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# Endless Shadow by John Brunner

## I

There are machines to move, that do move, half a million people a day from world to world as ex-peditiously as postal packages and with them million tons of freight like entries in a ledger, balancing, and I am Jorgen Thorkild walking. On two feet. Down a corridor. I could have sent for any of them. Waited for them. Instead, I walk down a corridor between two faceless lines of doors, hearing at the edge of hearing the noise within. Layered, the building, this part above ground, to look out from the windows over the city and work distracted by the outer sunlight. This layer: RIGER'S WORLD. Earthside representatives. This door named after Koriot Angoss.

Jorgen Thorkild paused with his hand out to the lock of the door. He was Director of the Bridge System. This door, like every other door here, would unlock for him if he merely set his hand to it. He listened.

Beyond the door, audible but fined down to a sharp cutting edge, someone singing. The dialect of Riger's World was not too far off that of Standard Earth speakers. The song was bawdy. After a few lines, someone with an instrument—it seemed acoustic, rather than electronic—chorded in an accompaniment, feeling for the structure of the simple melody. He closed the last inch-gap between his hand and the door, and the lock

clicked.

Koriot Angoss, not at his desk with its banked electronic equipment, but sitting on a padded stool from his home world, an untidy man with wild hair and a grin that showed a gold front tooth, held in one hand a mug of some pale brown liquid—a kind of beer, maybe. And on the long padded bench under the big window of the office, his confidential human secretary, the girl Maida Wenge, fingered the instrument Thorkild had heard through the door. It was an air-bellows device, an accordion of sorts. She stopped directly she saw Thorkild.

Angoss walked himself around the stool, sitting, moving his feet sidewise. He raised his mug to Thorkild.

"Good day, Director," he said, changing back from his native dialect in which he had been singing to Standard Earth. His accent showed slightly, but he had been here several years and worn it thin. "Will you take a mug with us?"

Thorkild shook his head, letting the door slide shut. He stood looking down at Angoss. It wasn't right. Was it? It couldn't be right for a man of such responsibility.

He said, unable to yield to the desire to speak of right and wrong, fitting and unfitting, "You're sending us a problem, I understand."

Angoss got to his feet and helped himself to more beer—it smelt like beer—from the jug standing in the middle of his flat desk-top. He said, "We have none on Riger's. Do we?"

"One you seem anxious to be rid of." Thorkild spoke evenly, but that cost him effort. "The preacher Rungley."

"Him," Angoss said, and sat on his stool again. "His sect is the Coppersnakes, they tell me. You can ignore them. And him." He waved again at the jug on the desk. "Sure you won't?"

"I haven't time," Thorkild said. "And that isn't an adequate answer."

Angoss parodied a look of hurt pride. "Don't you trust me?" he said.

"Why can we ignore him? I don't like the sound of him."

"Director, how many crazy preachers have you had come over the Bridges with, the much publicized intention of converting Earth?" Angoss

said with a sigh.

"Many, A few have given trouble."

"Rungley wont be one of the few. Look: the Coppersnakes are an offshoot of a sect which once flourished in Continental North America, result of a bastard crossing between an African fertility cult and Christianity. They handle snakes as proof of faith. They have a built-in check-and-balance mechanism—every so often someone gets bitten, and gets very sick or dies, and half the congregation changes its mind. You slip a few king cobras, kraits and mambas to Rungley. Inside a week he'll be hospitalized for the first time, and after that he'll likely go home."

It sounded like a sensible solution. Only, sensible solutions from a man found in working hours (not long hours, not overly demanding work) drinking beer with his secretary and singing a bawdy folksong?

Thorkild said, "What's their strength on Riger's World?"

"They meet in a hand-carpentered wooden hut." Angoss took another pull at his beer. "Since Rungley announced he was coming to Earth, they've built an annex to the church. They get maybe sixty people to a meeting."

"Why in hell don't you keep your archaic survivals to yourself?" Thorkild said. He didn't mean to be so brusque.

The girl Maida Wenge looked at him with somber, dark-pool eyes. She was beautiful by her own world's standards, but for Earthly tastes was too broad-hipped, too full-mouthed.

"You spliced us into the Bridge System," Angoss said coolly.

Thorkild hesitated a moment. Almost, he demanded to know what the point of that remark was. Then he saw what answer he would get. Abruptly he spun on his heel and went out of the office. Even before the door slid closed, he heard Angoss say, "Loving, again—highing the key for my basest notes have stretched my voice."

Riger's World, Platt's World, Kayowa, Earthside representatives. Busier on the layers above, for Platt's and Kayowa were taking immigrants currently. He saw it with his mental eye as he went to his own floor,

topmost on the building, where he ruled. Young for the fantastically responsible post—when he succeeded Saxena, less than forty. Equipped for it. That counted and nothing else did. Handsome, they told him: just under two full meters tall, his hair blond and shading to red, his eyes piercing blue, his build muscular, but lean because of his great height. Jorgen Thorkild, Director of the Bridge System.

Tired as hell. Why not?

If you were an Earthside representative for a whole buzzing lively world, you rated one or more human secretaries, as Angoss rated Maida.

If you were the Director, you rated a string of them.

If you were an Earthside representative, you had a staff of agents here and at home, obeying your orders, acting in your name.

If you were the Director, you had a staff numbered in thousands, here and everywhere.

And you still did the work.

He went in through the outer office. He said nothing to the busy men and women there. Only when he took his place at his desk did he speak to the air, activating the communicator with a coded order, and continuing.

"Anything since I've been out?"

"Responsible van Heemskirk called, and will call back in a few minutes," said a voice from the desk. "Also Alida Marquis called, and wants you to call her. And Inwards Traffic wants a decision on the Rungley case."

Alida—

He thought for a moment about Saxena, and wished he had not, and slid open a drawer in his desk. There was a portrait laid flat there. It showed the face of a worried man. He was not handsome. He looked as tired as Thorkild sometimes felt without showing it.

"Sir?" The puzzled voice came again from the desk.

"What was that?"

"The Rungley case. If Inwards Traffic hold him any longer, we'll be infringing the summary right and liable to suit."

"Let him go on his way." Thorkild thought that this was a decision made by an untidy man drinking beer and singing a dirty song, and it was still his decision. It was always his. Whether he fathered it or adopted it.

He thought of it like that because of Alida.

Then he wished he had not thought of Alida.

He said, controlling himself with determination, "But to supplement that, Rungley will want snakes. Supply them from the resources of Game Conservation. Try one of the major zoos if there's no other possibility. Make sure they're poisonous as hell. I want him in hospital within seven days and back on Riger's World inside a month, understood?"

"Yes, Director. Shall I call Alida Marquis?"

Thorkild felt a stab of unaccountable and foolish anger. He knew what he was going to say was self-defeating. He knew it would prejudice his chances, perhaps hopelessly. He said it.

"No. Let her call me back."

"Very good, Director. And... oh, Responsible van Heemskirk is calling again. Shall I put him through?"

"And be damned to him." But Thorkild said that to himself. Aloud, he merely agreed.

Responsible van Heemskirk appeared in the office. He was probably some miles away, but the solido equipment serving the Bridge Center was the finest possible and the illusion was perfect. He said, "Day, Jorgen."

"Day, Moses." Fat as butter and twice as greasy. Unfair. A career politician, and clever. Perhaps he was genuinely of an agreeable disposition. Only with politicians, how to know?

"We have these two aspirant worlds," van Heemskirk said. "Ipewell and Azrael. This afternoon all right?"

"Moses, you know that if there's one thing I hate—"

"It's showing round parties of giggling outworlders. I know." The voice from the illusory image was soothing, and a ripple indicating a sigh moved under the yellow satin blouse and was followed by a shrug. "However, it's the standard procedure, and they must know what the

Bridge System is, and they are important on their own worlds, and consequently we must do them the honor of being shown the Bridge Center by its most important man. And... we have this argument every time."

Thorkild had to nod. He said, "All right, when?"

"Fifteen hours. Usual procedure, of course."

"Ipewell and Azrael," Thorkild said. "What are they like?"

"Outworlders," van Heemskirk answered, with some contempt. "But you'll see. Until fifteen, then, and don't be so miserable. This only happens once a year or so."

"True. Moses! Just a moment before you cut out." Thorkild raised his hand as if to stop the intangible image by claspng hold on it.

"Yes?"

"How many times have you gone by Bridge?"

"I don't know. But no more often than I could help, except for vacations. Why?"

"I just wondered," Thorkild said.

The plump man looked at him, raising one eyebrow. He said, "And you? Every day?"

"No," Thorkild said. "Like you, when I have to. Until fifteen, then. Good-bye."

He saw the image dissolve. Then he went on looking at the place where it had been.

Half a million people a day, he thought. And I walk. Who are we? What are we?

Should he call Alida?

He opened the drawer again, and looked at Saxena's drawn face, and thought about Alida because he had to.

## II

When the sun came out on this city, and he had seen it come out, it looked incongruous. This time of mists, near dawn, and the occasional lift of wind and sift of drizzling rain, with the grayness of it, was more appropriate.

Jacob Chen drew close the concealing cloak about his neck, the hood over his head, and walked circumspect through the street. The buildings beside him were mostly of dark stone, a little glinting for the sheen of wet upon them, which caught and reluctantly gave back the occasional glimmer of the lights.

There were lights in a few windows, too. Not many. It was not yet dawn.

One should not think of climate as forming man, in this age when man could form climate. Here, had they neglected to do so because of economic difficulties, or from some obscure principle? He did not yet know. He ought to know. He felt he had failed in his duty by not knowing. Worse still, he had failed himself as he thought of himself, and doubt of his own capacity was the fearfulest thing he could face.

If they were hiding facts from him— But he had come out because of that suspicion, and walked the town nightlong, and sought with all his senses for the clue which would prove it true, and had nothing.

He sniffed the air. Fresh smoke. Someone lighting a warm fire to face the autumn day. And he could see it, spiraling up from the chimney of a house across the way.

There was a big gray building he could see from where he had come to now—a junction of streets he had not passed before, forming a circus with a blank obelisk in the center. He eyed the obelisk and his mind crowded automatically with anthropological data: fertility symbols, upstanding to the sky.

No. It made no sense. It was human, but lacked the vigor of the symbol.

He crossed the circus to the front of the gray building and stood listening. There was a chanting from within. Sometimes there was a hiss-and-slap and a shrill cry. Did you put a creation of pure chance in the middle of a junction where a building of such importance faced the street?

It seemed that these people did. There was disconnection here, so sharp he could barely admit the evidence of his senses.

He walked up the five shallow stone steps to the door of the gray building. Like many ceremonial structures, it had a huge door, eight meters high at least, occupying the greater part of this end wall facing him, and because the main door was so difficult to open without power hinges, which he could see it did not have, there was another, smaller, door set in it. This one stood ajar. He hesitated, and stepped inside.

One dim light swung in the wind inside the door, from a low false ceiling which—together with plain native-wood partitioning—created an anteroom beyond the entrance. No decoration. No symbolism. And yet such a place as this was crucial to their culture.

He had hypothesized. He could be wrong. He knew that. And in a sense knew he could *not*, for to be wrong was to destroy his existence.

He slid back the panel-door set in the partitioning and went beyond, into the great hall itself, which occupied most of the high-roofed building.

Here there was no furnishing except plain wooden benches, and again no decoration. The windows were tall slits with many small pieces of clear white glass set in metal frames. The floor was of stone flags. About fifty or sixty people were here, some sitting on the benches, some few lying on the floor unconscious. At the center of the group—the benches being disposed on three sides of a square at the geometric center of the hall—four men and two women wearing only coarse kilts were scourging each other with the things that made the hiss-and-slap: broad-lashed whips, short-handled, long-thonged.

