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Book Description:

The Rites of Ohe

by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Karmesin

He spoke with the voice of history from the vantage point of a thousand-year life span.

Merry Duner

With the destiny of planets at stake, she cared only for the man she loved.

Dombeno

A politician with a taste for power, he was jealous of Karmesin's supreme authority.

Snow

This courteous, golden-skinned alien gave his life in trying to hide the deadly secret of his people.

Remlong

Obviously, he was ashamed of not being an Ohean, and it had a dreadful effect on his objectivity.

Rex Quant

An idea he had—which even he never took seriously — condemned him to a terrible fate.

I

It seemed like a miracle to Merry when the immortal came into the foyer of the vast hotel. So far, her desperate venture had been ill-starred. She had staked everything on it, her financial resources as well as her hopes, and yet for all her planning, things had been going wrong.

For instance, thinking to make herself inconspicuous, she had dressed in a dark blouse drawn modestly over her bosom and dark leotards, and had put on no eye-catching jewelry. She had realized that was a mistake the moment she walked with studied casualness into the foyer. Of the hundred-odd people—and near-people—standing or lounging around the enormous hall, stationary or riding the flo-ways, she was by far the most noticeable. Peacock-gaudy, men in shimmersynth suits turned their tiaraed heads towards her; women wearing ropes of diamonds and strategically placed paint tried not to look calculatingly towards her when it occurred to them to wonder whether they too should break out from the bonds of fashion.

Clutching her purse, alarmed to realize that at any moment the service

supervisor in his bubble overhead might decide to assign her an inquiry robot, Merry was on the point of postponing her investigation when there was a commotion at the main door.

The word passed, like a breeze over a grassy plain. Merry caught it being whispered a few feet away from her.

"One of the immortals is here! He's coming in!"

Instantly, there was surge towards the door. It encountered another surge coming the opposite way as the bowing and scraping human staff, at least twenty service robots, and a string of floating camera-bubbles accompanied the immortal into the foyer.

Merry had one glimpse of him before the crowd closed in: a man of middle height and build, wearing an old-fashioned thermostatic suit of a subdued neutral shade, whose hair was quite white and whose eyes were unusually large and bright in his very pale face. But this commotion was her opportunity; she didn't wait a moment longer.

Trying not to hurry too much, she stepped on the flo-way leading out of the main foyer towards the older, and cheaper, wing of the hotel.

The flo-way reached its destination. It was surface-activated: only the topmost layer of three or four molecules' thickness flowed forward. At the end of its run, the surface layer interpenetrated with an immobile layer directly below, and brought her to a halt facing a range of old-styled elevators—physical capsules sliding in vertical shafts. In the new main wing of the hotel there were the very latest nulgee tubes.

Steadily, Merry moved to the elevator she was looking for. It gave access to the viewroof as well as the intermediate floors, and consequently was not privilege-locked to residents only. On her approach, its doors slid apart, and the smiling mask of an immobile service robot, there was little wasted on frills in this wing of the building, inquired her destination.

"Viewroof," she said. She had to lie. If she gave a room number, the robot would verify in milliseconds that she was not the occupant, and would put in a call to find out if she was an invited or approved guest. (Merry had considered posing as a hired girl, but the hotel had its own arrangements, and she had been compelled to come in as a mere sight-seer.)

"Please enter," the robot said. She complied, and the doors closed.

The moment she felt the capsule move, Merry went into frantic action. She opened her purse and drew out the first of the costly devices concealed in it. This was a simple field-disruptor, to put the robot out of action.

She thumbed the switch to maximum and swept the beam over the robot's figure. According to her informant, it was possible to put its courtesy and information circuits out of order without immobilizing the entire lift mechanism of the capsule. He might have been wrong. Merry's heart was in her mouth for an eternal moment. Then she saw that the robot's face had gone as slack as an unconscious man's, and she heard the capsule still streaking upwards.

Keeping the field-disruptor leveled at the robot, she stabbed with one finger of her other hand at the stop button on the capsule wall. Her information was that no one had bothered to disconnect these anachronistic override circuits; yet, the statement might be untrue.

It wasn't.

Merry was too cynical to believe in luck, but since the fortunate intrusion of the immortal into the foyer she was inclined to change her mind. Purse swinging from her arm, she peered to see which was the selector button for the eightieth floor.

There wasn't one.

For a terrible second she panicked and almost let the beam of the field-disruptor wander from the robot's body; then she caught on. You had to press the 8 and the 0 simultaneously to get floor 80. Her hand was just large enough for finger and thumb to reach the two buttons; if she had wanted floor 90, she couldn't have made it. Her hands, like the rest of her, were on a miniature scale, exquisite, but tiny.

The capsule had already passed floor 80. She felt it pause, hesitate almost, and again knew raw terror before the mechanism responded. The direction of travel reversed for a few heart beats, and then the elevator stopped.

The door didn't open.

Was it interlocked with the robot's internal circuitry? No. She saw with relief that the manual overrides were complete and included a button labeled: OPERATE DOORS. It occurred to her that these elevators must be three or four centuries old; she had never seen such elaborate manual controls before.

She got the doors open. Cautiously, ready to drop her field-disruptor back in her purse the instant she was in the corridor, she backed away from the robot.

Its face returned to normality. It looked almost puzzled for an instant, and then the doors closed. What it would do when it discovered that its information—passenger in capsule en route to viewroof—was false, Merry had no idea. She didn't much care.

There was nobody in the corridor. It was hardly surprising. The older, cheaper wing of the hotel would be used by people who came to Aryx with definite business in mind; those vacationing or at leisure would pay for the greater luxury of the modern side.

Were the doors numbered? That was the next question. They were, luckily. Each bore a four-figure group in luminous plastic; rooms vacant were shown by the numbers being dull, rooms assigned were shown by a pale pink glow, and rooms at present occupied by their residents were shown by a bright red glow. 8010, the room she was going into, was unassigned.

More luck! She was prepared to go ahead, even if it was both assigned and occupied, but at least she wouldn't have to overpower anybody. She slid her gun to the bottom of her purse and took out a lock-pick which she clamped to the door.

The seller had claimed it would cope easily with any lock more than a decade old. She had tried it out surreptitiously. It worked fine. But there was always the risk that new locks had been fitted...

The door opened. Breathing rapidly, Merry slipped through.

The room was small, with old-fashioned furnishings. There was a thermostatic bed, but it had no nulgee unit. There was an ordinary voice-operated room-service commander, not one of the new person-keyed follow-you bubbles. So that was all right. There was a sensiset, of course, a

euphoricon, and the usual trappings. Merry took them in at a glance and then forgot them. She was in too great a hurry to examine the room more closely.

Now, the last crucial item from her purse. She lifted it out gingerly, hoping it hadn't been knocked or damaged in any way. She looked around for a place to set it up. The bed—that would do?

She moved with practised deftness. First, the wide-angle coarse-focus scanner. Then the fine-focus scanner. Then the analyzer. She spun connections between them from a canister of liquid conductor.

Power. In an unoccupied room, the power source was probably disconnected; anyway, she hadn't been able to find out whether the hotel monitored the outlets for wasted current. She attached the fuel cell she had brought, and set it to maximum output.

And now—the basic datum. She felt inside the neck of her blouse for her treasured locket. Supposedly, it was of Earth-side origin; at any rate, Rex had said when giving it to her, you'd have to go back a long way to find anyone sentimental enough to make such things. He'd grinned. But Merry had found the idea of a locket rather charming, and had insisted, that he do the job properly—which was why the locket contained a plaited twist of Rex's hair.

With trembling fingers she put the hair into the field of the fine-focus scanner.

Now she had to wait. Anything up to ten minutes, the seller had told her. And this was going to be the longest and toughest wait of her life.

She hardly dared take her eyes from the small, neat device she had erected on the bed. It was humming faintly; it was old and much-used, and there was a little slack in the analyzer. But the odds against a false reading were still in the thousand-to-one region, and Merry would be satisfied with that.

Was there a flicker from the pilot light? Merry started forward and craned closer to the machine. And the moment she did so, the door of the room slid open.

Merry cried out and whirled to face the intruders. They were both

human. The woman, she didn't recognize; she had an air of authority which suggested she might be a senior member of the hotel staff. And that fitted. Because her unmistakable companion was the immortal with the pale face and white hair whom she had glimpsed some minutes ago on his arrival in the foyer.

II

The woman blanched visibly on seeing Merry. She lost her self-control only for a moment, however, and then barked in a voice like a Sirian smew:

"What are you doing in here? What's the meaning of this? By the stars, I know you! You're that woman who made false allegations against—"

She broke off, turning to her companion. "Immortal Karmesin!" she exclaimed in a contrasting tone of abject apology. "I don't know how to excuse this extraordinary happening! I'll call a service robot and the lawforce as well, and possibly you may reconsider your decision to reside in this wing of the hotel in view of the impeccable security arrangements we have in the—"

A flicker of interest had come into Immortal Karmesin's impassive face as his eyes roved first over Merry and then over the device she had set up on the bed.

"I told you, Mistress Gamal," he broke in wearily, "I'm a man of somewhat old-fashioned tastes. Why you should find that extraordinary in view of my age, I don't understand. I don't want to stay in a modern room with a damned room-service commander floating over my head all the time like an aura. I want comfort, peace and quiet. If you press me one more time to move into the new wing I'll move—to another hotel. Clear?"

Abashed, the woman swallowed hard.

"As for your question to this girl," Karmesin continued, moving forward with a meditative expression, "it seems about as ridiculous as everything else I've heard from you so far. What she is doing is perfectly clear; she's operating a person-spoor analyzer. All I'd like to be told is what the significance may be of the positive reading she's just had from it."

Merry jerked her head around. Sure enough, in the minute or so that had passed since Karmesin's entrance, the analyzer had finished its work of digestion and there was a red light showing on the top of its case.

"He *was* here!" she said fiercely.

"Immortal Karmesin!" Mistress Gamal cried in alarm. "Don't listen to her. She's subject to some kind of delusion, and for months she's been pestering the hotel with false allegations!"

"That's not true!" Merry blazed. "What I said was right. I've just proved it! You said you were going to get the law-force. Well, go ahead and do it! I want them here, as soon as possible, so I can prove my charges!"

"I'll call a service robot," Mistress Gamal said, turning to the door. "And a psychiatrist. Obviously she needs his attention more than the law's."

"You will do nothing of the kind," Karmesin said in a voice of such authority that it was inconceivable to disobey him. "You will shut the door and wait inside it."

Mistress Gamal gulped air like a stranded fish, and tried to formulate an objection. But since Karmesin's attention was no longer on her, she simply did as she was told.

"Now, child," Karmesin said, turning his rather skeletal smile on Merry. At once he caught himself. "Forgive me. I tend to call everyone child from the vantage point of a thousand years. Sit down, compose yourself, and tell me what you think you've discovered."

Feeling a little faint—not only from the double shock of being caught here and finding that her suspicions were correct, but also from the casual reference Karmesin had made to his thousand-year lifespan—Merry took a chair and put her hands together in her lap to stop their shaking.

"There's a bit of hair under the fine-focus scanner of the machine," she said. "It belongs to a man called Rex Quant. He's from Gyges. He's a psychosocial historian. I first met him about two years ago, when he was here on a contract. We—uh—we fell in love."

Karmesin cocked one pale eyebrow. "An interesting atavism," he said

without malice. "Very much committed to his work, was he?"

"Yes, he *is*." Merry stressed the present tense. "Well, when his contract was up he went home, but he promised to come back and see me again, and to try and get me a post with him so we could spend at least a few years together. And he did come back. I've just proved that he did."

"Immortal Karmesin!" exclaimed Mistress Gamal, who had recovered her composure completely. "This story has been—"

"Quiet," Karmesin said, and added to Merry in an encouraging tone, "Go on, child."

"I had a message from him a couple of months ago—I think it arrived on the third of Midspring. It said he'd got a Contract at a fee higher than he had dreamed, and was not only going to be able to take me to Gyges but could come and collect me personally in a week's time, and on top of that he could finally afford to stay in the Mira Hotel—this one. It had been a sort of joke between us, you see; we'd spent what seemed to us at the time a tremendous amount of money on coming to dine in the gardens on the viewroof just before he went away, and we'd wondered whether we would ever be rich enough actually to stay the night here.

"So I came here and asked for him, and I was told he wasn't here, he'd never been here, and they had no idea where he was. He'd told me his room number, you see—it had been reserved in advance from Gyges by the spaceline he was travelling on—and I kicked up a terrific row until I was finally shown this room, and I was allowed to punch the keys of the registration memory myself..." Her voice was growing unsteady. "Nothing! Nothing at all! But I was *sure* he'd kept his word, I was *sure* he'd have let me know if anything went wrong. I checked with the spaceport, and sure enough he'd arrived earlier the same day and the last record they had of him was when he took the Mira Hotel tube way.

"Why didn't you meet him at the spaceport?"

"I wish I had," Merry said tonelessly. "But I live out at Stonewall—"

"Where's that?"

"I'm sorry. It's about four hundred miles from Aryx, an island in the Sambhal Sea. And the spaceport is more than a hundred miles beyond

Aryx."

"In the opposite direction?"

"Yes—almost exactly."

Karmesin nodded. "Did he call you from the port on his arrival?"

Merry shook her head. "I was already on my way to Aryx, you see. I didn't want to waste even an hour before seeing him again. And there's no personal-call service on the foilboats between Stonewall and the mainland."

"I see," Karmesin said. Unexpectedly, he sighed, and Merry gave him an astonished look. With a wry smile, he explained:

"It's an old story, I'm afraid, child. I'd hoped—I always hope!—for something new. But such a disappearance is rather commonplace."

"Not to me!" Merry flared.

"No. No, I see that, and—I'm interested." Karmesin gestured at the person-spoor analyzer on the bed. "Apparently you've proved that Rex Quant was actually in this room, and for a long enough time to provide a detectable trace after a lapse of two months. That points to one of two possibilities: either he resided in the room for some days at least, or he had a very violent emotional experience here. Do you understand the principle of those analyzers?"

"I'm afraid not," Merry said humbly. "I'd only heard of them before I bought mine and was shown how to work it."

"Well, what they do is scan for type-resonances in the long-chain molecular debris which any human being leaves behind wherever he goes—personal aroma, grease from the hands, traces of perspiration, and even flakes of dead skin, too small to be seen by the naked eye. You reinforce these traces, obviously, on successive returns to the same location, and even the most modern room-cleaning equipment doesn't completely wipe them out; you can usually detect individual traces for a month or more.

"On the basis of what you've told me, it seems unlikely that your man

stayed here long enough to reinforce his spoor up to a level which would last months, plural. But a violent emotional upset can intensify the secretions—sweat, chiefly— to such a point. Hmmmm..." Karmesin rubbed his chin. "How was your man accustomed to dress?"

"Gyges-style," Merry said. "Uh—rather lightly."

"Yes, I've been to Gyges. Gyges was a king who exhibited his wife naked to another man—did you know?" Karmesin parenthesised. "So that's another point. Clothing wouldn't have absorbed so much of the spoor. Mark you, there's a risk of error with a machine as badly worn as yours—"

"The man who sold it said it was a thousand to one against error!" Merry put in.

"Yes, but a thousand to one is pretty poor odds when there are something like four hundred billion living human beings," Karmesin countered ruefully. "They used still to be able to use fingerprints as proof of unique identity when I was a young man; the odds were five billion to one against duplication. But even then there were more than ten billion people in the Solar System alone. I was about a hundred and twenty, I think, when they introduced this chromosome-resonance analysis instead—what they'll do when it becomes obsolete, I've no idea."

He briskened. "So let's begin by eliminating that source of error, shall we?" He turned to Mistress Gamal, who was standing by the door, extremely pale. "Get me the lawforce," he instructed her. "Tell them to bring a late-model person-spoor analyzer and say we have a lock of hair for it to work on. If you can get one with past-time discrimination, so much the better."

"Immortal Karmesin," Mistress Gamal said weakly, "with the best will in the galaxy I can't permit—"

Karmesin rose to his feet and suddenly was the dominant feature of the room, the building, the city Aryx. He said, "Mistress Gamal! Being an immortal is not without its drawbacks. I am bored! I am tired! I am endlessly driven! But it has compensations, too. And one of those compensations is power. Do you realize that I have only to go to that thing there"—he waved at the room's public communicator— "and say 'I wish the Mira Hotel to cease operation!' and it would be done? *Do you realize that?*" Merry caught her breath.

When Mistress Gamal had stumbled from the room, Karmesin again turned his skeletal smile on Merry.

"So!" he said. "I am doing what I can to help you, am I not? When we have established for certain that your man was actually in this room, we shall find out next what became of him when he left here. We shall inspect the monitors of the building; we shall check with the outgoing-spacelines to make sure he is still on this planet, and then we shall get the lawforce to institute a proper search. We shall contact the Embassy of Gyges, and have a search started on his home world, too. We shall—Why, child, you're crying!"

"I'm sorry!" the girl choked out, fighting to suppress her emotion. "It's just that after all these months of struggling to expose the truth, everything's happened so quickly and I can't get used to the relief." She dabbed tears away from her eyelids with her sleeve.

"Can I—can I ask you something, Immortal?" she said after a pause.

"Anything." Karmesin dropped back into his chair.

"Why are you doing it? Why are you so ready to help me, when there must be thousands of people who'd give their right arms to even talk to you?"

"I'm bored," Karmesin said. "I said so. And it's no lie. After a thousand years I have almost lost the hope of ever having a new experience. I divert myself by using my mind as much as possible, but how often is it amusing to cut paper with a razor?"

"A—? I'm sorry."

"Yes. Obsolete, aren't they—razors?" Again Karmesin rubbed his chin. "Never mind. It has to be undergone to be understood. Let's say, then that you appeal to me. I'm glad to see someone fond of somebody else, instead of being shallowly attracted. I am glad to see ingenuity, persistence, bloody-mindedness..." He laughed. "No, that's something else you wouldn't know about. Also obsolete. What's your name?"

"Merry Duner."

"Merry? Hah! We seem to be in a groove of obsolete words. We've had

virtually universal happiness for so long, terms like 'merry' have become degraded, haven't they? I'll bet you never hear that word used except perhaps as a name on Aryx."

"Oh, but you're wrong," Merry said with a tremulous smile. "Rex told me about its old meaning. He used to joke with me about 'making Merry.' Excuse me." She flushed a little.

"A psychosocial historian, you said," Karmesin commented. "Well, it isn't a bad joke, I suppose."

III

After that, there was a long period of silence in the room. Karmesin sat in his chair as relaxed and motionless as a doll, only allowing the muscles of his face to return to their normal slackness suggestive of that intolerable tiredness and boredom of which he had spoken. Trying not to stare too obviously, Merry looked at him and wondered what it was like to last a thousand years.

A thousand! It suddenly made sense to her in emotional terms. Why... when this man was a child, they were still sweating and dying on the planets of the second generation, like Avalon and Chichimeca. He had heard the news of the first encounter with non-terrestrial man when it *was* news, not history! He was not the oldest of the immortals—that was the woman Rebecca Lail, as every child was taught— but he must be among the first dozen.

She had never expected to speak, face to face, to one of these living legends, let alone be aided on the spur of the moment by the whim of one of them. Partly because it seemed irrelevant to learn too much about people she would not come in contact with, partly because of that irrational jealousy most ordinary folk felt despite their conscious knowledge of the burden endless life imposed, Merry had never added to the basic commonplaces given in school.

Immortal: a misnomer. The probable life expectancy was four to ten thousand years, achieved by tectogenetic manipulation, elaborate pre—and post-natal surgery, and chemical adaptation of the metabolism to eliminate all known sources of senescent change. Karmesin's circulation contained at least ten enzymes of artificial origin, and an exceptionally

high proportion of other, natural, enzymes.

Add eidetic memory, super-swift bodily repair mechanisms, limited regeneration of nervous tissue—the key, actually, to all the rest—and an IQ somewhere around the limits of the measurable, and that was a so-called immortal.

Purpose: to provide for succeeding generations of expanding humanity a reservoir of living direct experience in vanished environments, both physical and, more especially, cultural. By the twenty-third century CTE (Common Terrestrial Era), it was becoming so difficult for someone in late middle age, with ninety-odd years behind him, to remember and reconstruct how he had felt and reacted in the different circumstances of his youth that society was running the risk of shaking into pieces. One method of restoring stability would be to impose, deliberately, a period of stasis on the race, so that in an unchanging environment a total analysis of the recent past could be performed. Such a course was conceivable, but impracticable. The job would have to be done piecemeal over several centuries if it were done at all.

Merry gazed in wonder at the white hair on Karmesin's head. Under there, in that fantastically stocked brain were memories, accessible by techniques of simple hypnotic regression, as vivid as the sensinews and equally fresh!

This time she had let herself stare too long. Karmesin noticed, and stirred. With his habitual skull-like smile, he said, "You're wondering whether you ought to be envious, aren't you?"

"Y—yes," Merry admitted.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four. Local years, that is. Uh—about twenty terrestrial years."

Karmesin closed his eyes and leaned his head back; his chair moulded and adapted, supplying a rest for the nape of his neck.

"If we could make youth immortal, Merry, that would be wonderful. But it's beyond our grasp, and always will be. You love life. It excites you, because it's new and fresh. But no matter how carefully you ration your mead of experience, the time comes—in two centuries or ten centuries—

when you begin to repeat yourself, when everything shades into a universal routine. A lover can no longer be separated except by a deliberate exercise of will from earlier lovers; a taste, a smell, most evocative of stimuli, no longer appeal for their own sakes, but only for the reminders they give of the first time they were experienced, or the last time they were experienced, or another time they were experienced. I don't continue to live because I enjoy Me, Merry."

"Then—then why?" she ventured.

"Duty," Karmesin said. "Another old-fashioned word. I didn't ask for the responsibility I bear, but I have it, and it must be endured. Your man was a psychosocial historian. Did he lead you to investigate pre-galactic terrestrial literature, specifically, in Ancient English?"

"No. His speciality is recent history, early and middle galactic."

"Mine too... There was a writer called Swift, who foresaw me and my kind. He called them Struldrugs, miserable men and women visited by chance with the inability to die, condemned to grow old, then older, then older still, indefinitely, till they were toothless mumbling wretches rejected by their greatgrandchildren and forced to seek each other's company or go alone, to beg on the streets or starve. They gave us power, of course—but they had to. They needed our memories too badly to refuse."

"The—the Council of Immortals?" Merry said, thinking how archaic-romantic the phrase sounded.

"Yes, the Council exists." Karmesin seemed to have lost interest in what he was saying, which was hardly surprising in view of the thousands of times he must have repeated it, and fell silent.

Merry's face was solemn. She knew that at one time there had been a clamor for admission to the ranks of the immortals. Men had struggled and fought and ranted to be given millennia of life and for a while at any rate adult conversions had been tried; maybe two or three a year had been accepted after exhaustive psychological and physical tests. But the process of adaptation worked badly on adults. Moreover, the strain of even five centuries told, and there were allegedly none left of the "adult conversions"; they had died in accidents or by their own hand. For the past several hundred years admission had been pre-natal only, and the children had been carefully prepared by their education to endure the

strain.

Humanity had grown accustomed to living with its older brothers and sisters on planets whose history made Earth's look like a fleeting dream; it grew equally used to the existence of artificial immortals, and though their rarity made them a sensation wherever they chose to appear in public their longevity no longer seemed the perfectly desirable gift it once had been.

The door of the room slid back without prior warning, and Merry started and turned her head. Through the opening came a ponderously built man of early middle age—about eighty, Merry guessed—with a ruddy complexion and big, hairy hands poking out of his governmental uniform jacket. He was followed by two lawforce operatives who were guiding a professional-model spoor analyzer on a nulgee float big enough to make the room seem chilly with the draught of air it generated, and also by Mistress Gamal and another member of the hotel staff, a man whose expression was as disturbed as hers.

The ponderous man gestured to his companions to halt, and walked around the chair in which Karmesin was reclining, eyes closed. He opened his mouth to say something, and Karmesin forestalled him.

"You've put on weight in the past sixty years, Dombeno!"

The ponderous man almost gaped, then recovered himself and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "I wouldn't have believed it, Karmesin!" he said in an aggrieved tone. "I'll swear you didn't open your eyes."

"I didn't need to," Karmesin said, doing so now. "You're fatter and a bit more slouched, but you walk the same and you breathe the same. How are you, and what are you doing here?" He put out his hand to shake with Dombeno.

"I came down for the obvious reason," Dombeno said, dropping the immortal's pale fingers and sitting on the edge of the bed for lack of another chair in the room. "Oh, you may not know. I'm Chief Secretary for Planetside Affairs on this ball of mud nowadays."

"Come a long way in sixty short years," Karmesin said with a wry smile. "I'm still what I was last time we met. What was the 'obvious reason' you

mentioned?"

"Blazes, what do you think? If someone lands here who in theory has power to order all the inhabitants to go drown themselves in the Sambhal Sea, the local government wants to make sure he hasn't got this end in view! I'd just heard from the spaceport that you were here, and was setting off to see you, when we had this call from the hotel asking for lawforce representatives. So we came along together. What's the story, as if I had to ask?"

