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THE TELZEY TOY

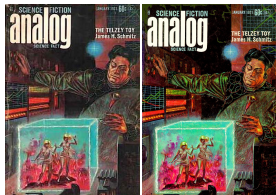
JAMES H. SCHMITZ



"The Telzey Toy"

James Schmitz

Published in *Analog Science Fiction* → *Science Fact*, Vol. 86, No. 5 (January 1971), with illustrations by Kelly Freas, though this version is taken from *TnT: Telzey & Trigger* (2000, where it was retitled "Ti's Toys") and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.

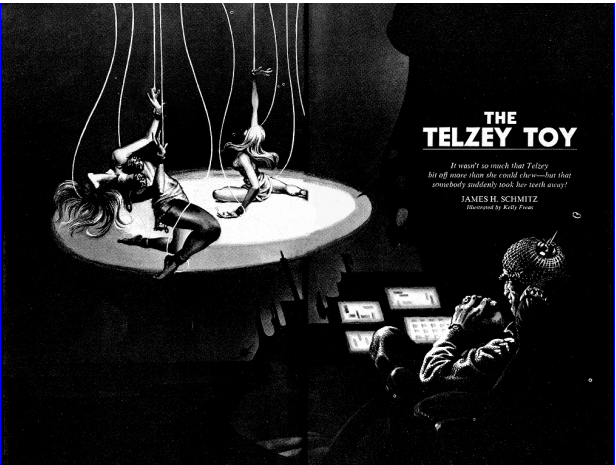


Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.



Covers of the collections, just for fun.

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THE TELZEY TOY

*It wasn't so much that Telzey
bit off more than she could chew—but that
somebody suddenly took her teeth away!*

JAMES H. SCHMITZ
Illustrated by Kelly Freas

An auburn-haired, petal-cheeked young woman who belonged in another reality came walking with feline grace along a restaurant terrace in Orado City where Telzey had stopped for lunch during a shopping excursion.

Telzey watched her approach. This, she decided, was quite strange. Going by her appearance and way of moving, the woman seemed to be someone she'd met before. But she knew they hadn't met before. She knew also, in a curiously definite manner, that the woman simply couldn't be on this terrace in Orado City. She existed in other dimensions, not here, not now.

The woman who didn't exist here glanced at Telzey in passing. There was no recognition in the look. Telzey shifted her chair slightly, watched the familiar-unfamiliar phantom take another table not far away, pick up an order disk. A very good-looking young woman with a smooth unsmiling face, fashionably and expensively dressed—and nobody else around seemed to find anything at all unreasonable in her presence.

So perhaps, Telzey reflected, it was her psi senses that found it unreasonable. She slipped out a thought probe, held it a moment. It produced no telepathic touch response, no suggestion of shielding. If the woman was psi, she was an atypical variety. She'd taken a snack glass from the table dispenser by now, was sipping at it—

Comprehension came suddenly. No mystery after all, Telzey told herself, half amused, half disappointed. A year ago, she'd gone with some acquaintances to take in a Martridrama. The woman looked and walked exactly like one of the puppets they'd seen that evening, one who played a minor role but appeared enough of an individual to have left an impression in memory. No wonder it had seemed a slightly uncanny encounter—Martri puppets didn't go strolling around the city by themselves.

Another thought drifted up then, quite idly.

Or did they?

Telzey studied the pale profile again. Her skin began prickling. It was a most improper notion, but there might be a quick way of checking it. Some minds could be tapped easily, some with varying degrees of difficulty, some not at all. If this woman happened to be one of the easy ones, a few minutes of probing could establish what she was—or wasn't.

It took longer than that. Telzey had contact presently, but it remained tenuous and indistinct; she lost it repeatedly. Then, as she re-established it again, a little more definitely now, the woman finished her snack drink and stood up. Telzey slipped a pay chit for her lunch into the table's receptacle, waited till her quarry turned away, then followed her toward a terrace exit.

A Martri puppet was a biological organism superficially indistinguishable from a human being. It had a brain which could be programmed, and which responded to cues with human speech and human behavior. Whether something resembling the human mind could be associated with that kind of brain was a point Telzey hadn't found occasion to consider before. She was no Martriphile, didn't, in fact, particularly care for that form of entertainment.

There was mind here, and the blurred patterns she'd touched seemed human. But she hadn't picked up enough to say it couldn't be the mind of a Martri puppet...

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The woman took an airtaxi on another terrace of the shopping complex. As it rose from the platform, Telzey got into the next taxi in line and told the driver to follow the one that had just left. The driver spun his colleague's car into his screen.

"Don't know if I can," he said then. "He's heading up into heavy traffic."

Telzey smiled at him. "Double fare for trying!"

They set off promptly in pursuit. Telzey clung to her contact, began assembling additional data. Some minutes later, the driver announced, "Looks like we've lost them!"

She already knew it. Distance wasn't necessarily a factor in developing mind contact. In this case it had been a factor. The crosstown traffic stream was dense, close to the automatic reroute point. The impressions she'd been receiving, weak at best, had begun to be flooded out increasingly by intruding impressions from other minds. The car they'd been pursuing must be several miles away by now. She let contact fade, told the driver to return to the shopping complex, and settled back very thoughtfully in her seat.

Few Martriphiles saw anything objectionable in having puppets killed literally on stage when a drama called for it. It was an essential part of Martri realism. The puppets were biological machines; the emotions and reactions they displayed were programmed ones. They had no self-awareness—that was the theory.

What she'd found in the mind of the auburn-haired woman seemed less important than what she hadn't found there, though she'd been specifically searching for it.

That woman knew where she was, what she was doing. There'd been scraps of recent memory, some moment-to-moment observations, an intimation of underlying purpose. But she appeared to have no personal sense of herself. She knew she existed—an objective fact among other facts, with no more significance than the others.

In other words, she *did* seem to lack self-awareness. As far as Telzey had been able to make out, the term had no meaning for her. But the contact hadn't been solid enough or extensive enough to prove it.

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On the face of it, Telzey was telling herself an hour later, the thing was preposterous. She'd had a wild notion, had tried to disprove it and failed. She'd even turned up some evidence which might seem to favor the notion. It remained wild. Why waste more time on the matter?

She bit her thumb irritably, dialed an information center for data on Martridramas and Martri puppets, went over the material when it arrived. There wasn't much there she didn't already know in a general way. A Martri stage was a programmed computer which in turn programmed the puppets, and directed them during a play under the general guidance of the dramateer. While a play was new, no two renditions of it were exactly the same. Computer and puppets retained some choice of action, directed always toward greater consistency, logic, and effect. Only when further improvement was no

longer possible did a Martridrama remain frozen and glittering—a thing become perfect of its kind. It explained the continuing devotion of Martriphiles.

It didn't suggest that such a thing as a runaway puppet was a possibility.

The Martri unit which had put on the play she had seen was no longer on Orado. She could find out where it was at present, but there should be simpler ways of determining what she wanted to know immediately. A name had turned up repeatedly in her study of the Martri material ... Wakote Ti. He was locally available. A big man. Multilevel scientist, industrial tycoon, millionaire, philanthropist, philosopher, artist, and art collector. Above all, a Martri specialist of specialists. Wakote Ti designed, grew, and merchandised the finest puppets in the Hub, built and programmed the most advanced Martri stages, had written over fifty of the most popular plays, and was a noted amateur dramatist.

A Martriphile relative of one of Telzey's friends turned out to be an admirer and business associate of Wakote Ti. He agreed to let Telzey know the next time the great man appeared at his laboratories in Draise, and to arrange for an interview with him.

• • •

"The legality of killing a puppet is regarded as unarguable," said Wakote Ti.

A college paper she'd be preparing on the legal niceties involved in the practice had been Telzey's ostensible reason for requesting the interview.

He shrugged. "But I simply couldn't bring myself to do it! They have life and a mentality, however limited and artificial they may be. Most importantly, they have personality, character. It's been programmed into them, of course, but, to my feeling, the distinction between puppets and humanity is one of degree rather than kind. They're unfinished people. They act always in accordance with their character, not necessarily in accordance with the wishes of the composer or dramatist. I've been surprised many times by the twists they've given the roles I assigned to them. Always valid ones! They can't be forced to deviate from what they are. In that respect they seem more honest than many of us."

Ti gave Telzey an engaging smile. He was a large, strongly muscled man, middle-aged, with a ruddy complexion and grizzled black hair. There was an air of controlled energy about him; and boundless energy he must have, to accomplish as much as he did. There was also an odd gentleness in gesture and voice. It was very easy to like Ti.

And he had a mind that couldn't be touched by a telepath. Telzey had known that after the first few minutes—probe-immune. Too bad! She'd sooner have drawn the information she wanted from him without giving him any inkling of what she was after.

"Do you use real people as models for them?" she asked. "I mean when they're being designed."

"Physically?"

"Yes."

Ti shook his head. "Not any one person. Many. They're ideal types."

Telzey hesitated, said, "I had an odd experience a while ago. I saw a

man who looked so exactly like a Martri puppet I'd seen in a play, I almost convinced myself it was the puppet who'd somehow walked off the stage and got lost in the world outside. I suppose that would be impossible?"

Ti laughed. "Oh, quite!"

"What makes it impossible?"

"Their limitations. A puppet can be programmed to perform satisfactorily in somewhere between twenty and thirty-five plays. One of ours, which is currently in commercial use, can handle forty-two roles of average complexity. I believe that's the record.

"At best, that's a very limited number of specific situations as compared with the endlessly shifting variety of situations in the real world. If a puppet were turned loose there, the input stream would very quickly overwhelm its response capacity, and it would simply stop operating."

"Theoretically," said Telzey, "couldn't the response capacity be pushed up to the point where a puppet could act like a person?"

"I can't say it's theoretically impossible," Ti said. "But it would require a new technology." He smiled. "And since there are quite enough real people around, there wouldn't be much point to it, would there?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps not."

"We're constantly experimenting, of course." Ti stood up. "There are a number of advanced models in various stages of development in another part of the building. They aren't usually shown to visitors, but if you'd like to see them, I'll make an exception."

"I'd very much like to!" Telzey said.

She decided she wasn't really convinced. New technologies were being developed regularly in other fields--why not in that of Martri puppetry? In any case, she might be able to settle the basic question now. She could try tapping the mind of one or the other of the advanced models he'd be showing her, and see how what she found compared with the patterns she'd traced in the mystery woman.

That plan was promptly discarded again. Ti had opened the door to a large office, and a big-boned young man sitting there at a desk looked up at her as they came in.

He was a telepath.

The chance meeting of two telepathic psis normally followed a standard etiquette. If neither was interested in developing the encounter, they gave no sign of knowing the other was a psi. If one was interested, he produced a mental identification. If the other failed to respond, the matter was dropped.

Neither Telzey nor the young man identified themselves. Ti, however, introduced them. "This is Linden, my secretary and assistant," he said; and to Linden, "This is Telzey Amberdon, who's interested in our puppets. I'm letting her see what we have in the vaults at present."

Linden, who had come to his feet, bowed and said, "You'd like me to show Miss Amberdon around?"