That was all.

Nobody at all turned to look at him. The people sitting on the benches mostly had their eyes closed; they had drawn up cloaks similar to the one he was wearing, covering the marks on their backs and hiding their heads in the hoods.

How do you build a society on this?

Jacob Chen looked, and shuddered, and went out again into the cold unwelcoming street.

Wrong, the stream of his thought cast up. A word like a corpse, oozing



from its mouth the water of a putrid river, stinking of decayed hopes.

Wrong. Not a word to which he could any longer attach a meaning. A programmer couldn't be wrong. A programmer had insufficient data.

He stopped in his tracks, turned, a great pounding in his chest as though his heart had suddenly grown to twice its size and iron hardness, clanging at every beat. His belly was stretched tight with apprehension, like the skin of a drum. He went back up the five steps towards the little door in the big door.

They came out from the city a few hours after dawn, four men in sweeping black robes, shiny, as if oiled, with fringed fur hats on their heads. They rode like mutes on the way to a funeral in a high-sided car powered by a humming electric motor. When they crossed the boundary of the spaceport they slowed the car so that a group of forewarned members of the port staff could fall in respectfully behind, walking stately in the rain.

Captain Lucy Inkoos came down the ramp from the ferry-ship. They had informed her about this, with regret that seemed genuine. And it wasn't for her to judge.

She stood uncovered in the rain, and drops spotted and then flowed together on the red fabric of her uniform. Her ancestors had made the Benin bronzes; her face, fine-carved, high-cheeked, was impassive as a bronze image as she waited for the approach of the cortege. Four of her officers stood with her beside the ramp.

The high-sided car halted. Stiffly, like awkward but silent machines, the four men in black shiny robes got to the ground. One of them walked forward to face Captain Inkoos.

He was at least her equal in height, and the high-crowned fur hat added twenty centimeters to that, so as to give the effect of immense stature. He was not looking down at her, but she seemed to hear his voice from far overhead.

He said, "We brought him back."

Captain Inkoos nodded. "I was told," she said. Around her the four officers shifted from foot to foot.

"We regret this," the man said. "As I have had the story, he asked to join one of our rituals. In the hall near the circus of the obelisk. By chance a participant decided to take action the very moment he joined the group. And... he is as you see."

The other three, with help from some of the port staff who had walked across the landing-ground in the rain, had opened the back of the car and were now lifting the body of Jacob Chen to the ground. They had wrapped him in a piece of black satin, but when the light fell full it showed a patch of reddish stain over where the corpse's heart must be.

"The man who killed him"—Captain Inkoos heard the voice seem now to come not merely from a great distance in space, but also from a point far away in time—"will of course be dealt with. Would you wish to send a representative to the execution when it takes place?"

Captain Inkoos repressed a shudder. She said, "No." And, realizing how thick and discourteous her voice must have sounded, went on, "We accept that Jacob Chen had no business to intrude on your ritual. He left the ship by himself, telling no one where he was going. He brought it on himself."

"His wishing to join the ritual—" the man said, "we have no objection, you understand. It is public. Only... we do not think he knew the reason for joining. And he did not find out."

Captain Inkoos felt her broad flat lips press together, narrowing, as she studied the face of the man with the fur hat. The fringe which fell all around it concealed his forehead, but the rain had gathered some of the hairs together into stringy bunches, and she could guess at the location of his hairline. A high forehead, a sensitive mouth, those hollow, intellectual's cheeks—

And they built on this death.

It was not her business to understand. She could only curse Jacob Chen for wasting himself, and nod, and thank the men in black shiny robes for bringing back the body, and ask for a transcript of the trial if there was to be one.

"There will not be a trial," the man said. "It was in the course of ritual, in plain sight. When one does that, he is deliberate. It is to restore reality to existence by invoking death. There is nothing else."

That wall they had battered for months, since first contact. Captain

Inkoos wondered if Jacob Chen had breached it in the last moments, before his life flooded from the knife-hole in his chest. The four officers moved from behind her and took the stiffening corpse, black-wrapped, from its bearers to carry it into the ship. One of them put his hand incautiously down as he moved into position; when he took it away, the palm was marked with rusty blood.

These are people, she said to herself. They had ancestors in common with me. All human beings are at least cousins. All human beings can understand one another. This world when found was assumed to be like—although unlike—others. There was this spaceport, with many ferry-ships which traveled to the local asteroids, mining and refining, and to a scientific observatory on the major satellite, and there was a good living-standard though drab compared with most other worlds'. They spoke a language close to Standard Earth, considering the long gap since previous contact with other human worlds.

And she had had to send for Jacob Chen, because he was a programmer and there was this wall of non-comprehension.

She glanced up the ramp. The body was going out of sight, awkwardly man-handled by the four officers. There would be an inquiry. There would be no blame. You didn't order a programmer to account for his movements. You sent for him because he knew what to do better than anyone else could.

And died. Through not understanding. Perhaps it would be generations before the problem was solved, if he had failed.

The black-robed men and the port staff stood silent; only the sound of the rain and the shifting of feet on the metal ramp could be heard.

No one would put blame on her, Captain Inkoos thought. But were you to blame Jacob Chen himself, a man who could punch a program of a million words into a computer? A man whose mind grasped problems beyond the conception of ordinary folk? Were you to blame these men in black robes and fur hats?

Or whom?

The port staff began to walk back to the administration buildings, low-crouched at the edge of the landing-ground. The man she had been talking to said, "We regret it, you understand."

"I believe you."

"We regret existence," the man said. He glanced at his companions and they nodded, and all four of them turned together to get back into the high-sided car.

Captain Inkoos thought of them as they might perhaps be—today, or tomorrow—stripped to the waist, offering themselves to pain. Pain is the only reality, they said. Pleasure can be negated; even boredom, the neutral, featureless state, makes pleasure impossible. But the happiest man can be hurled to the depths of misery by the stab of a rotting tooth, or the lash of a whip on his back. Unite reality to consciousness, they said, by pain. And if that too fails, a man may invoke the last reality of all by taking such action as to cause his death. Here, as on most worlds more backward than Earth, they killed a man for killing a man. Kill in the sight of witnesses, and in your turn be killed.

And the man you kill may by chance be Jacob Chen, unique genius, programmer.

She grew aware that her senior aide, Commander Kwan, had come down the ramp to stand beside her and watch the scattered components of the brief cortege disperse. After some time in silence, the commander said, "What are we to make of them?"

Captain Inkoos shrugged and didn't answer. Jacob Chen had not been able to; how could she?

"Will we ever be able to get on with them?" Kwan persisted.

"Ask the future," Captain Inkoos said shortly, and turned and walked up the metal ramp, the hard heels of her shoes making a sharp noise at every step.

### III

Like most worlds with characteristics fitting them for human occupation, Ipewell had one large satellite and a G-type primary. But Ipewell had no moon, and no sun.

They were Mother's Night Eye and Mother's Day Eye.

Formerly he had had no chance of being allowed out on his own unless one of Mother's Eyes was open. But by behaving so well lately that his family had almost become suspicious, Lork (Garria-third-boy) had contrived to stretch and stretch the periods when he could be out of sight without people asking where he had got to.

This evening: the big risk, the staking of all.

There was a gap of four whole hours today between the disappearance of the Day Eye into the red clouds of sunset and the opening of the Night Eye among the stars. Consumed half by terror and half by astonishment at his own bravery, he slipped away across the great yard of the family homestead towards the secret path among the bushes lining the river. The path had once been a creeocat run, **but** no one had seen a creeocat here in living memory.

Cautiously at first, then with increasing speed as he drew further away from home and the risk of being heard, he made his way around two bends of the river. He came finally to a place where a blaze had been cut in the thick spongy stem of a brellabush, and paused.

"Jeckin?" he whispered. "You there?"

Jeckin (Fabia-eighth-boy) rose from shadow, sighing with relief. "I thought for certain you'd been turned back," he said. "I haven't been waiting long, but it felt like an eternity. I expected the Night Eye to open any moment."

"Custom forbid!" Lork snapped. He spat on the ground and stamped three times on the little wet blob. "But we'll have to hurry anyway. Let's go."

Jeckin nodded and parted the bushes carefully. They crept between the heavy drooping leaves and emerged on the edge of the rolling grassy meadows that ran unbroken to the skyline. A long way ahead of them was a reddish glow marking their goal.

They began to run.

Ten minutes later they were too close to the red glow to go on running unnoticed. Jeckin pointed at a clump of maxage and Lork, grunting agreement, dived for its shelter. Together they panted to recover their

breath.

"See the ship?" Jeckin said softly.

"Big," Lork said. "How many people aboard?"

"I've heard it's a thousand, but I don't believe it. You *couldn't*."

Lork wasn't so sure, but he didn't answer. He lay and feasted his eyes. Dull-gleaming in the last of the twilight, the ship rested in a shallow dip on top of a rising mound, perfectly spherical except for the vertical spike pointing starwards above the hull. The reddish glow came from emergency lights at the foot of the mound, where the crew had set up a temporary village of prefabricated huts.

"What do we do now?" Lork whispered.

"Someone's coming this way," Jeckin muttered. "See?"

Straining his eyes, Lork made out two figures moving shadowy on the meadowland. For a horrifying moment they seemed to be heading straight for the maxage where he and Jeckin lay hidden; then they turned aside randomly, and he saw that they were simply strolling about. There was a sound of laughter, and a low woman's voice tinged with amusement said something.

Of course, it would have to be women they met first on this dangerous expedition. Imagine a woman hearing them with sympathy—even the *different* kind of woman rumor reported as being aboard the starship.

Correction: not two women, but a woman and a man. The man's gruff tones carried less well than his companion's, and were heard later.

"I think they're heading for us," Jeckin said unsteadily.

"Lie still till they're past, then," Lork hissed.

Excellent idea. Except that they weren't going past. When they came close to the clump of maxage they looked around to make certain they were out of sight of their companions nearer the ship. Then the man unrolled something mattress-like on the ground. The woman helped him straighten it. Lork's scalp began to prickle. Not—

But he could see clearly that the woman wasn't pregnant. By Ipewell standards she was skinny, while the man was a fine specimen such as any

Mother would have trouble keeping to herself; still, perhaps there were compulsory arrangements about fatherhood. Lork understood vaguely that the way of life the star-people followed differed from his own, but he had no experience to help him conceive how.

The man turned to the woman and put out his arms. They embraced.

"Oh no!" Jeckin exploded, and leapt to his feet.

The man and woman sprang apart, snatching at their waists. Two powerful lights—seeming to the terrified Lork at least as bright as the Day Eye—transfixed him and Jeckin. Miserably, he too stood up.

After a pause, the man spoke in Ipewell dialect. He said, "So, a couple of peeping toms."

"No... uh... *no!*" Lork babbled, and realized for the first time that there wasn't a respectful form of address for male superiors in Ipewell language. Men were by definition inferior, not able to reproduce. Yet it was wrong to speak to a man from the stars as an equal. "We just wanted to... uh—"

How to hammer into words what had driven them to defy the personal order of Mother Uskia, forbidding all males to go near the starship?

The woman said, "Who are you, anyway?"

Shaking, they gave their names.

"Jeckin (Fabia-eighth-boy)?" the woman repeated. "I've heard of your family. Life must be hell for you, isn't it?"

That wasn't a remark to expect from a woman. Jeckin was startled. Lork gave him an encouraging nod, and he suddenly burst out, "Yes! Yes! For my mother-in-fact has eleven children which should bring her great honor but we are all male, all of us, and she is past bearing now and the shame of having no daughters stains the family!"

