the ship. It isn't, and I don't know what powers it. But we do know now that the control unit is holding us in the time current, and it will go on holding us there as long as it's in operation.

"If we could shut it off, the *Queen* would be 'rejected' by the current, like Maulbow's sailer was. In other words, we'd get knocked back into normspace—which is what we want. And we want it to happen as soon as possible because, if Maulbow was telling the truth on that point, every minute that passes here is taking us farther away from the Hub, and farther from our own time towards his."

Kerim nodded, eyes intent on his face.

"Now I can't just go down there and start slapping switches around on the thing," Gefty went on. "He said it wasn't working right, and even if it were, I couldn't tell what would happen. But it doesn't seem to connect up with any ship systems—it just seems to be holding us in a field of its own. So I should be able to move the whole unit into the cargo lock and eject it from there. If we shift the *Queen* outside its field, that should have the same effect as shutting the control unit off. It should throw us back into normspace."

Kerim nodded again. "What about Mr. Maulbow's janandra animal?"

Gefty shrugged. "Depends on the mood I find it in. He said it wasn't usually aggressive. Maybe it isn't. I'll get into a spacesuit for protection and break out some of the mining equipment to move it along with. If I can maneuver it into an empty compartment where it will be out of the...."

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He broke off, expression changing, eyes fastened on the emergency panel. Then he turned hurriedly, reached across the side of the console for the intership airseal controls. Kerim asked apprehensively, "What's the matter, Gefty?"

"Wish I knew ... exactly." Gefty indicated the emergency panel. "Little red light there, on the storage deck section—it wasn't showing a minute ago. It means that the vault doors have been opened since then."

He saw the same half-superstitious fear appear in her face that had touched him. "You think *he* did it?"

"I don't know." Maulbow's control of the guns had seemed uncanny enough. But that was a different matter. The guns were a product of his own time and science. But the vault door mechanisms? There might have been sufficient opportunity for Maulbow to study them and alter them, for some purpose of his own, since he'd come aboard....

"I've got the ship compartments and decks sealed off from each other now," Gefty said slowly. "The only connecting points from one to the other are personnel hatches—they're small air locks. So the janandra's confined to the storage deck. If it's come out of the vault, it might be a nuisance until I can get equipment to handle it. But that isn't too serious. The spacesuits are on the second deck, and I'll get into one before I go on to the storage. You wait here a moment, I'll look in on Maulbow again before I start."

If Maulbow wasn't still unconscious, he was doing a good job of feigning it. Getfy looked at the pale, lax face, the half-shut eyes, shook his head and left the cabin, locking it behind him. It mightn't be Maulbow's doing, but having the big snake loose in the storage could, in fact, make things extremely awkward now. He didn't think his gun would make much impression on anything of that size, and while several of the ship's mining tools could be employed as very effective close-range weapons, they happened, unfortunately, to be stored away on the same deck.

He found Kerim standing in the center of the instrument room, waiting for him.

"Getfy," she said, "do you notice anything? An odd sort of smell... ."

Then the odor was in Getfy's nostrils, too, and the back of his neck turned to ice as he recognized it. He glanced up at the ventilation outlet, looked back at Kerim.

He took her arm, said softly, "Come this way. Keep very quiet! I don't know how it happened, but the janandra's on the main deck now. That's what it smells like. The smell's coming through the ventilation system, so the thing's moving around in the port section. We'll go the other way."

Kerim whispered, "What will we do?"

"Get ourselves into spacesuits first, and then get Maulbow's control unit out of the ship. The janandra may be looking around for him. If it is, it won't bother us."

* * *

He hadn't wanted to remind Kerim that, from what Maulbow said, there might be more than one reason for getting rid of the control unit as quickly as possible. But it had been constantly in the back of his mind; and twice, in the few minutes that passed after Maulbow's strange weapons were silenced, he had seen a momentary pale glare appear in the unquiet flow of darkness reflecting in the viewcreens. Getfy had said nothing, because if it was true that hostile forces were alert and searching for them here, it added to their immediate danger but not at all to the absolute need to free themselves from the inexorable rush of the Great Current before they were carried beyond hope of return to their civilization.

But those brief glimpses did add to the sense of urgency throbbing in Getfy's nerves, while events, and the equally hard necessity to avoid a fatally mistaken move in this welter of unknown factors, kept blocking him. Now the mysterious manner in which Maulbow's unpleasant traveling companion had appeared on the main deck made it impossible to do anything but keep Kerim at his side. If Maulbow was still capable of taking a hand in matters, there was no reasonably safe place to leave her aboard the *Queen*.

And Maulbow might be capable of it. Twice as they hurried up the narrow, angled passages along the *Queen's* curving hull towards an airseal leading to the next compartment, Getfy caught a trace of the ammonia-like animal odor coming over the ventilating system. They reached the lock without incident; but then, as they came along the second deck hall to the ship's magazine, there was a sharp click in the stillness behind them. Its meaning was disconcertingly apparent. Getfy hesitated, turned Kerim into a side passage, guided her along it.

She looked up at his face. "It's following us?"

"Seems to be." No time for the spacesuits in the magazine now--

something had just emerged from the air lock through which they had entered the second deck not many moments before. He helped the girl quickly down a section of ladderlike stairs to the airseal connecting the second deck with the storage, punched a wall button there. As the lock door opened, there was another noise from the passage they had just left, as if something had thudded briefly and heavily against one of the bulkheads. Kerim uttered a little gasp. Then they were in the lock, and Gefty slapped down two other buttons, stood watching the door behind them snap shut and, a few seconds later, the one on the far side open on the dark storage deck.

They scrambled down another twelve feet of ladder to the floor of a side passage, hearing the lock snap shut behind them. As it closed, they were in complete darkness. Gefty seized Kerim's arm, ran with her up the passage to the left, guiding himself with his fingertips on the left bulkhead. When they came to a corner, he turned her to the left again. A few seconds later, he pulled open a small door, bundled the girl through, came in himself, and shut the door to a narrow slit behind them.

Kerim whispered shakily, "What will we do now, Gefty?"

"Stay here for the moment. I'll look for us in the vault first."

And it should go to the storage vault first where it had been guarding Maulbow's machine, to hunt for them there. But it might not. Gefty eased the gun from his pocket on the far side of Kerim. Across the dark compartment was another door. They could retreat a little farther here if it became necessary—but not very much farther.

They waited in a silence that was complete except for their unsteady breathing and the distant, deep pulse of the *Queen's* throttled-down drives. He felt Kerim trembling against him. How did Maulbow's creature move through the airseal locks? The operating mechanisms were simple—a dog might have been taught to use them. But a dog had paws....

There came the soft hiss of the opening lock, the faintest shimmer of light to the right of the passage mouth he was watching through the door. A heavy thump on the floor below the locks followed, then a hard click as the lock closed and complete darkness returned.

The silence resumed. Seconds dragged on. Gefty's imagination pictured the thing waiting, its great, wedge-shaped head raised as its senses probed the dark about it for a sign of the two human beings. Then a vague rushing noise began, growing louder as it approached the passage mouth, crossing it, receding rapidly again to the left.

Gefty let his breath out slowly, eased the door open and stood listening again. Abruptly, there was reflected light in the lock passage, coming now from the left. He said in a whisper, "It's moving around in the main hall, Kerim. We can go on the other way now, but we'll have to be fast and keep quiet. I've thought of how we can get rid of that thing."

• • •

The cargo lock on the storage deck had two inner doors. The one which opened into the side of the vault hall was built to allow passage of the largest chunks of freight the *Queen* was likely to be burdened with; it was almost thirty feet wide and twenty high. The second door was just large enough to let a man in a spacesuit climb in and out of the side of the lock without using the freight door. It opened on a tiny control cubicle from which the lock's mechanisms were operated during loading processes.

Geffy let Kerim and himself into the cubicle from one of the passages, steered the girl through the pitch blackness of the little room to the chair before the control panel and told her to sit down. He groped for a moment at the side of the panel, found a knob and twisted it. There was a faint click. A scattering of pale lights appeared suddenly on the panel, a dark viewscreen, set at a tilt above them, reflecting their gleam.

Geffy explained in a low voice, "Left side of that screen covers the lock. Right one covers the big hall outside. No lights in either at the moment, so you don't see anything. Only way the cargo door to the hall can be opened or closed is with these switches right here. What I want to do is get the janandra into the lock, slam the door on it and lock down the control switches. Then we've got it trapped."

"But how are you going to get it to go in there?"

"No real problem--I'll be three jumps ahead of it. Then I duck back up into this cubicle, and lock both doors. And it'll be inside the lock. You have the picture now?"

Kerim said unsteadily, "I do. But it sounds awfully risky, Geffy."

"Well, I don't like it either," Geffy admitted. "So I'll start right now before I lose my nerve. As soon as I move out into the vault hall, the lighting will go on. That's automatic. You watch the right side of the screen. If you see the janandra coming before I do, yell as loud as you can."

He shifted the two inner door switches to the right. A red spark appeared in the dark viewscreen, high up near the center. A second red light showed on the cubicle bulkhead beside Geffy. Beneath it an oblong section of the bulkhead turned silently away on heavy hinges, became a door two feet in thickness, which stood jutting out at a right angle into the darkness of the cargo lock. A wave of cold air moved through it into the control cubicle.

On the screen, another red spark appeared beside the first one.

"Both doors are open now," Geffy murmured to the girl. "The janandra isn't in the vault hall or the lighting would have turned on, but it may have heard the door open and be on its way. So keep watching the screen."

"I certainly will!" she whispered shakily.

Geffy took an oversized wrench from the wall, climbed quickly and quietly down the three ladder steps to the floor of the lock, and walked across it to the sill of the giant freight door, which now had swung out and down into the vault hall, fitting itself into a depression of the flooring. He hesitated an instant on the sill, then stepped out into the big dark hall. Light filled it immediately in both directions.

He stood quiet, intent on the storage vault entrance far up the hall to his left. He could see the vault was open. The janandra might still be inside it. But the seconds passed, and the dark entrance remained silent and there was no suggestion of motion beyond it. Geffy glanced to the right, moved a dozen steps farther out into the hall, hefted the wrench and spun it through the air towards the ventilator frame on the opposite bulkhead.