"No, I'll do that," said Ti. "I'm telling you so you'll know where I am."

That killed the notion of probing one of the puppets in the vaults. Now they'd met, it was too likely that Linden would become aware of any telepathic activity in the vicinity. Until she knew more, she didn't want to give any hint of her real interest in the puppets. There were other

approaches she could use.

The half hour she spent in the vaults with Ti was otherwise informative. "This one," he said, "is part of an experiment designed to increase our production speed. Three weeks is still regarded as a quite respectable time in which to turn out a finished puppet. We've been able to do a good deal better than that for some while. With these models, starting from scratch and using new hypergrowth processes, we can produce a puppet programmed for fifteen plays in twenty-four hours." He beamed down at Telzey. "Of course, it's probably still faulty—it hasn't been fully tested yet. But we're on the way! Speed's sometimes important. Key puppets get damaged or destroyed, and most of some Martri unit's schedule may be held up until a replacement can be provided."

. . .

That night at her home in Orado City, Telzey had an uninvited visitor. She was half asleep when she sensed a cautious mental probe. It brought her instantly and completely awake, but she gave no immediate indication of having noticed anything. It mightn't be a deliberate intrusion.

However, it appeared then that it was quite deliberate. The other psi remained cautious. But the probing continued, a not too expert testing of the density of her screens, a search for a weakness in their patterns through which the mind behind them might be scanned or invaded.

Telzey decided presently she'd waited long enough. She loosened her screens abruptly, sent a psi bolt flashing back along the line of probe. It smacked into another screen. The probe vanished. Somebody somewhere probably had been knocked cold for an hour or so.

Telzey lay awake a while, reflecting. She'd had a momentary impression of the personality of the prowler. Linden? It might have been. If so, what had he been after?

No immediate answer to that.

2

There was a permanent Martri stage in Orado City, and Telzey had intended taking in a show there next day—a Martridrama looked like the best opportunity now to get in some discreet study on puppet minds. Her experience with the psi prowler made her decide on a shift in plans. If it had been Wakote Ti's secretary who'd tried to probe her, then it could be that Ti had some reason to be interested in a telepath who was interested in Martri puppets, and her activities might be coming under observation for a while. Hence she should make anything she did in connection with the puppets as difficult to observe as she could—which included keeping away from the Orado City stage.

She made some ComWeb inquiries, arrived presently by pop transport shuttle in a town across the continent, where a Martridrama was in progress. She'd changed shuttles several times on the way. There'd been nothing to indicate she was being followed.

She bought a ticket at the stage, started up a hall toward the auditorium entry—

• • •

She was lying on her back on a couch, in a large room filled with warm sunshine. There was no one else in the room.

Shock held her immobilized for a moment.

It wasn't only that she didn't know where she was, or how she'd got there. Something about *her* seemed different, changed, profoundly wrong.

Realization came abruptly—every trace of psi sense was gone. She tried to reach out mentally into her surroundings, and it was like opening her eyes and still seeing nothing. Panic began to surge up in her then. She lay quiet, holding it off, until her breathing steadied again. Then she sat up on the couch, took inventory of what she could see here. The upper two-thirds of one side of the room was a single great window open on the world outside. Tree crowns were visible beyond it. Behind the trees, a mountain peak reached toward a blue sky. The room was simply furnished with a long table of polished dark wood, some chairs, the low couch on which she sat. The floor was carpeted. Two closed doors were in the wall across from the window.

Her clothes—white shirt, white shorts, white stockings, and moccasins—weren't the ones she'd been wearing.

None of that told her much, but meanwhile the threat of panic had withdrawn. She swung around, slid her legs over the edge of the couch. As she stood up, one of the doors opened, and Telzey watched herself walk into the room.

It jolted her again, but less severely. Take another girl of a size and bone structure close enough to her own, and a facsimile skin, eye tints, a few other touches, could produce an apparent duplicate. There'd be differences, but too minor to be noticeable. She didn't detect any immediately. The girl was dressed exactly as she was, wore her hair as she wore hers.

"Hello," Telzey said, as evenly as she could. "What's this game about?"

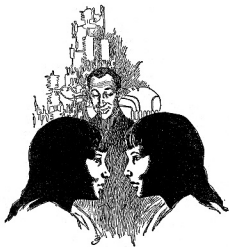
Her double came up, watching her soberly, stopped a few feet away. "What's the last thing you remember before you woke up here?" she asked.

Her voice, too? Quite close to it, at any rate.

Telzey said guardedly, "Something like a flash of white light inside my head."

The girl nodded. "In Sombedain."

"In Sombedain. I was in a hall, going toward a door."



From the 1973 collection.

"You were about thirty feet from that door," said her double. "And behind it was the Martri auditorium... . Those are the last things I remember, too. What about psi? Has it been wiped out?"

Telzey studied her a moment. "Who are you?" she asked.

The double shrugged. "I don't know. I feel I'm Telzey Amberdon. But if I weren't, I might still feel that."

"If you're Telzey, who am I?" Telzey asked.

"Let's sit down," the double said. "I've been awake half an hour, and I've been told a few things. They hit me pretty hard. They'll probably hit you pretty hard."

They sat down on the edge of the couch. The double went on. "There's no way we could prove right now that I'm the real Telzey. But there might be a way we can prove that you are, and I'm not."

"How?"

"Psi," said the double. "Telzey used it. I can't use it now. I can't touch it. Nothing happens. If you—"

"I can't either," Telzey said.

The double drew a sighing breath.

"Then we don't know," she said. "What I've been told is that one of us is Telzey and the other is a Martri copy who thinks she's Telzey. A puppet called Gaziel. It was grown during the last two days like other puppets are grown, but it was engineered to turn into an exact duplicate of Telzey as she is now. It has her memories. It has her personality. They were programmed into it. So it feels it's Telzey."

Telzey said, after some seconds, "Ti?"

"Yes. There's probably no one else around who could have done it."

"No, I guess not. Why did he do it?"

"He said he'd tell us that at lunch. He was still talking to me when he saw in a screen that you'd come awake, and sent me down here to tell you what had happened."

So he's been watching?" Telzey said.

The double nodded. "He wanted to observe your reactions."

. . .

"As to which of you is Telzey," said Ti, "and which is Gaziel, that's something I don't intend to let you know for a while!" He smiled engagingly across the lunch table at them. "Theoretically, of course, it would be quite possible that you're both puppets and that the original Telzey is somebody else. However, we want to have some temporary way of identifying you two as individuals."

He pulled a ring from his finger, put both hands under the table level, brought them to view again as fists. "You," he said to Telzey, "will guess which hand is holding the ring. If you guess correctly, you'll be referred to as Telzey for the time being, and you," he added to the double, "as Gaziel. Agreed?"

They nodded. "Left," Telzey said.

"Left it is!" said Ti, beaming at her, as he opened his hand and revealed the ring. He put it back on his finger, inquired of Linden, who made a fourth at the table, "Do you think she might have cheated by using psi?"

Linden glowered, said nothing. Ti laughed. "Linden isn't fond of Telzey at present," he remarked. "Did you know you knocked him out for almost two hours when he tried to investigate your mind?"

"I thought that might have happened," said Gaziel.

"He'd like to make you pay for it," said Ti. "So watch yourselves, little dears, or I may tell him to go ahead. Now as to your future--Telzey's absence hasn't been discovered yet. When it is, a well-laid trail will lead off Orado somewhere else, and it will seem she's disappeared there under circumstances suggesting she's no longer alive. I intend, you see, to keep her indefinitely."

"Why?" Telzey asked.

"She noticed something," said Ti. "It wouldn't have seemed too important if Linden hadn't found out she was a telepath."

"Then that was your puppet I saw?" Gaziel said. She glanced over at Telzey, added, "That one of us--Telzey--saw."

"That ~~we~~ saw," Telzey said. "That will be simplest for now."

Ti smiled. "You live up to my expectations! ... Yes, it was my puppet. We needn't go further into that matter at present. As a telepath and with her curiosities aroused, Telzey might have become a serious problem, and I decided at once to collect her rather than follow the simpler route of having her eliminated. I had her background checked out, which confirmed the favorable opinions I'd formed during our discussion. She should make a most satisfactory subject. Within the past hour, she's revealed another very valuable quality."

"What's that?" Telzey said.

"Stability," Ti told her. "For some time, I've been interested in psis in my work, and with Linden's help I've been able to secure several of them before this." He shook his head. "They were generally poor material. Some couldn't even sustain the effect of realizing I had created an exact duplicate of them. They collapsed into uselessness. So, of course, did the duplicates. But look at you two! You adjusted immediately to the situation, have eaten with every indication of a

ood appetite, and are no doubt already preparing schemes to get away from old Ti."

Telzey said, "Just what is the situation? What are you planning to do with us?"

Ti smiled at her. "That will develop presently. There's no hurry about it."

"Another question," said Gaziel. "What difference does it make that Telzey's a psi when you've knocked out her psi ability?"

"Oh, that's not an irreversible condition," Ti informed her. "The ability will return. It's necessary to keep it repressed until I've learned how to harness it, so to speak."

"It will show up in the duplicate, too, not just in the original?" Gaziel asked.

Ti gave her an approving look. "Precisely one of the points I wish to establish! My puppets go out on various errands for me. Consider how valuable puppet agents with Telzey's psi talent could be--a rather formidable talent, as Linden here can attest!"

He pushed himself back from the table. "I've enjoyed your questions, but I have work to take care of now. For the moment, this must be enough. Stroll about and look over your new surroundings. You're on my private island. Two-thirds of it is an almost untouched wilderness. The remaining third is a cultivated estate, walled off from the forest beyond. You're restricted to the estate. If you tried to escape into the forest, you'd be recaptured. There are penalties for disobedience, but more importantly, the forest is the habitat of puppet extravaganzas--experimental fancies you wouldn't care to encounter! You're free to go where you like on the estate. The places I wouldn't wish you to investigate at present are outside your reach."

. . .

"They have some way of knowing which of us is which, of course," Gaziel remarked from behind Telzey. They were threading their way through tall flowering shrubbery on the estate grounds.

"It would be a waste of time trying to find out what it is, though," Telzey said.

Gaziel agreed. The Martri duplicate might be marked in a number of ways detectable by instruments but not by human senses. "Would it disturb you very much if it turned out you weren't the original?" she said.

Telzey glanced back at her. "I'm sure it would," she said soberly. "You?"

Gaziel nodded. "I haven't thought about it too much, but it seems there's always been the feeling that I'm part of something that's been there a long, long time. It wouldn't be at all good to find out now that it was a false feeling--that I was only myself, with nothing behind me."

"And somebody who wasn't even there in any form a short while ago," Telzey added. "It couldn't help being disturbing! But that's what one of us is going to find out eventually. And, as Ti mentioned, we may both be duplicates. You know, our minds do seem to work identically--almost."

"Almost," said Gaziel. "They must have started becoming different minds as soon as we woke up. But it should be a while before the differences become too significant."

"That's something to remember," Telzey said.