Lork squeezed his friend's arm. He had often heard how hellish Fabia made life for her children because of their inferior sex.

The man and woman looked at each other, shrugging. The man said, "Well, now you're here, sit down and explain what you came for."

Gay Logan listened to the two boys. You could hardly make out their features in the dimness, but she could tell they were

nice-looking—dark-haired, probably rather dark-skinned like most of Ipewell's people, and about the same age: fifteen or sixteen. And intelligent. And frustrated.

Then her attention wandered from what they were saying and she looked at Hans Demetrios. He sat cross-legged, head cocked to one side, absolutely taut with concentration. A stab went through her.

This was where his interest lay, really. Not in her. Not in anyone, not even himself.

Half-jokingly they said there was a new breed evolving and Hans Demetrios belonged to it, and Jacob Chen, and a handful of others: as though a racial subconscious were reacting over generations to pressure created in environment by man himself. A hungry breed. You could see it. Hans Demetrios did not look in the least like Jacob Chen, and yet you could see the thing in common in their starving-bright eyes, their tense cheek-muscles.

Programers. Hans was young, and he would go far; already he was out of reach of Gay Logan.

She had tried. She knew the tools with which man tackled the complex universe; she understood the superimbecility of computers, what they could do, what not. She had to use them in her work. With terrible exhausting concentration and provided she was not disturbed even by the drift of a dust-mote across her vision, she could program a computer directly—to the extent of a few hundred words. They said Jacob Chen could write a program of a million words or more without an error, taking a month over it, and never set a symbol down on paper. All in the head. All at once.

And Hans— She had seen him today finish the program for the Ipewell Bridge; he had taken a fortnight over it, ten hours a day, pausing for meals and sleep, and never making a mistake.

You could go and watch him, hands moving on the input keyboard, and he would look up when he had adjusted to the need to be distracted, and nod and smile, and keep right on.

He sees a different universe, she thought. Not the same universe I see.

She felt a dull sense of resignation. He was a nice person, but she'd been so stupid.



"I'll explain," Hans was saying in friendly tones to the two boys. "This world is one of many which people from Earth came to centuries ago, to colonize and tame it. A planet is big, and human beings are small. You need a lot of them to conquer a new world. Usually the colonists bring with them enough equipment—sometimes including sperm and ova banks and artificial wombs—to tide them over the difficulties of the first generation.

"As we've pieced it together, a terrible disaster—perhaps an earthquake, or a very violent storm—destroyed most of the colonists' supplies. Your ancestors desperately needed manpower at all costs. They had to breed rapidly. So female fertility became a fetish, and fertile women assumed the dominant position in the evolving society here. That's all. The legends of the Greatest Mother, with her Night Eye and her Day Eye, and the rest, are just legends, invented to bolster the matriarchy and insure its survival."

The boys winced simultaneously. But of course both the Eyes were closed at the moment, so the blasphemy went unpunished.

"Right now," pursued Hans, "Mother Uskia is on Earth, negotiating the splicing-in of Ipewell to the Bridge System. By means of the Bridges, matter—including living people—can be transported from world to world. Since they were invented almost a century ago, we of Earth have made it our great task to re-unite scattered humanity on all the planets to which it may have wandered. This is not something other worlds must pay for. It's our service to the human race, our greatest ambition. Anyone can go by Bridge to anywhere he wants, provided he carries no sickness and no dangerous goods. That's our one condition—that *anyone* can use the Bridges."

"If you build a Bridge here," Lork ventured, "could... we use it?"

"If by the laws of this planet you're of the age of discretion, yes."

She heard the two boys sigh as one. Her own sigh was not heard except by herself.

When they headed for home, hurrying because it would soon be time for the Night Eye to open, they went in stunned silence. They felt like slaves suddenly shown the promise of liberty.

"Do you believe it?" Jeckin said when they reached the path along the river where they had to separate.

"I want to," Lork answered soberly.

"So do I."

For a while they listened to the splash of the river, staring at each other.

"Lork," Jeckin said awkwardly. "Lork, if it does happen, and they make this... this Bridge he talked about, and we can go to other worlds from here—shall we go?"

"Mother Uskia herself and all her attendants couldn't stop me," Lork said.

Jeckin glanced up between the close leaves of the brellabush to where the Night Eye was rising in the sky. He said, "She's watching."

"Let her," Lork answered. "I think she's going to have to watch a lot of things more abominable than what we're doing."

Jeckin chuckled throatily. He clapped his friend on the arm and slid without a sound into the night. Lork turned away likewise. On the way home he began to sing.

## IV

Godlike two hundred feet overhead, Jorgen Thorkild looked down on the people milling across the transit floor like insects, like signals in the circuits of a computer, like anything but human beings. From such a height they had no names or personal identity; featureless as molecules and almost as numerous, they were piped and channeled and directed on a purely statistical basis.

If I had a thunderbolt to hurl from this Olympian viewpoint, I wouldn't kill people. I'd just alter some entries in the memory banks.

What the hell happens to human importance down there?

Behind him the door leading on to the vantage platform hushed open.

He turned, composing his face to greet the honored delegates. At their head, Moses van Heemskirk, who would never miss such an opportunity. He couldn't have been prouder of the Bridge System if he'd invented the principle himself. By this time, perhaps he thought he had.

The vantage platform, and the impervious bubble enclosing it, had a refractive index equal to that of air. Most of the gang of delegates hung back even when van Heemskirk marched forward, hand outstretched towards Thorkild. The two who did not were probably the leaders. There were about sixty altogether; and could see how they were stratified, from leaders through aides down to clerks and attendants.

"Day, Jorgen!" van Heemskirk was saying. "Let me present to you the honored delegates of the latest worlds to aspire to membership of our stellar community—Mother Uskia, of Ipewell, and Lancaster Long of the planet Azrael!"

He turned. "Friends, this is Director Jorgen Thorkild, whose untiring work in the service of the Bridge System puts everyone on forty planets in his debt!"

Usually Thorkild turned van Heemskirk's fulsome flattery with some self-deprecating remark. Today he couldn't summon the energy. He merely shrugged, drawing a frown from van Heemskirk. He knew what that was due to: the same reason that had made van Heemskirk present the delegates to him, not the other way round, although their relative status on their home world was probably far superior to Thorkild's on Earth. In van Heemskirk's eyes, Earth's prestige was what mattered. He was never tired of reminding people that Earth got there first.

Got where? To what purpose?

Cautious, the rank and file of the delegations' was coming forward across the vantage platform. Thorkild ignored them. He looked over the leaders.

Mother Uskia, from Ipewell: a flat-faced, dark woman in a tight white shirt and tighter white trousers stretched across a bulging melon-belly. Pregnant, and proud of it. On Ipewell it had something to do with social status—hence the honorific Mother before her name. Leading out of the opening down the front of her shirt, between fat mounds of breast, was a thin flex connected to a microphone. A recorder, Thorkild assumed, to provide her with a permanent record of her trip to Earth.

And Lancaster Long: immensely tall, a hand's breadth more than Thorkild himself, wearing a splendid purple robe and a cylindrical hat of white fur. His complexion was rather sallow. His high-arched nose and sharp dark eyes lent him the looks of a bird of prey.

The oohing and ahing could be left to underlings. Mother Uskia and Lancaster Long moved to the edge of the platform and looked down thoughtfully. After a pause, Long said, "How much bigger is this place than the station on Mars that we were brought to?"

"In terms of handling capacity? Sixty or eighty thousand times," Thorkild answered.

There was a silence. Shortly van Heemskirk began to fidget. He did not easily endure inactivity. "Uh... Jorgen," he suggested, "tell our friends about the System. Whatever you think interesting."

What would they not already know? What could van Heemskirk imagine they did not know? Like a parrot, Thorkild started to recite worn facts.

"The station on Mars is used only for people like yourself who have to undergo quarantine and prepare psychologically for a first visit to Earth. Here we have Bridges direct to over forty inhabited worlds. This is the Bridge Center for the entire planet, but wherever the population density and traffic warrant it we have subsidiary Bridge Stations, one for every hundred million people or so, connected only to the Center handling off-planet traffic. We build big. We expect our equipment to remain adequate for at least another hundred years."

He broke off, acutely aware of Mother Uskia's microphone pointed at him, and of her intense, suspicious expression. Whatever you think interesting—that was what van Heemskirk had told him to talk about. And suddenly his mind was dry as a desert. What could be interesting about processing human beings—faceless, average, present or absent merely as statistical variations?

Did Long and Mother Uskia find this interesting? Long had an expression which defied analysis. Perhaps it was boredom. The only point of bringing these gangs of delegates here at all was so that they could see the Bridge Center in operation; they would have had the salient facts given to them within a short while of being contacted, long before they were brought to the Solar System.

He was staring at Long. Why? Tall, yes; beak-nosed, yes; very distinguished in his purple robe, yes. But for none of these reasons in particular. He... had an air of presence. That was it. As though he were *more here* than Jorgen Thorkild or Moses van Heemskirk or Mother Uskia, certainly *more here* than any of the flowing molecule-people on the transit floor so far below.

Long raised unblinking eyes from the study of the distant human traffic and met Thorlild's gaze directly.

Beginning to be alarmed, van Heemskirk rushed in. "Jorgen! Suppose you tell us about the people we can see down there at the moment—who they are, where they're going?" Yes, of course he might do that. It hadn't occurred to him. It hadn't occurred to him to look away after meeting Long's eyes, either. When he did so, he felt an unreal *click*, not a click, that was wrong, but something— He hunted in memory for what it reminded him of, and then got it. The sense of reluctant yielding, amounting almost to a soundless snap, when you draw apart the north pole of one magnet from the south pole of another.

It cost him effort to focus his eyes on the far-distant floor. He reminded himself that he knew the schedules for at least a week in advance, and he ought to be able to identify at least the large groups.

A straggling line of a hundred-odd men and women gorgeous in uniform scarlet caught his eye. With relief, he knew he had something he could say. "That's the crew of the scoutship *Alpheratz*," he said. "The relief crew, that is, going on duty. These ships spend their time tracking down the waves of —pre-Bridge colonization, locating worlds where people settled—"

It struck him violently that both these delegates were from worlds which scoutships had recently discovered. And the entire purpose of their visit was to tie in to the Bridge System.

He finished lamely, "Like yours, for example. I mean—"

Badly worried by now at Thorkild's peculiar incoherence, van Heemskirk hurried to try and cover for him. "It's the most remarkable achievement of mankind!" he declaimed in his public orator's voice. "The invisible links reach out from here to unite planet to planet as the strong bonds of affection unite a family. Yes, precisely, for mankind is one family, after all. Like bonds of affection between relatives!"

Promptly as he began to speak, Mother Uskia turned, pointing her microphone to catch his words.

Long, with much more discernment, ignored van Heemskirk's orotundity. He went on looking at Thorkild.

"It must be a highly complicated and demanding job that you hold, Director Thorkild," he said.

"It is!" van Heemskirk hastened to agree. "One of the most responsible in the galaxy."

Long did not even turn his head to acknowledge the interruption; van Heemskirk took note of the snub, and flushed. A faint stir of amusement colored Thorkild's gray thoughts. If Long could freeze out van Heemskirk like that, he would be a man worth knowing.

Remembering belatedly that he ought to make some answer for himself, he nodded.

"And are you satisfied?" Long pursued.

"Satisfied?" Thorkild turned the word round in his mind. "Not yet. Not until all the worlds that man has reached have been tied in to the Bridge System, I guess. And probably not even then."

