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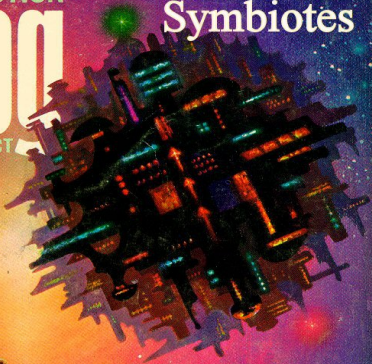
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Symbiotes

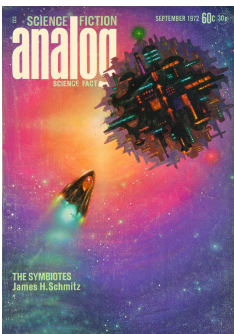
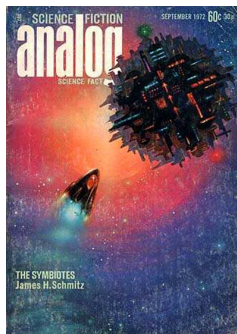


THE SYMBIOTES
James H. Schmitz

"The Symbiotes"

James Schmitz

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Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.

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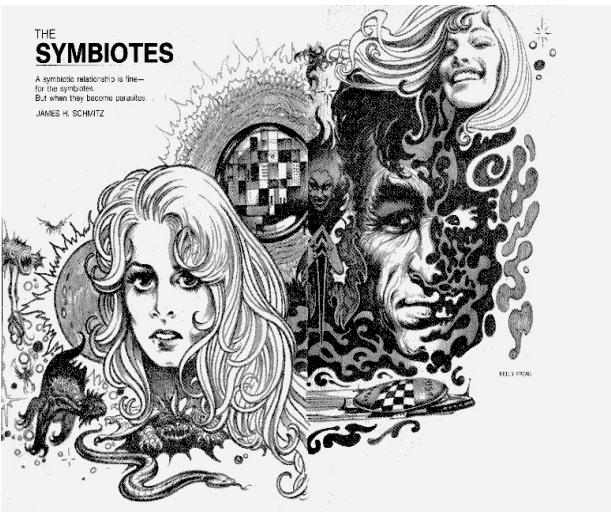
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THE SYMBIOTES

A symbiotic relationship is 'fine—
for the symbiotes.
But when they become parasites.

JAMES H. SCHWITZ



KELLY PROSS

Trigger had been shopping at Wehall's that morning, winding up with lunch on one of the store's terrace restaurants. She had finished, lit a Twirpy, and was smoking it contemplatively when a tiny agitated-sounding voice spoke to her.

"Good lady," it said, "you have a kind face! I'm a helpless fugitive and an enemy is looking for me. Would you let me hide in your handbag until he goes away?"

The words seemed to have come from the surface of the table. Someone's idea of a joke... . Trigger let the Twirpy drop from her fingers to the disposal disk and looked casually around, expecting to discover an acquaintance. People sat at tables here and there about the terrace, but no one was at all near her. And she saw no one she knew.

"Good lady, please! There isn't much time!"

She shrugged. Why not go along with the humorist?

"Where are you?" she asked, in a conspiratorially low tone. "I don't see you."

"Between the large blue utensil and the smaller white one. I don't dare show myself. The abominable Blethro wasn't far behind me!"

Trigger glanced at the blue pitcher on the table, moved it a few inches back from a square white sandwich warmer. Her eyes widened briefly. Then she laughed.

One of Wehall's advertising stunts! A manikin, a miniature male figure, crouched beside the pitcher. Straightened up, it might have reached a height of eight inches. The features were exquisitely mobile and lifelike. Blue eyes looked imploringly at her. It wore a velvety purple costume--the finery of an earlier century.

"You really are cute, little man!" she told it. "A work of art. And just what kind of work of art are you, eh? Protohom? Robot? Telecontrolled? Do you know?"

The doll was shaking its head violently. "No, no!" it said. "Please! I'm as human as you are. Help me hide before Blethro finds me, and I'll explain everything."

Her reactions were being recorded, of course. Well, she wouldn't mind playing their game for a minute or two.

"A joke's a joke, midget," she remarked, drawing up her eyebrows. "But slipping you into my bag just might be construed as shoplifting. Do you realize you probably cost a good deal more than I make in a year?"

"They said no one would believe me," the doll told her. Tears in the tiny eyes? She felt startled. "I'm from a world you've never heard about. Our size was reduced genetically. Blethro had three of us in a box in his aircar. We agreed to attempt to escape the next time he opened the car door... ."

Trigger glanced about. Halfway across the terrace, a man stood staring in her direction. She shifted the blue pitcher slightly to give the doll better cover. "Where are the other two?" she asked.

"Blethro seized them before they could get out of the car. If I'm to find help for them, I must get away first. But you believe I'm a toy! So I--"

And now the man was coming purposefully along the aisles toward Trigger's table. She cupped a light hand over the doll as it began to straighten up. "Wait a moment!" she muttered. "Does your abominable Blethro sport a great yellow moustache?"

"Yes! Is--"

Trigger swung her handbag around behind the pitcher, snapped it open, blocking the man's line of view. "Blethro seems to have spotted you," she whispered. "Keep down and pop inside the bag! We're leaving."

. . .

Bag slung from her shoulder, she set off quickly toward the nearest door leading from the terrace. Glancing back, she saw the man with the jutting yellow moustache lengthen his stride. But he checked at the table where she'd been sitting, hastily moved a few articles about and lifted the top off the sandwich warmer. Trigger hurried on, not quite running now.

A small sign on the door read Wehall Employees Only. She looked back. Blethro was hurrying, too, not far behind her. She pushed through the door, sprinted along the empty white hallway beyond it. After some seconds, she heard a yell and his footsteps pounding in hot pursuit.

The hall ended where another one crossed it. Blank walls, and nobody in sight. Left or right? Trigger ran up the branch on the right, turned another corner--there at last was a door!

A locked door, she discovered instants later. Blind alley! Blethro came rushing around the corner, slowed as he saw her. He smiled then, walked unhurriedly toward her.

"End of the line, eh?" he said, breathing heavily. "Now let's see what you have in that bag!"

"Why?" Trigger asked, slipping the bag from her shoulder.

Blethro grinned. "Why? Why were you running?"

"That's my business," Trigger told him. "Perhaps I felt I needed the exercise. Unless you're something like a police officer--and can prove it--you'd be well advised to leave me alone! I can make very serious trouble for you."

The threat didn't seem to alarm Blethro, who was large and muscular. He continued to grin through his moustache as he came

up. "Well, perhaps I'm a Wehall detective."

"Prove that!"

"I don't think I'll bother." He held his hand out, the grin fading. "The bag! Fast!"

Trigger swung away from him. He made a quick grab for her. She let the bag slide to the floor, caught the grabbing arm with both hands, moving solidly back into Blethro, bent and hauled forward. He flew over her head, smacked against the locked door with satisfying force, landed on the floor more or less on his shoulders, made an unpleasant comment and rolled back up on his feet, face very red and angry.

Then he saw the handbag standing open on the floor beside Trigger and a gun pointed at him. It wasn't a large gun, but its appearance was sleek and deadly; and it was held by a very steady hand.

Blethro scowled uncertainly. "Here--wait a minute!"

"I hate arguments," Trigger told him. "And I did warn you. So just go to sleep like a good boy now!"

She fired and Blethro slumped to the floor. Trigger glanced down. The doll figure was clinging to the rim of the handbag, peering at her with wide eyes. "Did Blethro have friends with him?" she asked.

"No. He came alone in the car. But he'd indicated he was to meet someone here."

Trigger considered, nodded. "We'll put this away again." She slipped the gun into a cosmetics purse she'd been holding in her left hand, closed the purse and placed it in the bag. Then she knelt beside Blethro, began going quickly through his pockets.

"Is he dead?" the small voice inquired from behind her.

"Not dead, midget! Nor injured. But it'll be an hour or two before he wakes up. Good thing I nailed him first--he carries a gun. What's your name, by the way? Mine's Triqger."

"My name's Salgol. What are you doing?"

"Something slightly illegal, I'm afraid. Borrowing Blethro's car keys--and here they are!" Trigger straightened up. "Now let's arrange this a little differently." She picked up Salgol, eased him into her blazer pocket. "You stay down in there when there's anyone around. Blethro left his car and the box with your friends in it on a lot next to the restaurant terrace?"

"Yes."

"Fine," Trigger said. "You point the car out to me when we get there. Then we'll all go somewhere safe, and you'll tell me what this is about so we can figure out what to do."

"Thank you, Trigger!" Salgol piped from her pocket. "I did well to trust you. I didn't have much hope for Smee and Runderin, or even for myself."

"Well, we may not be out of trouble yet! We'll see." Trigger snapped the bag shut, slung it from her shoulder. "Let's go before someone happens by here! Ready?"

"Ready." Salgol dipped down out of sight.

A few people glanced curiously at Trigger as she came back out on the restaurant terrace. Apparently they'd realized something was going on between her and Blethro, and were wondering what it had been about. She thought it shouldn't matter. Everyone having lunch here would have finished and left before Blethro regained his senses. She sauntered across the terrace, went along a passage to the parking lot, stopped at the entrance. There was no attendant in sight at the moment. She waited until a couple who'd just got out of their car went past her. All clear now... .

"Salgol?"

She could barely hear his muffled reply from the pocket.

"Take a look around!" she told him quietly. "We're there."

Salgol stuck his head out and identified Blethro's aircar as one of those standing against the parapet on the street side of the parking lot--the seventh from the left. Then he disappeared again until Trigger had unlocked the car door, stepped inside and locked the door behind her.

The car was of a fixed-canopy, one-way-view type. Trigger didn't take off immediately. The box in which Salgol's companions were confined stood on a back seat, and she wanted to make sure they were in there. She worked the latches off it and opened the top.

They were there--two tiny, charming females in costume dresses which matched Salgol's outfit. They stared apprehensively up at her. She lifted Salgol into the box and he spoke a few unintelligible lilting sentences to them. Then they were beaming at Trigger, though they said nothing. Apparently they didn't know Translinque. She smiled back, left the box open, sat down at the controls and took the car up into the air.

II

The hotel room ComWeb chimed, and Trigger switched it on. Telzey's image appeared on the screen.

"I came home just now and got your message," Telzey said. "I'm sorry there was a delay." Her gaze shifted around the room. "Where are you?"

"Hotel room."

"Why?"

"Seems better to keep away from the apartment just now."

Telzey's eyebrows lifted. "Trouble?"

"Not yet. But there's more than likely to be! I ran into something unusual, and it's a ticklish matter. Can you come over?"

"As soon as you tell me where you are."

Trigger told her, and Telzey switched off, saying she was on her way.

• • •

There was a world called Marell... .