"Find out if the owner of that lock of hair under the fine-focus scanner of the analyzer on the bed ever actually occupied this room." Karmesin gestured negligently.

"I thought so. You must be Merry Duner," Dombeno muttered, glancing at the girl, who gave a defiant nod. After a pause, he rounded on the men in charge of the spoor analyzer. "What are you waiting for? Didn't you hear what Immortal Karmesin said?"

The lawforce men exchanged glances. One of them grinned and shrugged, and they obeyed. For a few minutes there was no sound in the room except breathing and the hum of the apparatus in use.

Then one of the men by the machine gave a startled gasp, and turned blankly to face Dombeno.

"The reading's positive," he said. Merry gave a stifled cry. He eyed her uncertainly, and went on, "But that's absurd, Secretary! If this girl is Merry Duner, the man she's looking for is this character Rex Quant, off Gyges. And we went into that case two months back, and established that he never reached this hotel."

"Did you use a spoor analyzer then?" Karmesin inquired.

"No—uh—Immortal," the man said uneasily. "But we checked the registration memory and made exhaustive inquiries; there was no record of his presence here at the Mira."

"Well, there's a record now," Karmesin said. By an almost visible expenditure of nervous energy he got to his feet and faced the disconcerted Dombeno. "What are you going to do about it, Chief Secretary?"

Before Dombeno could answer, Mistress Gamal, who had been having a frantic argument in whispers with her companion by the door, strode forward. "Secretary, I swear it's all nonsense! This man Quant was never here! I'm willing to have my memory probed, if you insist, but I tell you you'll get the same answer from my regressed-time personality!"

"We shall see," answered Karmesin in a tone so neutral that Mistress Gamal was able to read a million threats into it. "I asked Dombeno a question, and I'm awaiting his answer. Come on, there!"

Dombeno licked his lips. "Well, we shall have to repeat our original investigations, then. We'll check the registration memory again, and the memory of the room-monitors for the old wing here, to see if unaccounted power has been expended..."

He broke off. "Immortal, I wonder if I could have a word with you in private?"

"If you like." Karmesin glanced around. "There's a privacy cell in that corner, I think. Come on, then, and don't be too long about it."

IV

The instant the privacy cell was sealed, Dombeno rounded on Karmesin.

"We, the government, want to know why you are here, and if it's not for purposes of local research we want to request you to keep your stay as short as possible."

"Local research?" parried Karmesin. "By me, or by your historians?"

"By our historians." Dombeno ran a finger around his close-fitting collar.

"No, no historical research team has requested my visit. I came of my own accord." Karmesin chuckled; the sound was dry, like two dead leaves being rubbed together. "You're getting uppish in your old age, Dombeno!"

The politician flushed redder than ever. He said, "You used not to mock at us!"

"It's a phrase which was still current when I was young," Karmesin said. "In the days when life-expectancy averaged only a hundred and ten, hundred and twenty. We said 'old age' then when someone reached ninety. Now you're middle-aged, you can take that literally enough to expect to reach a hundred and sixty and perhaps more; we're adding a steady five years a century to the overall life-expectancy on advanced worlds like yours. What are you looking for—the break-even point between my ineffable boredom and your fear of oblivion?"

Dombeno looked at the floor. "Damn you, Karmesin," he muttered. "How do you manage always to sound like a— a superhuman oracle?"

"I'm the voice of history," Karmesin said without a trace of conceit. "I'm a living reminder of the fact that the human race is fallible, imperfect and transient. We're a clever species, but not a great one. Have you said all you wanted to say?"

"No." Dombeno took a deep breath and forced himself back to his former train of thought. "I was informing you that we, the government, would be obliged if you would keep your stay as short as possible."

"What are you afraid of? A Phoenix trying to bomb me to death?"

By the expression on the politician's plump face, Karmesin knew that his guess had hit the mark. He went on, not waiting for a reply.

"Obviously you are. So I'd better be as blunt as you: the spread of the Phoenix mystery is the main reason why I'm here. Yours is the most advanced planet on which the belief has any significant following. So far it's lacked a focus. I'm a focus; it's anathema to a Phoenix that a man should live a thousand years, isn't it?"

"You mean you've come here as a target?" Dombeno was utterly appalled. "Damnation, Karmesin, we have enough trouble already with their bombings and wanton sabotage! Did you know there was a public immolation over on Stonewall barely a month ago? Sixty people some of them with a good twenty years of life ahead of them, suicided in a pyre!"

"Not a target. A focus." Karmesin didn't elaborate on the distinction he drew between the two. "I'd have informed you of this as soon as the news of my arrival had had a chance to get around. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to return to the matter of Rex Quant's disappearance."

"I don't see why you're—" Dombeno broke off. "Oh! Maybe I do." Suddenly he was sweating. "A psychosocial historian— and you came here direct from Gyges... Was he supposed to be studying the Phoenix mystery, the same as you are?"

"Not the same," Karmesin said grayly. "They study; I absorb, so that in another thousand years a man can tap my memory and rediscover this year of grace. Heaven help him. Excuse my antiquated phraseology. I'm an old man, and I'd be glad if sometimes people would remember that."

"You still haven't explained—"

Karmesin's eyes blazed as he made to unseal the privacy cell and return to the main room.

"111 tell you what I want you to know when I'm ready!" he snapped.

Waiting uneasily for Karmesin to emerge, Merry tried to avoid the hostile eyes of Mistress Gamal and her colleague from the hotel staff. Mistress Gamal, of course, did not dare attack Merry directly. The fact that an immortal had spoken for her was a powerful deterrent. But she could, and did, seek support for her grievance from the lawforce men, who were as angry as she at this arbitrary impugning of their professional competence.

Into one of the pauses in their low-toned discussion shrilled the call of the communicator.

Apart from a glance towards its source they all ignored the signal. But it was repeated, and then settled down to an irritating uninterrupted buzz. Finally it was unendurable; Mistress Gamal strode over to answer it.

The screen lit to show the face of a pretty girl in a fantastic headdress. They recognized her even before she spoke as one of the planet's leading sensinews commentators.

"Good day!" she exclaimed brightly. "I am informed that the Immortal Karmesin is residing there at the moment. I'd like to speak with him. A hundred million viewers who heard of his arrival over our noon newscast are eagerly waiting for further information about his plans during his visit."

"Immortal Karmesin isn't here," rapped Mistress Gamal. "And if he were he probably wouldn't want to talk to—"

There was a snicking sound from behind her as the privacy cell was unsealed, and involuntarily she glanced around.

"Shut that damned thing off!" howled her colleague, diving towards the communicator. But it was too late; as they emerged into the main room both Karmesin and Dombeno had stepped full in the field of vision of the communicator. Before the connection was broken, it was possible to see a grin of satisfaction on the face of the girl on the screen.

"What the—!" Dombeno halted in his tracks. "Who told you you could let a reporter poke her nose into this room? You there!" He pointed accusingly at Mistress Gamal. "Didn't you order privacy for us, at least?"

"No, I didn't!" retorted Mistress Gamal with a show of spirit. "You gave no orders to that effect, nor did Immortal Karmesin."

"Is this the standard of service you offer your guests? Are they accessible to any inquisitive outsider who cares to pry into their affairs?" Dombeno's voice rose to a bellow. "The Mira is supposed to be the finest hotel on Aryx, but I know back-street flophouses which guard their guests' privacy better than this!"

"I'm not interested in privacy," Karmesin said. "I've had none for centuries. Come on, let's get down to your main offices, Mistress Gamal. I want to see the inspection of the registration memory carried out. I may also wish to take you up on your offer to have your memory probed. Ah—you two!"

The lawforce men responded sullenly.

"One of you go and inspect the power-consumption monitor and find out if any power was assigned to this room, 8010, last—when was the actual disappearance, Merry?"

Merry swallowed hard. "Tenth of Midspring," she answered.

"Got that? Good. I don't mind which one of you goes, but make a thorough job of it. The other one comes with us."

Shrugging, the lawforce men reactivated the nulgee unit on their spoor analyzer, and again the breeze of displaced air cooled the room.

Ten minutes later, in Mistress Gamal's handsome and spacious office below the basement of the hotel, they stood around the master screen of the registration memory. In one corner of the room a newset was chuckling quietly to itself; it was set to filter out from the clock-around broadcast on the public affairs channel anything concerning a resident of the Mira Hotel and record it so that if the guest desired, it could then be put out over the large screen in the foyer. It had just picked out a reference to the sensistar Lubra Gore, and her creeper-swathed image was fading from the screen.

"Is this a late-model device?" Karmesin asked.

"The latest and most efficient on the planet!" retorted Mistress Gamal.

"How does it work?"

"Well, I can't show you by punching for Rex Quant! I'll punch for yourself, and you'll see." Mistress Gamal moved her hands rapidly over a set of alphabet keys under the screen, and finished by tapping a date-key labelled TODAY. At once a fifteen-second recycled shot of Karmesin approaching the registration desk in the foyer lit the screen; around its edges were colored flashes to which Mistress Gamal pointed.

"Alpha rhythm—theta rhythm—four genetic type-resonances—breathing frequency—heartbeat—and these two are a harmonic analysis of the components of your gait."

"And the name?"

She touched another key, and at once the name was printed across the repeating picture in bold red letters, together with his planetary citizenship—Terrestrial—his domicile, his last previous address, and the date of his arrival.

"Right. Punch for Rex Quant, last tenth of Midspring."

"I warn you!" Mistress Gamal sighed, but wiped the board and obeyed. The screen blanked; on it appeared only a fuzz of irregular coloured noise.

"What's the recording medium?" Karmesin demanded.

"A square of magnetic material—I don't know its precise composition—about an inch on a side and a tenth as thick. They aren't reusable; five years after the registration the information is automatically transferred to a remote store, under the Sambhal Sea somewhere, and the original is destroyed."

"I see," Karmesin murmured.

Dombeno, who had been chafing in the background, now came forward. "Karmesin, why aren't you satisfied with that? The spoor in room 8010 must be a false lead. This mechanism is tamper-proof!"

"No mechanism is tamper-proof," Karmesin contradicted firmly, and would have gone on, but at that moment the newset, chuckling to itself in the corner, squawked into full volume and normal focus. They turned to look at it.

"Flash! Flash-flash! Trrrriple flash, friends! As you were told on our noon newscast, our planet is currently enjoying the honor of a visit from the Immortal Karmesin, Earthside millenarian. That's a word we invented, friends, to suit the rare case of a man who's celebrated his thousandth birthday.

"After checking in at the Mira Hotel, Immortal Karmesin's first appointment was with the Chief Secretary for Planet-side Affairs, the respected and noteworthy Secretary Dombeno, whose former acquaintance with Immortal Karmesin might hint at a mere friendly call. But mere friendly calls don't involve the use of a privacy cell or the attendance of members of the lawforce. We therefore confidently predict—"

"Shut it off!" barked Dombeno, and rounded on Karmesin. "There's going to be the devil to pay now! Why won't you drop these silly affectations and stay in a proper hotel suite with proper privacy-devices?"

V

There was an audible gasp. It came from Merry. Yesterday she would have said it was just as unlikely she would be talking face to face with a

Chief Secretary of the government as with an immortal. But you didn't need prior acquaintance to realize that of the two the Chief Secretary was the small fry. He had no business losing his temper with an immortal.

Karmesin was unperturbed. He said, "I'm quite satisfied. Why, I haven't even lodged a complaint about finding this girl Merry Duner in my room, have I?"

There was a long moment of frozen silence, during which Dombeno put two and two together rather belatedly. He said at last, his voice shaking, "Karmesin, tell me one thing. Did you *ask* for room 8010?"

"Not directly," Karmesin said. "Not directly, no. I must admit that after studying the plan of the hotel I asked for a vacant room on the eightieth of the old wing..."

Merry listened in astonishment, and her surprise was redoubled by Dombeno's next outburst.

"You mean to say you came here *looking* for Quant?"

"Ah... I suppose I do mean that, yes." Karmesin permitted himself another skeletal smile, but a very brief one. "So now shall we get on with the job in hand? Oh!" He seemed to recollect Merry's presence, and looked towards her. "I should apologize for misleading you, child. Not everyone thinks that what I call obvious *is* obvious. Just ask yourself what kind of a contract a psychosocial historian can get which would pay him well enough to stay in this hotel, and I think your first assumption will be that it's a contract for a project involving the use of an immortal or immortals. Which is actually the case. I've just come from Gyges to find out why Rex Quant never returned to fulfil his allotted share of the work."

Merry closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall to steady herself.

"Mistress Gamal!" Karmesin resumed. "I want to see the list of those guests who left the hotel on the tenth of Mid-spring, please."

Silently resentful, Mistress Gamal punched the necessary keys. A series of the usual fifteen-second visuals flashed across the screen. There were about forty of them. When they had finished, Karmesin said merely, "Now the other guests."

"I'll have to punch for the day's new arrivals and those previously registered separately," Mistress Gamal said. She hesitated. "Our capacity is about five thousand, you know. Do you want to see the lot?"

"Not necessarily," Karmesin shrugged. "Just have them set aside from the main flow."

"But that'll *empty* the main flow," Mistress Gamal countered.

Karmesin waved for her to proceed and stop objecting; she did so.

When her hands had finished flying over the keys, the immortal cleared his throat.

"And now hold the date and punch for the residue," he said.

"What?" She stared at him. "But there is no residue!"

"I said punch for the residue!" Karmesin rapped. "You can do that, I take it? Some such instruction as 'all items not in the foregoing categories'?"

"Y—yes! But—"

"Then do it!" For the first time since his arrival, there was a hint of exasperation, almost, of excitement, in Karmesin's level voice. Weakly, Mistress Gamal ordered the memory to give up the required data.

And the screen lit.

"It *is*!" Merry said after a pause. "Oh, it *is* Rex!" She made as though to run to the screen and kiss the image, but Karmesin put his hand on her shoulder reassuringly.

"Not so difficult to find, was he?" he murmured. "In the past, that is!"

"But—but I don't understand!" Dombeno exclaimed. "Are you trying to tell me that his registration has been *overlooked* during the exhaustive searches of our lawforce?"

"The overlooking is understandable," Karmesin said. "The concealment... is a little harder to account for. You there!" he added to the lawforce man who had accompanied them. "You can go tell your colleague

that we won't need his data from the power-consumption monitors after all. We know that Rex Quant was here. Take him down with you to the physical memory store and remove the unclassified item from the channels. I take it there'll be a local-command system to identify it with."

The lawforce man had been unashamedly gaping at the screen. He stirred and gave a nod before hurrying out.

Merry had given way to tears again, and was sobbing with hardly a sound into a large white kerchief. Karmesin instructed her to take a chair, and turned to Dombeno.

"If you'll just be patient a while, I think I can give you your answer. Mistress Gamal, the day's departures again, please. Oh, and punch a 'hold' signal for the Quant registration so it won't go back into regular circulation before they retrieve it. Have you any idea how it could have been excluded from the major categories?"

"N—none," whispered Mistress Gamal, who now looked thoroughly frightened.

"Is there a way of entering additional data on one of the magnetized stores?"

"Why—yes! There has to be, so that we can include the guests' date of departure when it comes around."

"Ah! That'll be it," Karmesin said with satisfaction. "All it would need is an erroneous departure date, probably earlier than the date of arrival, and—"

"But an error like that is signalled at once!" Mistress Gamal objected.

"Would that matter, if the person keying in the data paid no attention? Which would be the case if he did it deliberately!" Karmesin cocked an eyebrow. "Never mind. We can consult an expert and settle it later. Now those departures, please."

They followed one another duly on the screen.

"Same again," Karmesin said, and then: "Give me just the nonths now."

Nonth—non-TH, non-Terrestrial human.

The phrase was conventional; it didn't refer to those of terrestrial ancestry born under other suns, but to members of races which had arisen independently elsewhere in the galaxy. Some hundreds such were known, mostly primitive or degenerating; only the children of Earth seemed to have sunk sufficient effort into the conquest of space to achieve significant success.

The result of the latest instructions reduced the sequence of visuals to two. Merry dried her eyes and stared at them. The others did the same with equal lack of comprehension.

"They're from Ohe, aren't they?" Karmesin demanded.

"That's right," Mistress Gamal said. "I've seen a lot of their kind—we must have had more visitors from Ohe here than from any other nonth planet."

Karmesin gave a frown. The individuals on the screen, taking turns to go through their few paces across the foyer towards the registration desk, were not unattractive. They were tall, slimly built, with skins like faded old gold leaf and eyes of a rich cedar-brown colour. Their heads were closely covered with small velvety caps on which designs were embroidered in shiny wire, and their costume included loose capes decorated with similar patterns, a sort of short tunic reaching to mid-thigh, and cross-gartered show-hose. Behind each was to be glimpsed a nulgee trolley piled high with baggage.

"Ohe," Karmesin murmured. "If I recall aright, that's a coined name, not the native one."

"That's right," Merry said without thinking. "It means—" She broke off, realizing belatedly that when an immortal said, "If I recall aright," it was strictly a figure of speech.

Karmesin glanced at her. "Yes. As you were going to point out, it's coined from one of the planet's outstanding peculiarities—zero heavy elements. What else do you know about Ohe, child? And where did you pick up the information?"

Nervously, Merry said, "Well, I've seen—maybe not these actual two,

but several Oheans anyway—out where I live, at Stonewall. Aren't they psychosocial historians too, like Rex?"

"They are indeed, and much admired." Karmesin rubbed his chin reflectively. "Dombeno, do you have many of them here?"

"Quite a few," Dombeno answered. "They've never given us any trouble. Why did you select them from the memory?"

"Young Merry just provided an excellent reason—weren't you listening?" Karmesin was ironically polite. "If the missing man struck up a casual acquaintance during his obviously brief stay in the hotel, it might well be with persons in the same line of business. I see you don't require a record of destination after departure; at least it's not here that I can find."

"We can get the information if you want," Dombeno said without enthusiasm. "But Ohe seems like a long way to send for information on a slim chance such as you've suggested."

"If they went home, they went home." Karmesin briskened, looking at Merry. "A question I've been meaning to ask you, child, if you'll excuse my using you as a kind of handy random sample of your planet. What do you know about the Phoenix mystery?"

"N—not much. There are a lot of people around where I live who hold to it, and I've tried to talk to some of them, but all I've been able to make out is that they think we're getting, well, sort of stale, not progressing the way we ought to. And their remedy for this is to shorten people's life-expectancy and destroy things which have lasted—uh—too long." She hesitated. "And they don't like immortals, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"Did Rex go with you to your home when he was here before?"

"Oh yes!" She smiled. "We spent two whole months together out there."

"Did he give any indication of being interested in the Phoenix mystery?"

"Not specially, no. He was—I mean, he *is* interested in practically everything. He did talk to some people who held with the idea, but I'm sure he was far too sensible to agree with it himself."

"Hmmm..." Karmesin was about to say something else, when the door of the office opened and the triumphant lawforce men returned with their booty carefully carried in a non-magnetic box.

"Found it without difficulty, Immortal Karmesin," the first of them said, and checked for a moment. Then, rather awkwardly, he went on, "I surely don't know why it was missed when we checked the memory in Midspring! I'd have said we did a thorough job."

"You wouldn't have heard of a small fable about a purloined letter," Karmesin said with a dry chuckle. "Maybe more of us should learn, the hard way, that there are few original ideas left."

"You sound like a Phoenix!" snapped Dombeno.

"Hardly," was Karmesin's mild response. "All that the Phoenixes would accomplish by being turned loose the way they want, would be to ensure that people could no longer remember which ideas were original and which weren't. We'd go through cycles of history time and again, like those pictures cycling on the screen there." He gestured at the repeating visuals of the Oheans, still playing away silently. "We have enough evidence from civilized nonth-worlds to be sure of that."

He regarded the enigmatic black square in the non-magnetic box for a moment, then gave a sigh and raised his large eyes to Dombeno's face.

"The rest of what I have to say had better be confidential," he stated. "Moreover, it had better be said in the presence not only of yourself but of your Secretary for Interstellar Affairs, the Ambassador from Gyges, and perhaps one of your staff from the Galactofed Delegation. Someone on rotating leave would do nicely. Do you have a separate Secretary for Nonth Affairs?"

Dombeno shook his head.

"Well, arrange a meeting such as I've indicated. Meantime you now have something to chew on as regards Rex Quant, haven't you? Institute a discreet but thorough search at once, concentrating chiefly on the hotel and its human staff, but don't neglect the minor memories: elevator-robots, for example, the power-consumption monitors, and so on. Get as much information as you possibly can about Rex Quant's stay here and try and discover at what point it was cut short. Ah—and I want data

about outgoing spaceflights for the tenth, eleventh and twelfth of Midspring, together with details of all connections made for transfer to onward destinations up to, say, the third stop out."

Merry made a hesitant noise, and he broke off and looked at her consolingly. "Yes, child, you'll be kept informed. You'll see that she is notified of any discoveries, won't you, Dombeno?"

And before Dombeno could reply, there was a terrific rumble overhead, the ceiling shifted and rained dust on their heads, and all the lights went out.

Merry thought for a second that she was screaming, but it was Mistress Gamal.

VI

"A chemical bomb, probably a rather large one which would have to be concealed in, say, an interstellar removal case, probably composed of devastase and time-fused, exploded somewhere in the old wing of the hotel, most likely in an elevator shaft." The words came through the near-darkness in Karmesin's neutral voice, and at once his hearers felt reassured; it was psychologically beneficial to realize that somebody was at work on calculating the factors involved in their predicament.

"Phoenixes?" Dombeno rapped.

"Quite conceivably. Mistress Gamal!"

The woman had stopped screaming, but was moaning to herself. Now, as her eyes adapted to the glow from the registration memory's screen and the screen of the newset in the corner, Merry could see the older woman try to compose her face.

"Y—yes, Immortal Karmesin?"

"Information, please. How is it that the lights are out but the two screens in here are still working?"

Mistress Gamal gave an audible gulp. Frowning, she said, "You're probably right about the—the bomb exploding in the old wing. Our

exterior power supplies come in through that part of the building. But the information and communication services, especially the major memories which would be spoiled by an interruption of their power-supply, are on separate circuits fed by a fusion-pile in the sublevel."

"Good. Then we can communicate with the exterior."

"Why, so we can!" Almost bursting with relief, Mistress Gamal hurried to the office communicator and in a few moments had contacted the service supervisor in his bubble overhanging the great foyer.

"What's happened?" she demanded, staring not at him but past him at the frenzied crowd milling on the floor of the hall.

"An explosion in the old wing!" the man babbled. "We're evacuating the hotel!"

"No, you mustn't do that! Get the lawforce and a rescue squad down and—"

"What do you think I've been *doing*?"

"Good, good! Is any other part of the hotel affected?"

"Except for the loss of power, no. We have emergency lights working, but the flo-ways and elevators are out of service. We're going to evacuate the upper floors by nulgee floater."

"Doors. Are they working?"

Karmesin had already thought of that. He had tested the door of the office and found it jammed. Corners had been cut here in the part of the hotel which the guests never saw, and designers accustomed to inexhaustible fusion power had omitted all provision for old-fashioned manual opening. He mentioned this to Mistress Gamal, who put her hand to her mouth in horror.

"At least ask him if he can switch some power through to us for lighting!" Karmesin said irritably.

She relayed the request; as she finished speaking, there was renewed commotion in the foyer and lawforce men and robots together with a large

emergency rescue squad came piling into view from hovering floaters in the street outside. The service supervisor excused himself and promised that he would send down members of the rescue squad to get them out of the basement office as soon as possible.

"Hm!" Karmesin murmured. "Well, I was hoping for a new experience, and I must say I've never been trapped by a saboteur in an underground room before."

Merry tried to laugh, but the sound was thin and betrayed her repressed terror. Karmesin put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"We might as well make ourselves comfortable," he said. "I'm afraid the bomb was ideally sited to annoy us, even if I wasn't in room 8010, which was probably the intended target."

"You said you'd come here as a focus!" Dombeno snapped.

"Yes, that's right. I can't legislate for the chance that Phoenixes might *choose* to make a target of me, can I?" Karmesin spoke absently, selecting a perch for himself on a convenient shelf.

The communicator sounded. Mistress Gamal answered it hastily.

"I'm afraid I have—uh—bad news," the service supervisor told them with a worried frown. "The bomb has destroyed all the elevator shafts in the old wing and access to the underground levels is blocked by debris. It may be an hour before we can get down to you."

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from Dombeno.

"We'll be as fast as we can," the man promised, and broke the connection in the act of turning away to talk to a rescue supervisor standing half in view behind him.

"Well!" Karmesin said, having let a few seconds of the estimated hour go by. "You have a clever breed of Phoenix on this planet of yours, Dombeno! What *have* they been studying here, by the way?"

"You should know," Dombeno grunted. "Supposed to know everything, aren't you? There are a score of worlds where Oheans have been invited to conduct social analyses from their own nonth viewpoint. I rather had the

impression that the work was co-ordinated with the regular job of immortal-study." He paused, eying Karmesin speculatively. "Why are you so interested in Oheans, anyway?" he added. "Anything to do with the Phoenix mystery?"