"You miss my point," Long said. "I realize that you won't rest content until the System has expanded to its ultimate possible limits. But what I meant was rather to ask you if your work satisfies you, or whether it's satisfying—maybe that would be clearer."

What might satisfaction mean? Whatever it was, Thorkild thought, he didn't have it. Not any more. Pipe people from here to there, shove freight around, take decisions from a beer-drinker singing an obscene song and have to acknowledge it for your own, like a man standing father to a chance-got child and lacking the tolerance of Joseph—and being turned down as in some ungraspable way inferior to Saxena; that was the worst of it. Had Saxena suffered this? Was this why he (for another reason than Alida, obviously) had killed himself?

He said, "The work's there. I can do it, I do do it; so far as that goes, I guess it's satisfying."

"As I understand it," Long said, the corners of his mouth turning

downwards as if through disappointment, "this Bridge System is now the work of Earth—Earth's reason for living. The service your planet provides for mankind is the way it was described to me."

Thorkild nodded again, wondering what was coming next.

"Tell me," Long said, looking not at Thorkild now but past him, eyes focused on a point in air, "would you agree the comparison made by Responsible van Heemskirk?"

Mother Uskia lifted her microphone as usual to catch Thorkild's reply. Perhaps it was the sudden irritating gesture which made him rap out words before he thought.

"It's more like an octopus, or the web of a spider," he said. "If you really want to know. Or less purposeful than that. Like the stems of a climbing plant feeling around for something to grab hold of and sink suckers into, without the blindest hint of what it's doing it *for*."

"Jorgen!" said van Heemskirk, appalled, and started forward. He was checked by Mother Uskia.

"One moment," she said. "Director Thorkild, kindly explain what the things are which you compared the Bridge System to: an octopus and a spider's web. On Ipewell we have neither."

"If you don't know what they are, how did you memorize the names on one hearing?" Thorkild demanded. "You pronounce the words perfectly."

A scowl crossed Uskia's flat face. "I know!" she snapped. "But my daughter must know too."

She zipped open the shirt stretched tight on her belly, and Thorkild saw that the flex from the microphone ran, taped to the skin, down to a button-size speaker plugged into her navel, turned inward to address the growing foetus.

Thorkild tried to stop a grin. The muscles strained in the cheeks. He waved at the thousands of people beneath his feet. "See the grayish crowd?" he said. "They're emigrants bound for Platt's World and Kayowa. Eight thousand a day and—" No good. The idea of the speaker plugged in her navel! You can't start educating them too young! *Wowph!*

And the hooting hysterical laughter began and seemed it would never

stop. He managed to force his eyes open three times in succession: once—van Heemskirk looking fit to burst with horror and anger; twice—Uskia, her face contorted with reaction to the insult he had offered her; thrice—Lancaster Long, looking like the dark angel after whom his planet had been named.

Then the laughter filled his eyes with tears and blinded him.

## V

Planning committee in session; you don't move a finger without a plan. You daren't. You're a juggler.

Alida Marquis pushed back her dark hair. The four men in the room, seated around the long table, looked at the gesture with a certain hunger; they saw the way the lift of her arm raised her full bosom, drew up the hem of her loose-hanging tan shirt, hand-blocked with ancient black designs, and let be seen an inch of bare skin around her waist. She was very beautiful—statuesquely built, perfectly proportioned, graceful in walking.

Thorkild hadn't called back. That worried her. It was the first time, and somehow disconcerting.

She said, "Come down to the beach sometime and see the rest of it. I swim like anybody else."

Three of the men chuckled self-consciously. The fourth— Metchel, Ways and Means Department—showed his too-large front teeth in a rabbit smile and said, "I'm not greedy, thank you, Alida."

The others chuckled again, with a more genuine amusement. Then, when they saw she wasn't smiling, they turned their minds back to the business before them.

"There won't be any problem of re-allotment of space in the Bridge Center," Metchel said. "Kayowa is due to fill its current emigration program within four months; traffic to Ipewell won't be heavy for a good while yet. And this other place, Azrael, aren't we still waiting for Chen's



report?"

Alida nodded. She stared down at the three-dimensional model of the Bridge City which was projected within the transparent depths of the table. Nearest her was the part that most concerned her as Supervisor of Relations: the strip of land and buildings running from the edge of the sea to the foot of the inland hills where forty worlds could meet face to face. Idly she ticked some off in her mind. That block of apartments was a piece of Platt's World; in the basement bar you could eat crisp sticks of peppertree and wash away the tingling after-taste with minty cordials, while a girl played wild skirling music on a uilleann pipe and sang like a gale through treetops. And the wide-spaced houses there—Glory, where tonight they would dance on the grass and the men would toss prickaburrs at the girls' clothing, and the girls who did not want to be caught and partnered would remember that the burrs would not stick on skin. Glory was sometimes fun.

Why hadn't Thorkild called back?

Someone was saying, "Chen's report? I heard, but I wasn't sure. They must have run into trouble if they sent for him."

She looked up. It was Laverne who had spoken, the psychologist in charge of mores adjustment, a too-clever man who could have made a lion lie down with a lamb, they said. And had not yet done so only because he had never been asked to.

Alida said, "Yes. The captain of the scoutship asked for him to be sent out. Her regular programmer couldn't handle the culture analysis; he did the Bridge program, but handed over the rest of the work to Chen."

"Well, in that case," Metchel said, "can't we assume that we ought to go ahead? Knowing Jacob Chen, we'll probably have his results before we're ready even if we start now."

Alida shrugged. Somehow the work in hand seemed misty and hard to grasp. It had never been this way before. It was good, demanding, rewarding work. She, and this staff around the table with her, and for each of them a thousand more experts armed with every conceivable tool for the job, were the people who made the smooth running of the Bridge System possible. Without event, without trouble, without unforeseen snags.

She looked down again into the table, at the model there. People of forty worlds in one city on Earth, their mores and traditions all different, their manners different, their dialects different. Should she go to Glory this evening? You could have fun at Glory. It might take the load off this unhappy mind.

She slapped the table, open-palmed. "No, don't proceed with Azrael's arrangements," she said. "Jacob Chen is a genius, but if they had to send him out there that means they found something difficult even for him. We'll just make the contingent arrangements for Ipewell, and before we meet again tomorrow I'll have a word privately with van Heemskirk and find out more details. Anything else?"

Laverne looked up. He said, "Yes. A preacher from Riger's, name of Rungley. Do you know about him?"

"The snake-worshipper," Alida said. "What about him?"

"They let him through this morning on Thorkild's instructions. I've had a word with Koriot Angoss about him, and it's all very well for Angoss to have assured Thorkild the man was safe to be let loose, but whereas on Riger's he's merely a fanatical member of an obscure sect, he's a novelty here, and... a problem."

"In what way?"

"He's immune to snake-venom. Angoss's idea was that he should be given some deadly snakes, so that he'd get pretty sick and be made to look foolish. Only, they sent through the results of his routine quarantine examination, and it turns out he has the enzyme S-hematinase. A black mamba could spit in his eyes and he wouldn't turn a hair. But other people who don't have the enzyme would require intensive chemotherapy, and at that they might be unlucky."

Alida passed her hand across her forehead. She said, "How does he come by this enzyme?"

"It's been selected for among his ancestors, on a chance basis for who-knows-how-many generations, and since emigration to Riger's, deliberately. He has it from both sides of his family."

"Watch him," Alida said. She tried to think of something to add, and couldn't. After a moment, Laverne shrugged and began to gather his documents into his portfolio. The others got to their feet and did the

same.

Into the sound of shuffling feet and rustling papers came the click of the solido projector turning on, and they automatically raised their eyes to see Responsible van Heemskirk's image floating in mid-air at the end of the room. His eyes sought Alida. He wore an ill-tempered expression and there were patches of sweat darkening his yellow shirt.

He said, "Have you been discussing Azrael?"

Alida looked at him. She had never seen him like this before. He was never disturbed by anything.

An extraordinary sense of unreasoning excitement gripped her. She felt the pulses in her throat begin to beat like hammers.

"Yes, we have," she said. "Not in detail, but—"

"All right. Get round to my office at once, and you, Laverne, better come too. You know Jacob Chen was sent out to Azrael in response to an urgent request from the scoutship captain there. Well, he got mixed up in some local ritual. And they killed him."

The eyes of all five in the room snapped tight on van Heemskirk's round face, glistening with perspiration.

"What's more," van Heemskirk said in a rough-edged voice, "we just had to put Jorgen Thorkild under sedation. He's had a breakdown and insulted the representative from Ipewell, and the System feels as though it's grinding to a halt."

There was a tall woman in scarlet uniform in van Heemskirk's office, her face as still and noble as an ebony carving; van Heemskirk presented her as Captain Lucy Inkoos. Also in the office in image—physically, he was around the world in the middle of the Gobi Gardens, in the capital of Earth—was Minister Shrigg. He had been bald since he was a boy, and gave the impression that ever since he had been too busy to find time to have the condition cured. His solido presence seemed to embarrass van Heemskirk terribly.

"Is there a connection?" he was saying as Alida and Laverne entered. Again, when they were seated, he said, "Is there a connection?"

"As far as can be seen, I doubt it," van Heemskirk said, and mopped his

face with a kerchief matching his shirt.

"All right. There will have to be an inquiry, of course."

Shrigg spoke with the satisfied tone of a man to whom official inquiries were the main business of life. To him, they were. Forty planets couldn't be governed; they had to govern themselves and co-operate where possible. Earth, one planet, was itself already too big to govern. It had to be run, like a machine of immense complexity, by experts. Shrigg was not an expert; van Heemskirk was. The knowledge rankled, and the opportunity to inquire into an expert's shortcomings was the chance Shrigg and those like him waited for.

Captain Inkoos stirred on her seat. She looked Shrigg's image straight in the eye.

"Why?" she said. "I have already established the facts as they happened. Jacob Chen, like all programers, depended on his own confidence in himself. Perhaps he was impatient. He ventured to take part in this deadly ritual on Azrael, and one of the natives, as they say there, 'took action' with a broad-bladed knife. It was Chen's fault, if anybody's. Local custom permits such killings. Afterwards it avenges them."

Alida, looking at the officer's dark strong face, felt a wakening of interest. To speak like that to Shrigg was not easy, however, justified it might be.

Shrigg scowled. He said, "Why was he sent there? Why was he permitted to risk his life? Programers are too rare and too valuable to be thrown away!" He leaned forward, his eyes on Captain Inkoos.

"Tell me," he purred, "did you not have your own programer on board?"

Honestly! Alida looked for someone with whom to exchange a glance mocking Shrigg's naivete, but Laverne was staring at Captain Inkoos, and she and van Heemskirk both had their gaze on Shrigg.

"I did," Captain Inkoos said coldly. "I filed a request for a more competent programer when my man failed to cope with the problem. I did not request Jacob Chen by name."

"Then who sent him out?" Shrigg rapped. "You, van Heemskirk?"

"I approved the assignment," van Heemskirk said. "He was the best

man available."

Shrigg gave a pleased nod. He looked round in image and in fact. "I see Laverne is with you," he said. "A good person, I imagine, to put my next question to. This... this murderous planet, as it has turned out to be: the background there must form part of the report of the inquiry. We must establish whether the request for an advanced programmer was justified; we must establish why Jacob Chen put himself in the dangerous position that resulted in his death. You're in charge of the adjustment of mores, Laverne—make your recommendation!"

The psychologist gave a faint smile. "Without the facts?" he said. "Without a programmer having worked over the entire background?"