The heavy tool clanged loudly against the frame, bounced off and thudded to the floor. Geffy started slowly over to it, heart pounding, with the vault entrance still at the edge of his vision.

Kerim's voice screamed, "*Geffy, it's--*"

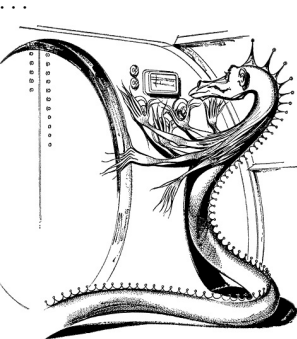
He spun around, sprinted back to the cargo lock. The janandra had come silently out of the nearest side passage behind him, was approaching with the remembered oiling swiftness of motion, its

great head lifted a yard from the floor. Gefty plunged through the lock, jumped for the top of the cubicle door steps, came stumbling into the cubicle. Kerim was on her feet, staring. He swung the cubicle door switch to the left, slapping it flat to the panel. The door snapped back into the wall behind him with a force that shook the floor.

On the screen, the janandra's thick, dark worm-shape was swinging around in the dim lock to regain the open hall. It had seen the trap. But the freight door switch went flat beside the other, and the freight door rose with massive swiftness. The heavy body smashed against it, went sliding back to the floor as the door slammed shut and the screen section showing the cargo lock turned dark.

"Got it—got it—got it!" Gefty heard himself whispering exultantly. He switched on the lock's interior lights.

Then he swore softly, and, beside him, Kerim sucked in her breath.



The screen showed the janandra in violent but apparently purposeful motion inside the lock ... and it was also apparent now that it was a more complexly constructed creature than the long worm-body and heavy head had indicated. The skin, to a distance of some eight feet back of the head, had spread out into a wide, flexible frill. From beneath the frill extended half a dozen jointed, bone-white arms, along with waving, ribbonlike appendages less easy to define. The thing was reared half up along the hall door, inspecting its surface with these members; then suddenly it flung itself around and flashed over to the outer lock door. Three arms shot out; wiry fingers caught the three spin-locks simultaneously, began to whirl them.

Gefty said, staring, "Kerim, it's going to..."

The janandra didn't. The motion checked suddenly, was reversed. The locks drew tight again. The janandra swung back from the door, lifting half its length upwards, big head weaving about as it inspected the tool racks overhead. An arm reached suddenly, snatched something from one of the racks. Then the thing turned again; and in the next instant its head filled the viewscreen. Kerim made a choked sound of fright, jerking back against Gefty. The bulging, metal-green

eyes seemed to stare directly at him. And the screen went black.

Kerim whispered, "Wha ... what happened, Gefty?"

Gefty swallowed, said, "It smashed the view pickup. Must have guessed we were watching and didn't like it... ." He added, "I was beginning to think Maulbow must be some kind of superman. But it wasn't any remote-control magic of his that let the janandra out of the vault, and opened the intership locks when it came up to the main deck and followed us down again. It was doing all that for itself. It's Maulbow's partner, not his pet. And it's probably got at least as good a brain as anyone else on board behind that ugly face."

Kerim moistened her lips. "Can it ... could it get out again?"

"Into the ship?" Gefty shook his head decidedly. "Uh-uh. It could dump itself out on the other side--and it almost did before it realized where it was and what it was about to do. But the inner lock doors won't open until someone opens them right on this panel. No, the thing's safely trapped. On the other hand...."

On the other hand, Gefty realized that he wouldn't now be able to bring himself to eject the janandra out of the cargo lock and into the Great Current. Its intentions obviously hadn't been friendly, but its level of intelligence was as good as his own, and perhaps somewhat better; and at present it was helpless. To dispose of it as he'd had in mind would therefore be the cold-blooded murder of an equal. But so long as that ugly and formidable shipmate of Maulbow's stayed in the cargo lock, the lock couldn't be used to get rid of the control unit in the vault.

A new solution presented itself while Gefty was making a rapid and rather desperate mental review of various heavy-duty tools which might be employed as weapons to force the janandra into submission and haul it off for confinement elsewhere in the ship. Not impossible, but a highly precarious and time-consuming operation at best. Then another thought occurred: the storage vault lay directly against the hull of the *Queen*--

How long to cut through the hull? The ship's mining equipment was on board, and the tools were self-powered. Climb into a spacesuit, empty the air from the entire storage deck, leaving the janandra imprisoned in the cargo lock ... with Maulbow incapacitated in sick bay, and Kerim back in the control compartment and also in a suit, for additional protection. Then cut ship's power to this deck to avoid complications with the *Queen's* involved circuitry and work under space conditions--half an hour if he hurried.

...



"Shouldn't take more than another ten minutes," he informed Kerim presently over the suit's intercom.

"I'm very glad to hear it, Gefty." She sounded shaky.

"Anything going on in the screens?" he asked.

She hesitated a little, said, "No. Not at the moment."

Gefty grunted, blinked sweat from his eyes, and took hold of the handgrips of the heavy mining cutter again, turning it nose down towards the vault floor. The guide light found the point he was working on, and the slice beam stabbed out, began nibbling delicately away to extend the curving line it had eaten through the *Queen's* thick skin. He had drawn a twenty-five foot circle around Maulbow's battered control unit and the instruments attached to it, well outside the fragile-looking safety field. The circle was broken at four points where he would plant explosives. The explosives, going off together, should shatter the connecting links with the hull and throw the machine clear. If that didn't release them immediately from its influence, he would see what putting the *Queen's* drives into action would do.

"Gefty?" Kerim's voice asked.

"Uh-huh?"

He could hear her swallow over the intercom. "Those lights are back now."

"How many?"

"Two," Kerim said. "I *think* they're only two. They keep crossing back and forth in front of us." She laughed nervously. "It's idiotic, of course, but I do get the feeling they're looking at us."

Gefty said hesitantly, "Everything's set but I need another minute or two to get this last connection whittled down a little more. If I blow the charge too soon, it mightn't take the gadget clean out of the ship."

Kerim said, "I know. I'll just watch ... they just disappeared again." Her voice changed. "Now there's something else."

"What's that?"

"You know you said to watch the cargo lock lights on the emergency panel."

"Yes."

"The outer lock door has just been opened."

"What!"

"It must have been. The light started blinking red just now as I was looking at it."

Gefty was silent a moment, his mind racing. *Why* would the janandra open the lock? From what Maulbow had said, it could live for a while without air, but it still could gain nothing but eventual death from leaving the ship--

Unless, Gefty thought, the janandra had become aware in some way that he was about to blow their machine out of the *Queen*. There were grappling lines in the cargo lock, and if four or five of those lines were slapped to the circular section of the hull he'd loosened... .

"Kerim," he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to blow the deal right now. Got your suit snapped to the wall braces like I showed you?"

"Yes, Gefly." Her voice was faint but clear.

He turned the cutter away from the line it had dug, sent it rolling off towards the far wall. He hurried around the circle, checking the four charges, lumbered over to the vault passage, stopped just around the corner. He took the firing box from his suit.

"Ready, Kerim?" He opened the box.

"Ready... "

"Here goes!" Gefly reached into the box, twisted the firing handle. Light flared in the vault. The deck shook below him. He came stumbling out from behind the wall.

Maulbow's machine and its stand of instruments had vanished. Where it had stood was a dark circular hole. Nothing else seemed to have happened. Gefly clumped hurriedly over to the mining cutter, swung it around, started more cautiously back towards the hole. He didn't have the faintest idea what would come next, but a definite possibility was that he would see the janandra's dark form flowing up over the rim of the hole. Letting it run into the cutter beam might be the best way to discourage it from re-entering the *Queen*.

Instead, a dazzling brilliance suddenly blotted out everything. The cutter was plucked from Gefly's grasp; then he was picked up, suit and all, and slammed up towards the vault ceiling. He had a feeling that inaudible thunders were shaking the ship. He seemed to be rolling over and over along the ceiling. At last, the suit crashed into something which showed a total disinclination to yield, and Gefly blacked out.

* * *

The left side of his face felt pushed out of shape; his left eye wasn't functioning too well, and there was a severe pulsing ache throughout the top of his head. But Gefly felt happy.

There were a few qualifying considerations.

"Of course," he pointed out to Kerim, "all we can really say immediately is that we're back in normspace and somewhere in the galaxy."

She smiled shakily. "Isn't that saying quite a lot, Gefly?"

"It's something." Gefly glanced around the instrument room. He had placed an emergency light on the console, but except for that, the control compartment was in darkness. The renewed battering the *Queen* had absorbed had knocked out the power in the forward section. The viewscreens were black, every instrument dead. But he'd seen the stars of normspace through the torn vault floor. It was something...

"We might have the light that slugged us to thank for that," he said. "I'm not sure just what did happen there, but it could have been Maulbow's control unit it was attacking rather than the ship. Maulbow said the lights were sensitive to the unit. At any rate, we're here, and we're rid of the gadget--and of the janandra." He hesitated. "I just don't feel you should get your hopes too high. We may find out we're a very long way from the Hub."

Kerim's large eyes showed a degree of confidence which made him almost uncomfortable. "If we are," she said serenely, "you'll get us back somehow."

Geffy cleared his throat. "Well, we'll see. If the power shutoff is something the *Queen's* repair scanners can handle, the instruments will come back on any minute. Give the scanners ten minutes. If they haven't done it by that time, they can't do it and I'll have to play repairman. Then, with the instruments working, we can determine exactly where we are."

Unless, he told himself silently, they'd wound up in a distant cluster never penetrated by the Federation's mapping teams. And there was the other little question of where they now were in time. But Kerim looked rosy with relief, and those details could wait.

He took up another emergency light, switched it on and said, "I'll see how Maulbow is doing while we're waiting for power. If the first aid treatment has pulled him through so far, the autosurgeon probably can fix him up."

Kerim's face suddenly took on a guilty expression. "I forgot all about Mr. Maulbow!" She hesitated. "Should I come along?"

Geffy shook his head. "I won't need help. And if it's a case for the surgeon, you wouldn't like it. Those things work painlessly, but it gets to be a mess for a while."

He shut off the light again when he reached the sick bay which was running on its independent power system. As he opened the cabin door from the dispensary, carrying the autosurgeon, it became evident that Maulbow was still alive but that he might be in delirium. Geffy placed the surgeon on the table, went over to the bed and looked at Maulbow.