Karmesin glanced at his distressed companions before answering.

"I suppose it's one way of passing the time," he mused. "I don't see any reason not to discuss it publicly. Why am I interested in Ohe, you ask? Aren't we all? Isn't it one of the curiosities of the known galaxy? You there, child!" he added, jabbing a slim finger at Merry. "Your man probably told you about Ohe, didn't he?"

"Yes." Merry put her small hands together to stop them from shaking. "Not that we talked very much about it, because his specialty was our own social history, but of course he did mention it. It's the home of a very old culture, isn't it?"

"Old when they were building pyramids," Karmesin said, rising to his feet and beginning to pace back and forth in the room. "Old when they were worshipping the Hindu Trinity of Creator, Preserver and Destroyer at Mohenjo-Daro, the Mound of the Dead. Old when men were painting magic animal-figures on the walls of caves. Before we had language, they had poetry. Before we had tools, they had machines.

Before we had metals, they—*would* have had nuclear power."

Karmesin's voice, which had risen to declamation pitch as he recited the achievements of the natives of Ohe, fell on the last phrase to its normal conversational level. Swinging to face Merry, he shot his gaunt arm straight out at her.

"Why didn't they?"

"I—uh— Oh! Because they had no heavy elements?"

"Pre—cisely," Karmesin said, giving a fair impersonation of a schoolteacher pleased with a bright pupil. "Of the seven known nonth species who have achieved nuclear power, including ourselves, every single one reached fusion by way of heavy-element fission. Short cuts exist, but have never been developed without the information made available by fission, typically of uranium, in one anomalous case of thorium.

"Other forms of life than the terrestrial type—CHON-type, carbon-hydrogen-oxygen-nitrogen—do exist." He snapped his fingers. "Other forms of life may conceivably have achieved their own kind of intelligence." Snap! "Who knows? It will be another millennium before *we* achieve sufficient detachment to analyze their concepts and adapt to them." Snap! "Whereas it has almost the force of natural law that the dominant species on a terrestrial planet is a vertical, bipedal, bibrachial, binocular simian." Snap! "Whether it's due to his affinity for trees, which is specious and unlikely, or his upright posture—ditto—or his development through a stage of cultivation in which he is dependent on knowledge of the sequence of the seasons, and learns to mark them by the phenomena of the heavens, your intelligent simian, whether terrestrial or nonth, is a dreamer, an astronomer, and a traveller in space if he gets that far."

He paused, and his extreme tension vanished. In a second he was gangling and lackadaisical. Merry leaned forward.

"Did the people on Ohe invent space travel for themselves?" she demanded.

"Oh yes! *Oh* yes! But space travel requires power. In particular, the dive into hyperspace which alone renders interstellar travel convenient—I don't say conceivable, but convenient—requires power on an almost unimaginable scale. Did *you* know, child, that something approaching the entire output of the star Sirius for twelve seconds was expended on conveying your Rex from Gyges to here?"

Merry, touched on a sensitive spot, paled and said nothing. Instantly Karmesin was demonstratively contrite. He dropped on one knee before her, squeezed her tiny hand, begged her pardon, leapt up and resumed his discourse in the manner of a rather offhand university lecturer. Watching, Merry was struck by the idea that the thing he was most bored with was simply himself, and that these ridiculous changes of manner were part of the technique by which he staved off that boredom.

"Yes... Well, as I was saying: here were these Oheans, able to squirt around their local system on their chemical jets, eager for the stars and unable to reach them. So they— uh—gave up." He spread his hands. "They retreated in a curious fashion. They resorted to a pattern which had previously been tried and discarded on other worlds as well as on Ohe: they did in fact elaborate a system involving discipline, asceticism, mental exercises, etcetera et-ceterahaha. You might call their society a theocracy,

but for the fact that it has no god. In our own pre-galactic history, perhaps the closest parallel is that of the Indian subcontinent, home of fakirs and gurus, home of a people described more than once as drunk with the idea of God.

"Why? Why that course, involving ritual and ceremony, self-abnegation and the use of koans? Who can say? We thought once that it was part of a search for the psi powers. Have you heard of that idea? I thought not; it's been nine hundred years since the last investigators took the question seriously. Gone! Gone with the wind. Ah, excuse me, I'm rambling. My head is stuffed like a pie with fruit, and not infrequently the juice leaks through the crust. Where was I?

"Of course! The psi powers: thought transference, the power to see into the future, the power to cover distance by an act of will. These were the hypothetical goals assigned to the Oheans. The Oheans probably laughed at our naivete and kept right on doing what they were doing. We still don't know what that may be. Our every guess has proved absurd. The last development was the one which decided us against struggling *too* hard to figure out their motives. It was when they proved to our entire satisfaction that they had elaborated a technique of psychosocial analysis which made ours look like what it is: the last-minute notion of a gang of star-crazy monkeys. I sound cynical about my species, and I am. I've seen too many of them for too long.

"Unfailingly polite, rather beautiful, the people of Ohe have become in the past two or three centuries familiar passengers on our spacelines. They speak Galactalk with an excellent vocabulary and perfect accentuation, while among themselves they communicate in a language refined by five thousand years of conscious direction which, as far as I know, no member of any other species has yet learned properly. We have computers to translate for us.

"And—ah—that's all I know about the Oheans, really."

He had been gesticulating; now he dropped his hands and gave his hearers a sleepy-looking smile.

"What on earth was the point of that lecture?" demanded Dombeno.

"The point?" Karmesin was deliberately and very obviously missing Dombeno's meaning. "Why, I was asked about the Oheans, wasn't I?"

And—" He cocked his head. "And I wanted to distract you until I heard the sound I hear now, which is the scraping of the rescue squad on the far side of that door. We shall be out of here in another two or three minutes."

VII

The newset in the corner squawked up to full volume again, and a fruity male voice said, "Flash, flash, flash-flash-flash! News of a bomb outrage at the celebrated Mira Hotel, largest in Aryx City and on our planet, where only a short time ago a distinguished visitor checked in, namely Immortal Karmesin of Earth, a thousand years old and more. Things are still confused, but there's small doubt that this is a fresh act of terrorism by followers of the so-called Phoenix mystery, who express their private dissatisfaction with the state of galactic affairs by threatening the lives of others and to whom the concept of immortal-study is like a goad. We show you now..."

"Moral: the concept of emergency exits is not as obsolete as some people think," Karmesin said lightly. He sniffed the jar of euphoric in his hand, nodded approval of its delicate bouquet, took a tiny sip and set the jar aside.

They had commandeered the luxurious Starfire Bar just off the foyer to serve as a rescue headquarters, and the tables were laden with control apparatus and unconscious victims of the explosion. A dark-skinned doctor, with no less than seven follow-you bubbles circling his head to relay his commands to his medirep robots, was anxiously checking the condition of the patients. No one, luckily, was dead; it might take time, but the injured would all be returned to normal health.

From the foyer came a continual Hubbub of complaint; hysteria, and demands to be moved to another hotel at once. Mistress Gamal and her staff were looking after that problem. Karmesin chuckled.

"I don't know what you're so cheerful about!" Dombeno grumbled. "What did you bother to take a euphoric for, anyway?" He signalled for a second helping in his own jar.

"I told you, I've had a new experience for the first time in a century or so." Karmesin dropped himself gangling into an easy chair. "What became of the little girl, by the way?"

"Fainted with the shock. The doctor gave her a restorative of some kind, I think." Dombeno glanced up the long room towards the medirep team. "Does it matter particularly?"

"To her, presumably," Karmesin shrugged. "Well, how about the bomber? What chance is there of getting him?"

"Damnation!" Dombeno gulped his drink and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "How should I know? We seem to have the entire Aryx lawforce on the premises, which is as it should be, but so far no one's come and reported anything. Just a moment."

He stiffened and raised his head, looking towards the door of the foyer. Accompanied by a load-bearing robot stumping on thick, dirt-grimed legs, a scowling lawforce officer was entering the bar. On sighting Dombeno, he gestured to the machine beside him and came hurrying over.

"Lawman Anse," he introduced himself briefly. "We seem to have found the bomber, Secretary."

"Where is he?" Dombeno tensed.

"Here," Anse informed him in a disgusted tone, and made the robot display its burden. On a slab of cracked artificial marble, torn from the interior wall of the old wing, there were several smears of blood and organic residues, and a heap of jagged debris interspersed with recognizable bits of bone.

Dombeno swallowed hard and made a frantic signal for the gruesome relics to be covered over. He said, when he recovered his voice, "Just as one might have expected!"

"The Phoenix on its pyre?" Karmesin suggested. "Did you ever study the original legend, Dombeno?"

"No, I'm not interested in ancient history!" the politician snapped. "I'm interested in preserving order here and now, and if this is a sample of what attends a visit by you these days I'd be much happier—"

He grew aware that Anse was staring at him in astonishment, and broke off his heated flow of words, gulping again at his drink.

Karmesin appeared not to notice. Studying the star-dotted ceiling of the bar, he said musingly, "You know, this Phoenix mystery has many of the symptoms of a contagious disease. I don't imagine you've ever had an epidemic here, have you?"

Dombeno gave him a blank look. After a pause, he said, "Ah, not since the pioneering days, no."

"I thought not. Immortals do have their uses, Dombeno, and I don't just mean as walking relics of the past, either. The Phoenix mystery spreads in crowded conditions, just as a disease used to. It also kills people, again like a disease. Hmmmm..." He paused. "Dombeno, call that conference I asked for, will you? And set the lawforce on the trail of Rex Quant. Make sure his girl is rigorously examined for all the petty details you can gather about his habits, his mannerisms, his special interests, everything. Likewise have the Embassy of Gyges signal home for some records about him. I don't want a single possibility overlooked this time."

"The room was wrecked, of course," Dombeno muttered.

"No connection," Karmesin said. "Apart from a very secondhand one, which I'd better not go into now."

Dombeno had acquired a taste for frills in the past sixty years, Karmesin noted as he entered the politician's office. Spherical, with variparent walls, it hung over the handsome city of Aryx at a thousand feet, and gave views not only of cloud-topped mountains, blue on the inland horizon, but also of the lazy-rolling Sambhal Sea, calm in evening sunlight.

The others were awaiting him, not in person, but as solido images. Politicians had an old-fashioned prejudice against sensiset conferences, thinking them perhaps too revealing.

Dombeno made formal introductions: Brolitch, Chief Secretary for Interstellar Affairs, was swarthy and sharp-nosed, with a gruff voice; Ten Mahn, Political and Historical Attache of the Embassy of Gyges, was tall, muscular, fair and rather good-looking in his brief kilt and gold-plated body-harness. Also in attendance was a woman named Inonia, a junior delegate to Galactofed on Earth, currently home on rotating leave. She listened intently, and said little.

Karmesin swept them with a smile as he took a chair, and wasted no time on preamble. He said, "Dombeno's told me, and I can read the same on your face, Brolitch, that you'd much rather I wasn't on Aryx. Or, failing that, that I'd come on some decently organized research project similar to the last which brought me here. Dombeno accuses me of exposing myself as a target for Phoenixes; whether he imagines that my boredom has reached the point at which I crave an involuntary suicide, or whatever his analysis may be, I haven't asked. I don't deal in irrelevancies. It isn't my fault that the Mira Hotel was bombed just after my arrival. It's his, and yours. Heaven's name, if you'll pardon my archaic invective! If you can't run your planet better than to permit wanton destruction by a bunch of discontented fanatics, you can't offload the blame on a casual visitor, immortal or no immortal!"

Dombeno flushed deeply and answered in defensive fashion, "The Phoenix mystery has—"

"Taken root on several worlds besides this, and nobody appears capable of dealing with it adequately," Karmesin supplied. "Granted. It follows that you're no more successful than anyone else. How are things on Gyges, Ten Mahn?"

"Better than here," the attache responded briskly. "We've had nothing to compare with today's bombing, or even with the public immolations out at places like Stonewall. We have some proselytizing, but no serious problem yet. And we're not minimizing the risk, either." He permitted himself a superior glance at Dombeno. "As you'll certainly be aware, Immortal Karmesin, having recently visited my planet."

"Contradiction," Karmesin snapped. "It's spreading like a plague. If you don't call a six hundred per cent increase of support in two decades a plague, I do!"

As defensive now as Dombeno, Ten Mahn retorted, "Put it in percentages if you like! I'll match you with a figure of decimal oh three percent of the population, at most!"

"Growing," Karmesin said curtly. "Never mind the wrangling, though. Let me get to my point."

"The third meeting in six hundred years of the Council of Immortals was held on Earth about a year ago. Ah, you look surprised. Well, it's not

generally known that we have met a third time; we don't seek publicity. The first meeting was held to discuss how we could secure the privilege of power which you reluctantly conceded to us in the persons of your dead ancestors."

He saw Dombeno scowl, and interpolated, "Yes! You'd undo that decision cheerfully, wouldn't you, now that you've tasted a little power yourself? Let me go on. The second meeting was to decide how to use that power once we had it. The third was to discuss the Phoenix mystery."

Ten Mahn shaped an O of comprehension with his mobile lips. Karmesin addressed his next remark to him.

"Are you informed as to the purpose of the research project for which the missing Rex Quant had been hired?"

"Ah..." Ten Mahn's image blurred for a second; he was consulting a brief prepared for him by his robots. When he was in focus again, he looked surprised. "Yes! It was a study of the Phoenix mystery."

"Why are you so astonished?" Karmesin jeered. "Isn't it a reasonable task for a psychosocial historian? Isn't it a big enough problem to warrant the involvement of immortals?"

Ten Mahn flushed and avoided a reply.

"All right, it wasn't so surprising," Karmesin went on. "Details, Ten Mahn! Details you would have if you weren't so smug on Gyges about the Phoenix mystery!" He switched his attention abruptly. "How long did Rex Quant spend in room 8010, Dombeno. Has your lawforce established that yet?"

"Not yet," Dombeno muttered. "At last hearing, they'd fined down the limits, though. Three hours plus or minus about forty minutes."

"During which he had an emotional upsurge so violent it left his spoor strong enough, two months later, for an old portable analyzer to identify. Was he killed, Dombeno?"

The politician rounded his eyes and was silent.

"He had better not be dead, Dombeno." Karmesin's voice was silky with

menace. "He is far too unusual to die young. This is not a love-besotted girl speaking worship of her godlike lover, Dombeno. This is Immortal Karmesin. *Do you hear me?*"

Dombeno's face twisted as though he would weep like a frustrated child. In the same moment, a signal came from a bubble-mounted communicator circling his head; with ill-hidden relief he took the call after a mutter of apology to the others.

"It's a report from the Mira Hotel," he relayed. "Something peculiar has been found growing in the old wing of the hotel, exposed by the cracking of the walls."

"Wait!" Karmesin ordered. "Don't tell me what it is. I say it's a network of fibrils, greyish in color, matting at irregular intervals into ganglia, without visible origin or end. Am I right?"

Stunned, Dombeno nodded.

"Clear the hotel," Karmesin said "after a pause. "Trace the fibrils. If necessary, clear the city. Send to Stonewall and have all places of public assembly examined; if the stuff is found, you may have to evacuate the island."

Dombeno was gulping air audibly. He said in a shaking voice, "But—but it's *impossible!*"

"Do it." Karmesin was inexorable. "Little man, child, what have you learned in the sixty years since I saw you last except the delights of power and the trappings of luxury? Do you think there was no reason why they gave us, me, power without limit? Do you think it was given simply because we demanded it, because we were greedy and dissatisfied? You do! I read it in your face! You never conceived another reason until now.

"I'll give you a reason. I have never seen such fibrils as have been revealed winding through the structure of that hotel. To my knowledge, none of my kind has seen it—yet. But I told you what had been found. Little man, child, *infant*, I do more than remember for your convenience and guidance. I have begun to learn. For the first time in my life, I have begun to learn."

He rose, blazing-eyed, and dismissed the conference with a wave of his

hand.

VIII

They had been grudgingly kinder to Merry this time than at her previous encounter with the bureaucratic lawforce of Aryx. They had waited till the doctor pronounced her free from the shock of being trapped in the underground office before starting their questioning; they had brought her a delicious meal from the hotel's kitchen, such as she had not eaten since Rex brought her here the eve of his departure to dine in the garden on the viewroof and joke about one day being able to afford to stay in the hotel.

So it was true. It wasn't just a wonderful dream. She, Merry Duner, was under the personal protection of an immortal, and because Karmesin said so the entire resources of a planet were at her disposal in the search for her lost lover.

Surely, now that such a miracle had happened, they would be reunited!

Last time, they had been bored with her insistence; now it was she who was weakening under the strain of theirs. Everything about Rex Quant seemed to interest them—his preferred vocabulary, his tastes, his mannerisms, his favorite foods and drinks, and beyond that things she could hardly bring herself to make public: his chosen fashion of making love, his private endearments, even the order in which he removed his garments before getting into bed.

She compelled herself to answer, remembering that any clue might lead to him.

And then, as the questions grew more recondite than ever, came the frantic interruption. Lawman Anse, who was taking down her evidence, paused and excused himself, and listened to the follow-you bubble by which he kept contact with his senior officers.

His face paled. He said, "What? Why? Is the place liable to fall down or something? Look, the bomb wasn't *that* big!"

He listened again. "Supercedes everything? But I'm taking the description of Quant from... All right, but I wish he'd make up his mind

about what he wants done first!" He let the bubble float back to its usual hovering station by his shoulder.

"I'm sorry. Immortal Karmesin has a new idea. We've got to clear the area, and I'm ordered to join the mopping-up squad shifting recalcitrants. So the rest will have to wait." He rose from his chair, and the bubble soared eighteen inches.

"But what shall I—?"

"I'm sorry, those are my instructions. I guess you'd better begin by doing what everyone has to do. Leave the hotel. Go home, maybe."

"I live in Stonewall!"

"You're lucky. According to what I was just told, they're considering evacuating the whole damned city!" Lawman Anse wiped his face. "What the idea is, only Karmesin knows. And frankly I'm none too sure about that!"

"But—Rex!" Merry said faintly.

"Maybe this has something to do with the search for him. Clearing out four million people seems like a hard way to go about it, but Karmesin's certainly interested in your boy from Gyges."

The communicator in the bubble squawked violently, and Anse snapped that he was on his way. "Now you be a sensible girl and get on the way to Stonewall before we pick the city up and shake it. Where are we going to *put* four million people? And food! And sanitation!"

He spun around and doubled away.

"Are you incapable of keeping more than one idea in your mind at once?" Karmesin thundered. "I suppose your incompetent idiots of lawmen welcomed the chance to forget their past stupidity. Was that it? Turned the girl out on the streets and didn't make arrangements to find her again, and at a time when they knew. They knew because they'd been *told* that they might have a mass evacuation to cope with!"

Dombeno shut his eyes. He said, "Karmesin, you're intolerable. If you wanted her kept, why didn't you specifically say so?"

"I did! I'd said so already! Why else were they interrogating her about Quant? Am I to think for your planetary government as well as myself?" Karmesin was beside himself with rage. "I suppose I have to tell you that I want the inquiries about Quant to go on, too!"

"It's going to absorb our entire lawforce, just policing the movement of four million people!" Dombeno snapped. "I can't throw them out into open country without making some sort of arrangements for—"

"Of course you can't, and I'm not asking you to! Feed them, shelter them, keep them amused for a day or two, by all means. But why the hell do they need policing? Don't you run this planet with enough tact and intelligence for people to realize that when you tell them to move you have a good reason? Are you going to have to drag them out of the city by their hair?"

"I haven't got a good reason!" Dombeno barked. "You won't give me one!"

"Oh, heavens preserve my sanity." Karmesin thrust his long fingers through his shining white hair from both sides of his head. "I *do* have to think for your entire government, obviously. Let's settle this question of the grey fibrils, at least. Then, if it turns out the evacuation is necessary, I'll go on your public information channels and give people the best reason they could ask for. Get me a team of the best biologists you have on the planet, and access to their computers, and send them down to the Mira Hotel as soon as possible."

The fibrils were almost unnoticeable. In the dusty mess which the bomb had left, they might have been taken for cobwebs—on Earth. There were no webspinning spiders here. Karmesin looked at them. Without turning his head, he addressed the biologist in charge of the team he had asked for, a stout woman named Decie in a sterile suit.

"Is it CHON-type organic?"

"Oh yes. Very long-chain stuff, too." Decie sounded as though she were attempting briskness to cover her awe at meeting an immortal. "I have the—"

"Never mind the exact schematics. Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

"No—uh—at least, not here. I have one of my aides checking the computers for reference to occurrences elsewhere, but so far—"

"It's not native to this planet?"

"Unless it's a recent mutation, the answer is negative. We have the usual native complement of dry-environment plants, but we've checked the entire list of about three thousand main species and—"

"I want shorter answers than that," Karmesin said gruffly. The woman bit her lip and nodded. "Is it alive?"

"I haven't checked."

"You what?" In genuine astonishment, Karmesin gazed at her. "You've found a brand-new, apparently non-native plant in the middle of your world's largest city and you haven't established whether it's alive? What's happened to this species of mine in the last millennium? Much more of this, and I'll turn Phoenix, I swear I will! We're going to *need* a fresh start if we can't make out better than this!"

Stiffly, Decie promised immediate action and stumbled away across the rubble-covered floor of what had been the elevator shafts. Tilting back his head, Karmesin idly counted the exposed floors above him, and found he could just catch a glimpse of the point near the eightieth floor where the bomb had gone off.

"I wish you'd tell me what you think it is," Dombeno grumbled for the twentieth time. He looked harassed and exhausted; clearly he wasn't used to being personally present at scenes of crisis any longer. Karmesin guessed he had taken to monitoring them from his office, or sending subordinates.

"I don't know yet. It could be one of two things." Karmesin's voice was calmer than it had been for some time. "Have they traced its root system, or whatever it has?"

"Not yet. Out in front of the hotel they're having to rip up the flo-ways on the sidewalks. I hope you realize what a disruption you're causing in our city!" he added fiercely.

There was a cry from the far end of the shaft-floor, and Decie came

stumbling back, grotesque in her inflated suit. "Immortal Karmesin! Immortal Karmesin!"

Karmesin waited. She waddled to a halt in front of him, puffing and blowing.

"We've checked it for bio-activity, and—and it's ridiculous! The stuff isn't merely alive. It's active on the sort of level where you'd only expect to find nervous tissue in a human being or a nonth!" Behind the faceplate of her suit, her face was pudding-pale and her eyes were wide.

"Hmmm..." was Karmesin's only comment for several seconds. His expression was abstracted. Then he pulled himself together.

"Right. Section out a sample of it, one complete chain, or whatever unit is independently viable, and take it to the best biolab you have in Aryx. And find out what it does. Yes, that's what I said! What it *does*. It does something besides grow, you may bet on that."

Without awaiting her reaction, he whirled towards Dombeno.

"And clear the city. Now. Any reports from Stonewall? No? Well, *get* them! Listen, little man, I don't care about disrupting your city, or your planet for that matter. If it turns out that this stuff does what I'm afraid it does, we'll probably have to sterilize this world and go elsewhere. *Now* do you understand how serious the situation is?"

IX

Merry had booked herself a berth on the overnight foilboat for Stonewall, but she could not bear the idea of lying awake and worrying in the darkness; she remained on deck with the wind whistling around her ears, listening to dance music made faint by distance from the after passenger saloon.

"Are you cold?" a soft voice inquired from close at hand. "If so, take my cloak."

Merry gave a start. She had not noticed the approach of the tall dark figure who now stood within arm's reach of her, his features invisible in the dim starlight. His body was curiously shapeless for a moment; then it

seemed to take a form like a bird spreading its wings as he made to remove and offer the cloak he had mentioned.

She stopped him with a gesture.

"No—no, it's very kind of you, but I'm not cold. Just that weird hooting made me shiver."

"I see." The stranger gave a pleasant chuckle and wrapped his cloak around him again. "The love-call of the creature you've named 'pseudobalena sambhalensis microminimus' with, I may say, remarkable disregard both for the niceties of your scientific vocabulary and for the rules of the pre-galactic languages from which you derive it. Excuse me."

"Oh! You're an offworlder!"

"True. To be exact, I'm a nonth, as you put it. My home is on the world which you've nicknamed Ohe. But for the darkness you would have realized. No offence."

"I'm sorry!" Merry exclaimed, straightening and peering with new interest at her unexpected companion. "Well—uh— won't you sit down? Oddly enough, I was being told about Ohe just today, back in Aryx City."

"Thank you, I will certainly join you. You were unable to sleep, I presume? My condolences."

"Oh, it's nothing serious. I'm worried about something, that's all. I thought I'd sit out here till I could relax before going to bed."

"Ye—es." The Ohean's head turned, a dim outline, to survey the star-jeweled night. "A curious atavism, this sense of peace and reassurance which the spectacle of the orderly rotation of the heavens can induce in your species and mine and all the others alike."

"I—I was hearing about that, too," Merry said tentatively. "Doesn't it have something to do with using them, a long time ago, to mark the progress of the seasons?"

"It may, possibly." The Ohean looked at her lingeringly. "Is it the case that you're a student of psychology, or history perhaps?"