Shrigg was taken aback. He said, "Why... well, I'll accept that, then. Captain Inkoos, your ship is still on Azrael?"

"Yes."

"And there's a representative of the planet here now, I gather. He'll be a good place to start the inquiry. I'll fly down tomorrow and see him."

Laverne said, "But Chen's work will have to be finished. For one thing, Responsible van Heemskirk here has to initiate negotiations to bring Azrael into the Bridge System."

Shrigg flushed, and Alida found herself wanting to chuckle. Logically, if Laverne could make a lion and a lamb lie down together, he could make them get up. And Shrigg was no lion.

There was a pause. Laverne spoke into it just before Shrigg meant to. He said, "If no one else has a suggestion, I'd propose that you try and get Hans Demetrios to handle it. He's a young man, but he's shown exceptional promise, and I've just finished studying his analysis of this other world that's been contacted: Ipewell. I'm impressed."

"I know him," Alida said. "I support the proposal. Moses?"

"He has a growing reputation," van Heemskirk agreed. "But he's rather inexperienced. And he's still in training, working with a scoutship."

"Perhaps it would be better not to risk another advanced programmer," Shrigg said, with what he intended for sarcasm. It rasped Alida's nerves like the dying scream of a wild beast.

There was no reply. They all merely looked at Shrigg.

Jacob Chen is dead, Alida said to herself. He was killed. Strange: a neutral fact. Because he was a rather neutral person? Hans, though, was too young to be neutral. She'd met him several times and liked him well.

Because nobody else was saying anything, she uttered the question which had been burning her mind since she came into the room. She was surprised to find how intense her voice was when she spoke.

"Jorgen Thorkild," she said. "What happened to him? Did you say a breakdown?"

And behind the words, a memory of Saxena.

"While talking to the delegate from Azrael," van Heemskirk said. And added doubtfully, "We don't know why. But I expect we may hear soon."

## VI

"Where are going, Hans?" the voice said emptily from the doorway of the cabin.

Hans Demetrios looked up. The sliding panel had been pushed back halfway, silent in its self-lubricating grooves.

Through the opening he saw Gay Logan, her lips parted and shiny-moist, her eyes narrowed a little and very bright.

"Earth," he said. "They sent for me. Come in."

"Earth!" She was taken aback. Her eyes darted over the disarray in the large, comfortable cabin; everything had been taken out of the closets and laid on the table, the bunk, the floor. There were gaps in the arrangement here and there; he had already packed almost half his belongings.

Then she opened the panel all the way, stepped through, closed it again and stood with her back against it. She said, "You didn't tell me you were going."

"I'm sorry." He folded his microfilm reader and dropped it in the case

he was currently filling. Then he gathered up the first of his thousands of microbooks.

Looking at him, Gay thought: yes, he is sorry. He means it. But he doesn't mean he's sorry he didn't tell me—not directly. To be exact, he's sorry it didn't occur to him to tell me. He didn't give enough weight to the possibility that I'd care.

She said, "When did you hear?"

Not pausing in the intricate task of sorting and stowing the microbooks, Hans glanced at the wall-clock. He said, "An hour ago, almost."

An hour. Maybe that accounted for... but then she realized she was fooling herself. She said, "It must be very urgent, then. Have you finished on Ipewell, or did they tell you to drop everything?"

"Part of both," he said. (Oh, the hunger in these men's eyes!) "I am finished here. The culture analysis is done; it's rather plain because the population is low and homogeneous. And the Bridge program is done. But even if it were not, I think they'd have sent me back if they really needed me."

"What's it about, anyway?" Probing. Cautious.

"They killed Jacob Chen on Azrael. They're sending me to finish his work there. It's a great honor." He put away the last of the microbooks and began on the recording crystals.

Gay said nothing for a long time. She closed her eyes. On the darkness of the lids she saw herself. You couldn't say this wasn't attractive. She was of a rare type, fine-boned, fair-haired, with violet eyes and a flawless skin that was always startlingly tanned. He had said what other men had said, in his own detached weighing-it-up fashion that somehow made the statement all the more honest and precious. He had said, "You're beautiful."

She opened her eyes. He was sorting the crystals with one hand, touching them into some preferred order on the table with the tips of his fingers. She put out one arm and took the fingers of his other hand with her own.

"Hans," she said. "Look at me."

He prepared himself to be interrupted in that way she had seen so often before, as it were double-checking the arrangement of all the facts he was holding in his head to be certain he would know it when he turned his full attention back to it, and obeyed. He smiled.

She pulled herself forward from the door by the hand which held his and put her other arm around his neck, kissing him fiercely on the lips and cheeks. He did respond to the embrace. He did, she was certain, know how to enjoy it. And yet—

She snatched herself away from him. "All right," she said wearily. "All right. Go on packing your things."

He hesitated. She resumed her place with her back against the door, this time linking her hands behind the small of her back and pressing them hard to the smooth resilient panel.

"Go on!" she said. "That was... sort of to say good-bye."

"Maybe it won't be goodbye," Hans said, smiling again, but turning to the table as he did so. His fingers went back to the quick, flickering movements of a few moments ago as though there had been no interruption. "You sound as though they were going to kill me too."

Even as a joke, it hurt. She said, "What happened?"

He told her, baldly, as it had come to him: the planet Azrael, the unique reality of pain, the wall of not-understanding against which the visitors had battered, the misgivings they had felt about tying in a planet to the Bridge system whose culture they could not weigh, measure and make predictions for, the fate of Jacob Chen who also failed to understand.

"And what concerns you is that that's an honor," Gay said thoughtfully. "To be sent for."

"Isn't it?" he answered. Miraculously the confused scattering of his belongings was melting like frost in sunlight, all stowed neatly in six oblong cases. Like a conjuring trick. "What I meant when I said it won't be good-bye—I might be sent back, or perhaps we'll see each other on leave. Where are you going when the Bridge crew takes over here?"

She ignored the question. She said, "Hans, what really gives you pleasure in life? What makes you want to keep going?"



She saw the beginning of a polite answer on his lips, and for once reacted faster than he could. "I don't mean me!" she flared. "I know about you with me. I know, how could I not? But it doesn't go deep. It doesn't reach all the way down into you, to where you really are."

He sat down on a chair which he might have placed beforehand for this moment. He gave a half-shy smile. It was that smile she had seen when they first met, which had startled awake in her the feeling that was now turning to a rough scar in memory.

"It's a different universe," he said.

"I thought of it like that," she agreed slowly. "The other night, out there, when the two boys came."

"Well... it's true. I can't help it, Gay. I am that way. They say—and I don't know how it's possible, but it fits— that it's a response to environment that produced people like me. How do I get pleasure from life? You're right: my work goes deeper into the part of me where I live than anything else ever can. It's so demanding."

His eyes unfocused. He stared towards the wall, left of the door, not seeing it.

"It makes one terrified," he said abruptly. "Because this engages everything, every single faculty, like clinging with your fingers and toes to a sheer rock wall. You inch up, and every inch is an achievement, and one slip is the end. I say it's terrifying. Anyone else can fail, and start over. I don't think I could. I imagine that's why Jacob Chen had to risk death, because he couldn't live and remember failure. It would have destroyed him.

"And yet once you succeed for a while, you don't want to do anything else. Nothing else uses so much of you! And you get the payment for it in personal esteem, the most selfish kind of admiration of what you've done, which helps a little and isn't enough, and sometimes the extra comes, which is enough. The two boys—you were just talking about them."

"Yes." Her voice shook perceptibly.

"They're going to be liberated. I know. I did the analysis of this culture, broke it down into symbols, weighted them, put them in the memory banks, ran some tests for interaction with Earth and the other planets in the Bridge System. This culture is sterile. It's going to break apart, and

people here will be able to breathe again for the first time since the days of the original colonists. The look in those boys' eyes. You saw it?"

Again she said, "Yes." Barely breathing it.

"When they build the Bridge to Ipewell, the computers will instruct the Bridge crew. But I instructed the computers. I set those boys free."

He seemed suddenly embarrassed at having talked so openly, and got to his feet. "Well, I guess I have to check out," he said. "They're setting up the Bridge for Earth in three hours' time. I'm sorry, Gay."

"How old are you, Hans?" she said.

"Twenty-two."

"How old was Jacob Chen?"

"Chen? Oh, must have been sixty, or perhaps older. Or again perhaps not. We tend to be infant prodigies."

"When did you first discover you would make a programmer?"

"I didn't. Other people found out for me. I was just about learning to read when they caught on."

She gave a bitter smile. "So I'm about seventeen years too late. What the hell! I'll try and remind myself that I'm not the only one who's going to be unlucky, setting her heart on you."

"For what?" he said.

There was a silence as tangible as stone.

"Plugging in for Earth now," said the voice of a technician, unemotionally filtered by the hear-this system. "Watch the green light."

A uniformed junior technician leaned on the trolley carrying Hans's six cases; when the green light came on in the freight compartment of the Bridge platform, he gave the trolley an accurate push, and it rolled with a hushing of soft tires into its proper place. Then the green light also flooded the personnel platform, and Hans moved forward, thinking deeply.

A Bridge. Simple enough in principle. The only characteristics distinguishing one volume of space from another were due to the presence of the matter and energy it "contained." All worlds suitable for human habitation were roughly the same distance from the same kind of sun, all of similar mass. It wasn't hard to reduce the residual distinctions to an effective null. Then, to provide a means of identifying a particular destination, you could introduce another, planned, difference.

Hans Demetrios walked into a zone of space identical with one on Earth. It *was* on Earth. It had taken a hundred gigawatts of power per kilogram of transferred mass to maintain the identity of the two spaces during transmission, and the computers that kept unbroken watch over that identity would probably have noted, reacted to and cancelled out about ten to the eighth information-bits corresponding to incipient discrepancies.

And he, Hans Demetrios, had told the computers what the discrepancies were.

He was thinking of Gay Logan. Intellectually, he knew he had not hurt her; she had hurt herself, by not thinking through what she wanted before trying to get it. If she had thought long enough, she would not have wanted it. Because Hans Demetrios was a programmer, a man whose ultimate task would be to instruct the computers which supervised the running of Earth, or the Bridge System, or perhaps of some planet other than Earth. And so long as he made no mistake whatever, he would grow. Unique. Unreachable. Moving into zones of experience where no individual but himself could possibly count.

And Gay Logan was a charming, attractive, highly intelligent girl, and nothing more.

Yet to know that someone had been hurt because of him affected him, just as he was affected by knowing that people had benefited because of him.

For most people it was enough to think. But a programmer had to know how he thought, and why he thought as he did, because the machines with which he worked could not do that for themselves.

He was on Earth, emerging in the bright light of one of the terminal rooms set aside for space-service traffic. A bored-faced technician in an overhanging vantage bubble was cutting off the power supply. On the floor

of the room itself a man was sitting waiting. As Hans came through, he got up.

"Programer Demetrios," he said. "I'm from Relations. Is that all your gear?"

He gestured towards the freight platform.

"That's all," Hans confirmed.

"Good. I don't know how your local day was where you came from; anyway, you'll be relieved to know that you aren't going to be pitchforked into your work at once. I have quarters arranged for you, where you'll find transcripts of all the events that have led up to your being called back to Earth. It's about nineteen hours here. At ten tomorrow you're to report to the Supervisor of Relations, Alida Marquis, and she will brief you further. Right?"

With half his mind, Hans accepted the words he heard. With the other half, he was thinking about the death of Jacob Chen.