To the extent that the emergency treatment instruments' cautious restraints permitted, Maulbow was twisting slowly about on the bed. He was speaking in a low, rapid voice, his face distorted by emotion. The words were not slurred, but they were in a language Geffy didn't know. It seemed clear that Maulbow had reverted mentally to his own time, and for some seconds he remained unaware that Geffy had entered the room. Then, surprisingly, the slitted blue eyes opened wider and focused on Geffy's face. And Maulbow screamed with rage.

Geffy felt somewhat disconcerted. For the reason alone that he was under anesthetic, Maulbow should not have been conscious. But he was. The words were now ones Geffy could understand, and Maulbow was telling him things which would have been interesting enough under different circumstances. Geffy broke in as soon as he could.

"Look," he said quietly, "I'm trying to help you. I... "

Maulbow interrupted him in turn, not at all quietly. Geffy listened a moment longer, then shrugged. So Maulbow didn't like him. He couldn't say honestly that he'd ever liked Maulbow much, and what he was hearing made him like Maulbow considerably less. But he would keep the man from the future alive if he could.

He positioned the autosurgeon behind the head of the bed to allow the device to begin its analysis, stood back at its controls where he could both follow the progress it made and watch Maulbow without exciting him further by remaining within his range of vision. After a moment, the surgeon shut off the first-aid instruments and made unobtrusive use of a heavy tranquilizing drug. Then it waited.

Maulbow should have lapsed into passive somnolence thirty seconds afterwards. But the drug seemed to produce no more effect on him mentally than the preceding anesthetic. He raged and screeched on. Geffy watched him uneasily, knowing now that he was looking at insanity. There was nothing more he could do at the moment—the autosurgeon's decisions were safer than any

professional's guesswork. And the surgeon continued to wait.

Then, abruptly, Maulbow died. The taut body slumped against the bed and the contorted features relaxed. The eyes remained half open; and when Gefty came around to the side of the bed, they still seemed to be looking up at him, but they no longer moved. A thin trickle of blood started from the side of the slack mouth and stopped again.

* * *

The control compartment was still darkened and without power when Gefty returned to it. He told Kerim briefly what had happened, added, "I'm not at all sure now he was even human. I'd rather believe he wasn't."

"Why that, Gefty?" She was studying his expression soberly.

Gefty hesitated, said, "I thought at first he was furious because we'd upset his plans. But they weren't his plans ... they were the janandra's. He wasn't exactly its servant. I suppose you'd have to say he was something like a pet animal."

Kerim said incredulously, "But that isn't possible! Think of how intelligently Mr. Maulbow..."

"He was following instructions," Gefty said. "The janandra let him know whatever it wanted done. He was following instructions again when he tried to kill me after I'd got away from the thing in the vault. The real brain around here was the janandra ... and it was a real brain. With a little luck it would have had the ship."

Kerim smiled briefly. "You handled that big brain rather well, I think."

"I was the one who got lucky," Gefty said. "Anyway, where Maulbow came from, it's the janandra's kind that gives the orders. And the thing is, Maulbow liked it that way. He didn't want it to be different. When the light hit us, it killed the janandra on the outside of the ship. Maulbow felt it happen and it cracked him up. He wanted to kill us for it. But since he was helpless, he killed himself. He didn't want to be healed—not by us. At least, that's what it looks like."

He shrugged, checked his watch, climbed out of the chair. "Well," he said, "the ten minutes I gave the *Queen* to turn the power back on are up. Looks like the old girl couldn't do it. So I'll—"

The indirect lighting system in the instrument room went on silently. The emergency light flickered and went out. Gefty's head came around.

Kerim was staring past him at the screens, her face radiant.

"Oh, Gefty!" she cried softly. "Oh, Gefty! Our stars!"

* * *

"Green dot here is us," Gefty explained, somewhat hoarsely. He cleared his throat, went on, "Our true ship position, that is—" He stopped, realizing he was talking too much, almost babbling, in an attempt to take some of the tension out of the moment. The next few seconds might not tell them where they were, but it would show whether they had been carried beyond the regions of space charted by Federation instruments. Which would mean the difference between having a chance—whether a good chance or a bad one—of getting home eventually, and the alternative of being hopelessly lost.

here had been nothing recognizable familiar about the brilliantly dense star patterns in the viewcreens, but he gave no further thought to that. Unless the ship's exact position was known or one was on an established route, it was a waste of time looking for landmarks in a sizable cluster.

He turned on the basic star chart. Within the locator plate the green pinpoint of light reappeared, red-ringed and suspended now against the three-dimensional immensities of the Milky Way. It stayed still a moment, began a smooth drift towards Galactic East. Gefly let his breath out carefully. He sensed Kerim's eyes on him but kept his gaze fixed on the locator plate.

The green dot slowed, came to a stop. Gefly's finger tapped the same button four times. The big chart flicked out of existence, and in the plate three regional star maps appeared and vanished in quick succession behind it. The fourth map stayed. For a few seconds, the red-circled green spark was not visible here. Then it showed at the eastern margin of the map, came gliding forwards and to the left, slowed again and held steady. Now the star map began to glide through the locator plate, carrying the fixed green dot with it. It brought the dot up to dead center point in the locator plate and stopped.

Gefly slumped a little. He rubbed his hands slowly down his face and muttered a few words. Then he shook his head.

"Gefly," Kerim whispered, "what is it? Where are we?"

Gefly looked at her.

"After we got hauled into that time current," he said hoarsely, "I tried to find out which way in space we were headed. The direction indicators over there seemed to show we were trying to go everywhere at once. You remember Maulbow's control unit wasn't working right, needed adjustments. Well, all those little impulses must have pretty well canceled out because we weren't taken really far. In the last hour and a half we've covered roughly the distance the *Queen* could have gone on her own in, say, thirty days."

"Then where...?"

"Home," Gefly said simply. "It's ridiculous! Other side of the Hub from where we started." He nodded at the plate. "Eastern Hub Quadrant. Section Six Eight. The G2 behind the green dot—that's the Evalee system. We could be putting down at Evalee Interstellar three hours from now if we wanted to."

Kerim was laughing and crying together. "Oh, Gefly! I knew you would...."

"A fat lot I had to do with it!" Gefly leaned forward suddenly, switched on the transmitter. "And now let's pick up a live newscast. There's something else I..."

His voice trailed off. The transmitter screen lit up with a blurred jumble of print, colors, a muttering of voices, music and noises. Gefly twisted a dial. The screen cleared, showed a newscast headline sheet. Gefly blinked at it, glanced sideways at Kerim, grimaced.

"The something else," he said, his voice a little strained, "was something I was also worried about. Looks like I was more or less right."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"Nothing really bad," Gefly assured her. He added, "I think. But take a look at the Federation dateline."

Kerim peered at the screen, frowned. "But...."

"Uh-huh."

"Why, that ... that's almost... "

"That," Gefly said, "or rather *this* is the day after we started out from the Hub, headed roughly Galactic west. Three weeks ago. We'd be just past Miam." He knuckled his chin. "Interesting thought, isn't it?"

Kerim was silent for long seconds. "Then they ... or we... "

"Oh, they're us, all right," Gefly said. "They'd have to be, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose so. It seems a little confusing. But I was thinking. If you send them a transmitter call... "

Gefly shook his head. "The *Queen's* transmitter isn't too hot, but it might push a call as far as Evalee. Then we could arrange for a Com-Web link-up there, and in another ten minutes or so ... but I don't think we'd better."

"Why not?" Kerim demanded.

"Because we got through it all safely, so we're going to get through it safely. But if we receive that message now and never go on to Maulbow's moon ... you see? There's no way of knowing just what would happen."

Kerim looked hesitant, frowned. "I suppose you're right," she agreed reluctantly at last. "So Mr. Maulbow will have to stay dead now. And that janandra." After a moment she added pensively, "Of course, they weren't really very nice--"

Gefly shivered. One of the things he'd learned from Maulbow's ravings was the real reason he and Kerim had been taken along on the trip. He didn't feel like telling Kerim about it just yet, but it had been solely because of Maulbow's concern for his master's creature comforts. The janandra could go for a long time without food, but after fasting for several years on the moon, a couple of snacks on the homeward run would have been highly welcome.

And the janandra was a gourmet. It much preferred, as Maulbow well knew, to have its snacks still wriggling-fresh as it started them down its gullet.

"No," Gefly said, "I couldn't call either of them really nice."

"Summer Guests"

Published in *If*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (September 1959), illustrated by Wally Wood, though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



No birds were these,
and surely not of a feather,
and there was no need to tell Mel
by the company he kept--it told him!

All through that Saturday night, rain drummed down mercilessly and unseasonably on Sweetwater Beach. Thunder pealed and lightning flared. In between, Mel Armstrong heard the steady boom of the Pacific surf not a block from his snug little duplex apartment. Mel didn't mind any of it. He was in bed, slightly smacked and wholly comfortable. He dozed, and now and then woke up far enough to listen admiringly to the racket.

At nine a.m., when he opened his eyes once more, he discovered the room was full of summer sunshine. Beyond his window gleamed a cloudless sky, and only the occasional gusts of wind indicated there had been anything like a storm during the night.

An exceptionally beautiful Sunday morning--made more beautiful, perhaps, by the fact that it marked the beginning of Mel Armstrong's annual two-week paid vacation. Mel was a salesman for Marty's Fine Liquors, a wholesale house. He was twenty-eight and in fairly good shape, but his job bored him. This morning, for the first time in months, he was fully aware of that. Perhaps it was the weather. At any rate, he had a sense, almost a premonition, of new and exciting events approaching him rapidly. Events that would break down the boundaries of his present humdrum existence and pitch him into the life of romantic adventure that, somehow, he seemed to have missed so far...

Recognizing this as a daydream, but unwilling to give it up completely, Mel breakfasted unhurriedly in his pajamas. Then, struck by a sudden, down-to-earth suspicion, he stuck his head out of his living room window.