"No." Merry gave a nervous chuckle. "I—uh—did pick up an interest in such things from, well, from a friend."

"Really." The Ohean didn't pursue the inquiry. He said after a pause, "I go by the name of Snow, by the way."

"Excuse me! I'm Merry Duner." And then, timidly but with decision, "Go by the name of...?"

"Yes. My own name is hard to pronounce, it seems. And to translate it more literally than by saying 'Snow', which has roughly equivalent overtones of coldness, purity and distance, would be—inconvenient." There was a smile audible in his voice; Merry felt she could relax a little.

"I—I'm very interested to meet you," she ventured. "I didn't realize until today what a very advanced species yours is. I mean, I'd seen your people here, in Aryx and even out where I live at Stonewall, but I'd never found out much about you."

"Then feel free to ask what questions you will," Snow said, leaning back negligently and crossing his legs. "Your species has been courteous towards us. Without your aid, we might never have crossed the interstellar gulfs. What poor assistance we can render in the study of psychosocial evolution is a disproportionately small repayment for such a gift."

"Oh, that's hardly true, is it?" Merry said. "Everyone says that your grasp of psychosocial studies makes our attempts look like—" She remembered Karmesin's phrase and quoted it, "The last-minute notion of a gang of star-crazy monkeys."

"Do they?" Snow's voice was sharp-edged for a second; on the next words it had returned to its former conversational pitch. "Flattering, but we would riot play down the achievements of the race which has made star-travel as rapid and easy as travel on a planet."

"Isn't it a matter of luck that you didn't do it first?" What was impelling Merry to say such uncharacteristic things, she didn't know. Most likely, it was simply the need to distract herself by talking. "After all, if you'd had plenty of uranium and thorium on your home world, you'd have been the race which opened the stars."

"Do you think so?" Snow shrugged. "Well, it's an academic question."

We turned aside and took another path, and now we probably would not choose otherwise if we had the chance."

"What sort of path?"

Snow laughed shortly. He said, "I'm not meaning to be discourteous, but I'll evade an answer. It seems that there's a psychological difference in our respective approaches to reality. Your most erudite philosophers have struggled with the best answer we can give to that question, and missed the point somehow. In fact, it's as much in the hope of arriving at mutual comprehension as of repaying our debt that we are engaged in the study of your race."

"You're on a research project now?"

"Yes." The Ohean looked up at the sky, and, for the first time, Merry could discern the fine cast of his features, the shape of his profile. "I have been engaged for some time in studies of the island community of Stonewall."

"Oh! Then you're probably one of the Oheans I've seen there. Forgive my not realizing before, but it is very dark out here."

"It is."

There was a silence broken only by the hum of the ship's power plant and the plash of the foils through the smooth water.

"What—what is life like on your home world?" Merry said at length. "I don't mean to repeat the question I asked before. I mean what would I see that would strike me as different if I went there?"

"Many things," Snow answered evenly. "But apart from the superficialities, like design, costume, and customs, which you find even among different worlds populated by your own species, what strikes members of your race as strange about our world is our concern with ordered and systematic behavior. It goes beyond behavior, indeed. It extends literally to the patterns of our thinking. It would not be an exaggeration to say that you seek pleasure in the unexpected. You laugh, for instance, when you are suspended by a clever exercise of imagination between a mundane reality and a universe of fantasy and nonsense. Perhaps we're growing old, but we find our pleasure in another fashion;

we enjoy system and order."

"Yes, you have various mental disciplines, don't you? And a lot of ritual which we would probably find boring because ritual is... I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude." Merry flushed, and was glad the darkness concealed the fact.

"No, far from being discourteous," the nonth appeared to prefer that less direct synonym, "you're displaying a flattering interest in my poor isolated planet."

"Please don't get the idea I'm studying the subject!" Merry exclaimed. "I have to admit, it's only what I learned today that I'm repeating."

"Few of your people are attracted by what concerns us," Snow said with a hint of irony. "It's probably useful that it should be so. After all, it's our relative detachment combined with relative similarity which enables us to make useful contributions to your understanding of yourselves."

"I'm afraid I don't know of any specific ways in which..." Merry let the words trail away.

"Various ways have offered themselves," Snow said. "But I wouldn't wish to seem proud of the small benefits we've been able to bring you. As I said, they pale to insignificance before your own mastery of star-flight."

"Is your present research connected with one of these benefits?"

"It's too early to say." Snow chuckled. "At the request of your Galactofed, a survey is in progress on the problem of the Phoenix mystery. We may make some minor progress toward its resolution."

"The Phoenixes..." Merry looked over the boat's side at the water, creaming now into phosphorescence as the foils disturbed a shoal of recently-spawned fry. "Did you see their public immolation in Stonewall recently?"

Snow nodded.

"Isn't it awful?" Merry demanded from the bottom of her heart. "And it's not just their own lives they throw away. They appear to think that they can justify murder! Why, only today they made an attempt on the life

of Immortal Karmesin at the Mira Hotel in Aryx! But you'll have heard about that."

Again, Snow nodded.

"But it is terrible, isn't it?" Merry persisted.

"If I were to answer that," Snow said after a moment of hesitation, "I might appear to be critical, and I would rather preserve my detachment. It's a professional asset, so to say."

"Of course," Merry agreed, thinking she had seen his point. "I shouldn't have asked you."

"Were you there when this outrage happened?" Snow went on. "From your tone of personal—ah—offense, I judge that you may have been."

"I was right in the hotel!" Merry confirmed. "As a matter of fact, I was in an underground office with Immortal Karmesin." Remembered awe colored her voice. "We were very lucky. We might have been practically on top of the bomb when it went off."

"I heard that one of your immortals was in Aryx," Snow said. "You're a friend of his?"

"Not exactly." Merry felt herself blushing again, and was extremely annoyed at the reflex.

"But you said 'we' might have been on top of the bomb. In the immortal's assigned quarters, one presumes?" probed Snow gently.

"I'd only just met him," Merry said. "I was in his room because..." No, she couldn't avoid explaining. "Because I was trying to prove that a friend of mine, a psychosocial historian as a matter of fact, had been there Some time ago. He'd disappeared, and everyone refused to believe he had come to Aryx at all. He hails from Gyges, you see." She bit her lip.

"Rex Quant?" The Ohean said in a casual tone.

"You—*know* him?" The words escaped Merry in a strangled gasp.

"Know *of* him, certainly. Why, he's perhaps one of the dozen or so most promising psychosocial investigators your race can presently boast."

"Is he? My Rex?"

"You didn't know?" Snow gave his pleasant chuckle again. "And yet you call him 'your' Rex! Well, he must be modest in addition to his other admirable qualities. I wish you a speedy reunion."

"Th—thank you," Merry whispered.

"And now, if you'll permit me, I'll retire." Snow rose, gathering his cloak about him. "I suggest you should do the same. Our talk will have released some of your insomniac tensions; exploit the fact, and seek sleep quickly."

"Yes, I'll do that," Merry said, and, with a hasty word of farewell, headed for the companionway to the sleeping deck below.

X

It was a long time since Dombeno had been made to dance attendance on anybody; he had enjoyed senior governmental rank for over five years, and the habit was quickly lost. He was young for his post. His predecessor had been a hundred and twelve when he took office, but comparative youth was no consolation. He broached a related subject to Karmesin.

"We need a break, don't we?" he said sourly. "How about a meal and maybe a drink?"

Karmesin gave him a look of surprise. "Yes, if you like. Why ask me? I'm not assuming responsibility for the running of your entire life, am I?"

Dombeno drew a deep breath. "Karmesin, you've become insufferable I" he snapped. "You don't seem to have the sense of proportion which goes with the power they gave you!"

"If you mean by that that I'm not prepared personally to see to the carrying out of every order I give you're quite right." Karmesin, sounding oddly unoffended, passed a hand through his white hair. "If you mean by that I'm prepared to admit that some people grow slack and lazy—right again. But you probably don't."

"I mean what I said!" Dombeno declared. "Telling us to empty a whole damned city on an hour's notice, with night falling into the bargain, and

giving no better reason than a lot of vague hints about sterilizing the planet, if you please. It's absurd! I think Galactofed should be informed. In fact, I'll get Brolitch to take the necessary steps."

Karmesin regarded him unblinkingly. "Galactofed knows," he said. "That is, Galactofed knows enough to tell you where to get off if you attempt to interfere with what I'm doing. But I'm sure you'd rather revoke your decision. After all, I could quote your planetary statutes at you. 'All Chief Secretaries for Planetside Affairs shall cause to be prepared and rehearsed, plans and techniques for the evacuation of any center of habitation larger than one thousand persons, whether to space or to another point on the surface of the planet.' "

"What?" Dombeno paled. "But that's—that's obsolete! That was required in the pioneering days, against the risk of the pre-colonization surveys overlooking something."

"It's never been countermanded," Karmesin said curtly. "It's simply fallen into abeyance. Planetary statutes are drafted by experts, with the computer memories of all space exploration to draw upon. You haven't the right to chop and change them to suit your lazy temperament. Oh, stop this stupid arguing, Dombeno, and get off for that meal you want so badly! I'm going to the biolab and talk with Decie. I'm losing my mind in your company. Oh! Before I go, let me remind you that I still want to find Rex Quant, and I still want his girl friend brought back."

"Do you honestly think I've forgotten?" Dombeno flared.

"You already have forgotten once," Karmesin said with insulting sweetness, and went out.

It had been a long, heartbreaking task to trace the grey fibrils down from the walls of the Mira Hotel, which they penetrated like a network of bloodvessels, into the substreet levels and all the way to their root system. They did have one, but it was peculiar, to put it mildly.

"Here's a cross-section of the fibrils themselves," Decie said, turning a switch on one of the score of *control* panels lining the walls of the lab. At once, a foot-square micrograph of a roughly circular biological specimen appeared on a screen facing her.

Taking up a light-wand, she began an exposition of the peculiarities.

"You see this main body here," she said, indicating the central mass of the fibril. "Well, that's long-chain CHON organic stuff. We're getting out the molecular structure, but there's something like four million atoms per molecule, so it'll take time. It has most of the characteristics of highly evolved nerve-tissue, as I told you. Its—how shall I put it without using far-out jargon? It's conductor, if you like, for the impulses which travel along it, doesn't seem to be the long-chain stuff, but a solution of organics in slightly saline water, which damps—not wets, but damps—the entire mass. I don't get this at all."

"Don't you?" Karmesin said. "What's the husk around the outside? Not the sheathing layer, which is probably just to stop dehydration or conduction to an exterior medium, but the very thin husk around that."

Decie gave him a look of unadulterated wonder. She said, "Are you a trained biologist, Immortal Karmesin?"

"I'm a living encyclopedia," Karmesin said wearily. "I'm a pillow leaking its feathers. I'm a dustbin of knowledge. In heaven's name, answer my question!"

"I'm sorry." Decie licked her lips. "Well, that husk is a rather remarkable thing. We're studying it now. It wasn't till after we'd discovered the peculiarities of the root system that we thought of investigating it closely. And yet, you ask about it immediately. You're quite right, Immortal Karmesin, we do need a fresh start, don't we?"

"Don't take what I said about Phoenix ideas seriously," Karmesin snapped. "It's open to me to practice their beliefs on myself at any time, by jumping in space or shooting myself. This husk, now.

"We haven't been able to find a specimen still in process of growth," Decie excused herself. "But what we think happens is this:

"The plant grows conventionally, to limits which are perhaps determined genetically, perhaps a function of environment. During this stage, the husk which you so quickly noted, is probably the growth-layer, as well as the channel by which nutriment and tissue-building substances are conveyed. Meantime, the core, what now forms that central mass, follows slightly behind, as hard wood follows soft shoot-tissues in many trees. At about the growth-termination stage, the husk atrophies, the juice or sap from it penetrates the core and wets it and sets it operating.

Probably there are special enzymes secreted, whose derivatives, neutralized after completing their task, are dissolved in what I've called the sap or conductor."

"Operating?" Karmesin picked the word out of the long statement and held it up like an unusual specimen from a biological collector's kit.

Decie drew a deep breath. She said, "It does something besides just grow, exactly as you warned us."

"What?" Karmesin snapped.

"We're still examining it," Decie returned defensively. "In about another half-hour we should have a clear idea. If you'd like to come in the next room of the lab, I'll show you our results so far."

Karmesin suppressed his impatience with visible difficulty, and accompanied her into the adjacent room.

Here a serious-faced group of four biologists were working on a curious assembly of equipment. There was a large hydroponics circulator, on the mesh top of which rested the knobbly end of the grey-fibrilled plant; hair-fine rootlets twined down into the nutrient liquid below. There was a sonar-to-visible interior probe, an X-ray probe, a collection of ultra-sensitive bio-activity detectors, and something which, to Karmesin, looked like the fourth cousin of an electroencephalograph, its green-glowing eye pupilled by a succession of expanding white rings bursting out from a center and disappearing off the edge of the screen at about one-second intervals.

"It's showing a new high now!" exclaimed one of the team of four, oblivious to the approach of Decie and Karmesin. "Did you see that? Any macroscopic trace to—? Oh, excuse me, Immortal Karmesin. Didn't see you come in."

"Didn't you?" Karmesin countered. He glanced around. In the semi-darkness in which they were working, it was hard to see the exact course of the alien plant, but now that his eyes were adjusting, he could tell they had draped it for convenience on a wall-mounted plastic rack reaching away towards the door by which he had entered the room.

"I—don't quite see..." the biologist ventured.

"This is my chief aide, Immortal Karmesin," Decie put in. "Nick Kraesser."

Karmesin ignored the remark. He moved towards the wall-rack again. "How's that for activity now?" he demanded.

"High again!" Kraesser snapped. At once his diffidence in face of an immortal was replaced by scientific enthusiasm. "Get any macroscopics on that one, you lot?"

"The activity's centered in the knob I stained blue," said one of his colleagues. "See there?"

"That settles it," Kraesser said with finality. "This thing's a biosensitive all right. But what's it for? Immortal Karmesin" he added, raising his head. "Maybe you can give us an idea. Let me just explain what we've established so far."

"By all means," Karmesin said. He sounded relieved, but they didn't venture to ask why.

"I suppose Decie's told you this thing is bio-active but not still growing?" Kraesser began. Getting a nod, he went on. "Well, when we'd determined that, we jumped straight to the only other clue we had, which was the high level of its activity, somewhere in the range where you only find complex nervous tissue. I proposed to my colleagues here that we examine the root-system for impulse-storage; it follows that a level of activity so high as that, involves transmission of rather elaborate information, and without storage it's pretty well useless.

"We hit the nail square on that first guess. The root-knob stained blue, that one I'm pointing at is about as electro-chemically lively as a good computer memory, and in my view that's probably what it is."

"You're a very bright young man, Kraesser," Karmesin said. "All right, Direction of the impulses now? Out or in?"

"In. We saw that when you moved close to the main stem of the plant, there nearer the door."

"So what is it?"

Kraesser drew a deep breath. "It's something I haven't seen before. It's a pre-programmed artificial plant."

"What?" incredulously from Decie. "Nick, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said," Kreasser replied. "I haven't dared dissect that root yet. We might too easily short away its stored information. But there's supposed to be quantities of the stuff all over Aryx, isn't there? We can get a few more specimens in and cut them up for analysis, and I predict I'll be shown right."

"That plant would have started its independent life in the form of a kind of corm, about one or two ounces weight, not more than an inch across. Its programme was tectogenetically inscribed on its chromosomes, and included three major stages: take root and spread to a predetermined extent above ground, then halt growth and reduce the outermost layer to its present husk-like condition, and finally detect and conduct back to the enlarged root-knobs information about local biological activity."

"It has no output, then?" Karmesin rapped.

"Output?" Kraesser sounded faintly surprised. "Er—no! I don't think so. Its energy level is something extraordinary for a plant. I think it derives from a fast-oxidation process in cells near where the rootlets join the root-bodies. But it isn't high enough to sustain what you'd call an output. No more than your own brain, say."

He hesitated. "Why do you ask that, Immortal Karmesin?"

"Never mind." Karmesin wiped his forehead. "In one way that's a terrific relief. In another it's a damned nuisance, because... Oh, never mind. Where's a communicator? I must call Secretary Dombeno."

"I'll get you a connection," Decie offered, and hurried back into the other room.

A few minutes later, Dombeno's ill-tempered face lit a screen there. "Oh, you again, Karmesin!" the politician growled. "I was just going to call you. The girl did as we expected, and took the overnight foilboat for her home out at Stonewall. I can have her picked up on arrival and fetched back if you like."

"Have you checked Stonewall for this grey plant yet?"

"I've given orders. They're going to examine the places of public assembly, as you requested. But I hope you don't want us to clear Stonewall of its people! It's an island, with literally nowhere else to send them!"

"No, I don't think that'll be necessary. In fact, on the basis of what I've just learned, you can countermand the evacuation of Aryx. I've been put rather neatly in a cleft stick."

Dombeno's face purpled, but before he could speak his mind Karmesin continued hastily, "So have you. So have you. I know, and I'm sorry for the trouble. But it's not of my doing, believe me. The stuff's got to be cleared out of Aryx, and that may take weeks. I also want you to begin clearing it if you find traces in Stonewall. Let me know if you do, and I promise I will then, once the news of what we're doing has been released, give you my very good reasons for panicking."

XI

Stonewall was a popular vacation resort. The sea was almost tideless; the weather equable for nine-tenths of the year, and the facilities for powerboat fishing, surface or sub-aqua swimming and other marine sports were among the best the planet could offer.

But not even at the height of summer could Merry remember seeing such a crowd of vessels at the mouth of the natural harbor which bit deep into the side of the island like a wedge-shape cut from a round slice of cheese.

She was not the only passenger to be bewildered as, in the light of early morning, the foilboat settled to the surface and cruised with an air of mechanical indecision towards the harbor. Literally everybody else aboard, apart from the few human members of the crew, crowded on deck to stare and ask each other startled questions.

There were a good thirty large vessels assembled, riding at anchor or humming back and forth: foilboats, cushioncraft, even one or two hobbyists' wind-powered catamaran yachts. Among them she spotted a pair of shining white government foillaunches, anchored close together

while their respective human commanders apparently argued with each other over the palisade of the bridge.

"Owing to unavoidable circumstances—"

The voice was enormous and booming; for a second Merry was at a loss, and then she realized this was information coming over the boat's seldom-used emergency PA system.

Everyone looked automatically towards the grille covering the speakers.

"Our entry into port will be delayed about twenty minutes. The vessels ahead are about to disperse, and we must give them free way. Thank you."

There was a renewed buzz of wondering comment. Glancing around her, Merry spotted her new friend of the night before, Snow the Ohean, and gave him an uncertain wave. At once he smiled and approached her.

"Good morning! You slept after all, I presume?"

"Yes, thank you. I feel much better." Merry gestured at the crowd of boats before the harbor. "What do you make of all this?"

"I've no idea," Snow said. "Some sort of emergency, it seems. I heard the morning news on rising, and it was stated that an evacuation had been proceeding in Arxy last night, though it was later countermanded without explanation."

"Yes," Merry said absently, and then caught herself. "The whole of Aryx? I thought it was only the area around the Mira Hotel! I thought it must be because the bomb had made the building unsafe, or something."

"Doubtless the facts will emerge sooner or later," Snow said offhandedly. "Look, there they go." He pointed.

One by one, the various ships were standing out to sea again, herded by the white government launches. One launch paused alongside their foilboat while the commander exchanged words with a member of the crew, and all the passengers strained to hear what was said.

"What's the crowd for?"

"Talking about clearing Stonewall, that's all! Take everyone off to the

mainland! Changed their minds now. I don't know what it was all about. Go into harbor as soon as the last one's moved out. Oh—hold it, hold it. Wait for a government skimmer, it says here. She's coming up from Aryx now. Should be in sight. Give her precedence into port, okay?"

The launch spat steam and water from her stern, leapt up on her foils, and streaked away to get the slow catamarans moving.

"They were going to evacuate Stonewall too!" Merry exclaimed. "Something terrible must be wrong!"

It was clear that the rest of the passengers shared her concern—apart from Snow, that was. He merely shrugged and repeated his belief that the facts would emerge eventually.

"That must be the official skimmer they were referring to," he added. He raised his arm towards the stern.

In a white cloud of sea-spray, the bulky skimmer came up from the skyline so fast it seemed to expand rather than approach them. A roar accompanied the operation of its jet-brakes; its pilot, a robot, of course, slipped it scalpel-wise between the departing vessels so tightly that some of them rocked on the fringe of the depression its lifters created in the water; then it vanished into the harbor, and only the last echo of its engines indicated when it berthed.

By the time their foilboat nosed cautiously into port after the skimmer, the passengers whose urgent mission had dictated the latter's frantic hurry had disembarked and gone up the flo-ways towards the center of town.

The passengers from the foilboat, on the other hand, found their progress blocked by impassive officials.

"You'll have to go around another way," the instructions were given. "Sorry, governmental decree, none of our doing."

In the midst of a close press of worried new arrivals, Merry glanced around uncertainly. The shortest way to her home lay straight ahead. The very way which had been closed. She felt too depressed to try and argue, as some of the others were doing. All she could think of was what alternative route she might take. There might be news of Rex, and if the authorities in

Aryx were trying to reach...

And yet—that no longer comforted her. She felt that yesterday she had exaggerated her hopes; everything from Karmesin's unexpected interest in her, to Snow's casual remark about Rex's brilliance, had combined to help her believe he would be found soon. This morning she was more inclined to recollect that two months has passed since he disappeared; that if he were truly so outstanding, other people would have hunted for him already, on Gyges as well as here.

Her hopes were fading, and she was coming to the sick conclusion that they had been illusory anyway. She had wasted all the effort and all the precious money she had squandered on her private search.

What was the good, then, of hurrying home? The authorities, especially the lawforce, back in Aryx would be too taken up by this on-and-off evacuation to think of Rex right now.

At her side she heard Snow murmur, "I'm acquainted with the official turning people back from here. Am I right in thinking that you wished to go straight ahead, rather than taking a circuitous route uptown?"

"Yes. But it's not important," Merry said. "I know other ways I can go. I've lived here all my life."

"One second." Snow laid a hand on her arm, with utmost politeness. "My friend the official is looking at you with some interest. He's coming this way. Look."

Merry felt a pang of nervousness as the official pushed through the milling and complaining passengers off the foilboat, ignoring their attempts to remonstrate with him. He gave Snow a nod of greeting and then addressed Merry.

"Are you Merry Duner?"

"That's right."

"I was told to watch out for you. A message came through from Aryx that you'd been sent home in error; they wanted to get some further information from you."

Merry's dying hopes rekindled. She didn't dare speak.

"So if you'll come with me up to Main Street... We've inactivated the flo-way, so it'll mean walking, but it's not far."

"Might one inquire what's happened to make you cordon off the town center?" Snow put in.

"I can't tell you, I'm afraid," was the reply. "However..." He hesitated, eying Snow's pale-gold face and embroidered Ohean cloak. "You'll be going to join your colleagues at the midtown office, I suppose?"

Snow nodded.

"In that case, you might as well come up with us. No point in inconveniencing you; we just can't cope with a swarm of people in the mid-town district this morning."

"Thank you," Snow acknowledged, and fell in behind.

There was a definite aura of wrongness about Stonewall today. Sensitive to it, Merry said nothing as they walked and merely glanced apprehensively from side to side and occasionally at Snow, who was uncharacteristically frowning.

The? first perceptible clue to the wrongness, though, was only apparent when they had gone some distance up from the port area. They rounded a corner, and entered one of the streets leading directly to the main plaza. And Merry stopped short in her tracks.

The paving and the flo-ways were torn up; the bricks of several large buildings—a hotel, a big store, a municipal office—had been stripped to expose the consolidated concrete beneath; men on nulgee floater platforms, armed with power tools, hung at random heights above the street, obeying instructions relayed from the ground by a group of pale-faced city officials.

"What's happened? A Phoenix outrage?" Merry demanded of their guide and escort. It was the first and only possibility that had struck her.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" the man responded humourlessly. "But—"

He got no further. At that moment Merry recognized two familiar figures standing near the group of officials directing the work; a third person was explaining with many gestures what was going on, and they were listening intently.

"Why!" Merry burst out, "that's Immortal Karmesin! And Secretary Dombeno! I saw them in Aryx yesterday!"

But Snow had reacted already. Heedless of a warning cry from their companion, he had drawn himself up to his full height and was striding forward, in Karmesin's direction, with his face like thunder.

"What's that?" Dombeno broke in, turning to see who had shouted. "Hey, Karmesin! There's the girl. She must have been picked up as she disembarked off the Aryx boat!"

"Much more to the point," Karmesin murmured as he too swung around to look, "there is an Ohean in the first state of emotional upset I've ever seen his kind display publicly."

Indeed, the gold-skinned man appeared extremely disturbed.. He halted when he was a couple of yards from them, and swept the surrounding walls, and ground with an icy gaze. His eyes lingered on the webs of greyish fibrils which the workers had detached from their places of concealment within the stone and concrete and rolled up carelessly like long, wispy shawls. When at last he managed to speak, his voice was thick with anger.