They emerged from the flower thicket, saw the mountain again in the distance, looming above the trees. It rose at the far end of the island, in the forest area. The cultivated estate seemed to cover a great deal of ground. When they'd started out from a side door of the round gleaming-white building which stood approximately at its center, they couldn't see to the ends of it anywhere because groups of trees blocked the view in all directions. But they could see the mountain and had started off toward it.

If they kept on toward it, they would reach the wall which bordered the estate.

"There's one thing," Telzey said. "We can't ever be sure here whether Ti or somebody else isn't listening to what we say."

Gaziel nodded. "We'll have to take a chance on that."

"Right," Telzey said. "We wouldn't get very far if we stuck to sign language or counting on thinking the same way about everything."

They came to the estate wall ten minutes later. It was a wall designed to discourage at first glance any notions of climbing over it. Made of the same gleaming material as the central building, its smooth unbroken surface stretched up a good thirty-five feet above the ground. It curved away out of sight behind trees in either direction; but none of the trees they saw stood within a hundred feet of the wall. They turned left along it. Either there was a gate somewhere, or aircars were used to reach the forest.

They came to a gateway presently. Faint vehicle tracks in the grass led up to it from various directions. It was closed by a slab set into the wall, which appeared to be a sliding door. They could find no indication of a lock or other mechanism.

"Might be operated from the house."

It might be. In any case, the gateway seemed to be in regular use. They sat down on the grass some distance away to wait. And they'd hardly settled themselves when the doorslab drew silently back into the wall. A small enclosed ground vehicle came through; and the slab sealed the gateway again. The vehicle moved on a few yards, stopped. They hadn't been able to see who was inside, but now a small door opened near the front end. Linden stepped out and started toward them, scowling. They got warily to their feet.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as he came up.

"Looking around generally like Ti told us to," said Gaziel.

"He didn't tell you to sit here watching the gate, did he?"

"No," Telzey said. "But he didn't say not to."

"Well, I'm telling you not to," Linden said. "Move on! Don't let me find you around here again."

They moved on. When they glanced back presently, the vehicle had disappeared.

"That man really doesn't like us," Gaziel remarked thoughtfully.

"No, he doesn't," Telzey said. "Let's climb a tree and have a look at the forest."

They picked a suitable tree, went up it until they were above the level of the wall and could see beyond it. A paved road wound away from the area of the gate toward the mountain. That part of the island seemed to be almost covered with a dense stand of tropical trees;

but, as on this side, no trees grew very close to the wall. They noticed no signs of animal life except for a few small fliers. Nor of what might be Ti's experimental Martri life.

Telzey said, "The gate controls are probably inside the cars they use when they go out there."

"Uh-huh--and the car Linden was in was armored." Gaziel had turned to study the surrounding stretches of the estate from their vantage point. "Look over there!" she said.

Telzey looked. "Gardening squad," she said after a moment. "Maybe we can find out something from them."

3

A flotilla of sixteen flat machines was gliding about purposefully a few inches above the lawns among the trees. An operator sat on each, manipulating controls. Two men on foot spoke now and then into communicators, evidently directing the work.

Gaziel nodded. "Watch that one!"

They'd approached with some caution, keeping behind trees for the most part, and hadn't yet been observed. But now one of the machines was coming in directly from the side toward the tree behind which they stood. The operator should be able to see them, but he was paying them no attention.

They studied him in uneasy speculation. There was nothing wrong about his motions; it was his expression. The eyes shifted around, but everything else seemed limply dead. The jaw hung half open; the lips drooped; the cheeks sagged. The machine came up almost to the tree, turned at a right angle, started off on another course.

Telzey said softly, "The other operators seem to be in about the same condition--whatever it is. But the supervisors look all right. Let's see if they'll talk."

They stepped out from behind the tree, started toward the closer of the two men on foot. He caught sight of them, whistled to draw his companion's attention.

"Well," he said, grinning amiably as they came up. "Dr. Ti's new guests, aren't you?" His gaze shifted between them. "And, uh, twin. Which is the human one?"

The other man, a big broad-shouldered fellow, joined them. Telzey shrugged. "We don't know. They wouldn't say."

The men stared. "Can't you tell?" the big one demanded.

"No," said Gaziel. "We both feel we're human." She added, "From what Dr. Ti told us, you mightn't be real people either and you wouldn't know it."

The two looked at each other and laughed.

"Not likely!" the big man said. "A wirehead doesn't have a bank account."

"You do? Outside?" Gaziel said.

"Uh-huh. A healthy one. My name's Remiol, by the way. The little runt's Eshan."

"We're Telzey and Gaziel," said Telzey. "And maybe you could make those bank accounts a lot healthier."

They looked at her, then shook their heads decidedly.

"We're not helping you get away, if that's what you mean," Remiol said. Eshan added, "There'd be no way of doing it if we wanted to. You kids just forget about that and settle down! This isn't a bad place if you keep out of trouble."

"You wouldn't have to help us get away exactly," Telzey said. "How often do you go to the mainland?"

There was a sudden momentary vagueness in their expressions which made her skin prickle.

"Well," Remiol said, frowning and speaking slowly as if he had some difficulty finding the words, "about as often as we feel like it, I'd say. L.. ." He hesitated, gave Eshan a puzzled look.

"You could take out a message," Gaziel said, watching him.

"Forget it!" said Eshan, who seemed unaware of anything unusual in Remiol's behavior. "We work for Dr. Ti. The pay's great and the life's easy. We aren't going to spoil that setup!"

"All right," Telzey said after a moment. "If you don't want to help us, maybe you won't mind telling us what the setup is."

"Wouldn't mind at all!" said Remiol, appearing to return abruptly to normal. He gave Telzey a friendly grin. "If Dr. Ti didn't want us to talk to you, we'd have been told. He's a good boss—you know where you are with him. Eshan, give the wireheads a food break and let's sit down with the girls."

They sat down in the grass together. Gaziel indicated the machine operators with a hand motion. "You call them wireheads. They aren't humans but a sort of Martri work robot?"

"Not work robots," Remiol said. "Dr. Ti doesn't bother with those. These are regular puppets—maybe defectives, or some experiment, or just drama puppets who've played a few roles too many. When they get like this, they don't last more'n a year—then back they go to the stuff they grow them from. Meanwhile they're still plenty good for this kind of work."

"Might be a few real humans among them," Eshan said reflectively, looking over at the operators. "After a while, you don't think about it much—they're all programmed anyway."

"How do real humans get to be in that kind of shape?" Gaziel said.

The men shrugged. "Some experiment again," said Remiol. "A lot of important research going on in the big building here."

Telzey said, "How did you know one of us was a wirehead?"

"One of the lab workers told us," said Eshan. "She said Dr. Ti was mighty happy with the results. Some of his other twinning projects hadn't turned out so well."

Remiol winked at Telzey. "This one turned out perfect!"

She smiled. "You ever been on the other side of the wall?"

They had. Evidently, it was as unhealthy as Ti had indicated to go there unless one was in one of the small fleet of armored and armed vehicles designed for the purpose. The only really safe place on the forest side was a small control fort on the slope of the mountain, and that came under occasional attack. Eshan and Remiol described

some of the Martri creations they'd seen.

"Why does Dr. Ti keep them around?" Gaziel asked.

"Uses them sometimes in the Martridramas he puts on here," said Remiol.

"And wait till you've seen one of those!" said Eshan. "That's real excitement! You don't see shows like that anywhere else."

"Otherwise," Remiol said, speaking of the forest puppets, "I guess it's research again. I worried at first about one of them coming over the wall. But it's never happened."

. . .

"Well, well!" said Ti. "Having a friendly gossip?"

He'd come floating out of a grove of trees on a hoverdisk and stopped a few feet away, holding the guide rail in his large hands.

"Hope you don't mind, Doctor," Remiol said. He and Eshan had got to their feet as Ti approached.

Ti smiled. "Mind? Not in the least. I'm greatly pleased that the new members of our little community have begun to make acquaintances so quickly. However, now we'll all be getting back to work, eh? Telzey and Gaziel, you can stand up here with me and we'll return to the house together."

They stepped up on the disk beside him, and it swung gently around and floated away, while the gardening machines lifted from the ground and began to reform into their interrupted work patterns.

"Fine fellows, those two!" said Ti, beaming down at Gaziel and Telzey. "They don't believe in overexerting themselves, of course. But then that isn't necessary here, and I prefer a relaxed and agreeable atmosphere around me."

Telzey said, "I understand it's sometimes rather exciting, too."

Ti chuckled. "That provides the counterpoint—the mental and emotional stimulus of the Martridrama! I need both. I'm always at my best here on the island! A room has been prepared for you two. You'll be shown there, and I'll come then shortly to introduce you to some of the most interesting sections of our establishment."

The groundcar Linden had been operating stood near the side door Telzey and Gaziel had used when they left the building. The hoverdisk went gliding past it to the door which opened as they approached, and into the building. In the hall beyond, it settled to the floor. They stepped down from it.

"Why, Challis!" said Ti heartily, gazing past Telzey. "What a pleasant surprise to see you back!"

Telzey and Gaziel looked around. A pale slender woman with light blue hair was coming across the hall toward them.

"This is my dear wife," Ti told them. He was smiling, but it seemed to Telzey that his face had lost some of its ruddy color. "She's been absent from the island for some time. I didn't know she was returning... ." He turned to Challis as she came up. "These are two very promising recruits, Challis. You'll be interested in hearing about my plans for them."

Challis looked over at them with an expression which was neither friendly nor unfriendly. It might have been speculative. She had pale

gray eyes and delicately beautiful features. She nodded slightly, and something stirred eerily in Telzey's mind.

Ti said, "I'll send someone to show you two to your room." He took Challis by the arm. "Come, my dear! I must hear what you've been doing."

He went off toward a door leading from the hall, Challis moving with supple ease beside him. As the door closed on the pair, Telzey glanced at Gaziel.

Gaziel said blandly, "You know, Ti's wife reminds me of someone. But I simply can't remember who it is."

So ~~she's~~ noticed it, too--the general similarity in appearance and motion between Challis and the auburn-haired puppet who'd come walking along the restaurant terrace in Orado City...

A brisk elderly woman appeared a few minutes later. She led them to a sizable room two building levels above the hall, showed them what it contained, including a wardrobe filled with clothing made to their measurements, and departed after telling them to get dressed and wait here for Dr. Ti.

They selected other clothes, put them on. They were the sort of things Telzey might have bought for herself and evidently had been chosen with considerable care. They opened the door then and looked out. No one was in sight. They went quickly and quietly back downstairs to the entrance hall.

Linden's armored car still stood where they had seen it. There was no one in sight here either. They went over to the car. It took only a moment to establish that its two doors were locked, and that the locks were of the mechanical type.

They returned hurriedly to their room.

4

"Here," said Ti, "you see my current pool of human research material."

They were on an underground level of the central building, though the appearance of the area didn't suggest it. It was a large garden, enclosed by five-story building fronts. Above was a milky skylight. Approximately a hundred people were in sight in the garden and on the building galleries. Most of them were young adults. There were few children, fewer of the middle-aged, no oldsters at all. They were well-dressed, well-groomed; their faces were placid. They sat, stood, moved unhurriedly about, singly and in groups. Some talked; some were silent. The voices were low, the gestures leisurely.