Trigger said, "The Old Territory people who set up the genetic miniaturization project did it because they thought it had been proved there'd be a permanent shortage of habitable planets around. So that sets it back about eleven hundred years, when they'd begun to get range but didn't yet know where and how to look."

They'd discovered Marell, which seemed eminently habitable, and decided to populate it with a human strain reduced in size to the point where a vast number could be supported by the planet without crowding it. A staff of scientists and technicians of normal size accompanied the miniature colony to see it safely through any early problems.

On Marell, a plague put an abrupt end to the project before it could get under way. It wiped out the supervisory staff and more than half of the small people; and no Old Territory ship touched on the planet again. The survivors were left to their own resources, which were slender enough. They came close to extermination but recovered, began to develop a technology, and in the course of the following centuries spread out until they'd made a sizable part of Marell their own.

"Steam and electricity," said Trigger. "They'd got up to that, but not beyond it. One group knew what actually had happened on Marell, but they kept their records a secret. Some others had legends that

they were descendants of Giants who flew through space and that kind of thing. Not many believed the legends. Then the Hub ship came."

It had been a surveyor ship. It moved about in Marell's skies for weeks before coming down to take samples of the surface. It also took a section of a Marell town on board, along with about a hundred of its inhabitants. Then it left.

"When was that?" Telzey asked.

"Salgol was one of the first group they picked up, and he was the equivalent of eleven standard years old at the time," said Trigger. "That makes it fifteen standard years ago."

"Most of the people they took with them then died," Salgol told Telzey. "They didn't treat us badly but they gave us bad diseases. They found out what to do about the diseases, and taught Translingue to those of us who were left, and some of the Giants learned one of our main languages."

Telzey nodded. "And then?"

"We went back to Marell. They knew we had an electrical communication system. They used it."

The Hub ship issued orders. Geologically, Marell was a rich world, and the Hub men wanted the choicest of its treasures. They were taking what was immediately on hand, and thereafter the Marells would work to provide them with more. Quotas were set. The ship would return each year to gather up what had been collected.

. . .

"How many Marells were there now?" Telzey asked.

Salgol shook his head. "That isn't definitely known. But when I was there last, I was told there might be sixty million of the people."

"So, even with limited equipment, it adds up to a very large annual haul of precious stones and metals."

"Yes, lady, it has," said Salgol.

"And you don't have weapons against space armor."

"No. The people do have weapons, of course, and good ones. There are huge animals there--huge as we see them--and some are still very dangerous. And the nations have fought among themselves, though not since the ship came. But they aren't like your weapons. One town turned its cannon on the Giants when they came to collect. The Giants weren't hurt, but they burned the town with everyone in it."

Trigger said, "Besides, there were threats. The Marells were told they'd better be thankful for the current arrangement and do what they could to keep it going. If the Hub government ever learned about them, the whole planet would be occupied, and any surviving Marells would be slaves forever."

"Did you believe that?" Telzey asked Salgol.

"I wasn't sure, lady. The Hub people I've met before today might do it, if they saw enough advantage in it. Perhaps you had a very bad government."



"Then why did you run away from Blethro? Wasn't that endangering your world, as far as you knew?"

Salgol glanced at his companions. "There's a worse thing beginning now," he said. "Those they took away before were to become

interpreters like myself, or to provide some special information. But now they plan to collect the most physically perfect among our young people and sell them in the Hub like animal pets. I felt I had to take the chance to find out whether there weren't some of you who would try to prevent it. I thought there must be, since you don't seem really different from us except for your size."

Telzey said after a moment, "They'd risk spoiling the present setup with something like that?"

"It wouldn't spoil it, Telzey," Trigger said. "Blethro was acting as middleman. He was to make a contact today to sell the idea, with Runderin and Smee as samples and Salgol filling in as their male counterpart. If the deal went over, the merchandise would get amnesia treatment and be taught Translingue before delivery to the distributor. They'd be sold undercover as a protohom android speciality. They'd think it's what they were, and I doubt it would be possible to disprove it biologically. They'd be dead in ten years, before they could begin to show significant signs of aging. They were to be treated for that, too."

Telzey remarked, "Developing self-aware intelligence in protohom products is illegal, of course."

"Of course. But if the results could be made to look like those two, somebody would find it profitable."

Telzey regarded the tiny ladies with their beautiful faces, elaborate coiffures and costumes. They gave her anxious smiles. Replaceable erotic toys. Yes, the exploiters of Marell might have hit on a quite profitable sideline.

She said to Salgol, "Could you tell someone how to get to Marell?"

He shook his head. "Lady, no. I've tried to find out. But the Hub men were careful not to let me have such information, and the people's astronomy isn't advanced enough to establish a galactic reference. All I can say is that it took the ships on which I've been three months to make the trip in either direction."

. . .

Trigger closed the door to the suite's bedroom, where the Marells had returned to their box. "Well?" she said. "How does it check out telepathically?"

"They are human," Telzey said. "Allowing for their backgrounds, they can't be distinguished mentally from Hub humans. Salgol's near genius grade. It's a ticklish situation, all right. How long's it been since Blethro might have come awake?"

"Not much more than an hour."

"How well are you covered?"

Trigger shrugged. "Blethro can give them my description, of course. I dumped his car, taxied back to where I'd left mine, left that in a garage, and taxied here. I really didn't leave much of a trail."

"No. But we'll assume Blethro contacted his principals at once. That's obviously a big outfit with plenty of money. And the matter's important to them. You could upset their entire Marell operation and land them in serious trouble. They're probably looking hard for you."

Trigger nodded. "They'd try for a quick pick-up first. I figured our best chance to get a line on them would be while they're still looking for me. In fact, it might be the only real chance for a century to find out where Marell is. If they can't locate me and those three, they could dissolve the project and wipe out the evidence, and they probably will."

"Where do you want to take this?" Telzey said.

"Psychology Service, top level."

"That seems the best move. Why didn't you go directly to their city center?"

"Because I didn't want to have it fumbled by some underling," Trigger

said. "I don't know the local Service group. You do."

"All right." Telzey looked at the room ComWeb. "Better not use that. I'll call the center from a public booth. They should have an escort here for you and the Marells in minutes."

She left. Trigger returned to the bedroom, told Salgol what they intended. He was explaining the situation to the other two while she closed and latched the box. She put on her blazer, glanced at her watch, sat down to wait.

Some three minutes later, she heard the faintest of clicks. It might have come from the other room. Trigger picked up the gun she'd left lying on the table beside her, stood up quietly, and listened. There were no further sounds. She started moving cautiously toward the door.

The air about her seemed to sway up and down, like great silent waves lifting and falling. Trigger stumbled forward into the waves, felt herself sink far down in them and drown.

III

"How do you feel?" a voice was saying; and Trigger realized her eyes were open. She looked at the speaker, and glanced around.

She was sitting in a cushiony deep chair; there was a belt around her waist, and her hands were fastened to the belt on either side. There was a tick in her right eyelid. Other nerves jerked noticeably here and there. The man who'd addressed her stood a few feet away. Another man, who wore a gold-trimmed blue uniform, sat at an instrument console farther up in the compartment. He'd swung around in his chair to look at her. This was a spaceyacht; and that splendid globe of magenta fire in the screen might be a sun she'd seen before.

Nerves jumping," she said in reply to the question. She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. "And thirsty. This is the Rasolmen System?"

The uniformed man laughed and turned back to the console. The other one smiled. "Good guess, Miss Argee! You're obviously awake at last. You had me worried for a while!"

"I did?" Trigger said. He'd shoved back the flap of his jacket as he spoke, and she had a glimpse of a gun fastened to his belt.

"It was that knockout method we used on you," he explained. "It's one of the safest known, but in about one out of every three hundred cases, you can run into side effects. You happen to be that kind of case. Frankly, there were a couple of times I wasn't too sure you mightn't be going into fatal convulsions! But you should be all right now." He added, "My name is Wrann. Detective by profession. I'm the man responsible for picking you up--also for delivering you in good condition to my employer. You'll understand my concern."

"Yes, I do," Trigger said. "How did you find me so quickly?"

He smiled. "Good organization--and exceptionally good luck! We had your description; and you'd been lunching at Wehall's. There was a chance you were among the store's listed customers. We ran your description against the list in the Wehall computer and had a definite identification in no time at all."

"I thought that list was highly confidential," said Trigger.

Wrann looked somewhat smug. "Few things remain confidential when you come up with enough money. You were expensive, but I'd been told to find you and a certain box, and find both fast, and ignore the cost. We'd thrown in a small army of professionals; but, as it turned out, you'd selected one of the first hotels we hit with your pictures and name. The name was no help. The pictures were. That identification came high, and the suite keys higher, but we got both. We were taking you out of there minutes later."

"What was hotel security doing all that time?"

Wrann grinned. "Looking the other way. Amazing, isn't it, in a fine establishment like that? Enough money usually does it. You were very expensive, Miss Argee. But my employer hasn't complained. And now we've almost reached our destination. Feel able to walk?"

Trigger moved her elbows. "If you'll take this thing off me."

"In a moment." The detective helped her stand up, nodded at a passage behind them. "We had a comfortable little cell ready for you, but I was keeping you up front as long as you were in trouble and conceivably could need emergency treatment to pull you through. You'll find drinking water in the cell. If you'll do me the favor, you might straighten yourself out a bit then, before I hand you over at the satellite. You look rather rumped."

She nodded. "All right. Did you bring along my makeup kit?"

"I brought along whatever you had at the hotel," Wrann said. "But I was told to keep your property together. You'll find a kit in the cell."

There were two barred cells then, facing each other at the end of the passage. Trigger stopped short when she saw who was in one of them. Wrann chuckled.

"Surprise, eh?" he said. "My employer also wants to see Mr. Blethro. Mr. Blethro was reluctant to make the trip. But here he is."

He unlocked the door to the other cell and slid it back, while Blethro stared coldly at Trigger. Wrann motioned her in, shut the door and locked it. "Now, if you'll back up to the bars—"

Trigger moved up to the door, and Wrann reached through the bars, unfastened the belt from around her waist and freed her wrists. "If you need anything, call out," he said. "Otherwise I'll be back after we've docked." He went off down the passage to the front of the yacht. Trigger drank a cup of water thoughtfully, returned to the cell door. Blethro sat on a chair, moody regard fixed on the floor. The yellow moustache drooped. She heard Wrann say something to the pilot in the forward compartment. The pilot laughed.

Blethro!" Trigger said softly. Blethro gave her a brief, unpleasant glance, resumed his study of the floor.

Trigger said, "Are you in trouble with whoever it is we're being taken to see?"

Blethro growled something impolite.

"It is my business," Trigger said. "I know how we can get out of this. Both of us."

. . .

He lifted his head, moustache twitching with sudden interest. "How?"