As he'd guessed, there were other reminders of the storm in the narrow courtyard before the window. Branches and assorted litter had blown in, including at least one soggly dismembered Sunday

paper. The low rent he paid for his ground-floor apartment in the Oceanview Courts was based on an understanding with the proprietor that he and the upstairs occupant of the duplex would keep the court clean. The other five duplexes that fronted on the court were bulging with vacationing visitors from the city, which made it a real chore in summer.

Unfortunately he couldn't count on his upstairs neighbor, a weird though rather amiable young character who called herself Maria de Guesgne. Maria went in for painting abstractions, constructing [mobiles](#), and discussing the works of Madame Blavatsky. She avoided the indignity of manual toil.

Mel made himself decent by exchanging his pajamas for swimming trunks. Then he got a couple of brooms and a hose out of a garage back of the court and went to work.

• • •

He'd cleared the courtyard by the time the first of the seasonal guests began to show up in their doorways, and went on to inspect another, narrower court behind his duplex, which was also his responsibility. There he discovered Maria de Guesgne propped on her elbows on her bedroom window sill, talking reproachfully to a large gray tomcat that was sitting in the court. Both turned to look at Mel.

"Good morning, Mel!" Maria said with unusual animation. She had long black bangs which emphasized her sallow and undernourished appearance.

"Morning," Mel replied. "Scatt!" he added to the cat, which belonged to somebody else in the neighborhood but was usually to be found stalking about the Oceanview Courts.

"You shouldn't frighten poor Cat," said Maria. "Mel, would you look into the bird box?"

"Bird box?"

"The one in the climbing rose," said Maria, leaning precariously from the window to point. "To your left. Cat was trying to get at it."

The bird box was a white-painted, weather-beaten little house set into a straggly rose bush that grew out of a square patch of earth beside Mel's bedroom window. The box was about ten feet above the ground.

Mel looked up at it.

"I'm sure I heard little birds peeping in it this morning," Maria explained sentimentally.

"No bird in its senses would go into a thing like that," Mel assured her. "I don't hear anything. And besides--"

"Please, Mel! We don't want Cat to get them!"

Mel groaned, got a wobbly stepladder out of the garage and climbed up. The gray cat walked over and sat down next to the ladder to watch him.

He poked at the box and listened. No sound.

"Can't you open the top and look in?" Maria inquired.

Holding the box in one hand, Mel tentatively inserted his thumbnail into a crack under its top and pushed. The weathered wood splintered away easily.

"Don't break it!" Maria cried.

Mel put his eye to the crack he'd made. Then he gasped, jerked back, letting go of the box, teetered wildly a moment and fell over with the stepladder. The cat fled, spitting.

"Oh, my!" said Maria, apparently with some enjoyment. "Poor Mel! Are you hurt?"

Mel stood up slowly. The bright morning world seemed to be spinning gently around him but it wasn't because of his fall. "Of course not," he said. His voice quavered somewhat.

"Oh?" said Maria. "Well, then—are there any little birds in the nest?"

Mel swallowed hard. "No," he said. He bent over and carefully picked up the ladder and placed it against the wall. The action made it unnecessary to look at her.

"Eggs?" she asked in a hopeful tone.

"No eggs either! No nothing!" His voice was steady again, but he had to get rid of Maria. "Well, I'll clean up this court now, I guess. Uh—maybe you'd like to come down and lend a hand?"

Maria replied promptly that she certainly would like to, but she hadn't had breakfast yet; and with that she vanished from the window.

Mel looked round stealthily. The cat was watching from the door of the garage, but no one else was in sight.

Hurriedly he replaced the stepladder under the bird nest and climbed up again.

• • •

Setting the box carefully down on the table in his living room, he locked the apartment door and closed the Venetian blinds. All this had been done in a sort of quiet rush, as if every second counted, which it did in a way. Mel wasn't going to believe, even for a moment, that what he thought he'd seen in that box could be really there; and he couldn't disprove it fast enough to suit him. But something warned him that he wouldn't want to have any witnesses around when he did take his second look.

Then, as he turned from the window, he heard a thin piping cry, a voice as tiny as the peeping of a mouse, coming from the table, from the box.

An instant fright reaction froze him where he stood. The sounds stopped again. There was a brief, faint rustle, like the stirring of dry parchment, and then quiet.

The rustling, he thought, must have been the wings—he'd been *sure* they had wings. Otherwise—

It could all have been an illusion, he told himself. An illusion that transformed a pair of featherless nestlings into something he still didn't want to give a name to. Color patterns of jade and pink flashed into his memory next, however, which made the bird theory shaky. Say a rather small green-and-pink snake then, or a lizard—

Except, of course, for the glassy glitter of the wings. So make it instead, Mel thought desperately, a pair of big insects, like dragonflies, only bigger... .

He shook his head and moistened his lips. That wouldn't explain that tiny voice—and the more he tried to rationalize it all, the more scared

He was getting. Assume, he took the mental jump, he really had seen the figures of two tiny, naked, green-and-pink people in there—with wings! One didn't have to drag in the supernatural to explain it. There were things like flying saucers, presumably, and probably such beings might exist on other worlds.

The thought was oddly reassuring. He still felt as if he'd locked himself in the room with things potentially in the class of tarantulas, but there was excitement and wonder coming up now. With a surge of jealous proprietorship, he realized that he didn't want to share this discovery with anybody else. Later, perhaps. Right now, it was *his* big adventure.

The room was too dim to let him distinguish anything inside the box as he had outdoors, and he was still reluctant to get his face too close to it. He gave it a gingerly rap with his knuckle and waited. No sound.

He cleared his throat. "Hello?" he said. Immediately, that seemed like an idiotic approach. Worse than that, it also brought no reaction.

For the first time, Mel had a sense of worry for the occupants of the box. There was no way of guessing how they'd got in there, but they might be sick or dying. Hurriedly he brought a lamp over to the table and tried to direct light inside, both through the round hole in its side and through the opening he'd made in the top. It wasn't very effective and produced no stir within.

With sudden decision, he shoved one hand into the opening, held the box with the other and broke off the entire top. And there they were.

Mel stared at them a long time, his fears fading slowly. They were certainly alive! One was green, a tiny body of luminous jade, and the other was silkily human-colored, which was why he had been confused on that point. The wings could hardly be anything else, though they were very odd-looking, almost like thin, flexible glass.

He couldn't force himself to touch them. Instead, he laid a folded clean towel on the table and tilted the box very slowly over it. A series of careful tappings and shakings brought the two beings sliding gently out onto the towel.

Two delicately formed female figurines, they lay there a moment, unmoving. Then the green one passed a tiny hand over her forehead in a slow, completely human gesture, opened slanted golden eyes with startled suddenness and looked up at Mel.

He might still have thought he was dreaming, if his attention hadn't been caught just then by a detail of undream-like realism. The other, the human-colored one, seemed to be definitely in a family way.

. . .

They were sitting on the folded bath towel in a square of afternoon sunlight which came in through the kitchenette window. The window was high enough up so nobody could look in from outside, and they seemed to want the warmth of the sun more than anything else. They did not appear to be sick, but they were still rather languid. It wasn't starvation, apparently. Mel had put bits of a variety of foods on a napkin before them, and he changed the samples as soon as his guests indicated they weren't interested. So far, canned sardine was the only item that had attracted them at all, and they hadn't done much more than test that.

Between moments of just marveling at them, assuring himself they were there and not an illusion, and wondering what they were and where they'd come from, Mel was beginning to get worried again. For all he knew, they might suddenly die on the bath towel.

"Miss Green," he said in a very low voice—he didn't want to give Maria de Guesgne any indication he was in the house—"I wish you could tell me what you like to eat!"

Miss Green looked up at him and smiled. She was much more alert and vivacious than the other one who, perhaps because of her condition, merely sat or lay there gracefully and let Miss Green wait on her. The relationship seemed to be about that of an elf princess and her personal attendant, but they were much too real-seeming creatures to have popped out of a fairy tale—though their appearance did arouse recurrent bursts of a feeling of fairy tale unreality, which Mel hadn't known since he was ten. But, tiny as they were, Miss Green and the princess primarily gave him the impression of being quite as functional as human beings or, perhaps, as field mice.

He would have liked to inspect the brittle-seeming wings more closely. They seemed to be made up of numerous laminated, very thin sections, and he wondered whether they could fly with them or whether their race had given up or lost that ability.

But touching them might have affected their present matter-of-fact acceptance of him, and he didn't want to risk that...

A door banged suddenly in the apartment overhead. A moment later, he heard Maria coming down the hall stairs.

Mel stood up in sudden alarm. He'd known for some time that his neighbor had supplied herself with a key to his apartment, not to pry but with the practical purpose of borrowing from the little bar in Mel's living room when she was out of both money and liquor. She rarely took much, and until now he'd been more amused than annoyed.

• • •

He went hurriedly into the living room, closing the door to the kitchenette behind him. If Maria knocked, he wouldn't answer. If she decided he was out and came in to steal his liquor, he would pretend to have been asleep in the chair and scare the hell out of her!

She paused before the apartment door a moment, but then went out into the court.

Mel waited until her footsteps died away, going toward the street. As he opened the door to the kitchenette, something buzzed noisily out of the living room past his shoulder—a big, unlovely looking horsefly. The apartment screens didn't fit too well, and the fly probably had been attracted by the smell of food.

Startled, he stopped to consider the new problem. There was a flyswatter hanging beside the door, but he didn't want to alarm his guests—and then, for the first time, he saw Miss Green's wings unfold!



She was up on her feet beside the princess, who remained sitting on the towel. Both of them were following the swift, erratic course of the big fly with more animation than they'd shown about anything so far.

Miss Green gave a sudden piping cry, and the glassy appendages on her back opened out suddenly like twin transparently gleaming fans, and blurred into motion too swift for Mel to follow.

Miss Green rose into the air like a tiny human helicopter, hands up before her as if she were praying.

It wasn't till the horsefly swerved from the kitchenette window and came buzzing back that Mel guessed her purpose.

There was a sharper, fiercer drone like a hornet's song as she darted sideways into the insect's path. Mel didn't see her catch it. Its buzzing simply stopped, and then she was dropping gently back to the towel, with the ugly black thing between her hands. It looked nearly as big as her head.

There was an exchange of cheerful piping cries between the two. Miss Green laughed up at Mel's stupefied face, lifted the motionless fly to her mouth and neatly bit off its head.