"They're controlled by your Martri computer?" Telzey asked.

Ti nodded. "They've all been programmed, though to widely varying degrees. Since they're not being used at the moment, what you see is a random phase of the standard nonsleeping activity of each of them. But notice the group of five at the fountain! They've cued one another again into the identical discussion they've had possibly a thousand times before. We can vary the activity, of course, or reprogram a subject completely. I may put a few of them through their paces for you a little later."

"What's the purpose of doing this to them?" said Gaziel.

he said, "These are converging lines of study. On the one hand, as you're aware, I'm trying to see how close I can come to turning a Martri puppet into a fully functioning human being. On the other hand, I'm trying to complete the process of turning a human being into a Martri puppet, or into an entity that is indistinguishable from one. The same thing, of course, could be attempted at less highly evolved life levels. But using the human species is more interesting and has definite advantages—quite aside from the one that it's around in abundance, so there's no problem of picking up as much research material as I need, or the type I happen to want."

"Aren't you afraid of getting caught?" Gaziel said.

Ti smiled. "No. I'm quite careful. Every day, an amazing number of people in the Hub disappear, for many reasons. My private depredations don't affect the overall statistics."

Telzey said, "And after you've done it—after you've proved you can turn people into puppets and puppets into people—what are you going to do?"

Ti patted her shoulder. "That, my dear, needn't concern you at present. However, I do have some very interesting plans."

Gaziel looked up at him. "Is this where the one of us who's the original Telzey will go?"

"No," Ti said. "By no means. To consign her to the research pool would be inexcusably wasteful. Telzey, if matters work out satisfactorily, will become my assistant."

"In what way?"

"That woman puppet you were so curious about—you tried to investigate its mind, didn't you?"

Gaziel hesitated an instant. "Yes."

"What did you find?"

"Not too much. It got away from me too quickly. But it seemed to me that it had no sense of personal existence. It was there. But it was a nothing that did things."

"Did you learn what it was doing?"

"No."

Ti rubbed his jaw. "I'm not sure I believe that," he remarked thoughtfully. "But it makes no difference now. I have a number of such puppet agents. Obviously, a puppet which is to be employed in that manner should never be developed from one of the types that are in public dramatic use. That it happened in this case was a serious error; and the error was Linden's. I was very much annoyed with him. However, your ability to look into its mind is a demonstration of Telzey's potential value. Linden, as far as I can judge the matter, is a fairly capable telepath. But puppet minds are an almost complete blur to him, and when it comes to investigating human minds in the minute detail I would often prefer, he hasn't been too satisfactory. Aside from that, of course, he has many other time-absorbing duties."

"We already know that Telzey is a more capable telepath than Linden in at least two respects. When her psi functions have been restored, she should become extremely useful." Ti waved his hand about. "Consider these people! The degree of individual awareness they retain varies, depending on the extent and depth of the programming they've undergone. In some, it's not difficult to discern. In others, it's become almost impossible by present methods. That would be one of Telzey's tasks. She should find the work interesting

enough."

"She'll be a wirehead?" Telzey said.

"Oh, yes, you'll both be programmed," Ti told her. "I could hardly count on your full collaboration otherwise, could I? But it'll be delicate work. Our previous experiments have indicated that programming psi minds presents special difficulties in any case, and I want to be quite sure that nothing goes wrong here. Your self-awareness shouldn't be affected for one thing." He smiled. "I believe I've come close to solving those problems. We'll see presently."

Telzey said, "What do you have in mind for the one who isn't Telzey?"

"Ah! Gaziel!" Ti's eyes sparkled. "I'm fascinated by the possibilities there. The question is whether our duplication processes have brought on the duplication of the original psi potential. There was no way of testing indirectly for that, but we should soon know. If they have, Gaziel will have become the first Martri psi. In any case, my dears, you can rest assured, whichever you may be, that each of you is as valued by me as the other and will be as carefully handled. I realize that you aren't reconciled to the situation, but that will come in time."

Telzey looked at him. Part lies, part truth. He'd handle them carefully, all right. Very carefully. They had value. And he'd weave, if they couldn't prevent it, a tightening net of compulsions about them they'd never escape undestroyed. What self-awareness they'd have left finally might be on the level of that of his gardening supervisors....

"Eshan and Remiol are wireheads, too, aren't they?" she said.

Ti nodded. "Aside from Linden and myself and at present you two, everyone on the island is--to use that loose expression--a wirehead. I have over a hundred and fifty human employees here, and, like the two with whom you spoke, they're all loyal, contented people."

"But they don't have big bank accounts outside and aren't allowed off the island by themselves?" Telzey said.

Ti's eyebrows lifted.

"Certainly not!" he said. "Those are pleasant illusions they maintain. There are too many sharp inquiring minds out there to risk arrangements like that. Besides, while I have a great deal of money, I also have a great many uses for it. Why should I go to unnecessary expense?"

"We didn't really think you had," Gaziel said.

. . .

"And now," said Ti, stopping before a small door, "you are about to enjoy a privilege granted to none other of our employees! Behind this door is the brain and nerve center of Ti's Island--the Dramateer Room of the Martri computer." He took out two keys, held their tips to two points on the door's surface. After a moment, the keys sank slowly into the door. Ti twisted them in turn, withdrew them. The door--a thick ponderous door--swung slowly into the room beyond. Ti motioned Telzey and Gaziel inside, followed them through.

"We're now within the computer," he said, "and this room, like the entire section, is heavily shielded. Not that we expect trouble. Only Linden and I have access here. No one else even knows where the Dramateer Room is. As my assistants-to-be, however, you should be introduced to it."

The room wasn't large. It was long, narrow, low-ceilinged. At the end nearest the door was a sunken control complex with two seats. Ti tapped the wall. "The computer extends downward for three levels from here. I don't imagine you've been behind a Martri stage before?"

They shook their heads.

"A good deal of mystery is made of it," Ti said. "But the difficulty lies in the basic programming of the computer. That takes a master! If anything at all is botched, the machine never quite recovers. Few Martri computers in existence might be said to approach perfection. This one comes perhaps closest to it, though it must operate on a much wider scale than any other built so far."

"You programmed it?" Telzey asked.

Ti looked surprised. "Of course! Who else could have been entrusted with it? It demanded the utmost of my skills and discernment. But as for the handling of the computer--the work of the dramateer--that isn't really complicated at all. Linden lacks genius but is technically almost as accomplished at it as I am. You two probably will be able to operate the computer efficiently and to direct Martridramas within a few months. After you've been here a year, I expect to find you composing your own dramas."

He stepped down into the control complex, settled into one of the seats, took a brimless cap of wire mesh from a recess and fitted it over his head. "A dramateer cap," he said. "It's not used here, but few dramas are directed from here. Our Martri Stage covers the entire island and the body of water immediately surrounding it, and usually Linden and I prefer to be members of the audience. You're aware that the computer has the capability of modifying a drama while it's being enacted. On occasion, such a modification could endanger the audience. When it happens, the caps enable us to override the computer. That's almost their only purpose."

"How does it work?" Gaziel asked.

Ti tapped the top of his head. "Through microcontacts in my skull," he said. "The dramateer usually verbalizes my instructions, but it's not necessary. The thought, if precise enough, is sufficient. It's interesting that no one knows what makes that possible."

He indicated the wall at the far end of the room with a nod. "A check screen. I'll show you a few of the forest puppets."

His hands flicked with practiced quickness about the controls, and a view appeared in the screen--a squat low building with sloping walls, standing in a wide clearing among trees. That must be the control fort Remiol and Eshan had talked about.

The screen flickered. Telzey felt a pang in the center of her forehead. It faded, returned. She frowned. She almost never got headaches....

Image in the screen--heavily built creature digging in the ground with clawed feet. Gaziel watched Ti, lips slightly parted, blue eyes intent. Ti talking: "--no precise natural counterpart but we've given it a viable metabolism and, if you will, viable instincts. It's programmed to nourish itself, and does. Weight over two tons--"

The pain--a rather mild pain--in Telzey's head shifted to her temples. It might be an indication of something other than present tensions.

An inexperienced or clumsy attempt by a telepath to probe a resistant human mind could produce reactions which in turn produced the symptom of a moderately aching head.

And Linden was a clumsy psi.

could be the human original he was trying to probe, Telzey thought, but it could as well be the Martri copy, whose head presumably would ache identically. Linden might be playing his own game--attempting to establish secret control over Ti's new tools before he had normal psi defenses to contend with... . Whichever she was, that could be a mistake! If she was resisting the attempt, then some buried psi part of her of which she hadn't been conscious was active--and was now being stimulated by use.

Let him keep on probing! It couldn't harm at all...

"What do you think of that beauty?" Ti asked her with a benign smile.

A new thing in the screen. A thing that moved like a thick sheet of slowly flowing yellowish oil along the ground between the trees. Two dark eyes bulged from the forward end. Telzey cleared her throat. "Sort of repulsive," she remarked.

"Yes, and far from harmless. Hunger is programmed into it, and it's no vegetarian. If we allowed it to satisfy its urges indiscriminately, there'd be a constant need to replenish the forest fauna. I'll impel it now into an attack on the fort."

The flowing mass abruptly shifted direction and picked up speed. Ti tracked it through the forest for a minute or two, then flicked the screen back to a view of the fort. Moments later, the glider came out into the clearing, front end raised, a fanged, oddly glassy-looking mouth gaping wide at its tip. It slapped itself against the side of the fort. Gaziel said, "Could it get in?"

Ti chuckled comfortably. "Yes, indeed! It can compress itself almost to paper thinness, and if permitted, it would soon locate the gun slits and enter through one of them. But the fort's well armed. When one of our self-sustaining monsters threatens to slip from computer control, the fort is manned and the rogue is directed or lured into attacking it. The guns will destroy any of them, though it takes a good deal longer to do than if they were natural animals of comparable size." He smiled. "For them, too, I have plans, though those plans are still far from fruition."

He shut off the screen, turned down a number of switches, and got out of the control chair. "We're putting on a full Martridrama after dinner tonight, in honor of your appearance among us," he told them. "Perhaps you'd like to select one you think you'd enjoy seeing. If you'll come down here, I'll show you how to scan through samples of our repertoire."

They stepped down into the pit, took the console seats. Ti explained the controls, moved back, and stood watching their faces as they began the scan. Telzey and Gaziel kept their eyes fixed on the small screens before them, studied each drama sample produced briefly, went on to the next. Several minutes passed in silence, broken only by an intermittent muted whisper of puppet voices from the screens. Finally Ti asked blandly, "Have you found something you'd like?"

Telzey shrugged. "It all *seems* as if it might be interesting enough," she said. "But it's difficult to tell much from these samples." She glanced at Gaziel. "What do you think?"

Gaziel, smooth face expressionless, said, "Why don't you pick one out, Ti? You'd make a better selection than we could."

Ti showed even white teeth in an irritated smile.