"By what right do you do this?" he thundered at Karmesin, immediately recognizing his supreme authority. "By what right?"

"I am glad to see you here," Karmesin interrupted with frigid courtesy. "I was on the point of fetching colleagues of yours. I'm told you maintain a research office near here. To ask precisely the same question: by what right have you seeded an alien plant on the soil of one of our planets?"

The tension seemed to leave Snow like dry ice subliming. He said in a calmer tone, "I see. I see. Well, the answer is simple, then. We are entitled to import to your worlds what research equipment we need, are we not? This—what you call an 'alien plant'—is nothing of the kind. It is a research tool, a detector for nervous activity which permits analysis of the statistically most prevalent concepts in the minds of those close to it."

Karmesin was silent for a long time. He said, "Why did you not tell us about these plants which you define as tools?"

"Do you explain to us nonths everything in your specialized fields?" countered Snow fiercely. "Do you explain star-drives and robots? No, you expect acceptance of them and their use. So with our tools. And another thing!"

Karmesin set his jaw grimly.

"Would you pay the price of using these tools?" Snow thundered. "Would you pay the price of a living, conscious mind for every single one of these—these 'alien plants' you have rolled up and tossed aside like rubbish on the ground?"

He checked, and wiped his face with his hand. "I had been about to call you 'murderer'," he finished., "Forgive me."

XII

That was the day which became—like incredibly few others —especially memorable to Karmesin because it held a new "last time." Days were stacked uniform-grey in his memory, like punched cards in the machines which he, and a handful of men and women like him, were just old enough to recall; punched-card memories had been antiques when he saw them, growing shabby, even dusty. That fitted his impression of himself. Days like grey-file-cards in his brain, flat, cyclical, featureless.

But today was like a red card slipped in among the grey—warning-red, danger-red.

He had not lost his temper, really lost it, let it slide butter-greasy out of control while he watched and heard himself helpless to countermand the reflex of anger, in more than three hundred years.

A little frightened, a little weakened by the almost sexual ferocity of this encounter with his alien self, his oldest enemy, Karmesin sat late by the Sambhal Sea, facing the stars as though in defiance. Unobtrusively, there were guards at the fringes of his vision, for Stonewall was as intermeshed with the Phoenix mystery as its ground and buildings were with the Oheans' "research tool."

Deliberately, he compelled himself to review the day's events, seeking the trigger of his temper, the last straw which had broken the back of his control, so that next time he would know it, next time he would dodge, absorb its impact, maintain the self-possession by which he dominated others.

The one thing he had said, the horrifying thing, which had shocked him so when it came from his lips that he snatched back his will-power almost physically... Was it really dangerous? Was it clear to his hearers what it implied?

"You don't realize how short a time a century really is!"

No... They wouldn't read into it all the implied meaning which had been so obvious to Karmesin the immortal. He felt his depression lighten a little. But not much. *He* knew what he meant.

They were too young to; remember the fad-experiments of avant-garde artists eight hundred years ago, when the nature of elapsed time and the problem of reconciling traditional relativity with faster-than-light stardrives had leaked over into the public consciousness; when every trick of, slow and fast motion had been called on for a sort of visual poetic depiction of the life-rhythm of star-hopping man. Once the stardrive was commonplace, no one was any longer concerned to portray these out-of-phase time-schemes.

Except the immortals.

How short a time a century really is... Dombeno, with whom he had lost his temper today, had not yet lived a hundred years. In the sixty since his first meeting with Karmesin, he had passed from graduate student of sociology to Chief Secretary for Planetside Affairs and had run the gamut of his career; there was a choice of no more than two directions for further progress before him now; to the figurehead status of Planetary President, or to the what-the-holder-makes-it office of head of the Galactofed delegation, the course followed by his predecessor. In any event, the lines of his remaining life were broadly mapped.

Karmesin, facing another three to nine thousand years of consciousness, had no maps, no easy security, no sense of heart-warming accomplishment. For him, the last sixty years were indescribably different. An immortal dared not crowd his existence with events; that way led to

the swift and total boredom of permanent repetition. Yet, by making his life slow, even, regular, so that significant experiences were spaced out, keeping their aura of contrast, he cut himself off from common humanity. It was like being surrounded by a speeded-up sensiset programme. It seemed sometimes that he had done no more than blink, or had taken a brief doze and like monstrously accelerated puppets, humanity had completed the evolution of a whole generation.

Laboratory specimens. Turn your back on a planet for half a century, and the graduate student is a Chief Secretary in its government.

Maybe it was nothing more, at first, than the illusion of reckless speed that this subjectively entrained which had made the far-flung handful of human immortals begin to worry. Standing back from the normal rhythm of succeeding generations, they knew from their own observation that there had been little actual change in the race. The same basic concepts, the same rather uncomplex desires, informed the minds of today as had done so when Karmesin was born a milliennium ago. The immortals themselves had contributed to this temporal conformity by existing; they were a permanently open channel to the deep past.

Yes, it wasn't news that the sense of transience and impermanence which had dictated the foundation of immortal-study was subjective; that it had been instability, not a fundamental change in man, which the expanding race had undergone on its way to the stars. Compare it to a spinning-top, precessing so wildly that it threatened to topple, then finding a new orientation and humming on merrily. The same top, the same spin, a different axis, nothing more.

Almost point for point, you could match the categorization in terms of which a modern man did his thinking with the categorization of a thousand years back. Then, one tended to think in terms of "near" and "far", "old" and "modern"; so today, the only changes being superficial: "near" might be equaled to distances up to about thirty light-years, for example, and "old" conventionally tended to recede along with the increase in the universal average life-expectancy.

At first, the immortals had assumed that this lack of substantial change was a problem for themselves alone, a direct consequence of their inflated life spans.

The Phoenix mystery suggested that it was a problem affecting the

whole of humanity.

In principle, this onset of staleness had been counteracted in pre-galactic days by the clash of one local culture upon another; decadence and collapse, typically, followed a long period of stable monotony, as in the case of Pharaonic Egypt or Imperial Rome, but the collapse was never total, and was followed in turn by a regeneration in a different form. So, to take conventional examples again, Rome even when falling dictated the future course of those cultures whose impact had brought it down.

In forestalling decadence, the technique obviously must be to insure that external cultural influences stirred up, but never undermined, the stable, advancing society painstakingly organized after the discovery of starflight.

In principle, once more, the existence of hundreds of nonth races offered a source of stimulation, ideally controllable because terrestrial man had a monopoly of all lines of communication. In practice...

The Phoenix mystery. Whose adherents maintained that man had exhausted his originality, and should purge himself of psychological senescence by tearing down his existing creations and beginning afresh.

Karmesin shivered.

There was a flaw in the concept of "ideal control" over external influence. One cannot control what one does not understand. And it had been young, brilliant, vociferous Rex Quant of Gyges who pointed out that, like the Franks who finished up talking a descendant of Latin, like Crusaders seduced away from their religious fervour by the superior civilization of the Saracens, terrestrial man might be at the mercy of influences he could not define. Awareness of inferiority would temper the enthusiasm generated by the race's expansion; weariness due to grappling with mist-intangible dissatisfactions could very easily lead to the nihilism of the Phoenixes.

Prior to the emergence of the Phoenix mystery as a recognizable danger, the people of Ohe had modestly proved that they were psychosocial analysts of inhuman brilliance, and had asked permission to study the starflying race which had discovered them. Acutely conscious of their lack of detachment, men had welcomed Ohean interest in their

problems. New areas of understanding had opened as a result. What more natural, then, than to enlist Ohean assistance when the proportions of the Phoenix threat grew alarmingly?

To which Rex Quant, with youthful iconoclasm said, "I've postulated a sense of inferiority in face of an external culture. Is there any nonth race more likely to make us feel inferior than these same Oheans, as the Greeks, even after being conquered, made the Romans feel indefinably barbaric?"

On top of that Oheans should have been heirs to the stars. Only the mischance which had starved their planet of radioactive elements had prevented them gaining access to the power required. Hypothesis—jealousy? Further hypothesis — are they deliberately encouraging the spread of the Phoenix mystery, as is suggested by their apparent ability to anticipate its next outbursts?

The Council of Immortals, concerned with the Phoenix Problem, had studied the possible means of spreading it artificially, bearing in mind the known resources of Ohe. They had come to the conclusion—Karmesin remembered the announcement as though he had heard it this morning—that the instrument would be biological, probably a quasi-vegetative field-generator, structured to resemble nerve-tissue, whose exterior husk would be greyish or whitish because it would represent a disused growth-layer.

Against this assumption there had been two major arguments: first, that it might be simple conceit leading mankind to invoke outside attack, and the Oheans' ability to forecast future adherents of the Phoenix mystery might be due to genuinely subtler insight into social processes; second, that such a biological instrument as had been hypothesized would serve more readily as a field-detector than as a field-generator.

Well, here it was. The very plant predicted. And it was a field-detector, and the biologist Kraesser had dismissed the idea of it having significant output. And the Ohean Snow had claimed responsibility for it immediately, and had stated that every single one of these plants, of which there were thousands in Aryx alone, had been programmed by sacrificing

THE RITES" the living, aware mind of an Ohean. The Ohean *became* the plant, those were his words.

The dedication implicit in such an idea made Karmesin tremble. What

all-demanding purpose could drive educated, thinking beings into sacrificing themselves? In so horrible a fashion, too! Not the clean termination of death, but a sub-animal extension of awareness!

And where was Rex Quant, whose warning cry had brought Karmesin from Earth two hundred light-years to Gyges? Where were the two Oheans who had left the Mira Hotel the day of Quant's arrival?

He was sick of this planet. Most especially he was sick of Dombeno, who represented in himself all of humanity's worst traits: impatience, greed for power, hatred of external demands.

Maybe the immortals should stop trying to interfere with the spread of Phoenix ideas. Maybe there should be a holocaust, and the dominion of the stars should pass to a race like the Oheans, calmer, more patient, better able to cope.

In the ultimate analysis, though, there was only one criterion by which one could judge a race fit to inherit the dominion of the stars: the literal act of so doing. And, for better or worse, terrestrial man was the chosen species.

There was a soft footfall behind him. Karmesin stirred on his chair and glanced up., A local lawman was approaching.

"I've been asked to inform you, Immortal," the man said. "What you predicted seems to be happening."

"Fine!" Karmesin exclaimed, rising briskly to his feet. "Maybe this is our chance to make sense out of the Ohean puzzle."

XIII

It was being borne home to Merry Duner that she was involved in something far more important than the simple disappearance of the man she loved. And the impact of the knowledge was depressing.

The meaning of most of the things she had witnessed today escaped her. There had been that extraordinary confrontation between Snow and Karmesin, among the debris of the collapsed facades and torn-up flo-ways of Main Street; then, the argument when members of the Ohean research

team had been fetched from their headquarters nearby, and had wept, literally wept, on seeing the strange grey-fibrilled plants dug up and tossed aside. Merry stood by, forgotten, wishing desperately she could be elsewhere.

And then, Karmesin's incredible loss of self-control, in which he shouted at Dombeno like a madman. What had provoked such an outburst? As Merry recalled, Dombeno had said nothing more than that Oheans had been allowed study facilities on human worlds for at least a century, and after such a long time, he had asked, was it necessary for Karmesin to be so frantic?"

Merry had been thinking roughly the same thing, but she had been excusing it by invoking the attempt on Karmesin's life made by the Phoenixes; she had to admit that if she stood to lose thousands of years of life she would not have been so patient as Karmesin with Dombeno, whose responsibility it was, after all, to maintain law and order here.

Then Dombeno, after Karmesin had shrieked at him, had lost his own temper, and Merry had learned that it was on Karmesin's say-so that they had first started to evacuate Aryx, then had to cancel the order, then had called out a fleet of boats to evacuate Stonewall, and then similarly had to countermand the job. Moreover, Dombeno accused, Karmesin had brought the Phoenix outrage on himself, by refusing to accept a suite in the modern, properly-protected wing of the Mira, and had climaxed his tirade by declaring that the immortals had not been given their power simply to stir up the peaceful lives of ordinary people and watch them run like frightened animals.

But that was as much as Merry was able to hear. By then, Karmesin had recovered himself. She had no doubt the altercation would continue in private, but, at least, it wouldn't embarrass her, the officials grouped around, or the Oheans. The knowledge that the last had been present made Merry feel rather ashamed for her species.

They sent her to lawforce headquarters to complete the dossier on Rex Quant which Anse had begun, and, at sundown, let her go after warning her that they might need to contact her in a hurry, telling her to make suitable arrangements if she were away from home for more than a short time. She consented, but in her heart, she felt that the whole affair was phoney. Concerned about Rex, they might be; concerned about her, they were not.

She had sometimes wondered what life was like for people in the old days, the periods Rex studied, for example, or, more immediately, the days Karmesin could remember, when there were still traces of primitive human social structure such as the semi-permanent family. Modern human education was largely directed towards early self-sufficiency, in recognition of the race's apparent inability to impose on itself close-quarter ties lasting more than about two decades.

It would have been nice, she thought as she lay listlessly awake in her bedroom, to come back to the childhood environment of a family; to be able to discuss what had happened with someone who had known her since birth, perhaps, get advice on what to do next.

But her parents had enjoyed each other's company for less than the average duration of modern marriages, and had taken up the option clause in their matrimonial contract as soon as they could, which was when Merry completed her primary social education at the age of twenty local years. Already, four local years later, she had come to think of them as rather close friends instead of relations. No one in the galaxy was closer to her than Rex had been, even now.

To learn that he was regarded as a genius... She smiled sleepily, and wondered what had become of him. Surely it didn't matter if Karmesin wasn't anxious to locate him for her sake; just let him be found, and affection would do the rest. She drifted into dream-filled sleep, in which sometimes she had traced Rex by herself, and discovered that he no longer cared, and sometimes she had been led to him by Karmesin, only to find that he now had Karmesin's age-old eyes and cared about her only inasmuch as she could lighten his ancient boredom.

Some time in the darkest hour of early morning, she was startled out of fitful slumber by the door-signal. She was not ungrateful for the disturbance at first—there had been no cause for smiling in those dreams—but when she checked the time and began to wonder who the caller might be, she felt a pang of alarm.

Phoenixes... ? It was conceivable; all Stonewall knew that she, a local citizen, had been brought into contact with Karmesin both here and in Aryx, as she had discovered by taking a news bulletin before retiring. Indeed, there had been two attempts to secure interviews with her, once by communicator and once by a remote-control bubble which came knocking on the window just after her return home. She had refused both,

and finally left the communicator out of circuit.

On the other hand, the caller might be from the police. They *had* asked her to remain accessible, and finding that they could not communicate with her they might have sent down a lawman or a robot to check on her safety.

It wouldn't be dangerous at least to find out who was there, she decided. Slipping from bed, she zipped herself into foam leotards and the blouse she had worn the day before, fresh and crisp from the one-hour detergent.

"Who is it?" she whispered, close to the door panel and wishing for proper vision equipment, such as was common in big cities like Aryx.

The answer came as a complete surprise.

"Snow and his companion Wanhope apologize for the intrusion on your much-needed rest, but wish to speak privately and urgently with you."

What in the galaxy could two Oheans want with her at this time? Merry shook off the last traces of sleep and opened the door.

Again to her surprise, Snow and the stranger, Wanhope, were carrying large packages wrapped in dark protective film. They seemed heavy; at any rate, when she indicated that they should put these burdens on a table, they did so with ill-concealed relief.

"I repeat my apology for this disturbance," Snow said. "I do assure you we would not have resorted to—"

"Please!" Merry interrupted. "I'll take your word for it. Sit down, won't you? Ah—can I dial you anything? It must be chilly out; you'd like a hot drink, perhaps?"

"Nothing, thank you." Wanhope's voice was much like Snow's, but more incisive. In build, too, he was like Snow, but slightly taller and heavier, his face having a sculptured quality as though a wooden carving had been copied in dull gold. "I understand that you are interested in the whereabouts of a certain Rex Quant from Gyges, a psycho-social historian?"

Merry's heart turned over as she recalled the casual acknowledgment Snow had made on the boat, saying that of course he knew of Rex. "Do you—?" she began, and could not finish.

"Know where he is?" Snow put in dryly. "I'm afraid we can't tell you that. But let me explain. We have been in contact with our home planet since the regrettable episode of this morning, when—I say it with due respect—Immortal Karmesin forgot himself and significantly set back our research work in Stonewall. It has been deduced by our analysts that certain parties' suspect that we may have had a hand in his disappearance."

"What?" Merry was genuinely dismayed. "But why should you do such a thing?"

"The proposed reason is clear," Wanhope said grimly. "It's a matter >of public knowledge that after his visit to this planet two years ago Quant formulated a theory about the spread of the Phoenix mystery. Arguing somewhat naively that because we are often able to predict an area of future spread, this suggests deliberate—ah—contamination, he accused us of trying to undermine your species' dominion of the stars."

"I don't believe it!" Merry cried. "I know Rex better than anyone, and he never said a word of it to me."

"If you hadn't seen him in two full years, he wouldn't have," Snow said. "This was a more recent inspiration." He grimaced. "However, his vanishing is unexplained. It is in our interests, as you'll see, to locate him if we can and inform your authorities. Suspicion is a deadly poison. We have become well acquainted with its work since we have been studying your people."

The implication, that suspicion was a thing of the past on Ohe, made Merry flush with shame for the shortcomings of her race. She said, "Anything that can be done to find him has my support. What can I do to help you?"

Snow and Wanhope exchanged glances. Wanhope said after a pause, "Your offer of co-operation is gratefully received. As to what you can do, that's simple. Obviously, the first thing we need to know is as much as possible about Rex Quant himself. In these packages," he began to peel back the film covering them, "we have research instruments of the kind

which is now familiar to everyone in Stonewall thanks to Karmesin's assumption that they were merely 'alien plants'." He bit the phrase off sharply. "With their aid, and your kind co-operation, we shall be able to discover directly from your memory everything you recall about Quant."

Merry stared at what was revealed in the packages: dead-looking, rather repulsive fronds of dark pseudo-vegetation, matted around heavy root-like knobs whose shape vaguely suggested that of a brain permeated by half-set plastic, firm but not rigid. The Oheans—for now Snow also was unwrapping the package he had brought—treated them with circumspect care.

"What would I have to do?" Merry asked faintly.

"Sit in a chair and permit these instruments to be applied to your scalp, and then think, with the greatest possible concentration, of your man, Rex." Snow's tone was soothing. "There's no pain, indeed, there are no subjective effects at all.

Merry steeled herself. She was recollecting other evidence in support of what the Oheans had said: Karmesin's selection of two Oheans, for instance, from the day's departures at the Mira Hotel—for specious reasons, she now realized; Snow's casual expression of admiration for Rex's talent when he might already have known of this attack he had made on Ohean good faith...

"Yes—yes, I'll help you," Merry said, and pointed to what looked like a convenient chair. "Shall I sit there?"

"Please," Wanhope confirmed, and Merry moved to comply. The Oheans picked up their plant-like "instruments," and as one man they converged on her.

"Hold it there, if you please."

The voice came through the closed door, and the Oheans swung round in astonishment. Merry, about to seat herself, leapt up with a cry. The door slammed back in its guides.

Through the opening, his pose negligent but his eyes alight with—what?—fury, perhaps—stepped Karmesin. Behind him, two lawforce officers, who were the first armed men Merry had ever seen in her life;

each bore a narrow-focus laser-gun, wired to a power-pack slung on his back. Behind them, a man pushing a nulgee trolley with a great deal of equipment on it, and last a fat woman with a dish-round, pasty-white face.

"Surprised to see me?" Karmesin said softly, addressing the Oheans. "Your spy-network tells you everything that is said or thought around it, doesn't it? But we have our methods too." He hefted something in his hand, which Merry recognized at once; it was a field-disruptor similar to the one she had used to inactivate the robot in the elevator at the Mira Hotel.

"Kindly bring those things you were about to apply to Merry's scalp over here," Karmesin went on, gesturing at the table where the wrappings still lay. "You wouldn't wish to be the proximate cause of their destruction by the laser-guns my friends are carrying, I'm sure. And then you can explain your presence. I should perhaps warn you in advance that I won't believe anything except the truth."

XIV

Stock-still in face of the guns trained on them, the Oheans did not react for a long moment. Then Wanhope said something in his own tongue to Snow, who responded similarly. Each uttered about a dozen phrases in rapid succession, trusting in the presumably known fact that no one but a native had ever learned Ohean fluently, before seeming to agree on what they should do. Which was, it transpired, to obey Karmesin's injunction.

With almost absurd care they placed their "instruments" on the table. Straightening and backing away, Wanhope said, "Kindly inactivate that field-disruptor. It may disturb the delicate electrochemical circuits in our instruments."

Karmesin, smiling ghoulishly, shook his head. "No. Not until they've been carefully examined. This," he waved at the man pushing the nulgee trolley, "is one of the leading biologists on Aryx, Kraesser by name. I had him brought out by skimmer to Stonewall along with his colleague"—making a mocking half-bow—"Decie. Kindly examine the specimens, you two," he added. "I'll confer meantime with our friends from Ohe."

He handed the field-disruptor to one of the lawmen, who took it

without looking and hung it on his belt, still in full operation.

"Your explanation, please," Karmesin rapped, moving forward.

Stiffly, Snow and Wanhope declined to answer.

"Immortal Karmesin!" Merry exclaimed after a pause. "I— uh—look, this is my home, and I invited these two in, and I think it's disgraceful, I really do!" Her voice shook with amazement at her own audacity, but having seen Karmesin lose his temper with Dombeno, she no longer felt the unqualified awe she had first experienced in his presence.

"Very well, child," Karmesin said. "You tell me why you invited them in."

Merry bit her lip, glancing at Snow, who gave a slow and deliberate shrug. Thus encouraged, she spoke with defiance.

"People are supposed to be saying that my Rex accused Oheans of spreading the Phoenix mystery deliberately! Now you're practically accusing them of making away with him to shut his mouth. Well, that's what it comes down to, anyway. So they very naturally want to find Rex if they can, and prove that they didn't kidnap him. What's more, I'm sure that Rex would never have insulted the Oheans the way he's supposed to have done."

"Quite true," Karmesin nodded. "That wasn't Rex Quant's idea, exactly. But you haven't told me what reason they gave for wishing to subject you to those—uh—devices of theirs."

"To find out what they could about Rex from my memory. If they're going to look for Rex too, and I'm glad of their help, they'll want information to go on."

"Hmmm..." Karmesin rubbed his chin, eyeing the Oheans. "Courteous of you, I'm sure! To help find the very man who's alleged to have accused you of bad faith."

Snow spoke rapidly to Wanhope in his native tongue, and received only a gesture as answer.

"Is that your story?" Karmesin asked him.

"Substantially, yes," confirmed Snow.

"I see. Does it square with your findings, Kraesser?" Karmesin swung to face the biologist.

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry, I wasn't listening." Kraesser straightened from his complex of equipment and wiped his face absently. "Did you ask what I've got so far?"

"That'll do."

"Well, this is a different matter altogether from the grey stuff that's growing all over the place. There's energy in that central mass; luckily it's still dormant. Probably it requires an additive to bring it up to full operation, an enzyme of some sort, maybe. It's active in the rho and sigma regions, and there's absolutely no doubt that this has an output. It's—"

From nowhere, apparently, there came an interruption. A rather slow, artificial-sounding voice uttered toneless words.

"First speaker: We, inflection indicating major portion of speaker's species, must act, or adopt courses of action, calculated to mislead, or designed to disturb the pattern in the sense of 'evolving pattern of events,' owing to a high probability, inflection indicating equivalent of seventy percent probability, of disadvantage accruing if we, inflection indicating number two both present, permit, or refrain from contrary action. Utterance incomplete, owing to interruption. Continues.

"Second speaker: traditional compressed phrase indicative of superfluous effort understood as speech, equivalent perhaps to 'painting the lily' but referring directly to the postulated long-term objective of Ohe. Question regarding item of presumptively scientific apparatus of a semi-organic nature, having to do with its current state of activity or inactivity and implying that, while speaker's apparatus is known to be inoperative, a state of uncertainty regarding another-of-two—"

They had listened in frozen silence, all except Karmesin, who was smiling broadly. Merry now realized that the eerie mechanical words were issuing from a speaker concealed in a pocket on the front of his dark tunic.

They broke off as Karmesin tapped a switch through the cloth.

"I warned you," he said to the Oheans. "I won't believe anything but the truth. I had a subspace line kept traffic-free to Earth, and ordered access to Galactofed's linguistic computers, just so that I could spring that little surprise on you. Do I have to labour my point, or will you believe me now when I say that we have massed resources against you which you cannot hope to match?"

"Against us?" Snow said. He was outwardly calm, while Wanhope's features had taken on the immobility of the carving which Merry had compared them to.

"Maybe that's too strong a word." Karmesin leaned casually on the table where Kraesser, absorbed, was studying the Ohean "instruments."

"Please!" Merry whispered. "What does all this mean?"