Mel turned hurriedly and went into the living room. It wasn't, he told himself, really so very different from human beings eating a chicken. But he didn't feel up to watching what he knew was going to be a dismemberment and a feast.

At any rate, the horsefly had settled the feeding problem. His guests could take care of themselves.

• • •

That night, Miss Green hunted down a few moths. Mel woke up twice with the sudden sharp drone in his ears that told him she had just made her catch. Both times, it was a surge of unthinking physical fright that actually roused him. Awake, and remembering the disproportion in size between himself and the huntress, his reaction

seemed ridiculous; but the second time he found he was reluctant to go back to sleep until it would appear that Miss Green was done with her foraging.

So he lay awake, listening to the occasional faint indications of her continuing activity within his apartment, and to more familiar sounds without. A train rattled over a crossing; a police siren gave a sudden halloo and faded into silence again. For a long time, there was only the whispering passage of distant cars over wet pavements, and the slow roll and thump of the surf. A haze of fog beyond the window turned the apartment into a shut-off little world of its own.

Miss Green moved about with no more than a whisper of air and the muted pipe of voices from the top of the kitchenette cupboard to show where she was. Mel had put a small carton up there, upholstered with the towel and handkerchiefs and roofed over with his best woolen sweater, to make a temporary home for his guests. The princess hadn't stirred from it since, but Miss Green remained busy.

He started suddenly to find her hovering directly over his bed, vaguely silhouetted against the pale blur of the window. As he stared, she settled down and came to rest on the blanket over his chest, effortlessly as a spider gliding down along its thread. Her wings closed with a faint snap.

Mel raised his head carefully to squint down along the blanket at her. It was the first time either of them had made anything resembling a friendly advance in his direction; he didn't want to commit any blunders.

"Hello," he said quietly.

Miss Green didn't reply. She seemed to be looking up at the window, disregarding him, and he was content to watch her. These strange creatures seemed to have some of the aloofness of cats in their manner, and they might be as easily offended.

She turned presently, walked up over the blanket and perched herself on Mel's pillow, above his head and somewhat to his right. And there she stayed silently. Which seemed catlike, too: the granting of a reserved and temporary companionship. He would not have been too surprised to hear a tiny purring from above his ear. Instead, drowsily and lulled in an odd way by Miss Green's presence, he found himself sinking back into sleep.

. . .

It wasn't surprising either that his mind should be filled for a time with vague pictures of her, but when the room about him seemed to have expanded into something like a faintly luminous fishbowl, he knew he was dreaming. There were others present. They were going somewhere, and he had a sense of concern, which had to do either with their destination or with difficulties in getting there. Then a realization of swift, irrevocable disaster--

There were violent lurchings as the luminosity about him faded swiftly into blackness. He felt a terrible, energy-draining cold, the wet clutch of death itself, then something like a soundless explosion about him and anguished cryings. The motion stopped.

Blackness faded back to gray, but the cold remained. Icy water was pounding down on him now, as if he were fighting his way through a vertical current carrying somebody else. A desperate hunt for refuge and finding it suddenly, and slipping inside and relaxing into unconsciousness, to wait for the return of warmth and life... .

Mel's eyes opened. The room was beginning to lighten with morning.

He turned his head slowly to look for Miss Green. She was still there, on the pillow beside his head, watching him; and there was something in her position, in the unwinking golden eyes, even in her curious fluff of blue-white hair, that reminded him now less of a cat than a small lizard.

He didn't doubt that she had somehow enabled him to share the experience that in part explained their presence here. Without thinking, he asked aloud, "What happened to the others?"

She didn't move, but he was aware of a surge of horrified revulsion. Then before his open eyes for a moment swam a picture of a bleak, rain-beaten beach ... and, just above the waterline, in a cluster of harsh voices, jabbing beaks and beating wings, great gulls were tearing apart a strange jetsam of tiny bodies too weakened to escape--

A small, plaintive crying came from the kitchenette. The picture faded as Miss Green soared into the air to attend to her princess.

. . .

Mel breakfasted in the living room, thoughtfully. He couldn't quite understand that luminous vehicle of theirs, or why it should have succumbed to the rain storm of Saturday night, which appeared to be what had happened. But his guests obviously were confronted with the problem of getting back to wherever they'd come from--and he didn't think Miss Green would have confided in him if he wasn't somehow expected to be helpful in solving the problem.

There was a thump on the sill outside his bedroom window, followed by an annoyed meowing. The gray cat that had been spying on the bird box seemed to suspect he was harboring the refugees. Mel went out into the little courtyard through the back door of the duplex and chased the animal away. The fog, he saw, was thinning out quickly; in an hour or so it would be another clear day.

When he came in, Miss Green fluted a few soft notes, which Mel chose to interpret as gratitude, from the top of the cupboard and withdrew from sight again.

One couldn't think of them, he decided, as being exactly like any creatures of Earth. The cold rain had been very nearly deadly to them, if the memory Miss Green had transmitted to him was accurate--as destructive as it had been to their curious craft. Almost as if it could wash right through them, to drain vital energies from their bodies, while in the merely foggy air of last night she had seemed comfortable enough. It indicated different tolerance spans with more sharply defined limits.

The thought came into his mind:

Another planet?

It seemed possible, even if it left a lot to explain. Mel got up in sudden excitement and began to walk about the room. He had a conviction of being right. It struck him he might be involved in an event of enormous historical significance.

Then, stopping for a moment before the window, he saw it--

Apparently high in the gray sky overhead, a pale yellow circle moved, much smaller than the sun, but like the disk of the sun seen ghost-like through clouds. Instantly, another part of his dream became clear to him.

. . .

He lost his head. "Miss Green! Come here, quick!"

A buzz, the swift drone of wings, and she was beside him, perching on his shoulder. Mel pointed.

She gave a lamenting little cry of recognition. As if it had been a signal, the yellow circle darted sideways in a long streaking slant, and vanished. Miss Green fled to report to the princess, while Mel stayed at the window, and quickly returned to him again. Evidently she was both excited and distressed, and he wondered what was wrong. If that apparition of pale light had been one of their vessels, as her behavior indicated, it seemed probable that its mission was to hunt for survivors of the lost globe.

Miss Green seemed either less sure of that, or less confident that the rescue would be easily effected. Some minutes later, she pointed to a different section of the sky, where the yellow circle—or another very like it—was now moving slowly about. Presently it vanished again, and when it reappeared for the second time it was accompanied by two others.

Meanwhile, Miss Green might have been transmitting some understanding of the nature of her doubts to Mel, because the ghostly vagrants now gave him an immediate impression of insubstantiality: not space-spanning luminous globes but pictured shapes projected on the air. His theory of interplanetary travelers became suddenly much less probable.

In the next few moments, the concept he was struggling with abruptly completed itself in his mind, so abruptly, in fact, that there was no longer any question that it had originated with Miss Green. The rescue craft Mel thought he was seeing actually were just that.

But the pictures in the sky were only signals to possible survivors that help was approaching. The globes themselves were elsewhere, groping their way blindly and dangerously through strange dimensions that had nothing to do with the ones Mel knew.

And they were still, in some manner his imagination did not even attempt to clarify, very, very "far away."

• • •

"I was wondering what you'd done with the bird box," Maria de Guesgne explained. "It's not there in the bush any more."

Mel told her annoyedly that the bird box had been damaged by the storm, and so he'd thrown it into the incinerator.

"Well," Maria said vaguely, "that's too bad." Her handsome dark eyes were shifting about his living room meanwhile, not at all vaguely. Mel had left the apartment door partly open, and she had walked right in on her way to the market. When she wasn't drinking or working herself up to a bout of creative painting, which seemed to put her into a tranced sort of condition, Maria was a highly observant young woman. The question was now how to get her out of the apartment again before she observed more than he wanted her to.

"How does it happen you're not at work on Monday afternoon?" she inquired, and set her shopping bag down on the armchair.

Keeping one eye on the kitchenette door, Mel explained about his vacation. Miss Green hadn't been in sight for almost an hour; but he wasn't at all sure she mightn't come out to inspect the visitor, and the thought of Maria's probable reactions was unnerving.

Two weeks?" Maria repeated chattily. "It'll be fun having you around for two weeks—unless you're going off to spend your vacation somewhere else. Are you?"

"No," Mel said. "I'm staying here—"

And at that moment, Miss Green came in through the kitchenette door.

At least, Mel assumed it was Miss Green. All he actually saw was a faint blur of motion. It went through the living room, accompanied by a high-pitched hum, and vanished behind Maria.

"Good Lord!" she cried, whirling. "What's that? *Oh!*" The last was a shrill yelp. "It stung me!"

• • •

Mel hadn't imagined Miss Green could move so fast. Rising and falling with furious menace, the sound seemed to come from all points of the room at once, as Maria darted out of the apartment. Clutching her shopping bag, Mel followed her out hastily and slammed the door behind them. He caught up with Maria in the court.

She was rubbing herself angrily.

"I'm not coming into that apartment again, Mel Armstrong," she announced, "until you've had it fumigated! That thing kept stinging me! What was it, anyway?"

"A wasp, I guess." Mel felt weak with relief. She hadn't really seen anything. "Here's your bag. I'll chase it out."

Maria stalked off, complaining about screens that didn't even protect people against giant wasps.

Mel found the apartment quiet again and went into the kitchenette. Miss Green was poised on the top edge of the cupboard, a gold-eyed statuette of Victory, laughing down at him, the laminated wings spread and raised behind her like iridescent glass fans. Mel looked at her with a trace of uneasiness. She had some kind of small white bundle in her arms, and he wondered whether it concealed the weapon with which she'd stung Maria.

"I don't think you should have done that," he told her. "But she's gone now."

Looking rather pleased with herself, Miss Green glanced back over her shoulder and piped a few questioning notes to the princess. There was a soft reply, and she soared down to the table, folded her wings and knelt to lay the bundle gently down on it. She beckoned to Mel.

Mel's eyes popped as she unfolded the bundle. Perhaps he really shouldn't have been surprised.

He was harboring four guests now—the princess had been safely delivered of twins.

• • •

At dusk, Miss Green widened the biggest slit in the bedroom screen a little more and slipped out to do her own kind of shopping, with a section of one of Mel's handkerchiefs to serve as a bag.