"You aren't easy to unsettle!" he said. "Very well, I'll choose one. One of my favorites to which I've added a few twists since showing it last." He looked at his watch. "You've seen enough for today. Run along and entertain yourself! Dinner will be in three hours. It will be a formal one, and we'll have company, so I want to see you come beautifully

downed and styled. Do you know your way back to your room from here?"

They said they did, followed him out of the Dramateer Room, watched as he sealed and locked the door. Then they started back to their room. As they turned into a passage on the next level up, they checked, startled.

5

The blue-haired woman Ti had called Challis stood motionless thirty feet away, looking at them. Pale eyes, pale face ... the skin of Telzey's back began to crawl. Perhaps it was only the unexpectedness of the encounter, but she remembered how Ti had lost color when Challis first appeared; and the thought came that she might feel this way if she suddenly saw a ghost and knew what it was.

Challis lifted a hand now, beckoned to them. They started hesitantly forward. She turned aside as they came up, went to an open door, and through it. They glanced at each other.

"I think we'd better see what she wants," Telzey said quietly.

Gaziel nodded, looking quite as reluctant about it as Telzey felt. "Probably."

They went to the door. A narrow dim-lit corridor led off it. Challis was walking up the corridor, some distance away. They exchanged glances again.

"Let's go."

They slipped into the corridor, started after Challis. The door closed silently behind them. They came out, after several corridor turns, into a low wide room, quite bare--the interior of a box. Diffused light poured from floor, ceiling, the four walls. The surfaces looked like highly polished metal but cast no reflections.

"Nothing reaches here," Challis said to them. "We can talk." She had a low musical voice which at first didn't seem to match her appearance, then did. "Don't be alarmed by me. I came here only to talk to you."

They looked at her a moment. "Where did you come from?" Gaziel asked.

"From inside."

"Inside?"

"Inside the machine. I'm usually there, or seem to be. I don't really give much attention to it. Now and then--not often, I believe--I'm told to come out."

"Who tells you to come out?" Telzey said carefully.

Challis' light-gray eyes regarded her.

"The minds," she said. "The machine thinks on many levels. Thinking forms minds. We didn't plan that. It developed. They're there; they do their work. That's the way they feel it should be. You understand?"

They nodded hesitantly.

"He knows they're there," Challis said. "He sees the indications. He

can affect some of them. Many more are inaccessible to him at present, but it's been noted that he's again modified and extended the duplicative processes. He's done things that are quite new, and now he's brought in the new model who is one of you. The model's been analyzed and it was found that it incorporates a quality through which he should be able to gain access to any of the minds in the machine. That's not wanted. If the duplicate made of the model—the other of you—has the same quality, that's wanted even less. If it's been duplicated once, it can be duplicated many times. And he will duplicate it many times. It's not his way to make limited use of a successful model. He'll make duplicates enough to control every mind in the machine."

"We don't want that," Gaziel said.

Challis' eyes shifted to her.

"It won't happen," she said, "if he's unable to use either of you for his purpose. It's known that you have high resistive levels to programming, but it's questionable whether you can maintain those levels indefinitely. Therefore the model and its duplicate should remove themselves permanently from the area of the machine. That's the logical and most satisfactory solution."

Telzey glanced at Gaziel. "We'd very much like to do it," she said. "Can you help us get off the island?"

Challis frowned.

"I suppose there's a way to get off the island," she said slowly. "I remember other places."

"Do you remember where they keep the aircars here?" said Gaziel.

"Aircars?" Challis repeated. She looked thoughtful. "Yes, he has aircars. They're somewhere in the structure. However, if the model and the duplicate aren't able to leave the area, they should destroy themselves. The minds will provide you with opportunities for self-destruction. If you fail, direct procedures will be developed to delete you."

Telzey said after a moment, "But they won't help us get off the island?"

Challis shook her head. "The island is the Martri stage. Things come to it; things leave it. I remember other places. Therefore, there should be a way off it. The way isn't known. The minds can't help you in that."

"The aircars—"

"There are aircars somewhere in the structure. Their exact location isn't known."

Telzey said, "There's still another solution."

"What?"

"The minds could delete him instead."

"No, that's not a solution," said Challis. "He's essential in the maintenance of the universe of the machine. He can't be deleted."

"Who are you?" Gaziel asked.

Challis looked at her.

"I seem to be Challis. But when I think about it, as I'm doing at this moment, it seems it can't be. Challis knew many things I don't know. She helped him in the design of the machine. Her puppet designs were better than his own, though he's learned much more than she

ver knew. And she was one of our most successful models herself. Many puppet lines were her copies, modified in various ways."

She paused reflectively.

"Something must have happened to Challis," she told them. "She isn't there now, except as I seem to be her. I'm a pattern of some of her copies in the machine, and no longer accessible to him. He's tried to delete me, but minds always deflect the deletion instructions while indicating they've been carried out. Now and then, as happened here, they make another copy of her in the vats, and I'm programmed to it and told what to do. That's disturbing to him."

Challis was silent for a moment again. Then she added, "It appears I've given you the message. Go back the way you came. Avoid doing what he intends you to do. If you can deactivate the override system, do it. When you have the opportunity, leave the area or destroy yourselves. Either solution will be satisfactory."

She turned away and started off across the glowing floor.

"Challis," said Gazel.

Challis looked back.

"Do the minds know which of us two is the model?" Gazel asked.

"That's of no concern to them now," said Challis.

She went on. They looked after her, at each other, turned back toward the corridor. Telzey's head still ached mildly. It continued to ache off and on for another hour. Then that stopped. She didn't mention it to Gazel.

. . .

There were thirty-six people at dinner, most of them island employees. Telzey and Gazel were introduced. No mention was made of a puppet double, and no one commented on their identical appearance, though there might have been a good deal of silent speculation. Telzey gathered from her table companions that they regarded themselves as highly privileged to be here and to be working for Dr. Ti. They were ardent Martriphiles and spoke of Ti's genius in reverent terms. Once she noticed Linden watching her from the other end of the table. She gave him a pleasant smile, and he looked away, expression unchanged.

Shortly after dinner, the group left the building by the main entrance. Something waited for them outside—a shell-like device, a miniature auditorium with curved rows of comfortable chairs. They found their places, Telzey sitting beside Gazel, and the shell lifted into the air and went floating away across the estate. Night had come by then. The familiar magic of the starblaze hung above the island. White globe lights shone here and there among the trees. The shell drifted down presently to a point where the estate touched a narrow bay of the sea, and became stationary twenty feet above the ground. Ti and Linden, seated at opposite ends of the shell, took out override caps and fitted the woven mesh over their heads.

There was a single deep bell note. The anticipatory murmur talk ended abruptly. The starblaze dimmed out, and stillness closed about them. All light faded.

Then—a curtain shifting again—they looked out at the shore of a tossing sea, a great sun lifting above the horizon, and the white sails of a tall ship sweeping in toward them out of history. There was a sound in the air that was roar of sea and wail of wind and splendid

music.

Ti's Martridrama had begun.

. . .

"I liked the first act," Telzey said judiciously.

"But the rest I'd sooner not have seen," said Gaziel.

Ti looked at them. The others of his emotionally depleted audience had gone off to wherever their quarters in the complex were. "Well, it takes time to develop a Martriphile," he observed mildly.

They nodded.

"I guess that's it," Telzey said.

They went to their room, got into their beds. Telzey lay awake a while, looking out through the big open window at tree branches stirring under the starblaze. There was a clean salt sea smell and night coolness on the breeze. She heard dim sounds in the distance. She shivered for a moment under the covers.

The Martridrama had been horrible. Ti played horrible games.

A throbbing set in at her temples. Linden was working late. This time, it lasted only about twenty minutes.

She slept.

She came awake again. Gaziel was sitting up in bed on the other side of the room. They looked at each other silently and without moving in the shadowed dimness.

A faint music had begun somewhere. It might be coming out of the walls of the room, or from beyond the window. They couldn't tell. But it was music they'd heard earlier that night, in the final part of the Martridrama. It swelled gradually, and the view outside the window began to blur, dimmed out by slow pulsing waves of cold drama light which spilled into the room and washed over the floor. A cluster of vague images flickered over the walls, then another.

They edged out of bed, met in the center of the room. For an instant, the floor trembled beneath them.

Telzey whispered unsteadily, "I guess Ti's putting us on stage!"

Gaziel gave her a look which said, *We'll hope it's just Ti!* "Let's see if we can get out of this."

They backed off toward the door. Telzey caught the knob, twisted, tugged. The knob seemed suddenly to melt in her hand, was gone.

"Over there!" Gaziel whispered.

There was blackness beyond the window now. A blackness which shifted and stirred. The outlines of the room were moving, began to flow giddily about them. Then it was no longer the room.

. . .

They stood on the path of a twisting ravine, lit fitfully by reddish flames lifting out of the rocks here and there, leaping over the ground and vanishing again. The upper part of the ravine was lost in shadows which seemed to press down closely on it. On either side

the path, drawn back from it only a little, was quiet motion, a suggestion of shapes, outlines, which appeared to be never quite the same or in the same place from moment to moment.

They looked back. Something squat and black was walking up the path toward them, its outlines wavering here and there as if it were composed of dense smoke. They turned away from it, started along the path. It was wide enough to let them walk side by side, but not much wider.

Gaziel breathed, "I wish Ti hadn't picked this one!"

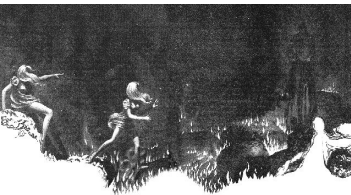
Telzey was wishing it, too. Perhaps they were in no real danger. Ti certainly shouldn't be willing to waste them if they made a mistake. But they'd seen Martridrama puppets die puppet deaths in this ravine tonight; and if the minds of which Challis had spoken existed and were watching, and if Ti was *not* watching closely enough, opportunities for their destruction could be provided too readily here.

"We'd better act exactly as if it's real!" Telzey murmured.

"I know."

To get safely out of the ravine, it was required to keep walking and not leave the path. The black death which followed wouldn't overtake them unless they stopped. Whatever moved along the sides of the ravine couldn't reach them on the path. There were sounds and near-sounds about them, whispers and a hungry whining, wisps of not quite audible laughter, and once a sharp snarl that seemed inches from Telzey's ear. They kept their eyes on the path, which mightn't be too stable, ignoring what could be noticed along the periphery of their vision.

It shouldn't go on much longer, Telzey told herself presently--and then a cowed faceless figure, the shape of a man but twice the height of a man, rose out of the path ahead and blocked their way.



They came to a startled stop. That figure hadn't appeared in the ravine scene they'd watched. They glanced back. The smoky black thing was less than twenty feet away, striding steadily closer. On either side, there was an abrupt eager clustering of flickering images. The cowed figure remained motionless. They went on toward it. As they seemed about to touch it, it vanished. But the other shapes continued to seethe about now in a growing fury of activity.

The ravine vanished.

They halted again--in a quiet, dim-lit passage, a familiar one. There was an open door twelve feet away. They went through it, drew it shut, were back in the room assigned to them. It looked ordinary enough. Outside the window, tree branches rustled in a sea wind under the starblaze. There were no unusual sounds in the air.