"You heard what Wrann said about that knockout stuff they used on me?"

"Some of it," Blethro acknowledged. "I heard *you* earlier."

"Oh? What were the sound effects?"

Blethro considered, watching her. "Someone choking to death. Gasps--hoarse! Groaning, too."

"Fine!" said Trigger. "And I'll now have some dandy convulsions right here in this cell. As soon as I start, yell for Wrann. If I can get his gun and keys, we'll go after the pilot next."

Blethro stared at her a moment longer, grinned abruptly.

"Why not?" he said. "I've become inconvenient to them--I've got nothing to lose." He stood up, came over to the bars of his cell. "You might even do it! But you'd better be quick. Wrann's a tough boy--tougher than he looks."

Trigger raked fingernails down the side of her face and dropped to the floor. Blethro bellowed, "Wrann! Better have a look at that girl! She's throwing a fit or something!"

Footsteps pounded along the passage before he finished. Trigger, contorting, eyes drawn wide, clutching her throat, breath rasping, heard Wrann's shocked curse. Then the bars rattled as the cell door slid open. Wrann came down on his knees beside her, reaching for an inner coat pocket.

Trigger's right hand speared stiffly into his throat. Wrann's head jerked back. She turned up on her left elbow, slashed her hand edge across the bridge of his nose, saw his eyes glaze, gripped his head in both hands, hauled him down across her and rammed his skull against the floor. Wrann made a gurgling sound.

Stunned but not out. His gun first--and she had it, hearing the pilot call, "Need some help back there, Wrann?" and Blethro's, "Naw--he's handling her all right!" as she squirmed out from under Wrann's weight and got to her knees. Wrann clamped a hand around her ankle then, pushing himself up from the floor; and she twisted around and laid the gun barrel along the side of his head. That was enough for Wrann. He dropped back, face down; and Trigger came to her feet.

She went quickly over to the cell door, Blethro watching in silence. Wrann's key was in the lock. Trigger took it out, glanced along the passage. She couldn't see the pilot from the door; but he could see the passage and anyone in it if he was at the console and happened to look around. She whispered, "Catch!" and Blethro nodded quickly and comprehendingly and put a big cupped hand out between the bars. She tossed the key over to him. He caught it. A moment later, he had his cell door unlocked and drew it cautiously open far enough to let him through.

They slipped out into the passage together. The pilot sat at his console, back turned toward them. Blethro muttered, "Better let me take the gun!"

"I can handle it." Trigger eased off the gun's safety, indicated Wrann. "Lock him in if you can do it quietly. But wait till I'm in the control section!"

She started off down the passage without waiting for his reply. She wasn't exactly trusting Blethro. Her own gun would have been preferable, but if her luck held, shooting wouldn't be necessary anyway. The magenta sun was sliding upward out of the yacht's screen; the pilot was using his instruments. She came up steadily behind him.

He reached out, pulled over a lever, then leaned back in his chair and stretched. "Wrann?" he called lazily. He turned, beginning to get out of the chair, saw Trigger ten feet away, gun pointed. He stared.

"Get up slowly!" she told him. "That's right. Now keep your hands up and go over to the wall."

She knew Blethro had entered the compartment; now he came into view on her right. He grinned. "I'll check him."

The pilot shook his head, began to laugh. "Damndest thing I've seen in a while! Awake five minutes, and you almost had the ship!"

"Almost?" said Trigger.

"Look at the screen."

She looked. The screen was blank. "Ship power went off just now," the pilot explained. "We're riding a beam."

Trigger said, "Check him out, Blethro!" Then, some moments later: "Where's your gun? You're bound to have one."

The pilot shrugged. "You're welcome to it! That drawer over there."

Blethro jerked open the drawer, took out the gun. "Now," Trigger said, "we have two guns on you, and we're in a bad jam. Don't be foolish! Sit down at the console, switch ship power back on and break us out of that beam. And don't tell me you can't do it!"

"I am telling you that." The pilot settled himself in the control chair. "I'll go through any motions you like. Nothing will happen. You can check for yourself. The people here don't want anyone barging in on them under power, so the satellite's overriding my console now, and we'll stay on their beam till it docks us. Sorry, but this simply hasn't done you any good!"

After a minute or two, it became evident that he'd told the truth. Blethro had begun to sweat. Trigger said, "How long before we dock?"

The pilot looked at a chronometer. "Should be another six minutes."

"Wrann brought a handbag of mine on board along with a box. Where did he put the bag?"

"There's a bulkhead cabinet beside the passage entry," the pilot told her. "It's not locked. The bag's in there."

"All right," Trigger said. "Get out of the chair. Blethro, put on his uniform. Hurry! If he's got a cap, put that on, too. I'll get my gun."

The pilot climbed out of the chair. Blethro frowned. "What'll that do for us?"

"We dock," Trigger said. "We come out. For a moment anyway, they may think you're the pilot. I'm a prisoner. We'll have three guns. We may be able to knock out the override controls and take off again."

The pilot shook his head. "That won't do you any good either."

Blethro grimaced, baring his teeth. "It can't hurt! They're dumping me, friend!" He jerked his gun. "The uniform off! Fast!"

There was a faint hissing sound.

Startled, Trigger looked around. Sudden scent of not-quite-perfume. Oh, no! Not again!

The pilot spread his hands, almost apologetically. "They don't take chances! We might as well sit down."

He did. Blethro was staggering backwards; the gun fell from his hand. Tugger stood braced for an instant against the armrest of the control chair, felt herself slide down beside it, while the pilot's voice seemed to go on, drawing slowly off into distance: "... told you ... it ... would ... do ... no... ."

IV

Again she came awake.

This was a gradual process at first: the expanding half-awareness of awakening—a well-rested, comfortable feeling. But then came sudden knowledge of being in a dangerous situation. There was a shield which guarded her mind, and that now had drawn tight as if it sensed something it didn't like. Full recollection returned as she opened her eyes.

She was in a day-bright room of medium size with colored crystal walls, unfurnished except for a carpet and the couch on which she lay. The day-brightness wasn't the natural kind; the room had no windows or viewscreens. There was one rather small square scarlet door which was closed. The room was silent aside from the minor sounds made by her own motions and breathing. She wasn't wearing the clothes she'd had on but a short-sleeved sweater of soft gray material, and slacks of the same material which ended in comfortably fitting boots.

Probably, though not necessarily, she was on the solar satellite which had hauled in the unpowered yacht with its unconscious pilot and passengers. Rasolmen was an open system. It had no planets and very little space debris. It did have, however, a sizable human population whose satellites circled the magnificent sun along their charted courses, as occasional retreats or permanent residences of people who liked and could afford that style of living. Large yachts

sometimes joined them for a few weeks or a year. There was almost no commercial shipping in the system beyond that which tended to the requirements of the satellite dwellers.

If the purpose had been only to silence her, it would have been simpler to kill her than to bring her here. So they must want to find out how much she'd learned about their operation, and whether she'd talked to others before she was caught.

It seemed a decidedly sticky situation, but she wasn't improving it by lying where she was until someone came to get her. Trigger got off the couch and went over to the scarlet door. There was a handle. She turned it, and the door swung open into a dark corridor with walls and floor of polished gray mineral in which there were flickering glitters. She moved out into the corridor.

Not many yards away, the corridor opened on a room which seemed to be of considerable size. Through the room poured a river of soundless fires, cascading down through the air, vanishing into the carpeting.

Trigger stood watching the phenomenon. Its colors changed, sometimes gradually, sometimes in quick ripples and swirls, shifting from yellow through pink and green to sapphire blue or the rich magenta blaze of the Rasolmen sun. No suggestion of heat or cold came from the room, no crackle of energy. It seemed simply a visual display.

She started cautiously toward the room. There was no other way to go; the corridor ended beside the door through which she'd come. Immediately, the flow shifted direction, surged toward her and became a fiery wall, barring her from the room.

Less sure now that it was only a display, Trigger waited, ready to retreat through the door. But when nothing more happened, she moved forward again. Again the phenomenon responded. It blurred, reformed as a vortex, lines of dazzling color spiraling swiftly inward to a central point which seemed to recede farther from her with every step she took. Trigger shook her head irritably. There was a strong hypnotic effect to that whirling mass of light. For a moment, she'd

come to a stop, staring into it, her purpose beginning to fade from her mind. But warned now, she went on.

And the vortex in turn drew back, away from her, freeing the entry to the room. Once more it changed, became the descending river of fire it had first appeared to be. Faces and shapes came sweeping down with the flow, sometimes seen distinctly, sometimes only as dim outlines within it. They whipped past, now beautiful, now horrible, growing more menacing as Trigger came closer. Then another abrupt blurring; and what took form was a squat anthropoid demon, mottled and hairless, with narrow pointed ears, standing in the room. He wasn't as tall as Trigger, but he seemed almost as broad as he was tall; and his slanted cat eyes were fixed avidly on her. The image was realistic enough to give her a start of fright and revulsion. Then, as she reached the room, it simply vanished. There was a musical giggle on her right.

"You're hard to scare, Trigger!"

"Why were you trying to scare me?" Trigger asked.

"Oh, just for fun!"

She might be twelve or thirteen years old. A slender, beautiful child with long blond hair and laughing blue eyes. She closed the instrument she'd been operating, an instrument about which Trigger hadn't been able to make out much except that it seemed to have multiple keyboards.

"I'm Perr Hasta," she announced. "They told me to watch you until you woke up, and I've been watching almost an hour and you were still just lying there, and it was sort of boring. So I started playing with my image-maker, and then you did wake up, and I wanted to see if I could scare you. Did I?"

"For a moment at the end," Trigger admitted. "You have quite an imagination!"

Perr Hasta seemed to find that amusing. She chuckled.

"By the way," Trigger went on, "who are 'they'?"

"They're Torai and Attuk," said Perr Hasta. "And don't ask me next who Torai and Attuk are because I told them when you woke up, and I'm to take you to see them now. They can tell you."

"Do you live here on the satellite?" Trigger asked as they started toward a doorway.

"How do you know you're on the satellite?" Perr said. "That was hours ago they brought you there. They could have taken you somewhere else afterwards."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Perr smiled. "Well, you are still on the satellite. But don't think you can make me take you to a boat lock. Torai is watching you now, and we'd just run into force screens somewhere. She's anxious to talk to you."

"I wouldn't want to disappoint her," Trigger said.

. . .

Attuk was a rather large, healthy-looking man with squared features and a quite bald head, who dressed with casual elegance and gave the impression of enjoying life thoroughly. Torai appeared past middle age—a brown-skinned woman with a handsome face and fine dark eyes. Her clothes and hair style were severe, but her long fingers glittered with numerous rings. Something ornate, which might have been a musical instrument in the general class of a flute, or perhaps a functional computer control rod, hung by a satin strap from her belt. Trigger decided it was a computer control rod.