## VII

Sometimes in dreams she saw the Bridge System like a fountain of rainbows. The rainbow bridge went up to Valhalla, and the heroes passed that way. But a bridge for heroes was part of mythology. The dream ended with the moving of the rainbow, frustrating as in life—always in the next field, over the next fence, till it faded away.

And sometimes Saxena was there, who had been no hero, who had yielded to the temptation of poison.

Despondent, Alida Marquis wandered through the forty-world city between the hills and the sea where all the planetary populations whose privilege was the Bridge came together and were friends. There was nothing at Glory tonight. A whisper had gone through the variegated buildings like a driving gale, and the people like dead leaves went scurrying with it to seek the newest latest.

Going with them in a chased golden mask and a cloak, which, had she

remained at Glory, she would have cast aside an hour ago, Alida felt her mind cycle like a recording set to repeat unceasingly. She could look about her at the miniature worlds she passed by or through, and where they usually filled her with exhilaration—her work!—tonight there was this lowering sensation of pressure and decay, as though a dank warm mist had closed invisibly on the land.

Thorkild had suffered a breakdown. On each of the sectors of the city which was effectively a different world with different people, dialects, customs, arts, she could feel, nearly see, a thing like a monstrous stubby hoof crushing down: the end of a rainbow turned to drab fog-brown, the reality of a Bridge.

Thorkild had suffered a breakdown. She did not like Thorkild very much because he was not Saxena and he held Saxena's post and Saxena had killed himself without telling her, his mistress of years, the reason why. But like or not like was irrelevant: Thorkild and she were bound by what they were.

Thorkild had suffered a breakdown. He was young for his post of fantastic responsibility, qualified purely by what he could do, as Saxena had been. So was she; she was only four years older than Thorkild and she was Supervisor of Relations. It was not only in the barely comprehensible field where the programers worked that you could point to evidence of a response to man-made environmental pressure, creating or selecting for what was necessary.

Thirty-nine worlds. Forty. Forty-two. To relate them in any way at all was a task for the gods, and there were only men and women. There were the handful (out of the whole race, how many thousand?) who could write a million-word program for the computers which were the most important tool, could define a planetary culture so that a mindless machine could understand it. And there were the people—nearly as few—who could use the tools the programers supplied. Alida Marquis. Jorgen Thorkild. Moses van Heem-skirk. For all his politician-like mannerisms, he was of the clan, where Shrigg was not. Compare a big corporation, perhaps: a manager to say do so-and-so, and to ask why it was not done after all, and executives to find a way to do it, or not.

She was moving now into the sector which was a transplant of Riger's World; some of the plants here had pink leaves and the buildings were faced with a reddish resilient wood. Many, many people were coming here.

To these people, Alida thought, the Bridge System simply *was*. They were proud of it. They felt their prestige enhanced because Earth was geared to this service for mankind, to run the Bridges and expand their scope. They were glad to have them. But what interested them was a wild-bearded preacher from Riger's World who could do something peculiar with a snake.

And yet... if you took the Bridges' away, these people would feel a lack, and be unhappy, and they would cast around for a replacement, and not finding one they would strike out blindly at each other. When Saxena killed himself, you had heard the wave of dismay go round the planet. Hurt without knowing why, people wondered, and questioned their reason for existence.

Nobody had planned *this* situation, though it could have been foreseen. The mere complexity, first of an Earth where people were not any longer ciphers to be reckoned with in the mass, but individuals at least partly able to invent creative goals, to use their lavish leisure and to think with some originality if need be, then of a loose and growing union of forty planets, had avalanched into being the people who were not free—who did the job because it was there, who had to do it because they were the people who could.

The most uncomfortable word in any human language, Alida thought, would be *conscience*. On a newly contacted world they killed Jacob Chen. Shrigg could hold all the inquiries he liked, as a man turns up wet flagstones and sees grubs writhe underneath for the discomfort of the light. And he would make no one suffer half as much as could the simple knowledge: I did the things that led to it.

By now she was pressed into a crowd, many of the people being masked, which was surging up the outside slope of the little amphitheater at the center of the Riger's World sector of the polyplanet city. They were laughing and joking on every side, passing gaudy containers of liquor, perhaps celebrating the mere fact that there were so many human worlds and Bridges to join them. The Earthside folk who were visitors here came mostly by couples; the others were resident staff-members from off the planet.

In the jostling melee, she felt a man come close, and a hand inquired under her cloak. It would be meant as a kind of flattery, and if she had stayed at Glory and danced with a crowd she would have taken it as such, but tonight it had all gone wrong. She tilted back her mask and looked at

the masked face of the man who had touched her, and he hesitated one moment, meeting her eyes.

It occurred to her, as he turned and forced his way away from her, that she would not have liked to face a mirror wearing the look that must have been there.

Suddenly disgusted with herself and the close pressure of people, because it was like a realization of the illusion she had suffered all evening long—the fog-brown weightless suffocating pressure of the Bridge System, she began to thrust her way at random among the crowd. To her surprise, she found herself isolated, moments later, on a little knoll commanding a clear view down into the heart of the amphitheater.

People were standing, sitting or lolling all down the interior slope, to the very edge of the low stage; it was hard for them all to get a view. Yet this knoll was empty—perhaps ten square yards of level, raised ground—except for one extremely tall man in a sweeping robe of blue embroidered with silver. On his head was a high fur hat, with a fringe dropping over his forehead.

From Azrael, Alida realized. The shock was great. She had not counted on chancing across anyone from the deadly world where Jacob Chen had died. The encounter was something to be prearranged, to happen in a week or so's time when Moses van Hemmskirk had finished the preliminary work and the formal negotiations for the Azrael Bridge began.

Confused, she found herself staring at the man from Azrael. How curious that he should be isolated like this! He had not noticed her come up on the knoll with him; he was staring down at the stage below.

After a moment, Alida also turned her attention that way. She saw a man in a brown shirt and loose brown breeches standing at the foot of a gilded caduceus perhaps four meters high, the eyes of the twined snakes lit up from within. This man would be Rungley. He had an untidy, light brown beard and a thick mop of unkempt hair. Behind him and all around the foot of the giant caduceus were a crowd of children singing something in edgy shrill voices; she could not make out the words, but the tune was catchy and rhythmical.

Beside the stage, staring up at Rungley, were a group of men and women in dark clothing. She thought she recognized—or was she guessing?—members of the resident staff from Riger's, come out to see

what their fellow-citizen was up to. At the moment, there was some small argument going on with a person in the crowd.

The argument ended while she was still straining to make out details. Something was passed up from the crowd, handled with gingerly care: a box. Rungley took it in a brawny hand and slapped the lid open. Reaching inside, he seized something that squirmed. A snake.

With part of her mind Alida thought that it was strange how strong an effect the sight of a snake had on these people, most of whom had probably never seen one except on film or in a zoo. A physical wave of silence seemed to pass through the crowd. Achingly, they all stared at the preacher.

He bent his head forward, putting his thick tongue out between his lips, and the snake struck.

By the fangs sunk in his tongue, he drew its head into his mouth. And bit.

And spat the dead head to the ground, and with it a reddish spray of his own blood.

Here and there she heard screaming, but muffled by pounding in her own ears. She found she could do nothing but stare and go on staring.

"Alida!" a voice said close to her, and she still could not tear her eyes away. The voice was familiar, though; it belonged to Koriot Angoss, the Earthside representative of Riger's. She answered accordingly.

"All this!" she said. "You've made a bad mistake, haven't you?"

"But he's a cheap mountebank!" Angoss said unhappily. "Someone in the crowd brought him a snake, I don't know where from, and he did what you just saw. That's the third or fourth time today. And it's a trick that Persian conjurers used to do, and on Riger's we find it too disgusting to be entertaining. But here—"

Alida managed to look away from Rungley at last. She turned, and found herself facing, not Koriot Angoss, but the hawkface of the man from Azrael, over Angoss's shoulder. His eyes were dark and astonishingly sharp.

He said, "This man—one of you is from his home world?"



"I am," Angoss said shortly.

"I present myself: Lancaster Long of the planet Azrael. I have been watching for some while. I have seen the preacher bitten several times by poisonous snakes, and he has shown no ill-effects."

"He's immune," Alida said.

A look of distaste crossed Long's regal features. He said, "And knows it?"

"Certainly. Do you imagine he'd risk it if he weren't?"

"I see," Long said in a tone like a frigid wind. "I had hoped that here for once was a person who took his life seriously. Instead, it turns out that he is a cynical trickster. It's of a piece with everything else I've seen since I was invited here."

His scornful manner nettled Alida against her will. She said, "Explain!"

"Why should you need such a simple thing explained? A man is not poisoned by water; would you go to see a man drink water? That is how you have persuaded me to waste my time." He swept his robe around him and began to stride down the hillside.

"Who's that?" Angoss demanded, Alida told him what she knew of Long's background in a few short sentences, following his tall figure with her eyes and noting how people made way for him automatically.

Angoss got the point before she did, and with a wordless cry started out in Long's wake. Even then she had to stand wondering and foolish for a moment before she too understood and hastened down the hill.

By the time she came to the stage—people not making way for her as they had done for Long—she was too late to interfere. Angoss had been in time to interfere, but not to stop it.

Many people in the crowd had brought snakes for Rungley; how they had found them all Alida didn't waste time guessing. As one was being passed up for the preacher to play with, Long had stepped in.

There was no denying it. His scorn was magnificent, and the brawny figure of Rungley quailed before him as he raised the snake he had seized and turned shouting to the crowd.

"This man!" he cried. "This petty fellow Rungley! He is immune to venom! He risks nothing with these snakes he allows to strike him! His actions are a lie and a sham!"

A swell of grumbling complaint at having their fun interrupted disturbed the crowd. He stilled it with an imperious gesture, the snake hanging from his fingers like the short lash of a whip.

"I," Long said, "do not know if I am immune. See *this!*"

And he shook his lean arm bare of his loose sleeve and offered it for the snake to strike.

## VIII

For a long time after she came into her office for the new day's work, Alida sat staring at the vast window overlooking the polyplanet sector of the city. When perhaps ten minutes had gone by, she gave a sudden bitter chuckle and crossed the room to the multiprinter unit.

She fed a sheet of black paper into it. Then she set the controls for maximum type-size and tapped out seven words on the keys. The machine hummed for a moment; then it delivered the paper with the words printed in large red letters.

She took the paper and walked to the window, where she pasted it up in the exact middle of the main pane. Then she went back to her desk and sat staring at it.

It read: WHY IS A MOUSE WHEN IT SPINS? After a while the answer didn't seem funny any more. She turned her mind effortfully to her work.

A few minutes before ten, when Hans Demetrios was due to arrive, it occurred to her to call the hospital where they had taken Thorkild. She waited, wondering why it had suddenly become important to her to know how he was.

The secretary putting the call through came back to report that Dr. Lorenzo wasn't available on a solido circuit at the moment and to ask what she wanted done.

"Get me a sound line," Alida sighed. She stared at the black oblong sign on the window. Shortly, a voice rang out from the speaker in her desk.

"Supervisor Marquis," it said. "Lorenzo here. In view of Director Thorkild's status I've taken personal charge of his case. I'm afraid I have no reassurance for you right now."

"How... no reassurance?"

"I'd have to use jargon to make myself clear. Call it a major personality failure, if you like."

"True to what?" Alida felt suddenly cold, and reached out to turn the heating to full with the manual over-ride.

"I shouldn't commit myself," Lorenzo said. "We're looking for the cause now. It'll take several days."

"You'll keep me in touch? Director Thorkild and I work in close association; things are bound to be difficult without him."

"I understand," Lorenzo said.