Mel left the lights out and stayed at the window. He felt depressed, but didn't quite know why—unless it was that so many odd things had

happened since Sunday morning that his mind had given up trying to understand them.

He wasn't really sure now, for example, whether he was getting occasional flash-glimpses of those circular luminous vessels plowing through another dimension somewhere, or whether he was half asleep and imagining it. Usually it was a momentary glow printed on the dark air at the edge of his vision, vanishing before he could really look at it.

He had a feeling they had managed to come a good deal closer during the day. Then he wondered briefly whether other people had been seeing strange light-shapes, too, and what they might have thought the glimpses were.

Spots before their eyes, probably.

Miss Green was back with a soft hum of wings, on the outer window sill, six feet from where he sat. She pushed the knotted scrap of cloth through the screen. There was something inside it now; it caught for a moment on the wires. Mel started up to help, then checked himself, afraid of feeling some bug squirming desperately inside; and while he hesitated, she had shoved it through. She followed it, picked it up again and flew off to the living room. After a moment she returned with the empty cloth and went out again.

She made eight such trips in the next hour, while night deepened outside and then began to lighten as a half-moon shoved over the horizon. Mel must have dozed off several times; at least, he suddenly found himself coming awake, with the awareness that something had just landed with a soft thump on the window sill outside.

It wasn't Miss Green. He saw a chunky shadow at one corner of the window, and caught the faintest glint of green eyes peering into the room. It was the cat from the courtyard.

In the same moment, he heard the familiar faint hum, and Miss Green appeared at the opposite end of the sill.

• • •

Afterward, Mel realized he'd simply sat there, stiffening in groggy, sleep-dazed horror, as the cat-shadow lengthened and flowed swiftly toward the tiny humanoid figure. Miss Green seemed to raise both arms over her head. A spark of brilliant blue glowed from her cupped hands and extended itself in an almost invisible thread of fire that stabbed against the cat's forehead. The cat yowled, swung aside and leaped down into the court.

Mel was on his feet, shaking violently, as Miss Green slipped in through the screen. He heard Maria open her window upstairs to peer down into the court, where the cat was making low, angry sounds. Apparently it hadn't been hurt, but no wonder Maria had suspected that afternoon she'd been stung by a wasp! Or that Miss Green's insect victims never struggled, once she had caught them!

He pulled down the shade and stood undecided in the dark, until he heard her piping call from the living room. It was followed by an impatient buzzing about the standing lamp in there, and Mel concluded correctly that he was supposed to turn on the light.

He discovered her on the living room table, sorting out the plunder she had brought back.

It wasn't a pile of electrocuted insects as he had expected, but a puzzlingly commonplace collection—little heaps of dry sand from the beach, some small white pebbles, and a sizable bundle of thin twigs about two inches in length. Since she was disregarding him, he

shifted the lamp over to the table to see what this human-shaped lightning bug from another dimension was going to do next.

That was the way he felt about Miss Green at the moment...

What she did was to transport the twigs in two bundles to the top of the cupboard, where she left them with the princess. Then she came back and began to lay out a thin thread of white sand on the dark, polished surface of the table.

Mel pulled up his armchair, poured himself a glass of brandy, lit a cigarette and settled down to watch her.

* * *

By the time Miss Green indicated to him that she wanted the light turned out again, he had finished his second drink and was feeling rather benevolent. She had used up all her sand, and about a square foot of the table's surface was covered now with a confusingly intricate maze of lines, into which she had placed white pebbles here and there. Some of the lines, Mel noticed, blended into each other, while others stopped abruptly or curved back on themselves. As a decorative scheme, it hardly seemed worthwhile.

"Miss Green," he told her thoughtfully, "I hope it makes sense to you. It doesn't to me."

She piped imperiously, pointing: the light! Mel had a moment of annoyance at the way she was ordering him around in his own apartment.

"Well," he said, "I'll humor you this time."

For a moment after he had pulled the switch, he stood beside the table to let his eyes adjust to the dark. However, they weren't adjusting properly—a patch of unquiet phosphorescent glimmering floated disturbingly within his field of vision, and as the seconds passed, it seemed to be growing stronger.

Suddenly, Mel swore in amazement and bent down to examine the table.

"Now what have you done—?" he began.

Miss Green fluted soothingly at him from the dark and fluttered up to his shoulder. He felt a cool touch against his ear and cheek, and a burst of oddly pleasant tinglings ran over his scalp.

"Stop that!" he said, startled.

Miss Green fluted again, urgently. She was trying to tell him something now, and suddenly he thought he understood.

"All right," he said. "I'll look at it. That's what you want me to do, isn't it?"

Miss Green flew down to the table again, which indicated agreement. Mel groped himself back into the chair and leaned forward to study the curiously glowing design she had created of sand and pebbles.

He discovered immediately that any attempt to see it clearly merely strained his vision. Details turned into vaguely distorted, luminous flickerings when he stared at them and the whole pale, spidery pattern made no more sense than it had with the light on. She must have some purpose in mind with it, but Mel couldn't imagine what.

Meanwhile, Miss Green was making minor adjustments in his position which Mel accepted without argument, since she seemed to

now what she was doing. Small tugs and pushes told him she wanted his hands placed on the table to either side of the design. Mel put them there. His head was to be tilted forward just so. He obliged her again. Then she was back on the table, and the top two-thirds of the pattern vanished suddenly behind a blur.

After a moment, he realized she had opened her wings and blotted that part from his sight.

• • •

In the darkness, he fastened his puzzled gaze on the remaining section: a quivering, thinly drawn pattern of blue-white light that faded periodically almost to the limits of visibility and slowly grew up again to what was, by comparison, real brilliance. His head was aching slightly. The pattern seemed to tilt sideways and move upward, as if it were creeping in a slow circle about some pivot-point. Presently, it turned down again to complete the circle and start on another round. By that time, the motion seemed normal.

When a tiny shape of light suddenly ran across the design and vanished again as it reached the other side, Mel was only moderately surprised. The figure had reminded him immediately of Miss Green. After a while, it crossed his field of vision in another direction, and then there were two more... .

He seemed to be swimming forward, through the pattern, into an area of similar tiny figures like living silhouettes of light, and of entrancingly delicate architectural designs. It was like a marionette setting of incredible craftsmanship, not quite real in the everyday sense, but as convincing as a motion picture which was spreading out, second by second, and beginning to flow about him--

"Hey!" Mel sat up with a start. "You're trying to hypnotize me!"

Miss Green piped pleadingly. Clearly, she had only been trying to show him something. And wasn't it beautiful? Didn't he want to see more?

Mel hesitated. He was suspicious now, but he was also curious. After all, what could she do to him with her tricks?

Besides, he admitted to himself, the picture had vanished as soon as he shifted his eyes, and it was beautiful, like moving about through a living illustration of a book of fairy tales.

He yielded. "All right, I do want to see more."

This time, the picture grew up out of the design within seconds. Only it wasn't the same picture. It was as if he had turned around and was looking in another direction, a darker one.

There were fewer of the little light-shapes; instead, he discovered in the distance a line of yellow dots that moved jerkily but steadily, like glowing corks bobbing on dark water. He watched them for a moment without recognition; then he realized with a thrill of pleasure that he was getting another view of the luminous globes he had seen before--this time an other-dimensional view, so to speak.

Suddenly, one of them was right before him! Not a dot or a yellow circle, but a three-foot ball of fire that rushed toward him through the blackness with hissing, sputtering sounds!

Mel surged up out of the chair with a yelp of fright, and the fireball vanished.

As he groped about for the light, Miss Green was piping furiously at him from the table.

Then the light came on.

* * *

She was in a rage. Dancing about on the table, beating the air with her wings, she waved her arms over her head and shook her tiny fists at him. Mel backed off warily.

"Take it easy!" he warned. He could reach the flyswatter in the kitchenette with a jump if she started shooting off miniature electric bolts again.

She might have had the same idea, because she calmed down suddenly, shook her wings together and closed them with a snap. It was like a cat smoothing down its bristling back fur. There was a whistling query from the princess now, followed by an excited elfin conversation.

Mel poured himself a drink with a hand that shook slightly, and pretended to ignore the disturbance of his guests, while he tried to figure out what had happened.

Supposing, he thought a trifle guiltily, settling down on the couch at a safe distance from the table--supposing they simply had to have his help at this point. The manner in which one of the rescue globes suddenly had seemed to shift close to him suggested it. Was he justified in refusing to go on with it? In the directionless dark through which the globes were driving, they might have been reacting to his concentrated awareness of them as if it were a radio signal from the human dimensions. And it would explain Miss Green's rage at the sudden interruption of the contact.

But another thought came to him then, and his guilty feelings vanished in a surge of alarmed indignation.

Well, and just supposing, he thought, that he *hadn't* broken the contact. And that a three-foot sputtering fireball materialized right inside his living room!

He caught sight of Miss Green eying him speculatively and rather slyly from the table. She seemed composed enough now; there was even the faintest of smiles on that tiny face. The smile seemed to confirm his suspicions.

Mel downed his drink and stood up.

"Miss Green," he told her evenly, choosing his words with care, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't intend to be the subject of any more of your experiments. At least not until I've had time to think about it."

Her head nodded slightly, as if she were acknowledging his decision. But the smile remained; in fact, Miss Green had begun to look rather smug. Mel studied her uneasily. She might be planning to put something else over on him, but he knew how to stop that!

Before he turned out the light and went to bed, Mel methodically and somewhat grimly swallowed four more shots of brandy. With that much inside him it wouldn't matter what Miss Green tried, because he wouldn't be able to react to her suggestions till he woke up again in the morning.

* * *

Actually it was noon before he awoke--and he might have gone on sleeping then if somebody hadn't been banging on his apartment

door.

"Wake up, Mel!" he heard Maria de Guesgne shouting hoarsely. "I can hear you snoring in there!"

He sat up a little groggily and looked at the clock. His guests weren't in sight.

"You awake, Mel?" she demanded.

"Wait a minute!" he yelled back. "Just woke up and I'm not decent."

When he opened the door, she had vanished. He was about to close it quietly and gratefully again, when she called down the stairway. "That you, Mel? Come on up! I want to show you something."