A place had been set for Trigger at a small table near the center of the room, and refreshments put out—fruit, a chilled soup, a variety of breads, two loaves of meat. The utensils included a sizable carving knife.

The others weren't eating. They sat in chairs around the wide green and gold room, which had a number of doors and passages leading from it. Torai was closest to Trigger, some fifteen feet away and a little to Trigger's left. Perr Hasta, beyond Torai, had tilted her chair back against the wall, feet supported by one of the rungs. Attuk was farthest, on Trigger's right, beside a picture window with an animated seascape at which he gazed when he wasn't watching Trigger.

"I had the impression," Torai remarked, "that you recognized me as soon as you saw me."

Trigger nodded. "Torai Sebaloun. I've seen pictures of you. I've heard you're one of the wealthiest women on Orado."

"No doubt I am," Torai said. "And Attuk and Perr Hasta are my associates in the Sebaloun enterprises, though the fact isn't generally known."

"I see." Trigger sliced a sliver of meat from one of the loaves and nibbled at it.

"You created something of a problem for us, you know," Torai went on. "In fact, it seemed at first that it might turn into a decidedly serious problem. But we moved in time, and had some good fortune in those critical first few hours besides. You've talked freely meanwhile and told us what we needed to know. You don't remember that, of course, because at the time you weren't aware of doing it. At any rate, there's nothing to point to us now--not even for the Psychology Service's investigators."

Trigger said, "I've seen something of the Service's methods of investigation. Perhaps you shouldn't feel too sure of yourself."

Attuk grunted. "I must agree with our guest on that point!"

"No," Torai said. "We're really quite safe." She smiled at Trigger. "Attuk favors having Telzey Amberdon picked up, to find out what she can tell us about the Service's search for you. But we aren't going to try it."

"It would be a sensible precaution," Attuk observed, looking out at the restlessly stirring seascape. "We could have a new mercenary group hired, with the usual safeguards, to do the job. If anything went wrong, we still wouldn't be involved."

Torai said dryly, "I'd be more concerned if nothing went wrong and she were delivered safely to our private place!" She looked at Trigger. "We obtained a dossier on Amberdon, as we previously had on you. What we found in it hardly seemed disturbing. But what you've told us about her is a different matter. It appears it would be a serious mistake to try to maintain control over a person of that kind."

Attuk made a disparaging gesture. "A mind reader, a psi! They can be handled. I've done it before."

"Well, you are not having that particular mind reader brought to the satellite for handling!" Torai told him. "The information we might get from her isn't worth the risk. She can't harm us as long as we keep well away from her. My decision on that is final. To get back to you, Trigger. Your interference made it necessary to terminate the very lucrative Marell operation at once. Now that it's known such a world exists, we can't afford to retain any connections with it."

Trigger said evenly, "I'm glad about that part, at least! You three have all the money you can use. You had no possible excuse for exploiting the Marells. They're as human as you are."

They stared at her a moment. Then Attuk grinned and Perr Hasta chortled gleefully.

"That's where you're mistaken," said Torai Sebaloun.

Trigger shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Oh, but truly you are! The Marells may be human enough. We aren't."

The statement was made so casually that for a moment it seemed to have almost no meaning. Then there was a crawling between Trigger's shoulder blades. She looked at the smiling faces in turn.

"Then what are you?" she asked.

Torai said, "It may sound strange, but I don't know what I am. My memory never goes back more than fifty or sixty years. The past fades out behind me. I keep permanent records to inform me of past things I should know about but have forgotten. And even the earliest of those records show that I didn't know then what I was. I may have forgotten that very long ago." She looked over at Attuk. "Attuk isn't what I am, and neither is Perr Hasta. And neither of them is what the other is. But certainly none of us is human."

She paused, perhaps expectantly. But then, when Trigger remained silent, she went on. "It shouldn't be surprising, really. A vast culture like this one touches thousands of other worlds, often without discovering much about them. And it alerts and attracts other beings who can live comfortably on its riches without revealing themselves. An obvious form of concealment, of course, is to adopt or imitate the human form. With intelligence and experience and sufficiently long lives, such intruders can learn in time to make more effective use of the human culture than most humans ever do."

Trigger cleared her throat, then:

"There's something about this," she remarked, "that doesn't fit what you're telling me."

"Oh?" Torai said. "What is it?"

"Torai Sebaloun herself. The Sebaloun family goes back for generations. It was a great financial house when the War Centuries ended. It's less prominent now, of course, but Torai must have been born normally. Her identification patterns must be on record. She must have grown up normally. Where a member of the Sebaloun family was involved, nothing else could possibly have escaped attention. So how could she be at the same time a long-lived alien who doesn't remember what it really is?"

Torai said, "You're right in assuming that Torai Sebaloun was born and matured normally. I sought her out when she was eighteen years old. I'd been watching her for some time. She was a beautiful

woman, in perfect health, intelligent as were almost all members of the Sebaloun line, and wealthy in her own right, not to mention her family's great wealth. So I became Torai Sebaloun."

"How?"

"I transferred my personality to her. The body I'd been using previously died. I forced out Torai's personality. I acquired her body, her brain and nervous system, with its established habit patterns and memories. I was Torai Sebaloun then, and I let the world grow gradually accustomed to the various modifications I wanted to make in its image of her. There were no problems. There never are.

"That's how I exist. I'm a personality. I take bodies and use them for a while. Before I discovered human beings, I was using other bodies. I know that much. And when my host body no longer seems satisfactory, I start looking around for a new one. I'm very selective about that nowadays, as I can afford to be! I want only the best."

She smiled at Trigger. "Of late, I've been looking again. I was on Orado when you took my property from Blethro. Since he's shown himself to be a most capable individual, I was interested in the fact that you'd been able to do it. As soon as we had your name, I was supplied with a dossier on you. I found that even more interesting, though it left a number of questions unanswered. So I had you brought to our satellite to make sure of what I'd come across. You've had a medical examination during the past hours, which confirms that you're in superior physical condition. Our interrogation revealed other excellencies. In short, I find no disqualifying flaw in you."

Trigger glanced at the other two. They had the expressions of detachedly interested listeners.

She told Torai carefully, "Perhaps you'd better go on looking! There are obvious reasons why it wouldn't be advisable for you to try to take over my identity."

"No, I couldn't do that," Torai agreed. "So this time we'll create a new one. Your appearance will be surgically altered. So will your identification patterns. And, of course, I don't intend to give up the

Sebaloun empire. All the necessary arrangements were made some while ago. Torai is the last of her family, and her sole heiress is a young protegee to whom the world will be gradually introduced after Torai's death. All that remained then was to find the protegee. And now--"

Torai broke off.

Barely fifteen feet between them, Trigger had been thinking. She could be out of her chair and across that distance in an instant. Attuk sat a good eight yards away. Perr Hasta, relaxed, chair tilted back against the wall, could do nothing to interfere.

Then, with the carving knife held against the brown neck of Torai Sebaloun, and Torai herself held clamped back against Trigger, they could bargain. Torai was in charge here; and whether it was insanity that had been speaking or an entity which, in fact, could make another's body its own, Torai obviously placed a high value on her life. She could keep it, on Trigger's conditions.

So, as Torai seemed about to conclude the outline of her plans for Trigger, Trigger came out of the chair.

She'd almost reached Torai when something stopped her. It was neither solid barrier nor energy screen; there was no jolt, no impact--all she felt was its effect. She could come no closer to Torai, whose face showed startled consternation and who'd raised her hands defensively. Instead, she was being forced steadily away. Then she was lifted into the air, held suspended several feet above the carpet, and something pulled at her right arm, drawing it straight out to the side. She realized the pull was on the blade of the knife she still held; and she let go of it, which was preferable to getting her fingers broken or having her arm hauled out of its socket by what she knew now must be an interacting set of tractor beams. The knife was flicked away and dropped lightly to the surface of the little lunch table.

Torai Sebaloun was smiling again. Her hands remained slightly raised, fingers curled, knuckles turned forward, toward Trigger; and all those glittering rings on her fingers clearly had a solid functional purpose.

"Quick! Oh, she was quick!" Perr Hasta was saying delightedly. "You were right about her, Torai!"

"Yes, I was right." Torai didn't turn her eyes away from Trigger. "And still she was almost able to take me by surprise! Trigger, it was obvious from what we'd learned about you that at some early moment you'd try to make me your hostage. Well, you've tried!"

. . .

Her fingers shifted. Trigger was carried back across the room, still held clear of the carpet, lowered and set on the edge of a couch against the far wall. The intangible beam complex released her suddenly; and Torai dropped her hands and stood up.

"The transfer is made easier by suitable preparations," she said, "and they've now begun. It's why I told you what I did. A personality that knows what is happening is more readily expelled than one which has remained unaware and unsuspecting until the last moment. You may not yet believe it's going to happen, but you won't be able to avoid thinking about it; and that's enough to provide a satisfactory level of uncertainty. Meanwhile, be at liberty to discover how helpless you are here, in fact, in every way. I'll be engaged in sensitizing myself to the personal articles I had brought to the satellite with you."

Perr Hasta also had come to her feet. "Then I can go to Blethro now?"

Torai shrugged. "Why not?"

She turned toward a door. Perr Hasta darted across the room to another door, pulled it open and was gone through it. Attuk got out of his chair, glanced at Trigger and smiled lazily as he started toward a hallway.

Somewhat incredulously, Trigger realized that they were leaving her

here by herself. She watched Torai open the door, got a brief glimpse of the room beyond it before Torai shut it again. Attuk had gone off down the hall.

She looked around. The lunch table was sinking through the richly patterned carpet, accompanied by the chair she'd used. Both were gone before she could make a move to recover the knife. The seascape Attuk had studied shut itself off. The chair on which Torai had been sitting followed the example of the lunch table. The one used by Perr Hasta moved ten feet out from the wall, did a sharp quarter turn to the left and remained where it was. The green and gold room was rearranging itself, now that three of its four occupants had left.

Possibly she didn't rate as an occupant of sufficient significance to be considered. Trigger got up from the couch and started toward the door left open by Perr Hasta. She glanced around as she got there. The couch had flattened down and was withdrawing into the wall.

From the doorway, she looked out at a vast sweep of wilderness—a plain dotted with sparse growth, lifting gradually to a distant mountain range. Somewhat more than a hundred yards away, Perr Hasta was running lightly toward a great sloping boulder. A dark rectangle at the base of the boulder suggested a recessed entrance.

Blethro was there? What was this place?

Perr Hasta could answer that. Trigger set off in pursuit.

She checked almost at once. For an instant, as she came through the door, she'd had the impression of the curving walls of a large metallic domed structure, in which the door was set, on either side of her. Then the impression vanished; and, looking back in momentary bewilderment, she saw neither structure nor door, but only the continuation of the great plain on which she stood.