When she had broken the connection, Alida told her secretary to get her a newsfax. It was brought in less than a minute. She scanned it closely, barely hearing the secretary say that Hans Demetrios had arrived, giving an answer only because the words echoed in her memory afterwards.

News: the investigation ordered into the death of Jacob Chen, advanced programmer, was in preparation. Crowds in the polyplanet sector to see the preacher Rungley. Delegate from new planet Azrael hospitalized after snake-bite. Statement by Rungley explaining Long's sickness by lack of faith in... in whatever Rungley had faith in. The enzyme S-hematinase, presumably. Statement by Koriot Angoss of Riger's. Negotiations for an Ipewell Bridge to proceed as scheduled. Those for an Azrael Bridge tentatively postponed pending the result of the inquiry into the death of Jacob Chen.

"But he can't do that!" Alida said aloud, reaching for the call-switch on the desk. In mid-movement she froze. She had the sudden insane impression that she was seeing Saxena.

Then the illusion passed. It was Hans Demetrios standing in the entrance of the office, and the only resemblance was that look—that

inquiring, hungry look which Saxena had also worn.

She had never seen Thorkild with that look.

She pushed aside the newsfax sheet and gestured for Hans to sit down. He did so, moving economically, and glanced up at the window to read her new sign.

"I see your point," he said.

"How do you mean?" she countered.

"The answer to your question, of course. Isn't it 'the higher, the fewer?'"

A smile came unbidden to her face. She said, "That's right. I hadn't expected you to know. I hadn't expected many people at all to know. It must be a very old bit of nonsense."

"Twentieth century," Hans said briefly. "Are you one of the few?"

"That was why I put it up."

For a few moments they sat and looked at each other. Alida found her sense of chill leaving her. To know the answer to the question, and to understand why she had put it up, was more than she would have expected from Thorkild, Saxena, anyone else she had ever met. Previously, when she had spoken with Hans, she had taken him for a merely nice young man. They were twenty or so years apart in age, after all. She found herself hoping she had not patronized him unduly.

She said, "I imagine you'll go higher than I ever shall. I don't envy you."

"It's not something we choose," Hans answered. "When I came in, you were saying something about, 'He can't do that!' I've seen today's news. Were you talking about Shrigg?"

"That's right." Her thoughts had gone wandering down an illogical byway; she chased them back. "A Bridge is the right and privilege of any human-occupied world. I don't care how many people are worried about Azrael. Shrigg can't hold back on the offer of a Bridge."

"I wouldn't press the point too hard," Hans said.

She stared at him. "You've worked on this already?" she suggested.

He nodded, taking out a file of documents from a portfolio he had

placed on his lap. He didn't look down at them.

"You said you'd seen today's news. So have I. Do you know why Lancaster Long did what he did—allowed that snake to bite him?"

"I was there when it happened."

"But you don't know?"

"I suppose I don't," she said wearily.

"I haven't spoken to him yet, though I'm going to try and do so, but I can guess. He did it because he didn't know if the snake could kill him."

She turned the words over in her mind and shook her head.

"How's Director Thorkild?" Hans said.

"I... why do you suddenly change the subject?"

"I haven't changed the subject."

A huge half-formed terror shadowy at the back of her mind, Alida struggled to make sense of that. Almost, she did, but the sense was worse than the shadow. She said, "I called the hospital and spoke to Lorenzo."

"The psychologist?"

"Yes. He's taken personal charge of Jorgen's case."

"And Lorenzo said?"

"He called it a major personality failure, and said that it would take several days to establish the reason."

Hans Demetrios glanced down at the papers he held. He said, "He was talking with Lancaster Long, I understand. Just before it happened."

"Is that what you meant when you said you weren't changing the subject?"

"Of course."

"But how could questions—presumably quite innocent questions—from a stranger upset Jorgen so badly?"

"They were the right questions," Hans said. "But you don't see what I

mean, so I'll have to leave it."

"No!" Alida said, and realized as she spoke how sharp and rude the tone of her voice was. "Uh... I mean no, please try to make it clearer if you can."

Hans shrugged and leaned back. He said, "The higher, the fewer. Out where Jorgen Thorkild is, or where Jacob Chen was, there are very few indeed. I can feel inside myself how it will be if I reach that kind of level. I can appreciate the loneliness, the feeling that you're being used by other people, and only you can know what it costs you. You have to reward yourself with hollow self-praise."

The half-formed terror was still in her mind. But now also Alida felt a growing, reasonless excitement. Her voice shook when she said, "Go on!"

"The crucial thing is that you must be able to persuade yourself that your slaving work is worthwhile. If you falter in that, or if you are driven as Jacob Chen was to a suspicion that you're faltering for another reason, you break apart. Jorgen Thorkild has broken apart. I've made a few inquiries, of Moses van Heemskirk and others. And I'm going to take a gamble which may break me."

"Which is?"

"I'm going to make the only assumption, as far as I can see, which Jacob Chen did not permit himself. He did not let himself believe that the people of Azrael are deliberately, consciously, knowingly dedicated to... destruction."

He raised his hand to his face, and Alida saw with a thrill of horror that his forehead was running with sweat.

"Don't try and press Shrigg," Hans said. "The later and longer you can postpone the negotiations for the Azrael Bridge the better it will be. The more time I'll have, I hope, to prove myself wrong."

"And break apart?" Alida said unsteadily.

"I have to risk that." Haris's knuckles were white on the hand with which he grasped his file of documents. "Do you see why now?"

"I... *no!*" Alida said forcefully.

"They say: pain is more real than pleasure; death is ultimately real. They take reality seriously. They make life seem justifiable by refusing to

mask its precarious nature. They would be ashamed of themselves if they did otherwise. We on Earth do it all the time. Lancaster Long was driven by shame when he offered his arm for that snake to bite. He was trying to make the audience see life as he sees it: a thing to be made real by the ending of it. This is alien to me. So far I haven't made it clear even to myself. I'm groping."

"But what if—" Alida broke off before she could voice her thought. She recognized that she was too afraid of it.

Hans looked at her with a kind of pity, but it was not a pity which could make her angry. He said, "Earth has built an ideal for itself, this past century or so. We've made the service of the Bridge System our reason for living. It's our source of pride in ourselves. Are you going to press a Bridge on Azrael against the will of Lancaster Long?"

She shuddered. It was a long, internal-shaking shudder almost orgasmic in its completeness. She said, "Because if the offer is refused—"

"He will *want* to refuse it!" Hans barked. "It will be the restoration of obsession with death to what he thinks of as a sick culture! Ours! What we most greatly prize, he will devalue—a cheap toy! As he thinks of the universe: it is easier to destroy than to build, therefore destruction is more real and people who forget that fact are infantile and inferior! On Azrael they ritualize killing. A man makes his life real by killing and being killed. A man who believes what Long believes can best serve his idea of reality by destroying the work of another. He can, and if we let him he will, destroy our work simply by refusing to have a Bridge on his planet."

"Why should he refuse it? The benefits it will bring—"

"Are nothing compared to the results of simply saying no."

There was a long silence. Dully, she picked up the newsfax sheet and pushed it into a waste-disposal chute. She said, "And you're prepared to be wrong, which might break you."

"If I'm not wrong, you can see what will become of me anyway." Again he had to wipe his face. He said then, "I am a doomed man. I have been tried and sentenced without knowing it. And I am very much afraid."

Alida tried to find something to say, and failed. Hans gathered his documents and put them away, and rose to his feet.

"I'm going to see Long in the hospital," he said. "And I shall see van Heemskirk again, and probably Laverne, and perhaps a few other people. But I can't delay going to Azrael for very long."

Unexpectedly, on the last word, the look came to his face again—the haunted look which had made her think for an instant that she was seeing Saxena. She found words pouring from her.

"Hans, look, you must talk about this; you can't go out alone on this! Why should you? The disaster is everyone's if you prove to be right. You must share that half of it at least."

He looked unhappily at her.

"The higher the fewer, all right!" she said. "But not fewer than necessary—that's stupid!"

He hesitated. Then he shrugged. "All right. I'll see you this evening for dinner. Will that do?"

She sank back into her chair. Eventually she said, "In the end, you're going to be very cruel. But you can't help it. I'll see you at nineteen hours."

He nodded and went out. When he had gone, she tore the silly sign from the window and threw it away.

## IX

"You are Jorgen Thorkild," said the voice from the box. "To be oneself as fully as possible is an adequate goal."

"You're only a machine," Thorkild told it, and picked it up from the white table where it stood. For a moment he hefted it meditatively, and then got to his feet.

The air was warm and cloying, syrup-heavy with the scent of the huge flowers covering every bush of the hundreds in the hospital grounds. They were artfully laid out to imitate nature, punctuated here and there with shallow pools on whose mirror-still surface lay nenuphars pink, blue and yellow.



Thorkild judged the distance to the nearest of the pools, drew back his arm, and let fly.

"I am a machine, true," the box allowed judiciously. "But the principles on which I was constructed—by human beings, remember—"

And splash.

Thorkild dusted his hands and sat down again. He could be certain that within ten minutes or a quarter-hour, Dr. Lorenzo would discover what had happened and come out to remonstrate; nonetheless, even that much peace from the tireless arguments of the machine would be worth it.

He reached for the refrigerated glass which was now all that stood on the table beside him. It was not until he raised it to his lips that he caught sight of the naked girl standing dappled with shadow among the thick leaves of a nearby shrub. She was looking at him, large-eyed, tremulous, like a shy fawn.

"Nefret," he said. He put his glass back on the table.

"I saw you throw the box in the water," the girl said. A hint of awe tinged her voice. "You're lucky!"

"Lucky, Nefret?" Thorkild didn't mind talking to her; he had spoken to her several times since they let him out from sedation. Most of the time you could only talk *to* her, not with her.

"Yes." She hesitated. Then she looked to left and right among the branches of the shrub, and chose a thick stem, heavy with gorgeous waxy blossom. She snapped it off near the base. Holding it up before her like a torch, seeming to need its light before she dared step out on the open lawn, she took a few cautious steps towards Thorkild's chair. He saw that she had drawn open eyes on her breasts again, with mud from the edge of one of the ponds.

"Lucky?" Thorkild said again, uncomfortably. She had her own eyes, too, and they were terribly sharp. They reminded him a little of Lancaster Long's.

"They'll cure me," Nefret said. "But they won't cure you. You won't let them."

"You can't cure someone who isn't sick," Thorkild said.

"It's sick to be different," Nefret said. She lowered the raw end of her flowery branch to the ground, and began to pick off petals one by one. She didn't look at Thorkild again.

"I'm soft," she said eventually. "I can feel the cure going on inside me now. Like hands shaping wet clay. One day soon I'll be made over entirely. I won't be me any more. This is the third time, so I remember, you see. And I'm too soft to stop it. But you, you're hard. They won't shape you any other way than the way you are. If they go on trying they'll break you into little pieces and dust, and you'll sparkle in sunlight."

"How were you different, Nefret?" Thorkild said. She was very young to be here for the third time, he thought; her body was half a child's, tight and firm under her brown skin.

"I don't want to be the same as everybody," she said. "I won't be happy. I'll only think I'm happy. I want to be the way I am."

A foot crunched on a gravel path. She let the branch fall and darted back into the bushes. She was gone before the topmost flower on the branch had reached the ground.

Thorkild took another pull at his drink before turning to see whose footfall he had heard. It was Lorenzo.

"You got here quickly," Thorkild said.

Lorenzo blinked. He was never happy in full sun; probably he had an optic weakness too small for convenient therapy. In his velvet voice he said, "I suppose you threw it in the lilypond this time."