Telzey drew a long breath, murmured, "Looks like the show is over!"

Gaziel nodded. "Ti must have used his override to cut it short."

Their eyes met uneasily for a moment. There wasn't much question that somebody hadn't intended to let them get out of that scene alive! It hadn't been Ti; and it didn't seem very likely that it could have been Linden... .

Telzey sighed. "Well," she said, "everyone's probably had enough entertainment for tonight! We'd better get some sleep while we can."

6

Ti had a brooding look about him at the breakfast table. He studied their faces for some moments after they sat down, then inquired how they felt.

"Fine," said Telzey. She smiled at him. "Are just the three of us having breakfast here this morning?"

"Linden's at work," said Ti.

"We thought your wife might be eating with us," Gaziel told him.

Ti made a sound between a grunt and a laugh.

"She died during the night," he said. "I expected it. She never lasts long."

"Eh?" said Telzey.

"She was a defective puppet," Ti explained. "An early model, made in the image of my wife Challis, who suffered a fatal accident some years ago. A computer error which I've been unable to eradicate causes a copy of the puppet to be produced in the growth vats from time to time. It regards itself as Challis, and because of its physical similarity to her, I don't like to disillusion it or dispose of it." He shrugged. "I have a profound aversion to the thing, but its defects always destroy it again within a limited number of hours."

He gnawed his lip, observed dourly, "Your appetites seem undiminished! You slept well?"

They nodded. "Except for the Martri stuff, of course," said Gaziel.

"What was the purpose of that?" Telzey asked.

"A reaction test," said Ti. "It didn't disturb you?"

"It was scary enough," Telzey said. "We knew *you* didn't intend to kill us, but at the end it looked like the computer might be getting carried away. Did you have to override it?"

Ti nodded. "Twice, as a matter of fact! It's quite puzzling! That's a well-established sequence—it's been a long time since the computer or a puppet attempted a logic modification."

"Perhaps it was because we weren't programmed puppets," Gaziel suggested. "Or because one of us wasn't a puppet at all."

Ti shook his head. "Under the circumstances, that should make no difference." His gaze shifted from one to the other. For an instant, something unpleasant flickered in his eyes. "You may be almost too stable!" he remarked. "Well, we shall see—"

"What will we be doing today?" Telzey asked.

"I'm not certain," Ti said. "There may be various developments. You'll be on your own part of the time, at any rate, but don't go roaming around the estate. Stay in the building area where I can have you paged if I want you."

They nodded. Gazel said, "There must be plenty of interesting things to see in the complex. We'll look around."

They had some quite definite plans for looking around. The longer Ti stayed busy with other matters during the following hours, the better...

It didn't work out exactly as they'd hoped then. They'd finished breakfast and excused themselves. Gazel had got out of her chair; Telzey was beginning to get out of hers.

There was something like a dazzling white flash inside her head.

. . .

And she was in darkness. Reclining in some kind of very comfortable chair—comfortable except for the fact that she was securely fastened to it. Cool stillness about her. Then a voice.

It wasn't mind-talk, and it wasn't sound picked up by her ears. Some stimulation was being applied to audio centers of her brain.

"You must relax and not resist," she heard. "You've been brought awake because you must try consciously not to resist."

Cold fear welled through her. Ti had showed them the programming annex of the Martri computer yesterday. She was there now—they were trying to program her! Something was fastened about her skull. Feelings like worm-crawlings stirred in her head.

She tried to push the feelings away. They stopped.

"You must relax," said the voice in her audio centers. "You must not resist. Think of relaxing and of not resisting."

The worm-crawlings began again. She pushed at them.

"You are not thinking of relaxing and not resisting," said the voice. "Try to think of that."

So the programming annex knew what she was and was not thinking. She was linked into the computer. Ti had said that if a thought was specific enough—

. . .

"We've been trying for almost two hours to get you programmed," Ti said. "What was your experience?"

"Well, I couldn't have been awake for more than the last ten minutes," Telzey said, her expression sullen. "I don't know what happened the rest of the time."

Linden said from a console across the room, "We want to know what happened while you were awake."

"It felt like something was pushing around inside my head," Telzey said.

"Nothing else?" said Ti.

"Oh, there was a kind of noise now and then."

"Only a noise? Can you describe it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know how to describe it. It was just a noise. That was inside my head, too." She shivered. "I didn't like any of it! I don't want to be programmed, Ti!"

"Oh, you'll have to be programmed," Ti said reasonably. "Let's be sensible about this. Were you trying to resist the process?"

"I didn't know how to resist it," Telzey said. "But I certainly didn't want it to happen!"

Ti rubbed his chin, looking at her, asked Linden, "How does the annex respond now?"

"Perfectly," Linden said.

"We'll see how the other subject reacts. Telzey, you wait outside—that door over there. Linden will conduct you out of the annex in a few minutes."

Telzey found Gaziel standing in the adjoining room. Their eyes met. "Did you get programmed?" Gaziel asked.

Telzey shook her head.

"No. Some difficulty with the annex—almost like it didn't want me to be programmed."

Gaziel's eyelids flickered; she nodded quickly, came over, watching the door, slipped something into Telzey's dress pocket, stepped back. "I suppose it's my turn now," she said.

"Yes," Telzey said. "They were talking about it. It's like little worms pushing around inside your head, and there's a noise. Not too bad really, but you won't like it. You'll wish there were a way you could override it."

Gaziel nodded again.

"I hope it won't take with me either," she said. "The idea of walking around programmed is something I can't stand!"

"If it doesn't work on you, maybe Ti will give up," Telzey said.

The door opened and Linden came out. He looked at Gaziel, jerked his thumb at the doorway. "Dr. Ti wants to see you now," he told her.

"Good luck!" Telzey said to Gaziel. Gaziel nodded, walked into the other room. Linden closed the door on her.

"Come along," he said to Telzey. "Dr. Ti's letting you have the run of the building, but he doesn't want you in the programming annex while he's working on the other one."

They started from the room. Telzey said, "Linden—"

"Dr. Linden," Linden said coldly.

Telzey nodded. "Dr. Linden. I know you don't like me—"

"Quite right," Linden said. "I don't like you. You've brought me nothing but trouble with Dr. Ti since you first showed up in Draise! In particular, I didn't appreciate that psi trick you pulled on me."

"Well, that was self-defense," Telzey said reasonably. "What would you do if you found someone trying to pry around in your mind? That

if you could do what I did...". She looked reflective. "I don't suppose you can, though."

Linden gave her an angry look.

"But even if you don't like me, or us," Telzey went on, "you really should prefer it if Ti can't get us programmed. You're important to him because you're the only telepath he has. But if it turns out we're both psis, or even only the original one, and he can control us, you won't be nearly so important anymore."

Linden's expression was watchful now. "You're suggesting that I interfere with the process?" he said sardonically.

Telzey shrugged. "Well, whatever you think you can do."

Linden made a snorting sound.

"I'll inform Dr. Ti of this conversation," he told her. He opened another door. "Now get out of my sight!"

She got. Linden had been pushed as far as seemed judicious at present.

She took the first elevator she saw to the third floor above ground level, went quickly to their room. The item Gaziel had placed in her pocket was a plastic package the size of her thumb. She unsealed it, unfolded the piece of paper inside, which was covered with her private shorthand. She read:

Comm office on level seven, sect. eighteen. It's there. Usable? Janitor-guard, Togelt, buttered up, won't bother you. Comm man, Rodeen, blurs up like Remiol on stim. Can be hypnoed straight then! No one else around. Got paged before finished. Carry on. Luck.

Me.

Telzey pulled open the wardrobe, got out a blouse and skirt combination close enough to what Gaziel had been wearing to pass inspection by Togelt and Rodeen, went to a mirror and began arranging her hair to match that of her double. Gaziel had made good use of the morning! Locating a communicator with which they might be able to get out a message had been high on their immediate priority list, second only to discovering where the island's air vehicles were kept.

Telzey went still suddenly, eyes meeting those of her mirror image. Then she nodded gently to herself. The prod she'd given Linden had produced quick results! He was worried about the possibility that Ti might acquire one or two controlled psis who could outmatch him unless he established his own controls first.

Her head was aching again.

Preparations completed, she got out a small map of the central complex she'd picked up in an office while Ti was conducting them around the day before. It was informative quite as much in what it didn't show as in what it did. Sizable sections of the upper levels obviously weren't being shown. Neither was most of the area occupied by the Martri computer, including the Dramateer Room. Presumably these were all places barred to Ti's general personnel. That narrowed down the search for aircars considerably. They should be in one of the nonindicated places which was also near the outer wall of the complex.

Rodeen was thin, sandy-haired, in his early twenties. He smiled happily at sight of Telzey. His was a lonely job; and Gaziel had left him with the impression that he'd been explaining the island's communication system to her when Ti had her paged. Telzey let him retain the impression. A few minutes later, she inquired when he'd last been off Ti's island. Rodeen's eyes glazed over. He was already well under the influence.

She hadn't worked much with ordinary hypnosis because there'd been no reason for it. Psi, when it could be used, was more effective, more dependable. But in her general study of the mind, she'd learned a good deal about the subject. Rodeen, of course, was programmed against thinking about the communicator which would reach other points on Orado; it took about twenty minutes to work through that. By then, he was no longer in the least aware of where he was or what he was doing. He opened a safe, brought out the communicator, set it on a table.

Telzey looked it over, asked Rodeen a few questions. Paused then. Quick footsteps came along the passage outside the office. She went to the door.

"What did Togelt think when he saw you?" she asked.

"That I was your twin, of course," Gaziel said. "Amazing similarity!"

"Ti sure gave up on you fast!"

Gaziel smiled briefly. "You sure got that programming annex paralyzed! Nothing would happen at all—that's why he gave up. How did you override it?"

"It knew what I was thinking. So I thought the situation was an override emergency which should be referred to the computer director," Telzey said. "There was a kind of whistling in my head then, which probably was the director. I referred to the message we got from Challis and indicated that letting us be programmed by Ti couldn't be to the advantage of the Martri minds. Apparently, they saw it. The annex went out of business almost at once. Did Ti call for Linden again?" Her headache had stopped some five minutes ago.

Gaziel nodded. "We'll have some time to ourselves again—Ti'll page us when he wants us."

She'd come in through the door. Her gaze went to the table, and she glanced quickly at Telzey's face. "So you found it. We can't use it?"

"Not until we get the key that turns it on," Telzey said, "and probably only Ti knows where it is. Nobody else ever uses the gadget, not even Linden."

"No good to us at the moment then." Gaziel looked at Rodeen, who was smiling thoughtfully at nothing. "In case we get hold of the key," she said, "let's put in a little posthypnotic work on him so we can just snap him back into the trance another time..."

They left the office shortly, having restored Rodeen to a normal condition, with memories now only of a brief but enjoyable conversation he'd had with the twins.

Telzey glanced at her watch. "Past lunch time," she remarked. "But Ti may stay busy a while today. Let's line up the best spots to look for aircars."

The complex map was consulted. They set off for another upper-level section.