"It means that your so-helpful Ohean friends were lying," Karmesin rapped. "Don't you understand? Oh, maybe you deserve to have it spelled out. Maybe next time you won't be so naive. Listen! Under, through, within this city of Stonewall, and Aryx, and who knows how many other cities of our species, have threaded the grey fibrils of Ohean plants. Call them plants. They grow! But they're artificial. They're sensitive to neural fields. Every single one of them is programmed of conscious, intelligent minds. The brilliant subtleties of Ohean social analysis are mainly a function of incredible quantities of information. Set your plants as you would instruct a computer, to sort out and store information about a social trend, then come and harvest the data when you like; that's the technique.

"I wasn't sure until now whether later instructions could be given. Apparently they can. There was a watch being kept on me, and it failed thanks to the field-disruptor I brought with me. Did you know you shouldn't put a field-disruptor too near your head, or too near your spinal cord? That's why; it jams currents on the neural level, too.

"These information-gatherers aren't the only tool in the Oheans' kit. I suspected the moment I found out how Rex Quant's disappearance from the Mira Hotel had been concealed, that they must have analogous equipment capable of output on a level adequate to blank out memory-traces. Selectively, you understand. As a surgeon would make tectogenetic improvements in a chromosome carrying a harmful mutation. Unless you knew something had been changed, you wouldn't

suspect.

"Nobody remembered Rex Quant at the Mira Hotel. Yet you proved he'd been there. His disappearance had been covered up by someone whose closest access to the registration memory was via the keyboard in Mistress Gamal's office, in a way that a few minutes' experimentation exposed to me. Yet Mistress Gamal, using that keyboard everyday of her life, never thought of a deliberately erroneous entry in the memory as a means of hiding an individual's record. That, and a dozen other things all pointed to one conclusion: memories had been tampered with, human as well as mechanical.

"Why? Why had Rex Quant undergone a violent emotional experience almost directly after his arrival at the hotel? As violent as—let's say, death!"

Merry gave a stifled cry, but Karmesin had used the shock word to probe the Oheans' composure, and his eyes were on those two pale-gold faces.

"Maybe not death, but still violent," Karmesin resumed. "Well, let's hypothesize for a moment. It is necessary to collect the data stored by the root-systems of the Ohean plants. It is convenient to be allowed the privacy of a hotel room in a strange city in order to attend to things like that. I theorize that the two Ohean residents who left the Mira Hotel that day were engaged in just such work: harvesting data. I theorize that the arrival from Gyges of Rex Quant with his mind blazing star-bright in conceptual areas of very great interest of Oheans—to wit, Ohe itself, and the Phoenix mystery—was harvested within a very short while of its collection by the plants, and that it was immediately obvious that to let such a man go unmolested would have, ah, undesirable consequences.

"The shock to Rex Quant of having two Oheans intrude on him with apparently hostile intentions, doesn't that strike you as adequate to leave a person-spoor such as the one you found?"

"You mean the Oheans—?" Merry's throat was so dry she could not complete the question.

"Ask these two, since we have them handy," Karmesin shrugged.

Merry's eyes, fiery with accusation, swept the impassive nonth faces.

Snow seemed to feel more need than Wanhope to deny the charge Karmesin had made, and after an eternal moment he did in fact speak.

"It's not true," he said thickly. "We are not responsible for the spread of the Phoenix mystery, and we did not kill Rex Quant."

"Contradict," Karmesin said softly. "You are responsible for the spread of the Phoenix mystery, whether you know it or not."

Merry gasped. After what Karmesin had himself said about Ohean pre-eminence in psychosocial analysis, it was a new shock to hear him accuse them of blatant ignorance.

"And further!" the immortal continued. "You will note that I never directly claimed that you killed Rex Quant. What to me is more likely—"

"Immortal Karmesin!" Decie was glancing up from the bio-equipment. "Take a look at this, will you?"

All else forgotten, Karmesin strode towards the trolley.

"Here!" Kraesser said, pointing to significant readings on his instruments. "Active on the conceptual level, you see? And if you graph the total"—switches clicked, and bright lines wavered across a screen—"you go way out past the limits of portable apparatus. To cope with what these things are putting out I'll need computers and possibly even direct subjective analysis."

"But what's your best estimate of what the things do?" Karmesin demanded.

"If the blurred components of that trace," Kraesser said, tapping the screen, "do what I think they do, and if the Oheans claim to incorporate conscious human intelligence in their *things* is borne out, which I find pretty hard to swallow right now, then my guess is that with these things you could do microsurgical repairs on a human mind. You could put in or take out whatever concept you wished."

"So that's what you've been doing with your missing millennium," Karmesin said, turning to face the Oheans.

For the first time even Wanhope's composure crumbled. He said in a

near-whisper, "What do you mean?"

"About your missing millennium?" Karmesin gave his skeletal smile. "Why, you know very well. There's a period of approximately a thousand years in Ohean history, following the decision to discontinue attempts at star-travel, during which the residue of your psychological drive towards expansion is supposed to have been dissipated or absorbed in other channels. Or so you say. We've reserved our opinion on that. Now I think we have grounds for contradicting you."

The two gold-skinned men looked at one another. Snow gave a kind of non-human shrug, and Wanhope said something. As one, they closed their eyes and folded toward the floor like dolls.

"What the—?" exclaimed Kraesser, glancing up. The lawmen made to dive forward.

"Hold it!" Karmesin rapped, and switched on the speaker in his pocket again. The artificial voice spoke after a moment.

"First speaker: expression indicative of futility and discontinuance of effort, overtones of hopelessly disturbed pattern in the sense of pattern of events. Concept of permanent voluntary cessation, or death for two persons inclusive of speaker."

"As though we didn't know," Karmesin said, and switched it off.

XV

"And that is the situation as it stands," Karmesin said.

Before him, physically present rather than as solid images—which was one measure of the gravity of their predicament—were the members of the two most important standing committees of the Galactic Federation. This was not a government exactly but a kind of permanently *ad hoc* administrative assembly: the Committee on Psychosocial Evolution, and the Committee on Inter-species Relations.

The ninth members of the latter committee had not been notified of the meeting. That was a second indication of the repressed panic which informed their deliberations.

The hall in which they met was enormous, considering that they totalled a mere eighty-odd individuals. But that was necessitated by the amount of information they were trying to cope with; every seat was an island among a sea of data-processing and communication equipment.

The first reaction to his amazing report came, as Karmesin had expected, from the chairman of the Relations committee, and was predictably hostile. It was meant to be. Since coming to Earth, Karmesin had had two private meetings with Lunghi, and had requested him to act as *advocatus diaboli*.

"Several points, Immortal Karmesin," Lunghi said, and there was a stir in the hall as those present, preferring to look directly at him rather than select his image on a vision circuit, turned their heads. "First off: you still don't know what's really become of Rex Quant."

"Granted," Karmesin said. "To offset that, the Oheans have no idea what's become of the two I told you suicided: Snow and Wanhope."

"Irrelevant," Lunghi said. "The association between Quant's disappearance and the presence of Oheans in the Mira Hotel at Aryx is circumstantial. What is supposed to have happened to Quant if they did kidnap him? Taking a terrestrial human off a terrestrially colonized world is a rather difficult task, I imagine."

"A possible means would be in a crate not subject to customs search," Karmesin said. "Alternatively, the memory-erasure techniques which we have now definitely established as part of their armory might have been employed to conceal his passage; we are checking all routes to Ohe for possible loopholes in this coer."

"Specious," Lunghi said. "You haven't shown what motive Oheans would have for kidnapping him. On your showing, they would have been more likely, if they panicked at all, to terminate his life altogether."

"I don't mean to give the impression that the Oheans panicked," Karmesin corrected. "On the contrary, as I've seen for myself, their self-possession remains remarkable in crises far worse than that posed by Quant's arrival in Aryx. The balance of probabilities is in favor of their attempting to erase from Quant's consciousness any concept of Ohean influence in the matter of the Phoenix mystery, then, to return him to us alive and well. This is supported by the cover story employed by Snow and

Wanhope to gain the confidence of Merry Duner; one may postulate that so complete a task of memory-alteration required additional information from an outside source about Quant's habits and personality, which could readily have been obtained from the girl."

"Inconsistent," Lunghi pursued. "Your biologist showed that the plants brought by Snow and Wanhope were designed to erase or replace memories, not to pick them."

"Excuse me for not stressing that," Karmesin agreed; he had left a few lacunae like this one in his first statement. "The Oheans brought two of their so-called instruments, either of which was capable of memory-alteration, but one of which, in particular, stored and retained a copy of the erased memories. As far as can be determined without subjective experience, which I've forbidden, Merry Duner was intended to suffer a reduction of her emotional attachment to Quant and a heightening of her sympathy towards Ohe. It was obviously impossible to abolish recollection of Quant's presence by that time; it was definitely possible to minimize the clarity of the girl's recollection, and it made sense to combine the two tasks for whatever benefit the alteration might bring."

"Whatever benefit?" Lunghi rapped. "So far you've shown no conceivable benefit!"

"But I have," Karmesin said softly. "I've mentioned that Merry Duner made Snow's acquaintance on the way home to Stonewall. I've mentioned that it was at Stonewall, while vacationing after the conclusion of the project which had brought him to Aryx, that Rex Quant was first struck by the connection between the Phoenix mystery and the Oheans, who had already for some time been carrying out studies of the island community by governmental permission. I've mentioned that I had earlier spoken a phrase in Merry Duner's hearing which she repeated to Snow. You have all been provided with the original source of that phrase, but perhaps you haven't had time to play the tape of Rex Quant's somewhat—uh—informal memorandum proposing the theory we owe to his insight. I will therefore quote:

" If it were not for the undoubted fact that the Oheans' technique of psychosocial analysis makes ours look like what it is, the last-minute notion of a gang of star-crazy monkeys, one would be tempted to conclude in view of the foregoing that they don't know what in hell they're playing at.' "

Karmesin paused. "It is my firm belief that, hearing a phrase attributable to Rex Quant on the lips of Merry Duner, Snow jumped to the conclusion that she had heard, him utter the rest of the sentence as it stood in his memorandum.

"The Oheans could not have heard that phrase from anyone except Rex Quant or a member of the Council of Immortals, or someone who had got it from one of those sources. When an Ohean did hear it from Merry Duner, he took steps to dim the clarity of her recollection of Rex Quant in order to make sure that the remainder of the utterance was forgotten; not knowing on exactly what occasion she had heard it—as Snow assumed, from Quant directly—he was forced to attempt a general blurring of her memory in that area.

"Now may I suggest that you study Rex Quant's memorandum in the light of the possibility that the Oheans were *afraid* to let that notion I quoted escape into general circulation? Then we'll see how we feel about my further proposals."

He leaned back, and everyone else in the hall except Lunghi, who had been forewarned, bent to a furious study of Quant's theories. Lunghi spoke softly to Karmesin over a person-to-person circuit.

"I think it'll be easier than you anticipated. Do you still want me to spell out all the other things, like the monitoring of all communication with Ohe, and how you've managed to prevent this discovery leaking back to them?"

"Wait for the reactions," Karmesin answered. "You're probably right, but I want to be sure."

"Any news of developments around Aryx or Stonewall?"

"Going nicely at last hearing. The surviving Oheans had literally no idea what happened to Snow and Wanhope or their equipment, and they didn't dare ask openly, of course; moreover, they couldn't find out by the usual channels because I ordered field-disruptors put into operation in all government buildings. I considered ripping out their plants, but changed my mind. If ordinary disruptors could make them useless, I thought I'd sow more confusion simply by apologizing and making out that we didn't object after all."

He broke off. A fast-reactor had completed his absorption of Quant's memorandum already, which was surprising even to Karmesin, who was pretty good at extracting the meat from a soup of verbiage like that. Hunting through his infallible memory for the name, he got it: Darin, Evolution committee.

"Darin?" he said over the general circuit.

"He makes out a very good case," Darin said. "But I'm not sure it's as good as his other one. What's he's done is review the entire corpus of information regarding the hypothetical long-term objective of Ohean society—twice, right? First, on what you'd call the skeptical assumption, that the long-term objective is unformulated, which would account very nicely for our lack of success in grappling with it; second, on the credulous assumption, to wit, that such an objective exists and the greater age and advancement of Ohean society has generated concepts inaccessible to us. Taking the second, he works out his theory, which we all now know, about the cause of the spread of Phoenix ideas: this unhappiness and vague depression at encountering a culture superior in indefinable ways, which seems better satisfied with its goal—whatever that may be—than we are with our technology and rather rudimentary psychosocial achievements."

Karmesin heard him out patiently. Now, he said, "Do you have any stronger objection than that Quant argues his second case better than his first? Because the reason for that is obvious: he didn't take his first case—what you've baptized the skeptical assumption—as seriously as the other. My whole thesis rests on the belief that the Oheans do."

"And that, in fact, they *don't* know—uh—'what the hell they're playing at?'" Darin's tone was scornful. "This is pretty unreasonable on the face of it!"

"I'm not prepared to prove my opinion yet," Karmesin said. "I've come here for one reason and one reason only: I want access to Ohe, and Oheans are under no obligation to accept me. Moreover, the power accorded to immortals is limitless only in respect of our own species, which is as it should be. I want backing when I go to Ohe. I want sanctions to compel them. I want, if the worst comes to the worst, the threat of force. If I sound barbaric, that's intentional. It may well be that you're right, and Quant's second view holds, and we are the expansionist barbarians encountering a civilized culture for the first time, a culture made static, not by internal shortcomings but by a cosmic accident which denied it the key to nuclear

energy.

"On the other hand..." He looked around the hall. By now, everyone had completed his or her study of the Quant memorandum and was listening with complete concentration.

"On the other hand, there's the matter of Quant's 'missing millennium,' isn't there? And you can't say that's badly argued. Experts recognized the argument at once as the first major contribution to Ohean psychosocial history ever made by someone who hadn't actually been on Ohe. For about a thousand years, as Quant rigidly demonstrated, there should have been a surplus of psychosocial energy, due to the abandonment of all hope of star-travel. It could not simply have dissipated, or the presently observable condition of Ohean society would be much more randomized; as is well known, it is systematized to a level we find inconceivable. Clearly, at least part of that surplus energy went into formulating their modern society; a great deal more is now known to have been absorbed in the development of their psychobiological tools. But a margin still remains. I repeat: it hasn't been dissipated, but *absorbed*.

"Having a view to all this, consider that the Oheans at Stonewall were horrified to discover that—thanks to the mischance of a bomb explosion in Aryx—we knew about their plants and what they were for. Consider that they attempted to alter the memories of Rex Quant retained by Merry Duner. Consider the motive I'd suggested for that. Consider their uncharacteristic lying, in an attempt to conceal the function of the plants they'd brought with them. Consider their suicide by voluntary cessation of mental activity when found out. Consider the—agreed, less weighty—circumstantial evidence which connects the disappearance of Rex Quant with the presence of Oheans. And even if you do not concede any of the foregoing, still consider the fact that, on Rex Quant's second or credulous assumption, there is an indirect link between the mere existence of Ohe and the dangerous spread of the Phoenix mystery.

"I submit that on either of these grounds I've made out an adequate case for granting my request."

"Vote now?" Lunghi asked the assembly crisply. After a little hesitation, the "yes" lights came on, one after another, and then in a swarm.

"I put the question!" Lunghi barked, and once more the lights came on, but much more quickly. There were no negatives and no abstentions.

"So resolved," Lunghi snapped. "Immortal Karmesin, you may go to Ohe. You may use whatever method is necessary, up to and including the powers set forth in your request now granted, that is to say, degrees of commercial, communicatory and psychosocial sanction and, in the last resort, the threat of forcible entry with the support of naval forces, to gain access to the surface of that planet and to obtain, under duress or otherwise, the information necessary to a final solution of the problem defined to us."

XVI

A short while after the first contact between terrestrial man and his Ohean cousins, it had been politely intimated that the continuing presence of aliens on the surface of Ohe was disturbing some indefinable pattern of events. By then, it was already suspected that Ohe's people thought in terms terrestrial man was unaware of; consequently, no objection was raised to the Ohean suggestion that an orbital station might be established and used as a permanent meeting-place and headquarters for the visitors.

Ohe, never having achieved nuclear energy, was still using orbital stations for ferry transshipment and similar purposes. Terrestrial man, with a thousand years' mastery of fusion behind him, was accustomed to lift his deep-space vessels straight from planetary surfaces on nulgee drivers, and had found the miniature Ohean ports quite adequate for landing on.

Still, the arrangement preferred by the Oheans worked quite well, as Remlong was at pains to point out. Remlong was the administrative director of the orbital station, and, in effect, held power corresponding to a planetary ambassador's; he was the Galactofed spokesman in the Ohean system, and the first person to whom Ohe made its infrequent and unfailingly courteous requests. He was a nervous, skin-and-bone man who blinked often and seemed badly upset by Karmesin's arrival.

Having gone through the mill of the reception Remlong had laid on for him, having duly admired the station, exchanged compliments with the resident Ohean staff and endured Remlong's repetitious assertions about the satisfactory state of affairs here, Karmesin decided to go to the quick of the ulcer.

Cutting short yet another of Remlong's persuasive declarations, he said, "Director Remlong, you're put out by my visit. Why?"

Remlong, taken aback, blinked a dozen times very quickly. He said, "Ah—"

"Oh, don't worry about offending me!" Karmesin said impatiently. "I'm not a sensitive Ohean, masking injury to his ego with bland self-control. I'm a man in a hurry to solve a problem. Well?"

Remlong took a firm grip on himself. He said, "Very good. I understand that an agreement between ourselves and the Oheans has been trampled underfoot at Aryx. It's been clear to me, with many years of contact with Oheans behind me, that they are extremely offended and disappointed. According to my information, Ohean research teams had been invited to study the spread of the Phoenix mystery on a number of the worlds where it's attracted significant support, and had been given the usual permission to import whatever equipment they found necessary. This has been arbitrarily countermanded by yourself, and not content with this gross affront, which I regard as uncivilized, you've interfered with communications between Ohe and Aryx, so that for some while past it has been impossible to find out the fate of the research students there. A relief team of four left here for Aryx more than a month ago, and nothing has been heard from them, either. Are they being held incommunicado? And if so, for what reason? I may, say this is making my position intolerable."

"Considering that it must have been the Oheans who told you all this, you seem to be very well informed," Karmesin murmured.

Remlong hesitated, turning the words over in his mind. He said at length, "You're not implying that the Oheans have misrepresented the situation, are you? Because I decline to accept the idea until I'm given some reliable evidence from a contrary viewpoint."

"There isn't any," Karmesin said. "Communications between Aryx and here *are* being deliberately interfered with. We are introducing a known variable into a hitherto stable situation in order to carry out an experiment in psychosocial evolution."

"But—but that's disgraceful!" Remlong exclaimed. "You can't conduct experiments with human beings, even if they are nonths!"

"Why not?" Karmesin countered. "My information is that Oheans are accustomed to experimenting continually with their own people; I fail to see why you think it right for them and wrong for us."

"That's a ridiculous comparison! What Oheans do on Ohe is their own business. I'm saying that having asked them to aid us in tackling the Phoenix mystery we have no right to renege on our agreement. Especially when every bit of help they give us represents time taken from their own concerns, which are at least as important to them as ours are to us."

"Those concerns being... ?" Karmesin inquired delicately.

"Really, Immortal!" Remlong was getting heated. "You should know I can't answer that. We've been trying for a very long time to grasp Ohean goals, and they've, proved too subtle and refined for us."

"Is there anything subtle and refined about panicky lying?"

"Is there anything subtle and refined about a physical attack on a young girl?"

Remlong blinked furiously. "I—I don't see..."

"Do you think we'd do what we did on Aryx without good reason?" Karmesin blazed. "Have you so far learned to distrust your species that you'd rather take an Ohean's word than your fellows'? The Oheans on Aryx misused their position of privilege; among other things, they did attempt an attack on a defenceless girl, were caught in the act, and the two responsible committed suicide. Now get this!"

He leaned forward. "Nobody in the Ohean system, but myself and you, knows what I've just told you. If I discover that an Ohean knows, I shall conclude that you abused your authority; I shall further conclude that contact with Oheans is psychologically unhealthy for our species, and all contact wilt forthwith terminate. Do you understand me?"

Remlong's mouth worked, but he gave a sickly nod. Karmesin felt a grim stir of satisfaction. Of course Remlong would tell the Oheans; if Karmesin's assessment of the situation was correct, however, the Oheans would go to any length to maintain the fiction of continued ignorance, and would indeed be forced to concede Karmesin's demands, for fear of appearing too well informed.

"I'm glad that's straight," he said. "Now, during the tour of the station which you gave me, you introduced me to a certain Lambak Yat, calling him your leading expert on Ohean affairs. I'd like to see him privately as soon as possible."

Lambak Yat was physically different from Remlong, but not clearly distinguishable in his attitude to Ohe. Karmesin added that observation to his accumulation of assorted data.

"About a year and a half to two years ago, you will have had a requisition for a psychosocial briefing document on Ohe," he told Yat. "It was probably made in the name of the man who originally asked for it—a certain Rex Quant, hailing from Gyges."

"I remember that clearly," Yat agreed. "It was the first of a positive wave of requisitions which lasted several months."

"You presumably filled them."

"Oh yes. Not without difficulty, of course. Some of the material asked for wasn't available, because of the vast lacunae that still exist in our translating computers. I don't know whether you realize it, but we're totally dependent on computers to supplement the rather limited area of mutual comprehensibility between Federal Galactalk and Ohean. The Ohean language is an artificially refined instrument capable of unbelievable compression and subtlety; at a rough estimate, two-thirds of the vocabulary of an average Ohean is untranslatable except with qualifications, circumlocutions and up to five or six alternative phrasings which between them convey a faint shadow of the overtones, the associations, the implications—"

"Quite," Karmesin sighed, fearing that Yat's enthusiasm would run away with him. "How did you set about filling the various requisitions you received?"

"Well, naturally my first step was to consult the chief of the resident Ohean collaboration team. The system on which we operate is the only possible one; at all times we have a staff of about twenty Ohean—uh—philosophers would be the nearest word, I suppose, though that's a pretty poor equivalent. And they consent to stay here for a period of about one local year, expanding our computer-stored vocabulary and so on."

"You were saying... ?" Karmesin prompted.

"Oh yes. Well, between us, we determined which areas of the inquiry could be dealt with at once, and which would need special inquiry, new translation work, and so forth. We prepared the easier stuff at once, sent it off with an explanation of the difficulties attending the rest, and awaited a confirmation of the urgent need for the extra work. It came, and I requested the assistance of the Oheans on it, and naturally they agreed at once. They always do, although sometimes one feels almost guilty about the trouble we put them to. Still, they maintain that the privilege of observing our society and other non-Ohean cultures repays them adequately." Yat sighed.

"You don't agree with this?" Karmesin suggested shrewdly.

"Well, it is hard to see why they're so pleased at the chance of visiting other worlds for research purposes when the depth and richness of their own culture is—is literally unparalleled."

"How can one be sure of that?"

Yat gave Karmesin a shocked look. "Really, Immortal! If you'll excuse my saying so, one can't work here in the Ohean system for nearly forty years, as I have, without realizing the truth of what I just said."

"Apparently not," Karmesin frowned, and went on before Yat could speak again. "I brought with me from Earth a number of questionnaire tapes, of a simple type which I'm sure you'll be very well acquainted with, designed to measure emotional attitudes on a triaxial scale. This is part of the investigation of the Phoenix mystery which is currently in progress, as I'm sure you know."

"Yes, of course I know," Yat said stiffly. "Have you brought these tapes for analysis by the Oheans? I'd have thought any of their research teams nearer to Earth would have been happy to—"

He broke off, because Karmesin was chuckling. "You don't understand," he said. "These tapes are blank. I want you to administer them to your staff, under conditions of strict controlability. There must be no consultation with Oheans about the answers, for instance."

"What in the galaxy is the point of that?" Yat demanded.

"Ah... Well, you might say that it's an attempt to establish the degree of interaction between observers and observed in the Phoenix investigation. Persons like yourself, who have been closely in contact with Oheans for a long time, obviously represent the extreme pole of this interaction."

Yat pursed his lips and shook his head. "I'd have thought the Oheans were well enough able to allow for such a factor in their analyses," he said. "Still, as you say. I'll make the necessary arrangements."

"Without informing anyone of the content of the questionnaire, of course," Karmesin stressed. With a hurt look, Yat nodded.

"And while you're doing this for me," Karmesin pursued,

"I'd like to see copies of all the answers you supplied to the data requisitions you've filled since Quant's."

"I can arrange that easily enough," Yat agreed.

"Fine." Karmesin rose. As though struck by an afterthought, he checked his movement towards the door. "By the way," he said, "did the name Quant mean anything to you when you received his original requisition?"

Yat shook his head. "Absolutely nothing," he said. "In fact, to be candid, I wondered what somebody with no direct experience of Ohe hoped to make of the information provided. It would be like—oh—making guesses about an animal from its mere skeleton. To know its real nature, its color, its temperament, its habits, you need the living reality."

"And what does Quant's name mean to you now?" Karmesin asked.