No time to ponder it. Perr Hasta already was halfway to the boulder. Trigger started out again—and, within a hundred steps, she again slowed to a stop, rather abruptly. What halted her this time was the sudden appearance of a sheet of soft, rosy light in the air directly

ahead. She'd come up to a force screen. And the whole view beyond the screen had blurred out.

V

When she passed through the door leading from the green and gold room, she'd entered a maze, a series of stage settings blending a little of what was real with much more that was projected illusion. To the eye, the blending was undetectable, and other senses were played upon as skillfully. Force screens formed the dividing walls of the maze, unnoticed until one reached them, responding then with a soft glow which extended a few feet to right and left. Trigger would turn sideways to such a screen, feeling its slick coolness under her fingertips, and move on along it, accompanied by the glow. Perhaps within a dozen yards, the screen would be gone, and she'd find herself in another part of the maze with a different set of illusions about her--and, presently, other force screens to turn her in new directions. She'd simply kept moving at first, trying to walk her way out, while she watched for anything that might be an indication to the pattern of the maze. One point became apparent immediately. She couldn't go back the way she had come; the maze's transfer mechanisms operated only in one direction. She passed through a forest glade where a light rain dewed her hair and sweater, and a minute later, was walking along the crest of a barren hill at night, seeing what might be city lights in the distance, while thunder growled overhead. Then a swamp steamed on either side and sent fog drifting across her path. Sounds accompanied her--animal voices, an ominous rustling in a thicket, sudden loud splashes. Something else soon became established: nothing had been left lying carelessly around here that might be considered a weapon. Trigger saw stones of handy size and broken branches, but they were illusion. Vegetation that wasn't illusion was artificial stuff which bent but wouldn't break. She hadn't been able to pull off even a leaf or pry loose a tuft of springy moss.

The settings presently took on an increasingly bizarre aspect. A grotesquely costumed bloated corpse swung by its neck from a tree branch, turning slowly as Trigger went by below. Immediately afterwards, she was in a place where she saw multiple replicas of herself all about, placed in other scenes. In one, she swayed in death beside the bloated horror, suspended from the same branch. In another, she strode across a desert, unaware of a gaunt gray shape moving behind her. An on-the-spot computer composition, initiated by her appearance in this part of the maze--

A few minutes later, she sat down on a simulated beach. There was nothing bizarre here. The white sand was real, and water appeared to sweep lazily up it not many yards away. Sea smells were in the windy air; and there were faint sounds which seemed to come from flying creatures circling far out above the water.

The maze section she'd just emerged from was one she'd passed through before. The illusion view had been new, but she'd recognized the formation of the ground. And when she'd gone through it before, she hadn't come out on the beach.

So the maze wasn't a static construction. The illusion views could be varied and exchanged, and there might be easily thousands of such views available. The positions of force screens and transfer points could be shifted, and had begun to be shifted. The actual area of the maze might be quite limited; and still she could be kept moving around in it indefinitely. If she came near an exit point, she could be deflected past it back into the maze. In fact, nobody needed to be watching to take care of that. The controlling computer would maneuver her about readily enough if that was intended.

Whatever purpose such an arrangement served the satellite's owners, it was no friendly one. The multiple-image area showed malice; a number of displays were meant to shock and frighten. Others must have walked in the maze before this, bewildered and mystified, while their reactions were observed. She'd been tricked into entering it as she attempted to follow Perr Hasta, perhaps to reduce her resistance and make her more easy to handle.

At any rate, she had to get out. The satellite was a complex machine;

the machine had controls. The smaller the staff employed by Torai Sebaloun--and there'd been no indications of any staff so far--the more intricate the controls must be. Somewhere such a system was vulnerable. But she had no more chance here to discover its vulnerabilities and try to change the situation in her favor than she would have had behind locked doors.

Therefore, do nothing. Stay here, appear reasonably relaxed. If somebody was studying her reactions as seemed likely, that couldn't be too satisfactory; and if they wanted to prod further reactions out of her, they'd have to make some new move. Possibly one she could turn to her advantage.

. . .

"Hello, Trigger!" said Perr Hasta.

Trigger looked around. The blond child figure stood a dozen feet away.

"Where did you come from?" Trigger asked.

Perr nodded at a stand of bushes uphill, which Trigger had reason to consider part of the beach scene's illusion setup. "I saw you from there and thought I'd come find out what you were doing," Perr said.

"A short while ago," Trigger remarked, "there was a force screen between that place and this."

Perr smiled. "There still is! But there's a way around the screen if you know just where to turn--which isn't where you'd think you should turn."

She sat down in the sand, companionably close to Trigger. "I've been thinking about you," she said. "There's an odd thing you have that didn't want you to be hypnotized."

Which seemed to be a reference to the Old Galactic mind shield.

Trigger didn't intend to discuss that, though she might already have told them about it. "I've never been easy to hypnotize," she said.

"Hm-m-m," said Perr. "Well, we'll see what happens. You're certainly unusual!" She smiled. "I was hoping Torai would let Attuk bring your psi friend here. It should have been an interesting situation."

"No doubt."

"Of course, Attuk doesn't really care what Telzey knows," Perr went on. "Her dossier shows what she looks like, and Attuk forms these sudden attachments. He can be quite irresponsible then. He formed a strong attachment to you, too—but you're Torai's! So Attuk's been sulking." She chuckled.

Trigger looked at her. The three of them might be deranged. "What kind of being is he?" she asked, as casually as she could.

"Attuk?" Perr shrugged. "Well, he is what he is. I don't know what it's called. A crude creature, at any rate, with crude tastes. He even likes to eat human flesh. Isn't that disgusting?"

"Yes, I'd call it disgusting," Trigger said after a moment.

"He says there was a time when he had human worshipers who brought him human sacrifices," Perr said. "Perhaps that's when he developed his tastes. I'm sure he'd like it to be that way again, but it's not so easy to arrange now. So he makes himself useful to Torai and she keeps him around."

"How is he useful to her?" Trigger asked.

"This way and that," said Perr.

"What are you, Perr?"

Perr smiled, shook her head. "I never tell anyone. But I'll show you what I do, if you like. Would you? We'd have to leave the playground."

"This is the playground?" Trigger said.

"That's what we call it."

"Where would we go?"

"To the residence."

"Where I was before?"

"Yes."

Trigger stood up. "Lead the way!"

Getting out of the maze without running into force screens was, as Perr Hasta had indicated, apparently a matter of knowing where to turn. The turning points weren't detectably marked and there seemed to be no pattern to the route, but in less than two minutes they'd reached an open doorway with a room beyond. They went through and closed the door. There was nothing illusory about the room. They were back in the residence.

"Torai controls the satellite from the residence?" Trigger asked.

Perr gave her a glance. "Well, usually that's where she is. But she could control it from almost anywhere on it."

"Ordinarily that's done from a computer room."

"We go through here, Trigger. No, hardly anyone goes to the computer room. Only when something needs adjusting or repairs. Then Torai has someone brought out to do it."

"You mean you don't have a computer technician on hand?" Trigger said. "What would happen to the satellite if your main computer broke down?"

"Goodness. There're three main computers. Any one of them could keep the satellite going perfectly by itself--and they're hardly likely to break down all together, are they? Here we are!" Perr stopped at a passage door and slid back a panel covering a transparent section in the upper part. "There! That's what I do, Trigger."

The room was small and bare. Blethro sat on a bench with his back against the wall, facing the door. His hands were loosely folded in his lap. His head lolled to the side, and a thread of spittle hung from a corner of his mouth. His eyes were fixed on the door, but he gave no sign of being aware of visitors.

"What have you done to him?" Trigger said after a moment.

Perr winked at her.

"I drank what Torai would call his personality," she said. "Oh, not all of it, or he'd be dead. I left him a little. He can sit there like that or stand, or even walk if he's told to. But I took most."

Drugs could account for Blethro's condition, but Trigger felt a shiver of eeriness.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

"Why not? It was a kindness really. They weren't going to let Blethro live. He's Attuk's meat. But that won't bother him now." Perr Hasta slid the window shut. "Besides, that's what I do: absorb personalities or whatever it is that's there and different in everybody. Some seem barely worthwhile, of course, but I may take them while I'm waiting for a prime one to come along. Or I'll sip a bit here and there. That's barely noticeable. I'm not greedy, and when I find something that should be a really unusual treat, I can be oh-so-patient until the time comes for it. But then I have a real feast!" She smiled. "Would you like me to show you where the computer room is?"

Trigger cleared her throat. "Why do you want to show me that?"

"Because I think you want to know. Not that it's likely to do you much good. But we'll see. It's this way, Trigger."

. . .

They went along the passage. Perr glanced sideways up at Trigger.

Blethro wasn't much," she remarked. "But you have a personality I think I'd remember for a long, long time."

"Well, keep away from it," Trigger said.

"That odd mind thing of yours couldn't stop me," Perr told her.

"Perhaps not. There might be other ways to stop you."

Perr laughed delightedly. "We'll see how everything goes! We turn here now. And that's the passage that leads to the computer room. The room's probably locked though--"

She took a step to the side as she spoke, and a door that hadn't been noticeable in the wall was suddenly open, and Perr Hasta was going through it. Trigger reached for her an instant too late. She had a glimpse of the smiling child face turned back to her as the door closed soundlessly. And even before she touched it, Trigger felt quite sure there'd be no way in which she could reopen that door. Its outline had disappeared again, and there was nothing to distinguish it from the rest of the passage wall.

VI

There was another door at the end of the passage Perr Hasta had said led to the computer room. The computer room might very well lie behind it. It was a massive-looking door; and while there were no visible indications of locks, it couldn't be budged.

Its location, at any rate, was something to keep in mind. And now, before she ran into interference, she'd better go through as much of the residence area as possible to see what useful articles or information it might provide.

The search soon became frustrating. The place seemed to be laid out like a large house with wings, extending through a number of

satellite levels. Some of the doors she came to along the passages and halls wouldn't open. Others did. The rooms they disclosed were of such widely varying styles that this might have been almost a museum, rather than a living place furnished to someone's individual preferences. As a rule, very little of the furnishing would be in sight when Trigger first came into a room; but it began to emerge from walls and flooring then, presenting itself for use. The computers were aware of her whereabouts.

Unfortunately, they weren't concerned with her needs of the moment. Nothing they offered was going to be of any help on the Sebaloun satellite. There must be some way of controlling the processes, but she didn't know what it was. Verbal instructions produced no effect.

She came back presently to the green and gold room to which she'd been conducted when she came awake. The door through which Torai had gone was closed. Trigger glanced at it, went to the passage along which Attuk had disappeared. The first door she opened there showed a fully furnished room. Something like an ornate bird cage with a polished black nesting box inside was fastened to one wall about five feet above the floor; and standing in the cage, grasping a bar in either hand, and gazing wide-eyed at Trigger as she peered around the door, was Salgol.