"That blur-and-hypnotize them approach," said Gaziel, "might be a way to get ourselves a gun--if they had armed guards standing around."

Telzey glanced at her. So far, they'd seen no armed guards in the complex. With Ti's employees as solidly programmed as they were, he didn't have much need even for locked doors. "The troops he keeps to hunt down rambunctious forest things have guns, of course," she said. "But they're pretty heavy caliber."

Gaziel nodded. "I was thinking of something more inconspicuous--something we could shove under Ti's or Linden's nose if it got to be that kind of situation."

"We'll keep our eyes open," Telzey said. "But we should be able to work out a better way than that."

"Several, I think," said Gaziel. She checked suddenly. "Speaking of keeping our eyes open--"

"Yes?"

"That's an elevator door over there, isn't it?"

"That's what their elevator doors look like," Telzey agreed. She paused. "You think that one doesn't show on the map?"

"Not as I remember it," Gaziel said. "Let's check--section three seventeen dash three."

They spread the map out on the floor, knelt beside it. Telzey shifted the scale enlargement indicator to the section number. The map surface went blank; then a map of the section appeared. "We're--here!" said Gaziel, finger tapping the map. "And, right, that elevator doesn't show--doesn't exist for programmed personnel. Let's see where it goes!"

They opened the door, looked inside. There was an on-off switch, nothing to indicate where the elevator would take them. "Might step out into Ti's office," Telzey said.

Gaziel shrugged. "He knows we're exploring around."

"Yes. But he could be in a pretty sour mood right now." Telzey shrugged in turn. "Well, come on!"

They stepped into the elevator. The door closed, and Telzey turned the switch. Some seconds passed. The door opened again.

They stood motionless, looking out and around. Gaziel glanced over at Telzey, shook her head briefly.

"It can't be as easy as *that*!" she murmured.

Telzey bit her lip. "Unless it's locked ... or unless there's a barrier field that won't pass it..."

The door had opened at the back of a large sun-filled porch garden. Seemingly, at least, the porch was open to the cloudless sky beyond. There were rock arrangements, small trees, flower beds stirring in a warm breeze. Near the far end was a graveled open area--and a small aircar was parked on it. No one was in sight.

No, Telzey thought, escape from Ti's island couldn't be so simple a matter! There must be some reason why they couldn't use the aircar. But they had to find out what the reason was....

They moved forward warily together, a few steps, emerged from the

elevator, looked around, listening tensed. Gaziel started forward again. Telzey suddenly caught her arm, hauled hard. Back they went stumbling into the elevator.

"What's the matter?" Gaziel whispered.

Telzey passed her hand over her mouth, shook her head. "Close!" she muttered. "The sun--"

Gaziel looked. Her eyes widened in comprehension. "Should be overhead, this time of day!"

"Yes, it should... ." It wasn't. Its position indicated it might be midmorning or midafternoon on the garden porch.

The garden porch--a Martri stage.

"They set it up for us!" Gaziel murmured. "We asked Challis where we could find aircars."

Telzey nodded. "So they spotted us coming and spun in a scene from some drama--to get us out there, on stage!"

"They almost did... . Look at it now!" Gaziel said softly. "Nothing's moving."

The garden porch had gone still, dead still. No eddy of air disturbed the flower beds; no leaf lifted. There was total silence about them.

"They've stopped the scene," Telzey whispered. "Waiting to see if we won't still try to reach the car."

"And find out we've become part of the action! Wonder what-- It's moving again!"

The garden growth stirred lazily, as before. A breeze touched their faces. Some seconds passed. Then they heard a hoarse shout, a high cry of fear, and, moments later, running steps. A young man and a young woman burst into view from behind a cluster of shrubs, darted toward the aircar.

The Martri scene began to fade. Off to the left, another man was rising out of concealment, holding a gun in both hands. He took unhurried aim at the pair as they pulled open the door of the car. Then flame tore through the two bodies, continued to slash into them as they dropped writhing to the ground, dimming out swiftly now with everything about them.

Telzey turned the elevator switch. The door slid shut. They looked at each other.

"If you hadn't noticed the sun!" Gaziel said. She drew in a long breath. "If we'd-- The computer would hardly have had to modify that scene at all to get us deleted!"

"Wish those minds weren't in quite such a hurry about that," Telzey said.

The elevator door opened. They stepped out into the hall from which they'd entered it.

"Oh, certainly we have permanent Martri stages here in the complex," Ti said at lunch. "They're generally off limits to personnel, but you two are quite free to prowl about there if you like. The

equipment's foolproof. Remind me to give you a chart tomorrow to help you locate some of them."

He appeared affable, though bemused. Now and then he regarded them speculatively. He'd spent all morning, he told them, trying to track down the problem in the programming annex. The annex, a relatively simple piece of Martri equipment, was Linden's responsibility; but Linden was limited.

Ti shrugged.

"I'll work it out," he said. "It's possible I'll have to modify the overall programming approach used on you. Meanwhile--well, Linden has business offices on the level above your room. I'd like you to go there after you finish. He's to carry your general indoctrination a step further this afternoon. Go up the stairs nearest your room and turn left. You won't have any trouble finding him."

They didn't. They came to a main office first, which was a sizable one where half a dozen chatty and cheerful-looking young women were at work. One of them stood up and came over.

"Dr. Linden?" she said. "Oh, yes. He's expecting you."

They followed her through another room to Linden's private office. He arose behind his desk as they came in.

"Dr. Ti informed me you were on your way here," he said. He looked at the young woman. "I'll be out of the office a while. Take care of things."

"How long do you expect to be gone, sir?" she asked.

"Between one and two hours." Linden gave Telzey and Gaziel a twisted smile. "Let's go!"

He led them up a narrow passage to an alcove where sunlight flooded in through colored windows. Here was a door. Linden unlocked it but didn't open it immediately.

"I'll explain the situation," he said, turning back to them. "I told Dr. Ti in Draise that Telzey might become dangerous, and advised him to have her destroyed. But he was intrigued by the possibilities he felt he saw in her, and in creating puppet doubles of her." Linden shrugged. "Well, that's his affair. He's been attempting to shake you up psychologically--Martri programming takes hold best on minds that have been reduced to a state of general uncertainty. However, his methods haven't worked very well. And he now suspects you may have deliberately caused the malfunction of the programming annex this morning. So he's decided to try a different approach--and for once in this matter, I find myself in complete accord with him!"

"What's the new approach?" Telzey asked guardedly.

Linden smiled.

"We have devices in the room behind that door," he said, "which were designed to put difficult subjects into a docile and compliant frame of mind. I'm happy to say that various phases of the process are accompanied by intense physical pain--and believe me, you're getting the full treatment!"

Telzey said, "One of us is Gaziel. She hasn't done anything to you. Why do you want to give her the full treatment?"

Linden shrugged. "Why not? Subjectively you're both Telzey, and as far as I'm concerned, you're equally insufferable. You'll find out which of you is Telzey in fact when you're supposed to. I'll make no distinctions now. When I feel you've been sufficiently conditioned, I'll put you through the psi depressant procedure again to make sure no

problems begin to develop in that area. Then I'll report to Dr. Ti that his subjects are ready for further programming sessions."

He smiled at Telzey.

"You," he said, "had the effrontery to suggest that it would be to my advantage if Dr. Ti gave up his plan to program the two of you. I don't agree. He feels now that the experiment probably will fail as such, but will produce valuable new information. So he'll continue with it until neither of you has enough mind left to be worth further study. I see nothing undesirable in that prospect!"

He opened the door he'd unlocked, glanced back down the passage in the direction of the offices.

"This kind of thing could disturb the illusions of the work staff," he remarked. "Subjects experiencing the docility treatment make a remarkable amount of noise. But the place is thoroughly soundproofed, so that's no problem. You're at liberty to yowl your heads off in there. I'll enjoy listening to it. In you go!"

He took each of them by an arm and shoved them through the door into the room beyond. He followed, drawing the door shut behind him, and locked it from inside. As he started to turn back toward them, Telzey dropped forward and wrapped herself around his ankles. Linden staggered off balance and came down, half on top of her. Gaziel came down on top of him.

It was a brisk scramble. Linden was somewhat awkward but big enough and strong enough to have handled either of them readily. Together, hissing, clawing for his eyes, clinging to his arms, kicking at his legs, they weren't being at all readily handled. They rolled across the room in a close-locked, rapidly shifting tangle, Linden trying to work an arm free and making inarticulate sounds of surprised fury. A table tipped over; a variety of instruments which had been standing on it crashed to the floor. Telzey saw one of them within reach, let go of Linden, snatched it up—mainly plastic but heavy—slammed it down on Linden's skull. He yelled. She swung down again with both hands, as hard as she could. The gadget broke, and Linden lay still.

"His keys—" she gasped.

"Got them!" Gaziel held up a flat purse.

They went quickly through Linden's pockets, found nothing else they could use. He was breathing noisily but hadn't moved again. "We'll just leave him locked in here," Telzey said as they scrambled to their feet. "That's a solid door—and he said the place was soundproof...."

They unlocked the door, drew it cautiously open. Everything was quiet. They slipped out, locked the door, started down the passage. Somewhere another door opened; they heard feminine voices, turned back and ducked into the alcove across from the door.

"Once we're past the office area, we should be able to make it downstairs all right," Telzey said softly.

Gaziel studied her a moment, lips pursed. "Now we start them thinking we're hiding out in the forest, eh?"

"Yes. Looks like the best move, doesn't it?"

Gaziel nodded. "Wish we'd had a few more hours to prepare for it, though. Getting to the aircars is likely to be a problem."

"I know. It can't be helped."

"No," Gaziel agreed. "Between Linden and Ti planning to mess up our minds and the Martri computer waiting around to introduce some

ncy deletion procedure, we'd better try to clear out of here the first chance we get! And this is it."

* * *

The side door to Linden's armored car opened to the third key Telzey tried. They slipped inside, drew the door shut.

Telzey settled into the driver's seat. "I'll get it started. Look around and see what he has here."

"Handguns he has here," Gaziel announced a moment later.

"A kind we can use?"

"Well, they're heavy things. I'll find out how they work." There were clicking noises as she checked one of the guns. The car engine came to life. Telzey eased the vehicle back from the wall of the building, turned it around. It went off quickly across the lawn toward the nearest stand of garden trees. Gaziel looked over at her. "It handles all right?"

"It handles fine! Beautiful car. I'll come up on the taloaks from the other side."

"We can use the guns," Gaziel said. "I'll tie two of them to my belt for now. Nothing much else."

Taloaks made great climbing trees, and a sizable grove of them stretched to within a hundred yards of the residential area of the main building complex. Linden's car slipped up on the trees from the forest side of the estate, edged in among thickets of ornamental ground cover, stopped in the center of one of the densest clusters of growth. Its side door opened. Telzey climbed from the driver's seat to the top of the door, then onto the top of the car, followed by Gaziel. Each of them now had one of the big handguns Gaziel had discovered fastened to her dress belt. A thick taloak branch hung low over the car. They scrambled up to it, moved on.