"Precisely the same!" Yat snapped. "Ohe isn't something to theorize about away back in the Solar System. It has to be experienced directly."

"Hmmm..." Karmesin "rubbed his chin. "What's the orbital distance of this station from the planet, do you know?"

"Of course! It's about twenty-one and a half thousand miles, I believe."

"When did you last go down to the surface?"

Yat blanched. He said after a pause, "Why—ah—it must have been about..."

"A long time ago, if you've forgotten when it was!" Karmesin sarcasm cut like a whip. "Yes, Ohe is something to be experienced directly, isn't it? Why not try it sometime? I'm going to!"

XVII

A sort of terror had gripped Karmesin now. Although he and other terrestrial immortals had often enough come in contact with Oheans on various psychosocial research projects on various planets during the past century or so, this was the first time that an immortal had come to the Ohean system. He had told the inquiring Merry that one of the things which drove him was a sense of duty, and that was nearly accurate, though the word wasn't completely adequate. More precisely, the same sense of swift change going on about him entrained an irrational feeling that the immortals were the only members of their species with a long enough view of the process of psychosocial evolution to make shift at directing it, and whether it was due, as he sometimes thought in cynical moments, to the human fondness for power, or had resulted from his basic education, as he really suspected, this feeling made him aware of a responsibility to be exercised.

Privately, although never publicly, because the term had acquired connotations of conceit in galactic society, he would refer to this complex of ideas as "conscience".

Now, he was feeling guilty because of it. It had been wrong to think that because the first task of the immortals was to speak as the living voice of past history they could afford not to concern themselves with problems like Ohe. They were going to have to discharge their obligations in the name of all species, terrestrial and nonth alike.

Without vanity, it seemed now to Karmesin that he did have an obligation towards Ohe.

He had arrived at this conclusion simply on the basis of his talks with Remlong and Yat; he would get confirmation from the completed questionnaires he had asked for, but he was ninety per cent sure what they would reveal. A race whose culture was truly so far ahead of terrestrial man's Would not be so shaken by a chance suggestion—not seriously intended even by the man responsible—that they didn't know what they were doing. A really confident culture would not find it necessary to

impress its visitors as the Oheans had tried, with success, to impress Remlong and Yat.

The Oheans—this was Karmesin's considered verdict — had been more badly hurt by the cosmic accident which denied them the power to reach the stars than they had ever admitted. And the old wound, still sensitive, had been reopened by the arrival of another species whose ancestors had still been barbaric when there was an advanced technical civilization on Ohe.

They were suffering from wounded pride and perhaps a little jealousy, and all their protestations of gratitude could not mask the fact completely.

The crucially important question remaining to be answered was: did the Oheans know what they were doing, or did they not? In other words, was Rex Quant's suspicion, which Karmesin was now inclined to accept, of a connection between Ohe and the spread of disillusionment, termed the Phoenix mystery, a simple by-product of the proud, aloof impression the Oheans attempted to give the galaxy, or was there a deliberate plan to undermine, over a period of centuries, terrestrial man's confidence in his own destiny?

The answer to that question could only be found on Ohe itself, and before he made his request to go down—which might have to be backed by a show of force—Karmesin needed to have all available data at his fingers' ends.

In the cabin assigned to him in the orbital station, he settled down to study the flood of information Yat had supplied.

He scanned the physical data cursorily to begin with. He didn't particularly care about the geography of Ohe, its anomalous mineral resources, or the biology of its native flora and fauna. What concerned him was Ohe's history, particularly its psychosocial history, its development as a planetary society with the marks of stability which could only show when the species had learned to comprehend its own nature. There were plenty of human worlds now which had known nothing but stability, but as late as the colonization-period of Chichimeca, when Earth had still been divided into loosely-federated power-blocs, terrestrial man's understanding of himself had fallen short of that critical level.

When he had familiarized himself with the broad categories into which

the available information fell, Karmesin begin to study it with a rather personal form of concentration. He used current observations as his starting-point, chiefly those of the post-contact period, when experts from Earth had spent a considerable time on the planet itself, rather than accepting second-hand information from Ohean "philosophers." A point having caught his attention, he would seek reasons for it in another category of his data, and from there go to hunt contributory factors in yet another section.

Bit by bit, darting from economic geography to history to linguistics to physical technology to psychosocial analysis and back, he rounded out his picture of the alien world.

Information processing was what concerned him; it was a good index of the real state of the society. The more complex the culture, the more information it processed.

"The actions of the typical Ohean individual." Ah, this looked promising. He straightened in his chair.

"The actions of the typical Ohean individual are totally directed towards the hypothetical long-term goal of the species, which is, however, differently conceived by the various sub-groups of the society. The commonest term used for it (by approximately 23% of the population) has linguistic affinities with the ur-terminology for the conceptual subclass 'cerebral activity' and particularly the group 'thought/ subgroup 'formulation of concepts.' It was hypothesized by Ying Sen, on the basis of this resemblance, that the planetary goal might itself be a search for a planetary goal to replace the frustrated urge for starflight; however, it has been shown by Nogun on the basis of later findings that this assumption is an over-simplification. (See appendix and references to Ying Sen, 22, and Nogun, 1-14).

"It was hypothesized by Ying Sen also that a shame-factor was operative, and that the Oheans might wish to conceal in face of a star-flying people their lack of racial purpose. However, Lambak Yat has shown that this assumption was over-hasty; no attempt at dissimulation can be found on analysis of the information provided from Ohean sources."

Karmesin rubbed his chin. Ying Sen, apparently, had had considerable insight into this problem. Who was he, anyway? He checked the list of

references, and found that he was the psychosocial analyst attached to the staff of the embassy ship which followed the original exploring ship to

Ohe. In other words, he might well have caught the Oheans with their masks off.

Clever people, these Oheans.

"Classification of Ohean individual activity (see table, one hundred forty classes, twelve thousand seven hundred ten subclasses, six million separate activities approximately) reveals a pattern consistent with a known goal. The area of experimentation, for example, has receded within the span of documented history; immediately prior to the unification of the planet and early space-flights (see appendix to historical section) the status accorded to experimental science was high, thirty-four per cent of the total educational effort was expended on it and—"

Karmesin skipped again. All man-like races went through that phase if they ever came within striking distance of planetary unification; if they didn't, they stayed primitive.

"Formalization of the planetary society then continued rapidly, and may be interpreted in the light of Nogun's hypothesis that a racial goal had been determined in the interests of which the effort of the individual was to be voluntarily subsumed in the corpus of social effort. No trace can be found of an imposed decision; it is reasonable to assume that an overriding concept of ultimate purpose began to dominate the individual on Ohe as the concept of return to the divine state dominated certain cultures of pre-galactic Earth. The goal, while held to be in itself unknowable at present, was clearly defined in such satisfactory terms as to provide an ambition for the individual within society. The area dominated by experimental science receded, with a last spurt conspicuous in the disciplines which we would regard as biological (although by that time our term 'science' hardly corresponded any longer to the Ohean term), marked by the abolition of epidemic diseases, the establishment of an excellent system of geriatrics, and the virtual disappearance of neurosis and psychosis. At the same time reforms in language were initiated and proceeded rapidly, with the apparent short-term aim of rendering information more digestible to the individual. A mark of success here is that Oheans seldom require computers, though they have had advanced models for at least five millennia; social groups set up on an *ad-hoc* basis perform the same function more conveniently.

"The highest status is now occupied by acts of minimal analysis of data; the term used might loosely be translated as 'drawing more correct conclusions.' In some way not yet fully understood, every act is held to contribute in a greater or lesser degree to this overall activity. The mere drawing of breath is regarded as confirmation of the assumption that a man must breathe, and an almost mystical awe surrounds the fact of awareness. Consciousness belongs linguistically to an anomalous category; the term is derived from roots having the connotation 'precious, desirable, valuable' with overtones of fragility; accordingly, the mind is exercised, occupied with verbal and non-verbal, 'puzzles' (very inexact translation), and 'refreshed' at intervals by what Nogun aptly termed 'Communion with nature.' (See appendix on public activity.)"

Karmesin's heart seemed to hesitate. He turned up the section of the appendix referred to.

" 'Communion with nature.' Nogun's term for the concept underlying the periodical public rites conducted in parks, forests, or buildings devoted to the display or maintenance of vegetable organisms. See also 'Funerary rites.' "

Karmesin drew a deep breath, and chased that reference too.

"Funerary rites: Little emphasis is placed on termination of existence in Ohean thinking. It is not, in fact, regarded as a termination; the equivalent word for 'death' derives from roots meaning 'fulfillment, completion, absorption (of water by a plant or food by a man).' A person dying usually belongs to a small *ad-hoc* social group of the kind devoted to data-processing or organization of ritual activity, and in that case his death is treated as a ceremonial occasion of the kind Nogun terms 'communion with nature'; the social group repairs to a grove of trees or building containing vegetation and there carries out a simple valedictory rite."

Karmesin shot from his chair, clawing at the communicator for a circuit to Lambak Yat.

"Has any outsider ever witnessed a funeral on Ohe?" he threw at the startled image of the so-called "leading expert" on Ohean society.

"Why—uh—I don't think so," Yat stammered. "They're very private affairs, you know. But our friends here will certainly give you any

information you—"

"I'm *sure* they will!" Karmesin snapped, and broke the connection. He was panting with unaccustomed excitement, and his heart was thumping.

He ran back the section of tape which attempted to define the Ohean racial purpose, and stopped it at the words which had suddenly leapt into focus in his memory. "*The goal, while held to be in itself unknowable at present...*"

Pounding fist into palm, he gazed at the enigmatic blue-green-black world floating beyond the viewport of his cabin, and whispered, "You poor devils! You poor, miserable, idiot-proud devils!"

XVIII

Remlong was looking upset again. Rather cynically, Karmesin put it down to the fact that he had probably never seen an Ohean nervous and worried before. As far as Karmesin was concerned, the experience was no longer a novelty.

The Ohean in question was the "philosopher" who went by the name of Luster, and was currently in charge of the resident Ohean group at the orbital station. He had been presented to Karmesin—or rather, the other way around— during the immortal's guided tour of the station. He was on the small side for his species; his head barely reached Karmesin's shoulder, and his face was also atypical, being round and rather fleshy.

In the conference hall of the station, he stood at the far end of a table, crafted on Ohe; the discipline of manual labour was regarded as contributing to the hypothetical "racial goal" of the planet. A viewport behind him framed his mysterious mother-world. The brilliant polish of the wood before him reflected the blurred image of his face and body.

Karmesin stood for a long moment looking at him from just inside the door before giving a nod of greeting and moving to a nearby seat. He didn't say anything. Remlong, his manner nervous, tried to indicate that he should take a chair closer to Luster, but Karmesin pointedly ignored his signaling and even went so far as to yawn.

Luster finally gave in. He moved towards Karmesin, and with

considerable ceremony seated himself on the other side of the table.

"As I intimated to you on our first meeting, Immortal Karmesin," he said, "It's a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. I believe that members of my species have encountered colleagues of yours—even yourself—while engaged on research elsewhere in the galaxy, but you flatter us with your attention by coming to our home system."

Elaborate courtesy? Or a smoke screen of verbiage? Karmesin still had to reserve judgment, but he suspected the latter now.

He said, "Yes... I suppose immortality in the form — which I exemplify is unfamiliar to you."

He watched Luster closely for a reaction. There was none perceptible. The Ohean merely shrugged.

"As I imagine you know, our attitude towards—ah— death is different from yours. You regard it as repugnant, and as a waste. We, on the other hand, see it as a climax and a fulfillment of consciously directed effort."

"So I'm told," Karmesin murmured, choosing his inflection with care.

Luster did not yet, of course, know of Karmesin's discoveries at Aryx and Stonewall; it had only been Snow's shocked reaction which breached the veil of secrecy the Oheans had maintained around their "research tools", and Karmesin was at pains to study uninformed Ohean reactions on this subject as he had studied the accumulated data on their society in the light of this fresh knowledge.

Not knowing, therefore, what to make of Karmesin's last remark, Luster smoothly switched the subject.

"I confess I had always imagined that the admirable drive and exuberance of your own species would preoccupy your attention and that of your colleagues. It must be a demanding task to keep abreast of events on the galactic scale to which you now accustom yourselves. I find it rather flattering that we claim a portion of your attention." Luster smiled.

"Well, the interaction between our two species is hardly news," Karmesin shrugged. "Particularly as regards the Phoenix mystery, for example."

Luster gave him a thoughtful look. "Yes. Yes, certain of our people have had the privilege of assisting in the analysis of that problem. Within limits, of course."

Remlong, silent till now beside Karmesin, swallowed audibly. He was extremely embarrassed by what he considered Karmesin's incivility towards the Ohean.

"Within limits," nodded the immortal. "Speaking of death, by the way—as we were a few moments ago—a funeral is something I should very much like to see when I go down to your planet."

The words rested in the air like thick smoke waiting for a breeze to puff it away.

At length Luster smiled and tilted his head. He said, "It is your desire to go down to Ohe, then?"

"Naturally. You must understand that we immortals are different in some ways from the rest of our species. If I make a long trip to the Ohean system, I don't rest content with polite conversation in an orbital station at a distance of more than twenty thousand miles."

"One would hardly ask that you should do so," Luster nodded. "Very well. I am sure suitable arrangements can be made. You will forgive my pointing out something of which I'm sure you're already aware—that the organization of our society is somewhat sensitive to exterior influence, and to preserve what we generally translate as its harmony we like to delimit that influence. Perhaps you'd convey to me an idea of what you'd like to see, and I'll request a ferry for you."

"An Ohean ferry?"

"Certainly. Oh, we shall be honored to provide you with transport. It won't in the least discommode us."

"Hmmm." Karmesin rubbed his chin in his habitual gesture of concentration, and there was a moment's silence. Then he said, "No."

Luster blinked in a manner astonishingly reminiscent of Remlong's, and Karmesin spared an instant to wonder whether it had in fact been copied by one of them from the other, and if so from which by which.

"No," he repeated. "The ship which brought me, and which is waiting in orbit, will suit me far better. As to the delimitation of exterior influence on your society's—ah—harmony, I'm sure your resources will prove adequate to cope with the impact of a single individual, especially a member of a species on which you've accumulated so much information. Remlong!" he added, turning to the station director, "inform the captain of the starship that I'm coming aboard in an hour for an immediate descent to the surface of Ohe. I'll tell him where to put down when I arrive."

Pop-eyed with dismay, Remlong gave a shocked gasp. "You can't do that!" he exploded. "It's—it's *rude!*"

"We're fertile ground for the spread of the Phoenix mystery, aren't we?" Karmesin said in a musing tone. "I'm sure Luster sees what I mean. Hmmm?" He glanced at the Ohean, who was visibly disconcerted.

"Truly, Immortal Karmesin, while not wishing to give offense to one of your standing, I would point out that—any disturbance we may suffer apart—a visit for purposes of study of our society would be far better undertaken when suitable preparations—"

He stopped short, reading Karmesin's expression.

"Ah!" the immortal said softly. "You're beginning to catch on, aren't you? In *here*," he clapped his hand to his temple, "I have a thousand years' experience. And I walk! I talk a language understood by four hundred billion intelligent creatures! I am the voice of my race's history, and anyone who wishes to listen to me can hear what I have to say. I am going down to the surface of Ohe, Luster, and I am going *now*." He paused. "Tell me, do you have an insect-equivalent on your world which exhibits rudimentary intelligence? Most inhabited worlds do. We call ours 'ants'. It was customary in my young days to study the social and quasi-psychological organization of these creatures by introducing controlled variables into their environments; at its crudest, the technique consisted in flooding their nests, or stirring them with a stick, or lighting a fire nearby, and then watching what happened."

Appalled, Remlong blurted, "But you can't treat a nonth species the way you treat ants! I've already complained to you about this high-handed behavior, and after what you've said now I'm going—I'm going to make a report to Galactofed!"

"Oh, go away and turn Phoenix," Karmesin said crossly. "It's about the only thing you're fit for. I grant that we've never before considered studying a nonth race in this crude fashion." He kept his eyes steadily on Luster.

"But we've never before run across a nonth race which exhibits this combination of apparently purposeful action with a total lack of conscious, intelligent design."

There was a long silence this time. Finally Luster bowed his head. Looking at his own reflection in the beautifully polished table, he said, "Immortal Karmesin, you will not be welcome on my planet. But we would not be so discourteous as to try and hinder your descent to it. Moreover, when you land I am sure you will be shown anything you wish to see."

"Two corrections," Karmesin said. "I will not see what I wish to see any more than I will see what you wish me to see! And second: it's not that you won't be so discourteous as to hinder my descent to your planet; it's simply that you won't be able to by any conceivable means."

He rose, eyes blazing. "I am no stranger to hate, man of Ohe! I have endured a thousand years of being hated for what I am through no desire of mine. Hate this—this snivelling booby all you like!" He jerked his head towards Remlong, who was reduced to speechless despair by now. "But I warn you, hating is a thoroughly unprofitable occupation. It can't undo the decrees of nature, however much it may salve wounded pride."

Clambering down the flexible tube between the orbital station and the airlock of the starship, he wondered if he had spoken too openly to Luster. He would have preferred to request the Ohean to conduct the conversation in his own language, and hear a detailed computer-commentary on the phrasing used. But such a request would have tended to put Luster on his guard, and Karmesin's purpose depended on startling him.

In that, he seemed to have succeeded rather well. He had scarcely dared hope for such a violent reaction as the one which had concluded their conversation; having deliberately chosen the most extreme terms in which to put his view, he had expected a shocked rebuttal from which he might get a clue to Luster's own opinion of his position, not a total failure of self-control.

It wasn't all going to be as easy as that, though. Luster might have

absorbed a poor impression of terrestrial man through his encounters with pliable weaklings like Remlong and Lambak Yat. His race as a whole, though, could have no such illusions. They might have lost their bearings. They certainly hadn't lost the universal biped gift of perseverance.

They couldn't have.

Karmesin wondered if his own kind would have had the guts to keep going in face of such a seemingly hopeless handicap as the one he suspected the Oheans labored under.

XIX

Looking down at the face of Ohe from the limits of atmosphere, seeing the inevitable twinkle of lighted cities in the fringe of the night hemisphere, Karmesin was struck by the thought that any human-occupied world, whether colonized or populated by an indigenous nonth species, could be expected to become a tangle of transport routes: physical, like roads and tunnels, or abstract, like sea-routes, air-corridors and ground-to-space corridors. They would be systematized, but traces of the underlying randomness would remain.

On Ohe, scarcely anyone traveled. Routes were few, clear and predictable; the vehicles that followed them were mostly silky-smooth monorail cars driven by linear induction motors, involved like everything else in the overall harmony of planetary activity. Few goods were transported; they were grown or manufactured where they were needed. Like the inhabitants' ambitions, they were formalized and localized. Some students of Ohean life had found its simplicity admirable.

But not one, to Karmesin's knowledge, had found it preferable.

Cities, like everything else, were reflections of the basic assumptions of Ohean thinking. Whatever they might be. A typical city would have its population of about three million distributed into local communities of five to ten thousand, with their own services, their own ceremonial, and presumably their own function in the total society. Each was organized around a kind of park, which at the edge of the city would blend into open country.

Near such a city, he decided, would be a good place to set down, but

not at a spaceport. If the rigidity of Ohean thinking was as extreme as he imagined, they would have anticipated his using one of the regular ports as soon as Luster warned them of his intention.

Moreover, darkness would be psychologically helpful in the first instance. The Oheans could not have evolved completely away from the typically human preference for daytime activity.

Accordingly he left the ship just beyond the terminator. He was as well protected for the duration of his mission as the available information about Ohe and the technical skills of terrestrial man could make him, in clothing which was at once vehicle and armour; in the event of danger, the star-ship could reach him anywhere on the planet's surface within less than two minutes. But he hoped to avoid making an emergency call to it. The sonic boom of a twelve-thousand-ton ship running in the atmosphere at maximum speed was capable of leveling cities like a kick from a monstrous boot. After putting him off, the starship made one idle turn around the planet and headed back to a low orbit to wait. It was now known to the Oheans that Karmesin was on their planet. It might be some time before they discovered precisely where he had arrived.

Like an invisible angel, betrayed only by a whispering wind from his nulgee unit, Karmesin soared over the city of his choice, trying to gain an impression of it as a functioning unit. There were flo-ways operating on a strictly Ohean variant of the basic principle; there were monorails, and very few aircraft. When he had absorbed the local geography, he cut the power on the nulgee unit and descended insect-lightly in one of the ubiquitous parks.

They were not parks. They were places for ceremony and ritual, and in the one he had selected a ceremony was in progress. Invisible, he moved down aisles between sections of a crowd totaling perhaps six thousand, who sat on the local grass-equivalent—a cushiony low-growing plant somewhat resembling moss—under soft artificial lighting and faced a transparent dome, not more than man-high, under which grew a grayish, dusty-stemmed plant of creeper habit, trained on a simple frame.

Curious, Karmesin switched on a device which had been incorporated in his clothing, an improved version of the makeshift with which he had so startled Snow and Wanhope: from a microphone on his shoulder, by a permanently-open subspace channel, the words of the crowd's unison chant were fed to a translation computer and brought back to a

bone-conduction speaker taped against his cheekbone.

"All speakers: repetition of collective phrase," he heard. "We inflection indicating general use, make available, or give, our valuable or hard-earned power of conscious perception. Repeat: we, inflection—"

He cut it off. It would have been the similarity between such chants as this and pre-galactic mental exercises used by—say—the Buddhist mystics which made early visitors compare Ohe with the "god-drunk" societies of ancient Earth.

He paused where the aisles between sections of the crowd intersected, because the chanting was dying out and movement was beginning somewhere near the front.

A line of about a dozen elderly men and women rose to their feet and moved towards the transparent dome containing the straggling creeper-like plant. Nogun's facilely-named "communion with nature," doubtless! Karmesin's lips twisted wryly.

The first of the elderly persons bent before the dome, not in a posture that suggested worship, but with practised casualness, bringing his hands and forehead very close to the dome but not touching it. He waited a few seconds. Then he moved to resume his place, and the next in line repeated the simple sequence of actions.

More chanting began; Karmesin checked, but the phrase intoned was the same as previously.

When the last of the elderly Oheans had resumed his place, the chanting stopped abruptly. Not looking around, the first uttered a sharp phrase, which Karmesin heard in translation. It was the expression of a typical ritual problem used as a mental exercise; Nogun, not unnaturally, had compared these exercises, partly verbal, partly numerical, to the traditional koans of Zen, but had had the sense to see the two did not correspond. Ohean mental exercises had logical solutions, even if their terms were hard to accept.

This one, for example: "Postulation of a wind-water system such that—" And a lengthy set of triaxial co-ordinates. "Two islands with given physical properties." They embraced minerals, location, shape, temperature, vegetation. "Postulate active beings of animal nature." Here the

translation stuttered; the speaker was referring to Ohean qualities as abstract as fairness, conscience, rectitude.

And the information have been given, the task was to set valid conditions for the exchange of the two islands regarded as reciprocal foci of potential instabilities in the postulated wind-water system—roughly. Karmesin, concentrating on the faltering computer-commentary, was still wrestling not with the problem itself but the conceivable purpose of setting it when the answer was apparently achieved. At last, the crowd began to disperse.

In ant-like unison, the thousands of Oheans melted back to their homes, and Karmesin, floating above their heads, watched mystified the conclusion of the first of the famous Ohean rituals which he had personally witnessed.

When the park was empty, he drifted down to a spot near the dome and stared at it, his mind a tumult of conflicting ideas.

XX

At length he decided that any attempt to work out why the problem had been set was fruitless; it was probably a matter of subtle ethical judgments rather than anything interpretable in real-world terms. Instead, he bent to examine the dome more closely and confirm his automatic conclusion that the plant-like thing it sheltered was in fact akin to the "research tools" he had seen on Aryx.

As far as visual inspection permitted, he determined that it was. He hesitated. Then he switched off the field which conferred his invisibility, for it would exclude the delicate pseudo-neural currents emitted by the plant, and put up his hands to the level of his temples, as he had seen the Oheans do during their obeisances, and bent as they had done towards the dome.

A glade. No, that was wrong. A sort of avenue between tall and noble trees, arching together above his head. There was sunlight beyond, and its gold patched the ground randomly. Puzzled, he tried to examine one of the trees more closely—they were tantalizingly unfamiliar—but he found he could not. He had no control in this situation. He was compelled to observe passively.

The discovery gave him a reflex stab of panic, but he forced himself to be calm, and waited.

After a long time, there were changes in his surroundings. As though nature had grown impatient, the sunlight faded. A knife-cold wind chattered between the branches, picking the leaves from them and whirling them savagely into his face. He tried to flinch away, and could not. (Not even that! Not even that!)

Leaves blotted out the vision of the forest clearing, and a sense of decay and oppression overwhelmed him. It lasted a subjective eternity. Then there was a fresh stir of change, carrying overtones that were nearly of hope, but not quite, as though hope itself had become tired.

A growing. An extension, forward. Concepts of progress and development. An obstacle. Karmesin struggled to determine its nature, and failed; his best guess was a stone embedded in earth.