She came quickly inside, drew the door shut and went to the cage. "Where are Smee and Runderin?"

Salgol nodded at the box. "In there. They're afraid of these people!"

"I don't blame them." Trigger gave him a low-voiced condensed account of her experiences. Runderin and Smee came out of the box while she was talking, and Salgol passed the information on in the Marell language. "Do you think they really aren't human?" he asked.

"I don't know what to think," Trigger admitted. "So far I've seen no evidence for it. But at any rate, it's a bad situation because they control the satellite. They may not intend to harm you three physically."

"We'd still be prisoners, and that's bad enough," Salgol said. "Isn't

there something we can do to help?"

"There might be. Let's see if I can open the cage lock."

The lock wouldn't open, but Trigger found she could bend the bars with her hands. She pried two of them far enough apart to let Salgol squeeze through. "Now," she said, "I know where Torai probably is keeping my gun. If you found it, do you think you could move it?"

"Perhaps not by myself. But two of us could." Salgol spoke to his companions. They replied quickly in voices like miniature flutes. "They both want to help," he told Trigger.

"Good. But if two of you can handle the gun, one of them will help best by staying in the cage."

"Why that?"

"To make it seem you're all still there, in case someone comes into the room."

Salgol spoke to his companions again, reported, "Runderin will come. She's the stronger. Smee will stay."

Runderin peeled out of her colorful but cumbersome outer clothes, and Salgol took off his purple coat. They arranged the clothing in the sleep box so it could be seen indistinctly by someone looking into the cage. Then the two squirmed out between the bent bars, and Trigger set them on the floor. She squeezed the bars back into place, gave Smee, who was now sitting on display in front of the box and looking rather forlorn, a reassuring smile, and left the room with two Marells tucked under her sweater.

The reduced furnishings in the green and gold room would have given her no place to hide; but Salgol and Runderin were quickly concealed behind chair cushions near the door Torai had used. From what Torai had said, Trigger's personal belongings should be in the room beyond the door. If she came out and left the door open, the two would try to get the gun as soon as she was out of sight. If they found it, they'd hide it and wait for an opportunity to let Trigger

know where it was.

With the gun, she might start to even up the odds around here rather quickly.

• • •

Trigger resumed her wary prowling. The Sebaloun residence remained silent. In empty-seeming rooms, the satellite's mechanisms responded to her presence and produced the room equipment for inspection. She inspected, went on.

Then a door let her into a wide low hall. Not far ahead, the hall turned to the right; and on the far side of the turn was another door. Trigger stood listening a moment before she went down the hall, leaving the door open behind her. Thirty feet beyond the turn, the hall was open on a garden. She glanced over at it, went to the door in the far wall, and found it locked.

She'd had no intention of checking the garden, nor did she go into the branch of the hall that led to it. It seemed too likely it would prove to be another trick entry point to their playground maze. But as she came back to the door by which she'd entered the hall, she found it blocked by a force screen's glow.

It sent a jolt of consternation through her, though it had been obvious that the satellite's masters would act sooner or later to limit her freedom of motion. But if the only exit from the hall was now the garden, and if the garden was in fact part of the maze, she'd been driven back to her starting point. Venturing a second time into those shifting computer-controlled complexities would be like stepping deliberately into quicksand.

She went part way down the branch of the hall and looked out at the garden from there. It was of moderate size, balanced and beautiful, laid out in formal lines. A high semicircular wall enclosed it; and above the wall was the milky glow of a light dome. There was no suggestion of illusory distances.

It might be part of the residence, and not a trap. But Trigger decided she wouldn't take a chance on it while she had a choice. If she stayed where she was, something or other must happen presently.

And then something did happen.

Abruptly, the figure of a man appeared on one of the garden paths, facing away from Trigger. He glanced quickly about, turned and took a few steps along the path before he caught sight of her.

It was Wrann, the Sebaloun detective who'd engineered her kidnapping in the Orado City hotel.

VII

Trigger watched him approach. He showed marks of their encounter on the yacht—bruises around the eyes and a plastic bandage strip along the side of his head where she'd laid him out with the barrel of his gun. Wrann's feelings toward her shouldn't be the friendliest, but he was twisting his mouth into an approximation of a disarming grin as he came quickly through the garden toward her. He stepped up into the hall, stopping some twelve feet away. She relaxed slightly.

"I'll be as brief about this as I can," he said. "My employers haven't forgiven me for nearly letting you and Blethro get away. I'm in as bad a position as you two now! I suggest we consider ourselves allies."

"Somebody may be listening," Trigger said.

"Not here," Wrann told her. "I know the place. But they may find out at any time that I'm no longer locked up and block our chance of escape. Minutes could make the difference!"

"We have a chance of escape?"

"At the moment," he said impatiently. "The delivery yacht we arrived in has left. It never stays long. But there's a separate spacelock where Sebaloun keeps her private cruiser. Unfortunately, I found an armed guard there. I didn't expect it because they rarely allow personnel on the satellite when they're here themselves. Sebaloun may have considered the circumstances unusual enough to have made an exception. At any rate, the man is there. I didn't let him see me. He knows me and isn't likely to know I'm no longer Sebaloun's trusted employee. But he'd check with her before letting me into the lock. So I came back to get a weapon."

"You know where to find a weapon?"

"I know where Attuk keeps his guns. It seemed worth the risk of being seen."

"It probably would be," Trigger agreed. "But unless you can unlock that door over there, we can't get into the residence from this hall. The other door's sealed with a force screen. Or was, a few minutes ago, after I came out here."

Wrann looked startled. "Let's check on that!"

The force screen was still present; and Wrann said he didn't have the equipment to unlock the other door. "I'm afraid we'll have to forget about Attuk's guns."

"Why?" said Trigger. "You know your way around here. Can't we go to another entry to the residence?"

Wrann shook his head. "I wouldn't want to try it. The garden's part of a mechanism they call their playground--"

"I've been there," Trigger said. "A maze effect."

"Yes, a maze effect. When somebody's let into the maze unaccompanied by one of the residents, the controlling apparatus develops an awareness of the fact and begins to mislead and confuse the visitor."

"How did you get through it just now?"

Wrann said, "I've been shown the way. I've had occasion to use it. And I didn't stay in the playground long enough to activate the mechanisms significantly. Working around to another residence entry would be another matter!" He shook his head again. "We'd never make it."

Trigger said, "We do have to go through the playground to get to the lock?"

"It's the only way that isn't blocked for us." Wrann looked at her. "I can get us there. Between us, we shouldn't need a weapon to take the guard."

"You're Torai's detective; I'm the prisoner, eh?"

"Right. I'm to put you on the Sebaloun cruiser. You have your hands on your head. When we get to the guard, you create a diversion." Wrann grinned sourly. "You'll think of something! I jump the guard. We can be off the satellite two minutes later."

Leaving the Marells behind. Trigger said, "And then?"

"We get in touch with the authorities immediately. I don't want to give Sebaloun a chance to get off the satellite. With luck, we'll be back with the law before she even knows we're gone."

Trigger said, "Don't you have a few things to hide yourself, Wrann?"

"Normally I'd have enough to hide," he agreed. "I understand your suspicions. But I have no choice. We're dealing with very dangerous people, Miss Argee! How long do you think I'd live—or you, for that matter—if those three stay at large, and the Sebaloun money is looking for us? As of now, I'll be glad to settle for Rehabilitation!"

Trigger nodded. "All right. Let's go! It could be a trap, of course."

Wrann looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"That door mightn't have been sealed because I was in the hall but

because someone knew you were on your way back to the residence."

"I see. We'll have to risk that." As they started down into the garden, Wrann added, "Stay close behind me. I'll hurry as much as I can, but we must be careful. Setting off even one force screen would alert the playground--and then we'll have had it!"

. . .

Wrann moved quickly, if cautiously, sometimes half running, rarely hesitating for more than a moment. Trigger concentrated on following in his steps. The maze remained silent and unresponsive as half a dozen illusion scenes slipped past. A stretch of flowering meadow was briefly there, and twice patches of mossy turf where Wrann's greater weight made him sink in almost ankle deep at every step, though Trigger didn't have much difficulty.

Then he vanished ahead of her again. She slowed, carefully took the same stride she'd watched him take--and went stumbling through pitch-blackness. She caught her balance, stood still, feeling sand under the soles of her boots.

"Wrann?" she said quietly.

There was no reply. Her heart began to race. Dry, musty odors, warm stirring of air... . She listened, lips parted, barely breathing, and heard sounds then, soft ones, as if someone moved cautiously over the sand. The sounds didn't seem close to her.

After a moment, they stopped, and Trigger realized the darkness was lifting. A dim, sourceless glow had come into the air. It strengthened slowly into a sullen light; she began to make out something of her surroundings. It looked like a stretch of steep-walled gully filled with sand, a dry watercourse. No way to tell yet what part was real, what part was illusion.

Then she saw something else. A shape stood on the other side of

the gully, farther along it, back against the overhanging rock wall.

It didn't move. Neither did Trigger, watching it, between moments of scanning the sand about her. A simulated dry watercourse might have contained some real rocks, and she would have felt better with a rock in either hand at the moment. She saw nothing but sand.

She didn't think that shape was Wrann.

The glow strengthened again. The shape remained motionless and indistinct; but an abrupt jolt of fright had gone through her, for now she recognized the squat demon figure Perr Hasta's image maker had showed her after she came awake. The thought that Perr was at play again flicked up, but she discarded it at once. The image maker had been used to introduce her to the satellite. It wouldn't be involved here.

With that, she saw the anthropoid creature move away from the gully wall, start slowly toward her. There was a point some twenty feet to her left where the rock bank wasn't too steep. She should be able to scramble up there, but she didn't want to try it yet. She didn't know what was above; a blur of light shrouded the upper levels of the gully. She looked back. The water-course seemed to twist out of sight beyond its bank fifty feet away. She thought she was likely to meet a force field before she got nearly that far.

She could see the approaching anthropoid more clearly now than she liked. The dwarfishly broad body looked tremendously strong. He made crooning sounds which at moments seemed almost to become slurred words. The yellow eyes stared. Trigger felt a surge of revulsion, began to back away. He continued his unhurried advance as if he knew she wasn't retreating far--and once those great hands closed on her, all her skills weren't likely to be of much further use... .

There was the glow of a force field behind her.

Trigger edged toward the left along the glow. The stalking creature angled in slowly to corner her between screen and bank. She shifted to the right and, as he swerved, back to the left. He came at her

suddenly then, thick arms reaching, and she ducked, scooping up two handfuls of sand, slashed sand full into the yellow eyes, and was past him.

. . .