He locked the door behind him and went upstairs. Maria received him beamingly in her living room. She was on one of her rare creative painting sprees, and this spree, to judge by the spattered appearance of the room and the artist, was more riotous than usual. A half dozen fair-sized canvases were propped on newspapers against the wall to dry. They were turned around, to increase the shock effect on Mel when he would get his first look at them.

"Ever see a salamander?" Maria inquired with anticipation, spreading a few more papers on the table.

Mel admitted he hadn't. He wished she'd given him time to have coffee first. His comments at these private showings were usually regarded as inadequate anyway.

"Well," Maria invited triumphantly, selecting one of the canvases and setting it abruptly up on the table before him, "take a look at one!"

Mel gasped and jerked back. "Holy Judas!" he said in a weak voice.

"Pretty good, eh?" For once, Maria appeared satisfied with his reaction. She held it away from her and regarded it. "One of my best!" she cried judiciously.

About three times life-size, it was a quite recognizable portrait of Miss Green.

. . .

It didn't occur to Maria to offer Mel coffee but he got a cigarette from her. Fortunately, he wasn't called upon to make any more comments; she chattered away while she showed him the rest of the series. Mel looked and listened, still rather shaken. Presently he began to ask questions.

A salamander, he learned, was a fire elemental. Maria glanced at her fireplace as she explained this, and Mel noticed she seemed to have had a fire burning there overnight, which wasn't too unusual for her even in the middle of summer. Listening to the bang-haired, bright-eyed oddball rattling off metaphysical details about salamanders, he became aware of a sort of dread growing up in him. For Miss Green was pictured, wings and arms spread, against and within furling veils of yellow-white flame....

"Drawn from life?" he inquired, grinning to make it a joke. He pointed at the picture.

Without looking directly at her, he saw Maria start at the question. She stared at him intensely for a moment, and after that she became more reticent.

It didn't matter because it was all on the canvases. She had seen as much as he had and more, and put it down with shocking realism.

seen through somebody else's eyes, Miss Green's world was still beautiful; but now it was also frightening. And there was what Maria had said about salamanders.

"Maria," he said, "what actually happened last night?"

She looked at him sullenly. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mel."

"I imagine," he suggested casually, "you were just sitting there in front of the fire. And then--"

"Gosh, Mel, she was beautiful! It's *all* so beautiful, you know..." She recovered quickly. "I fell asleep and I had a dream, that's all. Why? What makes you ask?"

She was beginning to look rather wild-eyed, but he had to find out. "I was just wondering," he said, "whether they'd left."

"Why should they leave-- Look, you oaf! I called you in to give you the privilege of looking at my paintings. Now get out. I've got to make a phone call."

He stopped at the door, struck by a sudden suspicion. "You're not going to try to sell them, are you?"

"Try to sell them!" She laughed hoarsely. "There are circles, Mel Armstrong, in which a de Guesgne original is *understood*, shall we say? Circles not exactly open to the common herd... This series," she concluded, rather prosaically, "will get me two thousand bucks as soon as I let one or two of the right people have a look at them!"

* * *

Brewing himself a pot of coffee at last, Mel decided that part of it, if true, wasn't any of his business. He had always assumed Maria was living on a monthly check she got from an unidentified source in Chicago, but her occasional creations might have a well-heeled following at that. As for the way Miss Green had got in to sit for her portrait--the upstairs screens weren't in any better shape than the downstairs ones. The fiery background, of course, might have been only in Maria's mind.

There was a scratching on top of the cupboard and whispery voices. Mel ignored the slight chill that drifted down his spine. Up to that moment, he'd been hoping secretly that Maria had provided a beacon for the rescue team to home in on while he slept, and that his guests had been picked up and taken home.

But Miss Green was peering down at him over the edge of the cupboard.

"Hi, salamander!" he greeted her politely. "Had a busy night? Too bad it didn't work."

Her head withdrew. In the living room Mel stopped to look at the design of sand and pebbles, which was still on the table. Touching one of the thread-like lines, he discovered it was as hard and slick as lacquer. Otherwise the pattern seemed unremarkable in daylight, but Mel dropped a cloth across it to keep it out of sight.

Miss Green fluttered past him to the sill of the bedroom window. He watched her standing on tiptoe against the screen, apparently peering about at the sky. After a while, it began to seem ridiculous to let himself become obsessed by superstitious fears about this tiny and beautiful, almost jewel-like creature.

Whatever abilities she might have, she and the princess were only

trying to get home--and, having seen their home, he couldn't blame them for that.

He had a return of the fairy-tale nostalgia his glimpse of those eerily beautiful places had aroused in him the night before, a pleasantly yearning sensation like an awareness of elfin horns blowing far away to send faint, exciting echoes, swirling about the commonplace sky of Sweetwater Bay. The feeling might have been resurrected from his childhood, but it was a strong and effective one.

He recalled how bored he'd been with everything before they appeared....

He walked softly through the bedroom and stopped behind Miss Green. She was making an elaborate pretense of not having noticed his approach, but the pointed ears that could follow the passage of a moth in the dark were tilted stiffly backward. Mel actually was opening his mouth to say, "Miss Green, I'll help you if I can," when it struck him sharply, like a brand-new thought, that it was an extremely rash promise to make, considering everything that had happened so far.

He wondered how the odd impulse ever had come to him.

In sudden suspicion, he began to trace the last few minutes through again. He had started with a firm decision not to let his guests involve him in their plans any more than was healthy for him, if at all--and the decision had been transformed, step by step, and mental twist by mental twist, into a foolish willingness to have them make use of him exactly as they pleased!

Miss Green, still maliciously pretending to watch the sky, let him think it all out until it became quite clear what she had done and how she had done it. And then, as Mel spluttered angrily at this latest interference with his freedom of thought and action, she turned around and laughed at him.

* * *

In a way, it cleared the air. The pressure was off. Maria had proved a much more pliable subject than Mel; the rescuers had their bearings and would arrive presently. Meanwhile, everybody could relax.

Mel couldn't help feeling relieved as he grew sure of that. At the same time, now that the departure was settled, he became aware of a certain amount of belated regret. Miss Green didn't seem to know the exact hour; she was simply watching for them well ahead of their arrival.

Where would they show up? She waved her arms around in an appealingly helpless gesture at the court outside and the sky. Here, there--somewhere in the area.

It would be a fire globe. At his question, she pointed at the opposite wall of the court where a picture of one formed itself obligingly, slid along the wall a few feet, and vanished. Mel was beginning to enjoy all this easy last-minute communication, when he heard Maria come downstairs and open the door to the other court. There was conversation, and several sets of footsteps went up to her apartment and down again.

Cautioning Miss Green, he took a look around the shutters of the living room window. A small panel truck stood in the court; Maria was supervising the careful transfer of her paintings into its interior. Apparently she didn't even intend to let them dry before offering them for sale!

The truck drove off with Maria inside with her paintings, and Mel

discovered Miss Green doing a little spying of her own from the upper edge of the shutters. Good friends now, they smiled at each other and resumed their guard at the bedroom window.

The princess joined them around five in the afternoon. Whether she had been injured in the accident or weakened by the birth of her babies, Mel couldn't tell, but Miss Green carried her friend down from the cupboard without visible effort, and then went back for a globular basket of tightly woven tiny twigs, which contained the twins.

It was a masterfully designed little structure with a single opening about the thickness of a pencil, and heavily lined. Mel had a notion to ask for it as a souvenir, but decided against it. He lifted it carefully to his ear, to listen to an almost inaudible squeaking inside, and his expression seemed to cause Miss Green considerable silent amusement.

All in all, it was much like waiting patiently in pleasant company for the arrival of an overdue train. Then around seven o'clock, when the room was already dark, the telephone rang abruptly and returned Mel with a start to the world of human beings.

He lifted the receiver,

"Hello, oaf!" said Maria de Guesgne in what seemed for the moment to be an enormous, booming voice.

Mel inquired agreeably whether she'd succeeded in selling her paintings. It was the first thing that occurred to him.

"Certainly I sold them!" Maria said. He could tell by now that she was thoroughly plastered again. "Got a message to give you," she added.

"From whom?"

"Maybe from me, ha-ha!" said Maria. She paused a moment, seemed to be muttering something to herself, and resumed suddenly, "Oaf, are you listening?"

Mel said bluntly that he was. If he hung up on her, she would probably ring back.

"All right," Maria said clearly. "This is the message: 'The fiery ones do not tolerate the endangering of their secrets.' Warning, see? Goo'bye."

She hung up before he could say anything.

* * *

Hers had been a chilling sort of intrusion. Mel stood a while in the darkening room, trying to gather up the mood Maria had shattered, and discovering he couldn't quite do it. He realized that all along, like a minor theme, there had been a trace of fear underlying everything he did, ever since he had first looked into that bird box and glimpsed something impossible inside it. He had been covering the fear up; even now he didn't want to admit it, but it was there.

He could quite simply, of course, walk out of the room and out of the apartment, and stay away for a week. He didn't even ever have to come back. And, strictly speaking, this was the sort of thing that should have happened to somebody like Maria de Guesgne, not to him. For him, the sensible move right now would be to go quietly back into the normal world of reality he had stepped out of a few mornings ago. It was a simple physical act. The door was over there... .

Then Mel looked back at his quests and promptly reversed his

decision. They were certainly as real as any living creatures he'd ever seen, and he felt there weren't many human beings who would show up as well as Miss Green had done in any comparable emergency. His own unconscious fears meant only that he had run into a new and unpredictable factor in a world that had been becoming increasingly commonplace for a number of years now. He could see that once you'd got settled into the idea of a commonplace world, you might be startled by discoveries that didn't fit that notion--and he felt now, rather hazily, that it wasn't such a bad thing to be startled like that. It might wake you up enough to let you start living again yourself.

He took the receiver off the phone and laid it on the floor, so there wouldn't be any more interruptions. If he ran off now before seeing how the adventure ended, he knew he would never quit regretting it.

He went into the bedroom and pulled his chair back up to the window. The shadowy silhouette that was Miss Green turned and sounded a few fluting notes at him. He had the immediate impression that she was worried.

What was the matter?

She pointed.

Clouds!

• • •

The sky was still full of the pastel glowings of the sunset. Here and there were patches of black cloud, insignificant-looking, like ragged crows swimming through the pale light.