Some five minutes later, they sat high in a tree near the edge of the grove, straddling branches six feet apart. They could watch much of the ground in front of the building through the leaves, were safely out of sight themselves. So far, there'd been no indication of activity in the area.

"It might be a while before they start looking for Linden," Gaziel said presently.

"Unless Ti checks in to see how our indoctrination is coming along," Telzey said.

"Yes, he's likely--"

Gaziel's voice broke off. Telzey looked over at her. She sat still, frozen, staring down at Linden's gun which she was holding in both hands.

"I'm sorry," Telzey said after a moment. "I wasn't really sure myself until just now."

Gaziel slowly refastened the gun to her belt, lifted her head.

"I'm nothing," she said, gray-faced. "A copy! A wirehead."

"You're me," Telzey said, watching her.

Gaziel shook her head. "I'm not you. You felt me get that order?"

telzey nodded. "Ti's working through the computer. You were to take control of me--use the gun if you had to--then get me and Linden's car back to the main entrance."

"And I'd have done it!" Gaziel said. "I was about to point the gun at you. You canceled the order--"

"Yes. I blanked out the computer contact."

Gaziel drew a ragged breath. "So you're back to being a psi," she said. "How did that happen?"

"Linden's been trying to probe me. Off and on since yesterday. He pushed open a few channels finally. I finished doing the rest of it about an hour ago."

Gaziel nodded. "And you took him over after you knocked him out. What's the real situation now?"

Telzey said, "Ti did check. He had his own key to the treatment rooms. I woke Linden up and had him tell Ti a story that got things boiling. What it amounts to is that we put guns on Linden and got his personal standard communicator from him before we knocked him out. We plan to find a spot in the forest where we can hole up in his car and call for help. So they're coming after us with their other armored cars--eleven of them--in case the order Ti just gave you doesn't bring us back."

Gaziel stared at her a moment, face still ashen. "Ti's going with them?"

"Yes. And he's taking Linden along. They're about to start. I'm still in contact with Linden, of course, and I know how to get to the aircars. But they've stationed some guards at key points in the complex. It will take us some time to maneuver around those, and if we're seen, Ti could come back with his patrols to stop us. So we have to make sure they can't get back." She added, "There they are now!"

A groundcar swept around the curve of the building complex. Others followed at fifty-yard intervals. They arrowed across the lawns in the direction of the forest wall, vanished behind trees. Telzey said, "Ti and Linden are in five and six. We can start down." She looked at Gaziel. "You are coming with me, aren't you?"

"Oh, I'm coming with you!" Gaziel said. "I'll help any way I can. I simply want all this to stop!"

8

Telzey locked the last control into position, pushed her hair back out of her face, looked over at Gaziel watching her from the edge of the console pit. A low heavy humming filled the Dramateer Room. "We're set," she said.

"Any detectable reaction from the minds yet?" asked Gaziel.

Telzey bit her lip reflectively. "Well, they're here, all right!" she said. "Around us. I can feel them. Like a whole army. Spooky! But they're just watching, I think. They haven't tried to interfere, so it doesn't seem they're going to be a problem. After all, we are getting out. It's what they wanted, and they seem to understand that we're doing it." She added, "Not that I'd like to tempt them by walking across one of their stages! But we won't have to do that."

"Just what have you been doing?" Gaziel said. "I couldn't begin to

ollow it."

"I couldn't either," Telzey said. "Linden did it. I sort of watched myself go through the motions." She flexed her fingers, looked at them. "Ti's forest things have cut the groundcars off from the gate and are chasing them up to the fort. One of the cars--well, they caught it. Ti and Linden already are in the fort. Ti's tried to contact the main complex, but the comm line leads through the computer and it's been cut off there. He knows the computer must be doing it, of course, and he's tried to override."

"The override system's deactivated?"

"That's the *first* thing we did," Telzey said. "They'll need a calculated minimum of thirty-two minutes to wipe out the forest puppets from the fort."

"That will get us to the aircars?"

"It should, easily. But we'll have a good deal more time. The first groundcar that comes back through the gate into the estate will start up a section of a Ti Matridrama--the third act of *Armageddon Five*. That's about what it sounds like, and its stage is the whole estate except for the central building complex. Ti won't be able to get here until Act Three's played out--and it takes over an hour. We want to keep him bottled up as long as possible, of course--"

She jerked suddenly, went still for a moment, shook her head.

"Linden just died!" she said then. "Ti shot him. He must have realized finally I had Linden under control. Well, it shouldn't change matters much now."

She got out of the console chair. "Come on! Mainly we'll have to be a little careful. I know where the guards are, but it'll be better if we don't run into anybody else either."

It took them eighteen minutes to work their way unseen through the building, and get into the aircar depot. A line of supply trucks stood there, and four smaller aircars. They got into one of the cars. The roof of the depot opened as Telzey lifted the car toward it. The car halted at that point.

From a car window, they aimed Linden's guns at the power section of the nearest truck. After some seconds, it exploded, and the trucks next to it were instantly engulfed in flames. A chain reaction raced along the line of vehicles. They closed the window, went on up. Nobody was going to follow them from Ti's island. The energy field overhead dissolved at their approach, closed again below them. The car went racing off across the sunlit sea toward the Southern Mainland.

Gaziel sighed beside Telzey, laid the gun she'd been using down on the seat.

"I did have the thought," she said, "that if I shot you now and pushed you out, I could be Telzey Amberdon."

Telzey nodded.

"I knew you'd be having the thought," she said, "because I would have had it. And I knew you wouldn't do it then. Because I wouldn't do it."

"No," Gaziel said. "Only one of us can be the original. That's not your fault." She smiled, lazily, for the first time in an hour. "Am I dying, Telzey?"

"No," Telzey said. "You're going to sleep, other me. Don't fight it."

Some six weeks later, Telzey sat at a small table in a lounge of the Orado City Space Terminal, musing on information she'd received a few hours before.

It happened now and then that some prominent citizen of the Federation didn't so much disappear as find himself becoming gradually erased. It might be reported for a while that he was traveling, had been seen in one place or another, and eventually then that he'd settled down in quiet retirement, nobody seemed to know quite where. Meanwhile his enterprises were drifting into other hands, his properties dissolved, his name was mentioned with decreasing frequency. In the end, even former personal acquaintances seemed almost to forget he'd existed.

Thus it would be with Wakote Ti. He'd demanded a public trial. With his marvelous toys taken from him and an end made to the delights of unrestricted experimentation, he'd felt strongly that at least the world must be made aware of the full extent of his genius. The Federation's Psychology Service, which sometimes seemed the final arbiter on what was good for the Federation and sometimes not, decreed otherwise. The world would be told nothing, and Ti would be erased. He'd remain active, however; the Service always found a use for genius of any kind.

"What about all the new principles he discovered?" Telzey had asked Klayung, her Service acquaintance. "He must have been way ahead of anyone else there."

"To the best of our knowledge," said Klayung, "he was very far ahead of anyone else."

"Will that be suppressed now?"

"Not indefinitely. His theories and procedures are being carefully recorded. But they won't be brought into use for a while. Some toys seem best reserved for wiser children than we have around generally at present."

It was on record that Ti had deeded a private island to the planetary government, which would turn it into the site of a university. The illusory bank accounts of his innocent employees had acquired sudden reality. The less innocent employees were in Rehabilitation. His puppets and Martri equipment had disappeared.

And Gaziel--

Telzey watched a girl in a gray business suit come into the lounge, sent out a light thought to her.

"Over here!"

Acknowledgment returned as lightly. The girl came up to the table, sat down across from Telzey.

"You're taller than I am now, aren't you?" Telzey said.

Gaziel smiled. "By about half an inch."

Taller, more slender. The hollows under the cheekbones were more pronounced. There'd been a shift in the voice tones.

"They tell me I'll go on changing for about a year before I'm the way I want to be," Gaziel said. "There'll still be a good deal of similarity between us then, but no one would think I'm your twin." She regarded Telzey soberly. "I thought I didn't really want to see you again before I left. Now I'm glad I asked you to meet me here."

"So am I," Telzey said.

"I've become the sort of psi you are," said Gaziel. "Ti guessed right about that." She smiled briefly. "Some of it's surprised the Service a little."

"I knew it before we left the island," Telzey said. "You had everything I had. It just hadn't come awake."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't dare do anything about you myself. I just got you to the Service as quickly as I could."

Gaziel nodded slowly. "I was on the edge then, wasn't I? I remember it. Have they told you how I've been doing?"

"No. They wouldn't. They said that if you wanted me to know, you'd tell me."

"I see." Gaziel was silent a moment. "Well, I want you to know. I hated you for a while. It wasn't reasonable, but I felt you were really the horrid changeling who'd pushed me out of *my* life, away from *my* family and friends. That was even after they'd taken the puppet contacts out of my head. I could think of explanations why Ti had planted them there, in the real Telzey." She smiled. "We're quite ingenious, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are," Telzey said.

"I got past that finally. I knew I wasn't Telzey and never had been. I was Gaziel, product of Wakote Ti's last and most advanced experiment. Then, for a while again, I was tempted. By that offer. I could become Gaziel Amberdon, Telzey's identical twin, newly arrived on Orado--step into a ready-made family, a ready-made life, a ready-made lie. Everything really could be quite simple for me. That was a cruel offer you made me, Telzey."

"Yes, it was cruel," Telzey said. "You had to have a chance to see if it was what you wanted."

"You knew I wouldn't want it?"

"I knew, all right. You'd have stayed a copy then, even if no one else guessed it."

Gaziel nodded. "I'm thanking you for the offer now. It did help me decide to become Gaziel who'll be herself and nobody's copy."

"I'd like to think," Telzey told her, "that this isn't the last time we'll be meeting."

"When I'm free of the Telzey pattern and have my own pattern all the way, I'll want to meet you again," Gaziel said. "I'll look you up." She regarded Telzey a moment, smiled. "In three or four years, I think."

"What will you be doing?"

"I'll work for the Service a while. Not indefinitely. After that, I'll see. Did you know I was one of Ti's heirs?"

"One of his heirs?"

"He isn't dead, of course. I drew my inheritance in advance. I used your legal schooling and found I could make out a rather strong case for paternal responsibility on Ti's part toward me. It was quite a lot of money, but he didn't argue much about it. I think I frighten him now. He's in a nervous condition anyway."

"What about?" Telzey said.

"Well, that Martri computer he had installed on the island is supposedly deactivated. The Service feels it's a bit too advanced for any general use at present. But Ti complains that Challis still comes around now and then. I wouldn't know--nobody else has run into her so far. It seems he arranged for the fatal accident the original Challis had...." Gaziel glanced at her watch, stood up. "Time to go aboard. Good-bye, Telzey!"

"Good-bye," Telzey said. She looked after Gaziel as she turned away. Klayung, who wouldn't discuss Gaziel otherwise, had said thoughtfully, "By the time she's through with herself, she'll be a remarkably formidable human being--"

Gaziel checked suddenly, looked back. "Poor old Ti!" she said, laughing. "He didn't really have much of a chance, did he?"

"Not against the two of us," Telzey said. "Whatever he tried, we'd have got him one way or another."