She heard snarling as she made a dash for that not-quite-vertical section of the gully's bank, scrambled a dozen feet up it, and stopped. A screen had acquired glowing visibility overhead. She looked back. The anthropoid had followed, digging at his face with his hands. She dropped down, slipped under his swift lunge. Fingers clawed along her back and almost ripped the sweater from her, but then she was away and coming up with her hands full of sand again. As he swung around after her, she let him have the second dose. He uttered a gurgling howl.

Full daylight flooded the gully. Torai Sebaloun's amplified voice announced from above, "I am seriously annoyed with you, Attuk!"

Trigger, moving back, glanced up. The haze effect was gone. A view-screen had taken its place; and the enlarged faces of Torai and Perr Hasta were looking down through it.

Torai appeared very angry, while Perr obviously was enjoying herself. The anthropoid peered up at them, blinking painfully, before he turned and lumbered away. Abruptly, his shape blurred, seemed about to flow apart, then reassembled itself. What it reassembled into was the quite human appearance of Attuk, elegantly clothed. He stalked over to the wall of the gully, vanished into it. The screen had gone blank.

Trigger pulled down her sweater, brushed sand from her palms and turned as Torai and Perr Hasta came walking up the gully behind her.

"So now you know Attuk's a shape-changer!" Perr said smilingly to her. "What you saw here is what we think is his own shape. It's the one he almost always uses when he gets someone into his place in

the playground. A crude creature, isn't he? He would have been rather careful with you, of course."

"Careful or not," said Torai, "if he'd damaged the body in the least, I should have killed him! As it is, I'll have to think up a suitable punishment for Attuk. But that can wait." She added curtly to Trigger, "I'm ready to transfer. You'll come along now."

Trigger went along, having no choice in the matter. Torai's ring beams held her hemmed in as she walked ahead of the two, and the beams controlled the pace at which she could and must walk. Once she tried to slow her steps, and they simply lifted her and carried her on a few yards before she was set down to start walking again.

"Attuk did Wrann very well," Perr Hasta was saying chattily from a little behind her. "The voice and manner of speaking, too! Of course, Attuk always is very good with voices."

Torai said, "I'm also somewhat annoyed with you, Perr! You shouldn't have let it go that far. Their bodies can die of fright, as you know. What good would this one have been to me then?"

"Oh, I called you in time!" said Perr. "Trigger's charts show she isn't the kind to die of fright." She laughed. "Wasn't it beautiful, the way she sanded up his eyes?"

. . .

The insane conversation went on until they were back in the residence. There Torai's beams steered Trigger into a narrow room and to an armchair set up at its far end, turned her around and placed her in the chair. Torai took the computer control rod hanging from her belt in one hand and brought her thumbnail down on a point near its lower end. The beam effect released Trigger.

"Stretch your hand out toward me," Torai said.

Trigger hesitated, reached out, saw a screen glow appear in the air

a few feet ahead of her. She drew back her hand. The glow vanished.

"You're sealed into that end of the room," Torai told her. "So you might as well relax." She turned her rings toward another armchair in the room, and the beams drew the chair over to a point opposite Trigger, about twelve feet from her. Torai settled herself in the chair, and Perr Hasta came up and stood beside her, smiling at Trigger.

Torai studied Trigger a moment then, with an expression that seemed both hungry and contented. She nodded slowly.

"Yes, a good selection!" she remarked. "I should be well satisfied with that one. And I see no reason for further delay." She leaned back and closed her eyes.

Trigger waited. Presently, something began to happen; and she also shut her eyes to center her attention on it. A sense of eager greed and momentary scraps and bursts of what might be somebody's thinking were pushing into her awareness. She studied them a moment, then started blanking out those impressions with clear strong thoughts of her own which had nothing to do with Torai Sebaloun or the Rasolmen satellite, but with people and events and things far away, back in time. It went on a while. Her defense appeared rather effective, though new Torai thoughts kept thrusting up, quivering with impatience and anger now, until Trigger blanked them away again. The Old Galactic shield remained tight, and it might be Torai hadn't counted on that. Frustration grew in the thoughts still welling into Triggers awareness; then, abruptly, anxiety and acute alarm.

"Perr--you're not helping! Perr! Perr Hasta!"

No reply from Perr. A sudden soft thumping noise, and Torai screamed once; and Trigger's eyes flew open.

Torai had fallen out of the chair and lay shaking on the carpet; and Perr Hasta was on her knees beside her, peering down into her distorted face with much the same avidity Trigger had seen in Torai's own expression and in the yellow eyes of anthropoid Attuk. Perr

looked up at Trigger then, and laughed.

"I knew it!" she said. "She got stuck in that mind thing of yours, Trigger! If she had any difficulty, I was to start absorbing your personality to make it easier for her, but I didn't. She can't get through, and she can't get back."

Perr looked down at Torai again. "And--now, now, now! I've waited a long time for the personality of the Torai thing, and now I'll take it all, and there's nothing it can do about it."

The child face went blank, though a smile still curved its lips; and Perr's body began weaving gently back and forth above Torai.

Trigger got quietly out of her chair.

VIII

If Torai Sebaloun had succeeded in implanting her personality in Trigger's body, she would have found herself behind the force screen which now held Trigger imprisoned at this end of the room, with the computer control rod which had switched on the screen fastened by its satin strap to the belt on the dead Torai body on the far side of the screen.

Hence, since Torai must regard Attuk and Perr Hasta as somewhat uncertain allies, there should be a device to release the screen on this side. Trigger had been waiting for an opportunity to start looking for that device; and now, with Torai helpless and Perr Hasta preoccupied, the opportunity was there.

Unfortunately, the switch, button, or whatever mechanism it was, seemed well hidden. Trigger went quickly over the smooth walls, glancing now and then at the two outside. Something that might be Torai's thoughts still flickered occasionally through her mind, but they were barely perceptible, and she no longer bothered to blank them

out. Perr Hasta, completely absorbed, showed no interest in what was happening on this side of the screen.

When the walls provided no clue, Trigger began searching the armchair. Engaged with that, she discovered suddenly that Perr was back on her feet and watching her. At the same time, she realized she could sense no more Torai thought impressions, and that Torai, who'd been stirring feebly when she looked last, was now quite motionless. Perr Hasta gave her a slow, dreamy smile.

"Torai was very good," she said. "Every bit as good as I'd expected! So you'd like to get out?"

"Yes," Trigger acknowledged. "Do you know what I have to do in here to turn off the screen?"

"No."

Trigger bit her lip. "Look," she said. "If you'll take that control rod on Torai's belt--"

"Goodness," said Perr, turning away. "I wouldn't know how to use the thing. Besides, why should I let you out? I must go find Attuk."

She sauntered out of the room, humming. Trigger gritted her teeth and resumed her search. One nightmare was down; but two were still up and around. She had to get out, fast!

A tiny voice cried, "Trigger!"

She jerked about. Salgol and Runderin were dancing up and down on the other side of the glowing screen.

"We found your gun!" Salgol piped. "Is she dead? What is this thing between us?"

Trigger let out a breath of partial relief. "You have my gun? Good! Yes, she's dead, but the other two might show up any time. That's a force screen between us. Now, look--"

She explained rapidly about the computer control rod. She'd been

watching Torai and was able to describe exactly where Torai had pressed on the rod to turn on the screen. There must be some kind of switch there.

The Marells confirmed there was a button there. In fact, the rod was covered with grouped rows of tiny buttons. The trouble was that depressing the button in question proved to be beyond their combined strength. Trigger, watching their struggles, exclaimed suddenly, "Stuff in my handbag!" They looked at her, breathing hard. "Keys!" she went on. "Something Salgol can slam down on the button--"

They'd turned and darted halfway out of the room while she was still speaking. Trigger resumed her investigation of the armchair. It seemed to her she'd already looked everywhere. In frustration, she banged her fist down on the chair's padded backrest. There was a sharp click.

She stood frozen for an instant, swung back toward the screen, reaching out to it.

No glow... .

No screen!

She stepped through the space where it had blocked her and unfastened the control rod from Torai's belt with shaking fingers. Manipulating the ring beam mechanisms probably would take plenty of practice--no time to bother with that now! She ran out of the room after the Marells.

. . .

The playground maze was still trying to be a problem; but the computer rod made the problem rather easy to handle. The force screen controls seemed to be grouped together at one end. When they encountered a screen now, Trigger hit the studs there in quick succession until she came to the one that switched off the screen;

and they'd hurry on until checked again. Salgol, Runderin and Smeel had no trouble keeping up with her. Her interference with the screens might be confusing the overall maze mechanism. Sound effects soon died away, and the scenery took on a static appearance. At this rate, it shouldn't be long before they'd passed through the playground area.

Force screens, however, might not be the only difficulty. If Attuk was aware Torai's transfer attempt had failed and that Trigger was again free, he could be waiting to intercept her with a gun near the periphery of the playground. He'd said an armed guard had been stationed at the spacelock; and if that was true, she might, in fact, have two guns to deal with before she got off the satellite. When the surrounding scenes began to look unfamiliar, she moved with growing caution.

One more screen went off. Trigger started forward over springy moss, along the side of a simulated weathered stone wall, watching the top of the wall and the area ahead. The Marells followed close on her heels. Some thirty feet on, the wall turned to the right. She checked at the corner. The wall disappeared in dense artificial vegetation not far away. More of the stuff on the left. A path led between the two thickets.

Had a shadow shifted position in the shrubbery at the moment she appeared? Yes. She could make out something there now. It seemed to be a rather small dark shape.

She glanced down at Salgol who was peering up at her. She whispered, "Be careful, you three!" and started slowly toward the thicket. She stopped again. The shrubbery stirred--the half-glimpsed shape was moving. Something familiar about it?

A hand parted branches; a quite familiar face looked out warily. Telzey's blue eyes went wide.

"Trigger! You're here! "

"I didn't know you were here, Telzey."

"I woke up just a few minutes ago." Telzey shook her head. "Last thing I—"

Trigger said hastily, "Better wait with that! We're on a private satellite, Rasolmen System. Somebody had unpleasant plans for both of us, but I'm on my way to a spacelock now. With luck, if we move fast enough, we can make it." She turned to the left. "Come on!"

Telzey stepped out from the thicket. Trigger's right hand went under her sweater front, came out with the gun. She shot Telzey through the head, jumped back as she staggered, stitched a line of fire down the front of her body as it fell and began to blur; then stood there, gun held ready, watching it change into something much larger.

Anthropoid Attuk wasn't dead, somewhat to her surprise. But then it was a life form she didn't know much about. It was down, at any rate, making watery sounds as it tried to lever itself up on its thick arms. She leveled the gun at the staring yellow eyes.