"Rain," the thought came. "The cold rain--the killing rain! Another storm!"

Mel studied the sky uneasily. They might be right. "Your friends are bound to get here first," he assured them, looking confident about it.

They smiled gratefully at him. He couldn't think of anything he might do to help. The princess looked comfortable on the towel he had laid along the screen, and Miss Green, as usual, looked alert, prepared to handle anything that had to be handled. He wondered about asking her to let him see how the globes were doing, and, instantly, a thought showed clear in his mind: "*Try it yourself!*"

That hadn't occurred to Mel before. He settled back comfortably in the chair and looked through the screen for them.

Four or five fiery visualizations quivered here and there in the air, vanished, reappeared, vanished... .

Mel stopped looking for them, and there was only the sky.

"Closer?" he said aloud, rather pleased with himself. It had been easy!

Miss Green nodded, human fashion, and piped something in reply. Closer, but--

He gathered she couldn't tell from here how close, and that there was trouble--a not quite translatable kind of trouble, but almost as if, in their dimension, they were struggling through the radiant distortions of a storm that hadn't gathered yet here on Earth.

He glanced up at the sky again, more anxiously now. The black clouds didn't seem to have grown any larger.

. . .
By and by, because he had not had any awareness of going to sleep, Mel was surprised to find himself waking up. He knew immediately that he had been asleep a long time, a period of hours. There was grayness around him, the vague near-light of very early morning, and he had a sense of having been aroused by a swirling confusion of angry sounds. But all was silent at the moment.

Her answer was instantly in his mind. The storm had caused a delay—but a great globe was almost here now!

A curious pause followed. Mel had a sense of hesitation. And then, very swiftly and faintly, a wisp of thought, which he would have missed if that pause had not made him alert, showed and vanished on the fringe of his consciousness.

"Be careful! Be very careful."

Miss Green turned back to the window. Beside her now, Mel saw the princess sitting as if asleep, with one arm across the twig basket and her head resting on her arm. Before he could frame the puzzled question that was struggling up in his mind, there was a series of ear-splitting yowls from the court outside. It startled Mel only for a moment, since it was a familiar sort of racket. The gray cat didn't tolerate intruding felines in its area, and about once a month it discovered and evicted one with the same lack of inhibition it was evidencing right now. It must have been the threatening squalls which usually preceded the actual battle that had awakened him.

The encounter itself was over almost instantly. There were sounds of a scampering retreat which ended beyond the garage, and, standing up at the window, Mel saw the gray shape of the winner come gliding back down the court. The cat stopped below him and seemed to turn up its head. For a moment, he felt it was staring both at him and at Miss Green, very much like a competent little tiger in the gusty, gray night; then it made a low, menacing sound and moved on out of sight. Apparently it hadn't yet forgotten its previous meeting with Miss Green.

Mel looked down at her. "Why should I be careful?"

There was a pause again, and what came then hardly seemed an answer to his question. The princess was very weak, Miss Green indicated; he might have to help.

He was still wondering about that—and wondering, too, whether he'd really had something like a warning from her—when a sudden wavering glare lit up the room behind them.

For a moment, he thought the fireball was inside the building. But the light was pouring in through the living room window; its source was in the opposite court, out of his line of sight. There was a crackling, hissing sound, and the light faded.

Miss Green came darting at him. Mel put his hand up instinctively and felt her thrust the basket into it. Almost instantly, she had picked up the princess and was outside the screen—

Then the cat attacked from below in a silent, terrible leap, a long, twisting shadow in the air, and they seemed to drop out of sight together.

. . .
Mel was out in the court, staring wildly around. In the swimming grayness nothing stirred or made sound. A cool, moist wind thrust at

his face and faded. Except for the toy basket of twigs in his hand, he might have been awakening from a meaningless dream.

Then a lurid round of light like a big, wavering moon came out over the top of the building, and a sharp humming sound drove down through the air at him. Instinctively again, he held out the basket and felt it plucked away. He thought it was Miss Green, but the shape had come and gone much too swiftly to be sure of that.

The light grew brilliant, a solid white--intolerable--and he backed hurriedly into the shelter of the garage, his heart hammering in excitement and alarm. He heard voices from the other court; a window slammed somewhere. He couldn't guess what was happening, but he didn't need Miss Green's warning now. He had an overwhelming urge to keep out of sight until the unearthly visitor would be gone--

And then, running like a rabbit, the gray cat appeared from behind a box halfway down the court and came streaking for the garage. Mel watched its approach with a sort of silent horror, partly because it might be attracting undesirable attention to him--and partly because he seemed to know in that instant exactly what was going to be done to it.

It wasn't more than twenty feet away when something like a twisting string of fiery white reached down from above. The animal leaped sideways, blazed and died. There was a sound very like a gunshot, and the court was instantly dark.

Mel stayed where he was. For half a minute or so, he was shaking much too violently to have left his retreat. By the end of that time, he knew better. It wasn't over yet!

Pictures forming in the moist, dark air ... delicate, unstable outlines sliding through the court, changing as they moved. Elfin castles swayed up out of grayness and vanished again. Near the edge of his vision other shapes showed, more beautiful than human... .

Muttering to himself, between terror and delight, Mel closed his eyes as tightly as he could, which helped for a moment. But then the impressions began drifting through his mind. The visitors were still nearby, hanging somewhere outside the limits of human sight in their monstrous fireball, in the windy sky. They were talking to him in their way.

Mel asked in his mind what they wanted, and the answer showed immediately. The table in his living room with the pattern of glassy sand and pebbles Miss Green had constructed. The pattern was glowing again now under the cloth he had thrown over it. He was to go in and look at the pattern... .

"No!" he said aloud. It was all terror now.

"Go look at the pattern... . Go look at the pattern... ."

The pictures burst round him in a soundless wild flowering of beauty, flickering rains of color, a fountain of melting, shifting forms. His mind drowned in happiness. He was sinking through a warmth of kindness, gratitude and love... .

• • •

A drift of rain touched his cheek coldly--and Mel found himself outside the garage, moving drunkenly toward the apartment door. Then, just for a moment, a picture of Miss Green printed itself on his mind.

She seemed to be standing before him, as tall now as he was,

motionless, the strange wings half spread. The golden unhuman eyes were looking past him, watching something with cold malice and contempt--and with a concentration of purpose that made a death's mask of the perfectly chiseled green face.

In that second, Mel understood the purpose as clearly as if she had told him. In the next, the image disappeared with a jerky, complete abruptness--

As if somebody were belatedly trying to wipe it out of his memory as well! But he knew he had seen her somehow--somewhere--as she actually was at that moment. And he knew what she had been watching. Himself, Mel Armstrong, staggering blindly about in his other-dimension, down in the court!

He hadn't stayed in the court. He was back in the garage, backed trembling against a wall. She--*they*--weren't trying to show him gratitude, or reward him somehow; before they left, they simply wanted to destroy the human being who had found out about them, and whom they had used. The table and the pattern were some sort of trap! What he couldn't understand was why they didn't simply come down in their fireball and kill him as they had the cat.

They were still pouring their pictures at him, but he knew now how to counteract that. He stared out through the garage window at the lightening sky--looked at, listened to, what was there, filling his mind with Earth shapes and sounds!

And he promptly discovered an ally he hadn't been counting on. He hadn't really been aware of the thumping wind before, and the sketchy pattering of raindrops, like a sweeping fall of leaves here and there. He hadn't even heard, beyond the continuous dim roar of surf from the beach, the gathering mutter of thunder.

They couldn't stay here long. The storm was ready to break. They weren't willing to risk coming out fully into the Earth dimension to hunt him down. And he didn't have to go to their trap....

Rain spattered louder and closer. The sweat chilled on Mel's body as his breathing grew quieter. They hadn't left him yet. If he relaxed his eyes and his mind, there was an instant faint recurrence of the swirling unearthly patterns. But he could keep them out by looking at what was really here. He only had to wait--

Then the rain came down in a great, rushing tide, and he knew they were gone.

• • •

For a few seconds, he remained where he was, weak with relief. Over the noise of the storm, he heard human voices faintly from the other court and from neighboring houses. That final crash must have awakened everybody--and someone had seen the great globe of fire when it first appeared.

There should be some interesting gossip in the morning!

Which concerned Mel not at all. After drinking in the sweet certainty of being still alive and safe, he had become aware of an entirely unexpected emotion, which was, curiously, a brief but sharp pang of grief at Miss Green's betrayal. Why, he must have been practically in love with that other-dimensional, human-shaped rattlesnake! Mulling it over in moody amazement at himself, it struck Mel suddenly then that one could interpret her final action somewhat differently, too.

Because she could have planted that apparently revealing picture of herself deliberately in his mind, to stop him from stumbling into the trap the others had set for him. She might have been planning to

have him from the beginning or merely relented at the last moment. There was no way of ever really knowing now, but Mel found he preferred to believe that Miss Green's intention was good.

In the driving rain, he hesitated a moment beside the blackened lump that had been the cat, but he couldn't force himself to pick it up and remove it. If someone else found it, it might add to the gossip, but that wasn't any business of his any more. Everyone knew that lightning did funny, selective things. So far as he was concerned, the matter was all over.

He opened the duplex door and stood staring.

His apartment door was open and the room beyond was dark, as he had left it. But down the little stairway and out of Maria's upstairs apartment, light poured in a quiet flood.

* * *

She must have returned during the night while he was sleeping, probably drunk as a hoot-owl. The commotion downstairs hadn't been enough to arouse her. But something else had--she'd come down following swirling, beautiful, unearthly pictures, hunting the pattern that would guide her straight into a promised delight.

Mel didn't have to reach into the apartment to switch on the light. Lightning did funny, selective things, all right, and from where he stood he could smell what had happened. They hadn't wasted that final bolt, after all.

Oddly enough, what was uppermost in his mind in those seconds, while he continued to put off seeing what he was going to have to look at very soon, was the final awareness of how he must have appeared in their eyes:

A stupid native, barely capable of receiving training and instruction enough to be a useful servant. Beyond that, they had simply had no interest in him.

It was Maria they had worried about. The mental impressions he'd picked up in the court had been directed at her. Miss Green had been obliged to stop him finally from springing a trap which was set for another.

For Maria, who might have endangered their leaving.