Associated concepts: mycelium, thread-like process from a central source, burrowing.

Snap.

Eating, pain, satisfaction, waste, frustration. He was still passive.

The awareness expanded abruptly. Not a forest, but a cave. Over and above and all around, sensed but not seen, the existence of a range of mountains steeper than any now present on Ohe. Most of the aboriginal peaks had been razed in the process of geotailoring the land-masses to provide equable weather. Within the mountains, arch-roofed caves of indescribable beauty. The beauty was boring. Karmesin recognized the nature of that boredom instantly. Before he could react in any way at all to his recognition, he was aware of more changes.

Heat in a hole, in a tunnel. Strains, stresses. Explosion! Tumbling in chaos, the beauty of the caverns, and a muted amusement without substance. Then there was darkness, and sense of tiredness. A waiting.

Karmesin snatched at the tattered remnants of his self-possession and fought his way back to his physical body. He moved a hand he could not feel to find a switch by sheer intellectual calculation. The switch closed. A field-disruptor built into his clothing came abruptly into operation. He felt

himself falling backwards, and was aware of sprawling on the mossy sward at the foot of the dome.

He was more exhausted than he had ever been before in his life. He barely had the energy to realize that the lighting had been dimmed around him, before he was compelled to close his eyes and let himself drop into oblivion, with one single inextinguishable command to himself and this was the only surviving trace of his normal willpower.

The command was *keep that switch closed!*

He woke to swishing footsteps, by the thousands, on the mossy ground, and leapt to his feet. It was daylight. A soft rain had fallen, and where he had been lying grayish fibrils showed among the green.

Coming into the park, as always at the beginning and end of a day, were the staid Oheans, puzzled to see him in off-world clothing, still more puzzled by his pale complexion and white hair. They were moving to surround him—not him, but the dome, he remembered. And remembering, remembered everything.

He was visible. Almost, he panicked and vanished, but caught himself in time. He activated his nulgee unit and soared from the ground, swooped back to the top of the dome and poised there, the consequent focus of the whole crowd's attention. Nearer the back of the throng, a few younger men and women were shouting excitedly, but the feeling of the assembly was clear: that a commotion was wrong, out of place, and inexcusable even if Karmesin was still more out of place.

"Translate!" he whispered urgently to the mindless computers waiting his bidding in the distanceless vacuity of hyperspace without the monstrous burden he had sensed on Ohe. "I am a thousand years old!"

He snapped up the volume of the tiny speaker on his cheek and piped the computer's obliging version of his claim through an amplifier composed of filaments within the fabric of his garments. Loud enough to carry to the edge of the crowd, the Ohean phrase rang out:

Invisible, Karmesin leapt skyward from the transparent dome, his mind a raging sea of anger, pity, and something else—something much too closely akin to insanity.

Where else? Eagle-wise, he surveyed the city. Everywhere the morning rituals, in the places which were not parks, the crowds which did not know what they were doing were gathering for the ceremony of dedication to foolishness—

There, then! Quickly! And shout with a computer's voice in a language he did not understand: "I am a thousand years old!"

Again, in another place: "I am a thousand years old!" And again. And not only at the morning ceremonies, because there the minds might be sealed by a millennium-weight of tradition, but also in the streets, in the houses, in the places which were not quite schools but served to form the thinking of the young among quiet arbors of dusty-gray plants with brain-roots leaking madness. Shouting!

"I am a thousand years old! Hear me! I, Karmesin, walk and speak a language understood by four hundred billion of my species—and you too, if you will hear me, you too can understand!"

They came after him within the hour, circling down the sky in stored-power nulgee floaters, the freest minds on Ohe and the worst-enchained. There was fusion-power available to Karmesin; he could have jumped up the currents of the air like a bubble seeking the surface of a river and left them trailing stupidly behind.

But he saw the way they came, not with menace, determined to eliminate this stick-wielding lunatic who shattered the peace of their ants' nest world to see what would happen, but with steadiness and resignation, mourners at the funeral of an age-old hope. The madness went out of him, and he waited, hovering, for their circle to close.

There was sunlight now, with the morning clouds shredding apart half a mile overhead, and the newcomers threw their vehicles open to the sky to look towards him without benefit of instruments.

Karmesin wiped his forehead. It was running unbelievably with sweat.

From the floater which had settled level with him and at the point where he faced it directly, a voice addressed him not in Ohean but in the galactic tongue.

"You are the immortal called Karmesin?"

"Yes."

"You are a thousand years old?"

"Give or take a few decades, so I am."

There was a pause. Then, as though forced out painfully, "What do you want with us, Karmesin? Why did you come to Ohe?"

Karmesin wanted to laugh all of a sudden. To recollect, now, the original purpose of his coming was to think how ludicrously petty it was, when the ruins of a whole culture were dropping about him like fragments of colored glass.

He said, "Why—I came looking for the man Rex Quant!"

Again, a long pause. At last the spokesman sighed.

"We will take you to him," he said. "But..."

"I know what's become of him," Karmesin said. "Now, I know."

Even knowing—it was a shock.

A gaudy group, the floaters had escorted him through the clear morning air across more than half a continent, to a city where sea, forests and low hills met in a local microcosm of the whole planet. They had invited him down, swooping over the streets and parks where the people went about their futile business, to the foot of an over-arching dome like the thousand-times-magnified counterpart of that sheltering the greyish plant-that-wasn't—

He gave up struggling to attach labels, and was content to absorb the impressions.

Beneath the dome, tunnels. Root-systems. What? Never mind. Organic complexes unbelievably vast, grown deliberately and fostered over century upon century in pursuit of a vain goal. And here, cradled in a life-sustaining womb of transparent membranes, naked, vacant-eyed, artificially nourished, head garlanded with trailing grayish fibrils from the planet-devouring monster, was Rex Quant.

Karmesin looked as long as he could bear to, and then turned away.

"What were you trying to do?" he demanded. "Wipe from his memory the truth you were afraid of?"

Uncharacteristically, the Ohean spokesman seemed at a loss for his answer. At length he said, "We—attempted it. It seemed the most... civilized solution. But the traces go too deep, and his whole mind has..." He broke off; after a further pause he added, "We regret it. We—apologize."

"He is nothing to me," Karmesin said. His voice was strangely harsh and dry. "He is nothing now, I suppose, to my species as a whole. But there is a girl who will weep."

He shot a sharp, accusing glance at the Ohean.

"Maybe that's beyond your comprehension. You don't care about *one*."

The Ohean was silent.

"Well, what are you going to do now?" Karmesin said roughly. "Apart from blaming yourselves for your ancestors' stupidity!"

As though to voice an objection, the Ohean framed words. Karmesin cut him short.

"Do nothing rash!" he warned. "Even if you could conceal the truth from the rest of the galaxy, you cannot conceal it any longer from yourselves. Perhaps it would be kindest to leave you to work out your own destiny—again—and this time get it right. You may take anything of ours that you think necessary."

"Must we borrow now?" the Ohean said bitterly.

"You haven't got much of your own," Karmesin said with deliberate brutality. "And you haven't felt any qualms about borrowing up to now, have you?" He shot a glance at Quant, hanging in his giant womb, and felt his palms prickle with sweat.

There was discussion among the Oheans. Karmesin had no desire to know what was said. These were the freest minds of Ohe. They must be, for they, of all the planet's millions, had learned what he meant and had come to speak with him. But they were fools.

He decided at last to wait no longer. On foot, as though the burden of normal weight were a reminder of his human estate, he plodded to the entrance of the dome and there spoke wearily to the air, telling the starship to come and find him.

When the captain asked him his further orders a short time later, he paused for thought before replying. When he spoke, his own words surprised him.

"Take me to Aryx," he said. "There's something I must..."

His voice trailed away. He turned and looked out of the viewport at the blue-green-black globe of the planet Ohe, and went on staring at the port long after the dive into hyperspace had blanked it and the entire universe from view.

XXI

It was all too obvious that Dombeno was put out by the return of the unpredictable immortal, although when he received him in the variparent sphere which formed his office, high above the city of Aryx, he did his best to be civil, and attempted discussion of the way events had developed since Karmesin's departure for Ohe. Trying to keep his mood from coloring his words, he reported the lodging of a complaint by the Ohean research team from Stonewall with the Galactic Federation, the curious nervous breakdown which some of the Oheans had suffered within a week of Karmesin's order to stop them communicating with home, and other related matters.

To everything that was said, Karmesin returned at most a nod or a grunt. His mind seemed to be totally preoccupied by his own thoughts.

"When will the girl be here?" he demanded eventually.

Dombeno glanced out over the city. "Soon," he said. "I gave instructions for her to be located and brought here as soon as your message came from orbit." He hesitated, and then went on with forced eagerness, "We agreed with the authorities on Gyges to co-operate in the search for Rex Quant, by the way. We—"

"Rex Quant's on Ohe," Karmesin said wearily. "And he probably won't

ever be fit to come back. That's why I'm here."

Dombeno's eyes rounded, but before he could expostulate the call signal sounded on the communicator bobbing in the air beside his head. He spoke to it, and looked relieved.

"They found the girl. She's on her way up now."

Karmesin turned to select a chair and dropped into it. After a pause, Dombeno went on, "Do you mean you came all the way back from Ohe to here just to see the girl and tell her? I find that incredible! A message would have served!"

Karmesin gave his skeletal smile. "It would be a nice sentimental touch, wouldn't it?" he said wryly. "But—no. It's one of the reasons I came back to Aryx, but there are others of greater importance." He leaned forward.

"I'm going to be a considerable nuisance, I'm afraid, but the results will be worth it. I now have sufficient information on the spread of the Phoenix mystery to begin the task of its elimination, and Aryx strikes me as just about the best starting-point for the job. It won't be easy. We have more than a hundred years' ingrained impressions to erase. But we can get over the teething troubles here, and after that we can tackle the other infected worlds."

"Well, that's good news!" Dombeno exclaimed, his expression brightening. "I suppose it was something you learned from the Oheans which gave you the answer."

"No. It was something the Oheans learned from me."

Dombeno looked blank, but before he could speak again Merry Duner was announced.

She came nervously into the office, clutching the same purse she had been using when she first encountered Karmesin, hardly acknowledging Dombeno's presence even with a glance but keeping her gaze fixed on Karmesin. There was a moment of taut silence before the immortal stirred.

"I have bad news for you, Merry," he said in a gentle voice. "You will never see your Rex again."

Merry closed her eyes for a few seconds. When she answered, however, her voice was quite steady.

"You've found out what became of him?"

Karmesin nodded. "Sit down," he invited. "I want you to listen very carefully to what I'm going to say, because in essence it's the report I'm going to make to Galactofed, and so it's destined to be part of history eventually. I want to know if it seems right to you. I want to know if I can make it clear to you that the Oheans are the most pitiable unfortunates ever to walk a planet in this galaxy."

Dombeno started, and Merry shook her head as though dazed.

"Pitiable?" she said. "But I thought—"

"Everyone thought that," Karmesin said, smiling without humor. "But listen. I'll make it as clear as I can.

"Did your Rex ever mention to you a hypothesis which used to be entertained in the days when quasi-intelligent machines, advanced computers and so forth, were just beginning to make their impact on society? The hypothesis I refer to was this: that machines more complex than the human brain might be instructed to evolve still more complex examples of their own kind, and these in turn to evolve others, until finally they transcended human ability to comprehend their workings?"

"N—no. I don't think Rex ever mentioned an idea like that."

Karmesin sighed. "I'm sometimes surprised at the things which get overlooked," he mused. "One can't say they're forgotten, because they must be recorded somewhere, but one's standards of what matters and what doesn't matter change so rapidly, as though there are fashions in thinking as fickle as fashions in clothing, or slang..." He briskened. "I'm sorry, I'm rambling.

"Let me first recapitulate what everyone knows of the history of Ohe. Like any other humanoid race, the Oheans had ambitions to spread from their planet towards the stars. The well-known mischance which deprived them of access to high-number elements, and so to what we've found to be the easiest path to nuclear energy, frustrated that typically human dream.

"Foiled, they still had to select some alternative racial goal, equally satisfying psychologically. One of the platitudes of psychosocial studies is that a stable unified planetary society requires such a goal to focus the surplus of psycho-social energy formerly dissipated in such sinks as war, ideological conflict, and the task of perfecting the society itself.

The goal which the Oheans picked for themselves was perhaps the most grandiose concept ever evolved by intelligent beings. Since they could not progress outwards, they decided to progress inwards, and to—to force, if you like, the evolution of a superhuman order of awareness, ultimately to become a planetary overmind with a consciousness as far above human intelligence as our intelligence is above the blind mechanism of the social insects."

Dombeno, who had been listening with pop-eyed concentration, said into Karmesin's pause, "But—but that's a perfectly clear and well-defined aim! I thought the whole point about Ohean society was supposed to be—"

Karmesin interrupted him by raising a hand. "Patience. Let me finish. I know what you're going to say, and you're absolutely right.

"Consider, though, the means adopted by the Oheans to make progress towards their goal. You recall the grayish, long-stranded plant-like organisms which we found here?"

"I'll never forget them! Dombeno said grimly. "The trouble we had through that, one way and another!"

"It must have been a desperate decision to use such things on another world," Karmesin reflected. "However, I'm getting ahead of myself again. My point is that, not having any idea how a super-consciousness could be sustained without a physical envelope, the Oheans applied themselves to the manufacture of synthetic organisms, vegetably independent of preformed protein sources and other animal limitations, and theoretically capable of indefinite expansion to sizes which make primitive rain forests the only adequate comparison. I've seen one such of these artificial—well, containers!—for intelligence on Ohe, and it's monstrously large.

"As you know, they very early provided a means of communicating with such synthetic organisms. We have mechanical devices which can affect and manipulate electro-chemical balances within the brain, and so condition thinking, memory, the storage of conceptual referents, but our

equipment is mindless and crude. Attempting similar processes from a biological standpoint, the Oheans settled on an infallible method of making communication possible. Each and every one of their artificial intelligences was programmed, in ways I haven't fathomed, by the literal assimilation of a human mind. They claim, you know, to regard death as a climax and a fulfillment, and if they'd achieved what they set out to do they'd have every right to make that claim and be proud of it. "Only...

"Consider the mental preparation required to—to acclimatize a human personality to this transfer. Consider the mental, psychological disciplines which are necessary. Consider the degree to which all other activity must be subordinated to this single purpose. The pleasure, the enjoyment, all the humanly ordinary facets of existence must be subjugated to the purest intellection, because only that is to be transferred at the end of a person's life and absorbed into the embryo planetary awareness.

"And *awareness* here is the right word—not intelligence, barely even consciousness—because while these artificial organisms do have perception of their environment it's dominated by their power to perceive neural currents and from them analyze concepts in the minds where they originate. It's a fantastic achievement anyway, which no one else has matched, but it's—it's sterile.

"It can't have been long before difficulties of communication, for all their care, became apparent. Well, one presumes they were foreseen; after all, the ultimate goal was to force the evolution of something beyond intelligence. But if the Oheans hadn't started to suspect something had gone wrong, they wouldn't have created such a linguistic smoke screen around their racial purpose when we, by accident the heirs of the stars, contacted them. They were desperately afraid that an error might have occurred to make their efforts futile. "And it had. "In their attempts to prepare individuals psychologically for a continuation of existence as factors in a corporate supermind, they ruthlessly stripped their society of all the elements of variety, change, stimulating accident, which are the goads of psychic evolution even more than of physical evolution. Listen, I understood this *immediately*, on the first occasion when I attempted the direct-awareness communication which the Oheans maintain with their artificial organisms. I recognized beyond a doubt, within minutes, a sense which I've become only too well accustomed to: a sense of infinite, illimitable, inexpressible *boredom*. For thousands of years there has been no significant change in Ohean society; it's been a repetition, a repetition,

a repetition, frustrating the very purpose to which it's dedicated."

Karmesin's voice was shaking, and he had to pause and wipe sweat from his face. Noticing Merry's look of inquiry, he gestured for her to speak.

"Do Oheans laugh?" she asked softly.

Thoughtfully, Karmesin nodded. "Did you think of that because of something an Ohean said to you?"

"Yes. Snow told me, on the boat home to Stonewall, just after you came here before, that they took pleasure in orderly arrangement, or something like that, while we could take it in—uh—being suspended by imagination between reality and nonsense. Or some such phrase."

"I doubt if an Ohean has laughed for ten centuries," Karmesin said.

There was another moment of silence. Then Merry said, "I begin to see why you want us to pity them."

"It's a reason I hadn't thought of myself, but it's a good one," Karmesin agreed. "Well, here is this boredom, and it feeds on itself. The only use to which their intended-to-be superhuman faculties can be put, apart from collecting endlessly repetitive information from replicate exterior minds, is—is daydreaming! And problems arising in these idle musings are taken by the Oheans and elevated to the status of necessary mental disciplines.

"One more thing I must make clear. The Oheans are indisputably brilliant as psychosocial analysts, and when I first began to suspect what their trouble was, I wondered how so glaring an error could have passed unnoticed. Then I caught on. Their brilliance at psychosocial studies is due to three things: an exceptionally high average racial intelligence—doubtlessly eugenically selected for and consciously stimulated; a vast capacity for processing data not as we do, by inhuman machines, but by means of their artificial organisms which are human-oriented by virtue of their own nature; and the fact that shortly prior to the advent of ourselves they had taken the decision to re-establish psycho-social analysis in order to settle the question of whether they had gone wrong or not."

There was a grunt from Dombeno, who nodded several times.

"I see!" Merry exclaimed. "Then, presumably, when we contacted them, they were, well, kind of jealous, because we had what they originally wanted, and they'd settled for what they still regarded as slightly second-best, and even *that* was going sour on them, but they concealed the truth from us because they were ashamed. Is that it?"

"I'd put it a bit more elaborately," Karmesin said. "But you've grasped the essential idea very clearly."

"What a terrible thing to happen!" Merry said, staring at nothing. "What an absolutely *terrible* thing!"

XXII

Dombeno gave a cough. "Ah—you did say that all this had somehow given a key to the problem of the Phoenix mystery," he ventured. "And I think you said it was something the Oheans learned from you—ah...?"

"That's right." Karmesin stirred on his chair. "You must understand the desperation the Oheans felt when they saw the magnitude of our achievements. Their own, which we can admire, and should, seemed hollow to them. Maintaining the outward appearance of vast intellectual and cultural superiority—you should meet some of the people we have out in the Oheans system, by the way, who practically worship Oheans!—they still felt envy.

"You see, it must have appeared to them that not only had terrestrial man attained star-travel, but—as it were, in a fit of absent-mindedness—we'd also done something more practically useful than they had in their chosen sphere. I refer to the creation of immortals. I'm here, talking to you as anyone would, and you understand me in ordinary human terms. Yet I'm the possessor of a thousand years' experience, and I serve a definite function for the species. Contrast that with the Oheans' suspicion that their vaunted super-intelligences were decaying into day-dreaming and boredom and returning nothing in exchange for the total direction of the planetary society towards augmenting them.

"The rise of the Phoenix mystery, which we—impressed by their skill in psychosocial analysis—invited them to help us tackle, was obviously due to what Rex Quant suggested. The mere presence of another culture with

what seemed to be inconceivably superior concepts and ideals reacted with our dissatisfaction, lack of a sense of fulfillment, alienation-whatever you call it, it's been the same for millennia—which is, after all, the divine spark firing our ambition, so we can't eliminate it. Result: *accidie*, despair, nihilism.

"The Oheans must have realized this at once. And so they were faced with a choice. If they decided deliberately to foster Phoenix ideas, concealing their cause from us, might they undermine our galactic domination? Of course, intellectually, they must have been aware that the chances were millions to one against success, but they were tempted. Now that's why they brought their so-called research tools to Aryx; man is a technological beast, and Aryx is the most technologically advanced planet where the Phoenix mystery has a hold, as you know, Dombeno. Where better, then, to take the risk of having this well-kept secret exposed in order to identify precisely the forces at work so that they might later be engendered artificially?

"Only Rex Quant came to Aryx. Young—only about forty—iconoclastic, a psychosocial historian, nominally and by training, but possessed of an intuitive insight into contemporary psychosocial problems which put him into the class of true geniuses. At the time of his arrival in the Mira

Hotel, with his mind boiling with his new ideas about the Phoenix mystery, its connection with Ohe and the fact that his suggestions were resulting in the vast, highly-paid research scheme with which I too was to be associated... then, by sheer chance, two Oheans were not merely also in the hotel, but busy gathering the harvest of data from their web of—oh!" Karmesin snapped his fingers impatiently. "We shall have to invent a proper name for these Ohean organisms!

"Worse than anything else about Rex Quant was that he had suggested, even if he didn't take it very seriously, that the Oheans didn't know what the hell they were playing at—I quote. Imagine the effect on two Oheans already terrified that the secret of their 'research tools' might be exposed, thinking very specially about that risk because of what they were doing at the time.

"The emotional shock which left Rex Quant's spoor in room 8010 of the Mir a Hotel followed the sudden intrusion of two Oheans, badly frightened by what they'd detected, and..." Karmesin spread his hands. "They took him away. As neatly as possible they made it appear he had never reached

the hotel; they tampered with the memories of people who had had dealings with him, they made a simple amendment in the registration memory, and hoped against hope that no one would discover their trickery. They hadn't time for more elaborate precautions; they had to get away from Aryx with their cargo of collected data, and they dared not miss their next flight for home because although the direct journey from here to Aryx isn't exceptionally long there's no direct service, and you have to juggle connections. They'd have had to wait almost a week for the next convenient flight off-world, and hide Quant during that time.

"It might very well have come off, but for you, little one." Karmesin glanced at Merry.

She shook her head firmly. "Please, Immortal!" she said.

"Don't say that. It's not true that I made any important difference. You'd have been looking for Rex anyway. They tell me I was helpful in other ways, but it was pretty much pure chance."

She bit her lip. Then, "What — became of him?"

"He's dead," Karmesin said without a trace of hesitation; after all, in the important sense the words were literally true. "I'm very sorry," he added.

"I don't think I was expecting to see him again, really," the girl said. She looked away, and after a moment covered her face with her hands.

"I—I'd rather not know any more than that," she choked out.

"As you wish," Karmesin said. With uncharacteristic awkwardness, he went on, "There's no further need for you to stay if you don't want to. It just occurred to me that it might be easier to hear the news this way than be getting a message at home."

She nodded, rising from her chair blindly, and made towards the door. On the point of leaving, she turned back.

"Thank you," she said simply, and was gone.

"What did become of Quant?" Dombeno asked from a dry throat. "Was it something pretty horrible?"

"Very," Karmesin snapped. He jumped up and strode across the floor to stand close to the variparent wall and gaze out over Aryx. The city was in shadow of a thick cloud that had blown up to obscure the sun.

"Phoenix..." he murmured after a while. "We've not only got to control this Phoenix thing, Dombeno. We've got to learn from it. We've got to learn what the Oheans were trying to learn, and for the same reason, so that we can apply the correct forces to foster it and make it spread."

"What?" Dombeno blinked, his expression uncertain. "But — but why?"

"Oh, not here!" Karmesin rapped. "Not on any of our worlds. On Ohe! They've got to go through this cycle of destruction and resurrection. Everything they believed in and prized will have to be torn down, so that a fresh beginning can be made. Exactly what the Phoenixes have been advocating for our species, isn't it? I wonder what they'll make of their second chance..."

His voice tailed away as he frowned speculatively into the future.

"You'll find out, won't you?" Dombeno said sourly. "You'll be there to see it happen!"

"Yes!" Karmesin's expression lightened, until he looked almost happy for the first time that Dombeno could recall. "Yes, of course!" He gave a harsh laugh, and added cynically, "If I last, that is. If I can stand the strain."

Dombeno muttered an answer, but Karmesin paid no attention. Outside, a wind was rising, and while he watched it tore the veil of cloud away from the sun and the city sprang into a brilliant polychrome glow, as the gorgeous colors of the phoenix in the legend sprang from the dull gray ash of its extinguished pyre.

Book Description:

The Rites of Ohe opens with a young woman sneaking into a hotel room. It turns out she is convinced that something happened to her lover there a few months previously — this was the last place he was seen before he disappeared. Nobody believes her, but then a chance confrontation with Karmesin, one of a small group of human immortals, changes things. Karmesin becomes convinced that something strange did happen.

Karmesin's investigations quickly focus on a the mysterious non-human, though very humanoid, residents of the planet Ohe (called that because it has no heavy elements). The residents of Ohe are regarded as experts in sociology, and they have been recruited to help diagnose something called the "Phoenix Mystery", a violent cult plaguing the human worlds. The Oheans are a much older civilization than humans, but hamstrung by their lack of heavy metal, they never really explored beyond their planet.

The mystery inevitably leads Karmesin to Ohe itself, and to some surprising discoveries about the real motives and real accomplishments of the people of Ohe. It's a pretty interesting book, though perhaps just a bit slight — I think it might have worked better at about half the length. It's also, as with a fair amount of Brunner novels, a bit subdued in tone — not quite morose but not triumphal, either. Solid work, though, and more evidence that you can will almost never fail to be entertained by a Brunner book.