"No! Wait!" Perr Hasta, slipping out from the thicket, dropped to her knees beside Attuk. "Attuk, too! Oh, Trigger, I'm grateful! I wanted him almost even more than Torai. Now--"

Her face smoothed into its empty feeding look. There was a tug at Trigger's slacks. She glanced down. The Marells were looking at her, white-faced. "What are those two doing?" Salgol's small voice asked nervously.

Trigger cleared her throat.

"The big one's dying," she said. "The other one's helping it die. It's all right—it may have saved us some trouble."

"How did you know the big one wasn't Telzey?" Salgol asked. "We thought you'd killed her!"

Well, Trigger thought, for one thing Telzey would have discovered I was around moments after she woke up. Unless something had been done to her mind after Attuk had her brought to the satellite.

There'd been that doubt... .

Trigger said, "I was almost sure as soon as I saw her. But, of course, I had to be quite sure. Did you notice how deeply she sank into the moss? She would have had to weigh almost three times as much as I do." She shrugged. "So now we'll let Perr Hasta have her treat!"

Attuk had collapsed meanwhile, and Perr Hasta was bent above him, her long silky hair almost concealing his head. Trigger added, "It won't take long. Then I'll talk to her."

. . .

Perr Hasta said drowsily, "That should last me quite a time! Why, yes, you're right, Trigger. Your gun would kill me as quickly as it did Attuk. Much more quickly, in fact. My physical structure is delicate and could be easily disrupted. You'd like me to show you to the spacelock? That will be simple. You're already past the screen barriers."

Trigger said, "There's a guard at the lock?"

"No guard," said Perr. She yawned. "Torai had the satellite planned so no humans would be needed on it, except the ones who come to deliver this and that, or to fix something. And, of course, our visitors. My! What a visitor you turned out to be, Trigger! This has been a most interesting experience."

"All right," Trigger said. "No guard. If you're lying, you're likely to go before he does. Blethro first, then. I'm not leaving anything human here. Where is he?"

"Blethro's dead," Perr said. "Attuk's been feeding. I'll take you to what's left if you want, but you won't like what you see."

"Let's go there anyway," Trigger said.

She didn't like what Perr Hasta presently showed her, but there was

no question that it had been Blethro.

"Now we'll go to the spacelock," she said.

They went there. There was no guard. One vessel was docked in the inner lock area, the Sebaloun cruiser, a luxury boat. Trigger motioned Perr Hasta into it ahead of her with the gun, the Marells following. She checked out the cruiser's controls, with Perr standing beside her, decided she understood them well enough. "Back outside, Perr!" she said.

She followed Perr Hasta outside. Lock controls next; and they were simplicity itself, computer directed, the satellite computers responding to the cruiser's signals. No operator required. "Perr--" she began.

Perr wasn't there.

Trigger looked quickly around, skin prickling. She hadn't seen Perr disappear, hadn't been aware of her disappearance. Perr had been there, standing next to her, a bare instant ago. Now Perr was nowhere in sight.

A faint giggle behind her. Trigger turned, gun pointed. Nothing. But then the giggle again. She fired. Pause, and there was giggling overhead, in the dull gleam of the inner lock. Her gun point searched for it. The giggling shifted. This way, that--

A whisper then. "I'd drink your personality now, Trigger! I was saving it up. But I can't. I'm too full. Perhaps the next time."

Trigger backed to the cruiser's entry lock, gun covering the area behind her, slipped in and dove into the pilot seat. The entry lock slammed shut. Engines already on ... purr of power. She threw in the satellite's lock switches. The cruiser moved forward into the outer lock. Inner lock slid shut. Outer lock opened. She cut in full drive. In the same instant, it seemed, the satellite shrank into invisibility behind them, and she hit the subspace switch.

Some minutes later, Salgol addressed her tentatively from the seat

beside her. "Would it distract you if I spoke to you now?"

"Huh?" Trigger looked around, saw the three of them gathered there, watching her solemnly. "No, it's all right to talk," she said. "We'll be running on automatics for a while."

Salgol hesitated. "Well, I—we noticed your face is quite pale."

"I suppose it might be." Trigger sighed. "There's some reason for it, Salgol."

"There is? We aren't safe?"

"Oh, we should be physically safe enough at the moment." Trigger shook her head. "But we may find we still have very big problems."

IX

"How much did the Service tell you after I got back?" Trigger asked.

"Not much at all," Telzey said. "Just that you were safe and sound but currently incommunicado. And that your little people were all right, too." They'd been having dinner together while Trigger related her experiences on the Sebaloun satellite.

"Of course, I had my own lines out," Telzey went on, "so I did pick up a few things. There's a flock of diplomats preparing for a trip to Marell to make official contact with its civilization, so somebody got to the group which was exploiting the Marells in time. Then I tapped a man who knew that group had a connection to the Sebaloun enterprises. When it was reported that Torai Sebaloun and two close associates had disappeared in space on her private cruiser and were presumed dead, I figured you could have had something to do with it.

"And, by the way, there were a couple of matters we were able to

clean up at this end meanwhile. Some detective friends tracked down the outfit Wrann had hired to hunt for you. They were working without a license and had broken a number of unwritten rules on the job, and the big private agencies feel that sort of thing reflects on everyone. Once we'd identified them, all that was necessary was to pass the word along here and there."

"I hope they weren't treated too roughly," Trigger said.

Telzey shrugged. "I didn't ask. But I understand someone was extremely rough on the hotel security people who fingered you for Wrann and helped smuggle you out. I suppose that was regarded as the nth degree in unprofessional conduct. At any rate, you won't have problems in that area. No one seems much interested in Blethro's disappearance. He had a long, very bad record—it was almost bound to catch up with him eventually. But that still leaves a number of people who might connect you to the Sebaloun satellite and Torai Sebaloun."

Trigger said, "It turned out to be only Wrann and the yacht pilot and some of Wrann's underlings. They've had a case of group amnesia. Anyway, they're mostly in Rehabilitation."

Telzey settled back. "So, what were they keeping you incommunicado about?"

"Symbiote Control."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a special Service group," Trigger said. "Top-secret. They figured I might as well tell you since you'd be finding out anyway."

"I'd be trying to," Telzey admitted.

"Uh-huh. It seems there's a variety of immigrant creatures that keep out of sight in one way and another. They like the advantages of life in the Hub. Some pretend to be human. Mostly they're harmless, and some are considered useful. The Service likes to keep an eye on them, but sees no special reason to bother them otherwise.

"But then there are the ones that aren't harmless. Symbiote Control pumped me about everything that happened on the satellite. They already knew about the Torai type of entity and the Attuk type. The Perr Hasta type was completely new; but what I could tell them about it seemed to explain some rather mysterious occurrences they have on record."

"They knew about the first two?" Telzey said.

"Yes. They're taking care of that quietly, partly because there aren't enough of either around to be worth setting off a public panic. Attuk was a Gelter. It's their name for themselves. Gelters get checked out individually. Most of them have sense enough not to use their shape-changing in ways they shouldn't, and they help locate others who might be doing it. They have an understanding with the Service. They can stay as long as they make no trouble."

"Where do they come from?"

"They don't know," said Trigger. "A Gelter ship got wrecked on a Hub world before humans ever reached this galactic area. The ones here now are remote descendants of the crew. They have no record of their home world and, of course, it could be almost anywhere. It's different with the Torai type of entity. They do know where that one came from and how it got here, and some other things about it. It's in the exploration records... ."

. . .

Most of the surface of the entity's planet of origin, Trigger explained, was a watery swamp where no intelligent life had evolved. The host bodies available to it there had primitive nervous systems, and it was incapable of developing awareness which extended beyond that of its host. But a Hub expedition had spent some time on the planet and left it with numerous living specimens. The entities in the specimens began to transfer to human bodies. It was an instinctive process at that point; but with human brains, they acquired a human intelligence

potential. They made use of it. Their existence wasn't suspected until decades later.

"What's been done about their world?" Telzey asked.

"It's posted. Satellite warnings in Translingue and a dozen other major Galactic languages, explicit about the danger of psychic invasion. Fortunately, the entity can't reproduce when it adopts a host outside its native ecology. There's no way to establish exactly how many were set at large in the Hub by that one expedition, but almost all of them seem to have been located by now."

"What do they do with them when they're located?"

"Not much one can do with them really, is there?" Trigger said. "They don't harm the host body. It lives and procreates and doesn't mutate out of the species. It uses its brain and may be performing a valuable function in society. To the sentient individual, of course, they're a destructive parasite. But that's how they've evolved. They get a choice between dying when the body they've currently occupied dies or going back to their world and its water creatures. I understand most of them decide to go back."

"So those three entities found one another," Telzey said, "and formed an evil little coven, grouped about the Torai Sebaloun figure."

"For their mutual benefit," said Trigger. "You can see how Attuk and Perr could be useful to Torai. The Sebaloun family members who might have competed for control with her all seem to have died at convenient moments."

Telzey said after a pause, "There's still nothing to show what happened to Perr Hasta?"

"Nothing whatever. It was hardly three hours before I was back at the satellite in a Service ship with psi operators on board. But it was airless by then—open to space—the computer system off. And Perr was gone. It's a little odd, because the delivery lock was sealed, and there are no other facilities for a second spacecraft on the satellite. But perhaps she wouldn't need a spacecraft. After all, we don't know

what she's really like. At any rate, I'm reasonably certain Perr Hasta is still around."

"And being around, she could look you up," Telzey said.

"Yes," said Trigger. "That's what makes it awkward for me. Of course, she's a capricious sort. She may have dropped the idea of absorbing my personality by now."

Telzey shook her head. "She doesn't seem to have been capricious about waiting for her chance to get at Torai and Attuk!"

"I know," Trigger said moodily. "I can't count on her forgetting about me--and that doesn't leave me much choice. I'm not going into hiding because of Perr, and I wouldn't want to have a Service operator keep me under indefinite mind-watch, even if they were willing to do it. Or even you. So I'll accept the Service offer to get those latent abilities of mine organized enough to turn me into some sort of functioning psi." She looked at Telzey. "They don't expect me to reach your level, but they think I should become easily good enough to handle Perr if she shows up. She didn't try to tackle Torai or Attuk until she had them at a disadvantage, so she must have limitations."

"They'll probably have you that far along in no time," Telzey said.

"Yes, I suppose so... ."

Telzey smiled. "Cheer up, Trigger! It really isn't all that bad, being a functioning psi."

"Oh, I know." Trigger returned the smile briefly. "I imagine it will be fun, in a way. And it certainly has its advantages. It's just that I never planned to be one. And now that I'm about to get started--well, it still seems rather strange to me. Shall we go?"

"Might as well." They gathered their purses and rose from the table. Telzey remarked, "You won't find it any stranger than a number of things you've already done."

"No?" said Trigger doubtfully.

"Definitely not. Take tangling with three inhuman monsters on a Rasolmen satellite, for example--"