He hooked his foot under the bar of a chair on the other side of Thorkild's table and sat down.

"Only because you weren't around for me to break it over your head," Thorkild answered.

He saw Lorenzo wince a little, and was amused. The doctor was of medium height, his hair crisp and brown, his shoulders rather narrow and his legs and arms exceptionally thin. It had occurred to Thorkild the first time he met him that he was afraid of people bigger than himself, and knew it, and was ashamed at the irrational reaction. Thorkild was much bigger.

"All those voice-boxes do, you know," Lorenzo said after a pause, "is to verbalize the subconscious doubts we found when we analyzed you on your arrival. If you're going to be honest with yourself, you'll have to know if they make sense or not."

Thorkild emptied his glass. He said, "I've put you in rather a quandary, haven't I? If I do break one of the boxes over your head, that'll mean anti-violence therapy, and this will deprive me of whatever makes me so useful to other people. And if I simply pay them no attention, as I have been doing, I'm not going to be useful anyway. Isn't it splendid?"

Lorenzo stared impassively at him. He said, "Alida Marquis has been inquiring after you. I saw her this morning. She seems very upset."

"First time," Thorkild said.

"Why have you changed your attitude towards her?"

"Why has she changed hers towards me?" Thorkild shrugged.

"For the past several months, at least," Lorenzo said, "you've been beseeching her to make a contract with you, to apply for two children and three if you could swing the deal."

"I seem to remember," Thorkild agreed warily.

"You don't talk about a three-child contract as a joke," Lorenzo suggested.

"Alida didn't talk about it," Thorkild countered with a smile. It wasn't a good smile; it was too bitter. "She had as little to do with me as she could. As little as I would let her. I should have thought she'd have been glad to get me out of her hair."

He shifted slightly on his seat, ostentatiously turning his head to look at the bushes into which Nefret had disappeared. "Do you frown on affairs between your patients, doctor? I rather fancy little Nefret. She ran away when she heard you coming. Maybe if you'd go away again she might come back."

"Oddly enough, you mean that," Lorenzo said. He sounded puzzled. Thorkild shot him a sharp glance. That was the difficulty with this man. He *was* intelligent, and no contempt anyone else felt for him could mask the fact.

There was a brief silence.

"I see," Lorenzo said at last, and got to his feet. Thorkild stopped him with a gesture as he was about to walk off.

"What do you see?" he demanded.

Lorenzo looked down at him with an expression of some pity. "Your pride must have been badly wounded," he said. "Maybe it's as well that you've finished up here. Wounded pride is no basis on which to found a marriage. And it would have been disastrous for the children."

"What do you *mean*?" Thorkild barked.

"You can still be angry," Lorenzo said. "You're human, if you can be angry. Alida Marquis was Saxena's mistress, wasn't she?"

"Yes. But that has nothing to do with wounded pride. I've given up pride, doctor. I gave it up when I realized that all I had to be proud of was how good I was at being used by other people."

"And when, precisely, did you realize that?" Lorenzo purred.

Thorkild considered the question. He said, "Yes, I do know—the moment when I answered Lancaster Long's question about my work, and then I saw Uskia with the speaker plugged into her navel so her unborn child could eavesdrop on what was going on. And I thought: I work like hell. I exhaust myself. I have to sweat out petty details and grand policies, and I have to stand father to other people's decisions—which may be wrong, but if they are, I'm blamed. For the sake of idiots. For the sake of superstitious, knuckleheaded, potbellied morons like Uskia. I should be proud of *that*?"

"Saxena killed himself," Lorenzo said. "Why?"

Thorkild looked away. "I don't know," he muttered. "They said it was through exhaustion and overwork. I never believed that. If anyone knows, Alida does, and she's always refused to tell me."

"I put it to you," Lorenzo said, "that you never cared for Alida Marquis as a person. She symbolized to you that status which Saxena, your predecessor, achieved. You knew he killed himself. You were terrified that you might do the same. You felt you were not even as good as he was, and therefore the risk was even greater in your case. To try and stave off this

haunting terror, you struggled to compel Alida to do more for you than she had done for Saxena—to marry you, in fact, and acknowledge that you were a better man than Saxena. Instead of which she has refused even to become your mistress. That's how your pride was wounded. That's why you broke, and had to come here."

A sudden wave of happiness went through Thorkild. He raised a sunny grin to Lorenzo. "I think you're right," he said. "And I don't think it matters any more. Why should I have to convince myself I'm better than any other human statistic?"

"Consider my job! I'm a hydraulics engineer, supervising the flow of human beings every day of my working life, processing them exactly as I process freight! Can something which behaves as a statistic *be* more than a statistic? I could get as much from a bale of textiles as from a traveler going by Bridge."

"Nonsense," Lorenzo said. "Can a bale talk?"

"Imagine! I approach a crowd of emigrants and say, 'Who are you?' They'll say, 'Ivan Chang going to Platt's World', or 'Mary Schultz going to Kayowa'. I go to the freight section and I look at labels. They say, 'Cultivating machinery going to Platt's World', or 'Educational materials, Kayowa'. And I learn just as much, and just as little."

"But if—"

"We've created this magnificent network of Bridges. We can ship people from star to star and all the time we're scouting for more planets to link into the System. Pushing out with all the superb intellection of ivy sprawling up a tree, the System spreads. Daily traffic shows a predictable standard deviation from an average which increases equally predictably—all as neat as any corporation accounts sheet. If you can treat people like that, they're lumps! Clods! I'm people. And that therefore includes me."

"Human beings create goals for themselves. Without goals human beings are merely vegetables." Lorenzo blinked.

"So you believe in destiny!" Thorkild laughed harshly.

"We make our own to fulfil our goals. Ultimately, perhaps, our destiny is to understand the cosmos."

"And then die."

"Not necessarily. We've always set ourselves new objectives to replace old ones. Possibly there's something beyond."

Thorkild yawned hugely. He was in control of himself again. He said, "You can say the same of... of a speck of fungus-spawn shot out of a puffball. Maybe it too comforts itself with the promise that there's something beyond this patch of leaf-mould. Well, we're past the leaf-mould, and what do we have? Action for action's sake, growth for the sake of growth."

"And all this was made clear to you by a few words from Lancaster Long?" Lorenzo suggested with a hinted sneer.

Thorkild refused to rise to the bait. He said, "If you like to put it that way. I was worried and overworked, and he asked me why I endured this. Whereupon I saw I had no need to."

He looked into his glass, but it was empty. Shrugging, he added, "If there are more people like him on his home world, they'll jolt the rest of us when they tie in to the System."

Lorenzo hesitated. He looked suddenly aged. He said at last, his voice low and brittle, "They decided not to."

"They what?" Thorkild tensed, staring up at the doctor.

"Decided not to." Lorenzo gave a wan smile. "Think it over. Do you know what the name of his planet means?"

Thorkild didn't react, so Lorenzo went on. "Azrael," he said, "is the legendary name of the Angel of Death, and it wasn't chosen at random for his planet, either! If you're so sick of life, why don't you follow Saxena's example, instead of leaving the work to an out-world stranger?"

He spun on his heel and strode away. It was a long time before the look of haunted terror with which Thorkild watched him go changed to something a little nearer to the human.

"But this is wrong," Alida said suddenly. "To come to him like beggars makes us all the more inferior to him."

In the entrance hall of the house which had been allotted to Lancaster Long for his stay on Earth she stood with Moses van Heemskirk, and with a score of other officials. It was expected that Laverne would come later; he was arranging some final detail with Uskia regarding the establishment of an Ipewell area in the polyplanet sector of the city.

Many people had used this handsome building. Usually the period of negotiation had been long enough to allow some stamp of the occupant's personality—at least, of the character of his home world—to imprint on the place. No such trace of Lancaster Long could be sensed now.

Only now and then someone passed into view in an alcove, or crossed the hallway on soft shoes with a swish of a long, dark-colored robe.

Moses van Heemskirk gave her a bitter smile which did not seem right for his round face. He said, "One man! And we hang on his decision as though on a rope, by the *neck!*"

"Are we wrong?" Alida said emptily.

"Could he be right?" van Heemskirk said, turning the question deftly and making it somehow far more dangerously valid.

There was a sound of doors opening, and they turned. That was the door of the room into which Minister Shrigg had disappeared.

"Why do we have to rely on *him?*" someone said in the crowd, barely above a whisper. But everyone waiting in the hall could hear, and nodded agreement.

Then Shrigg came out, his face like a storm, flushed to the limits of his bald pate, scythed through the crowd to the main door and out, dragging his yes-men and his attendants in his wake like scraps of paper whirling in the wind of a fast vehicle. All eyes followed him despairingly. It was not until he was out of sight that Alida—and in the same moment, the rest of the watchers—saw Lancaster Long standing in the open doorway where Shrigg had passed.

With immense deliberation, Long hawked, pursed his lips, and spat on

the floor where Shrigg's feet had been.

"Sold by a fool," Alida said.

"Could you have done better?" van Heemskirk countered, in the moment before Long's eyes sought him out among the crowd, Long's arm was raised imperiously to beckon him close. He went. They had all swallowed their pride by now.

"I shall return to Azrael today," Long said. "I, and those with me. You will instruct Captain Inkoos to get her ship off my planet immediately afterwards. I've had enough of argument."

Unconsciously he rubbed one forearm with the fingers of the other hand; Alida realized that he was touching the place where the snake's fangs had sunk in.

"We look forward to your changing your mind soon," van Heemskirk said, defiantly staring up at the beaked face so far above his own. Alida was aware of some small admiration for his manner. He conveyed counter-contempt against Long's own; in words it would have been: you'll grow up, you'll learn better.

Long, though, took no notice. He said, "I've said this to Minister Shrigg, but he is wooden-headed and a booby, and you at least have some inkling of what I talk about. I want you to recognize the reason why I spurn your gilded bait, why we of Azrael have no respect for your elaborate toys."

Hans had said he would make the Bridge System seem like a toy, Alida remembered. But it was not good to think of Hans. He too was elusive, the end of a rainbow. She could touch and hold him, and never be near him. Perhaps she never would be near him. But the courage in him!

"Why take the time?" van Heemskirk said, with superbly affected boredom. "To analyze petty jealousy is a futile occupation. A child will persuade himself that another's... toy, if you like, is worthless, for the sake of comfort."

"Your jibes don't touch me," Long said. "And I cannot touch you, because you live away from reality."

"I see," van Heemskirk said indifferently. "Well, hear me say this, at least."



"I've had enough of your babbling," Long answered.

"I think—" van Heemskirk said delicately, and did not end his sentence. But a wave of tension passed among those listening, and Alida found herself leaning fractionally forward. It seemed as though van Heemskirk was going to say something unexpected. Important? *Salvation?*

"Well?" Long rapped out.

Conscious that this was a moment he could dominate, van Heemskirk took his time. He spoke slowly, savoring the words.

"You have made your position quite clear, I think. Consequently it will not surprise you that we took your word when, in the course of discussion with myself and other representatives of the Bridge System, you declined so firmly to have a Bridge to Azrael.

"It should please you that the scoutship *Hunting Dog*, Captain Lucy Inkoos commanding, lifted for space on my orders directly Minister Shrigg finished his final talks with you. By now the ship is orbiting, and will not return to the surface of the planet."

It was like the sun coming out on a dull day. Smiles came to every face except Lancaster Long's own, and Alida's. She stood quite frozen.

"But—" Long said after a confused pause.

"For yourself," van Heemskirk said, "what you do is entirely your own affair."

He cocked one eyebrow impudently at Long, turned on his heel, and walked towards the door. Behind him someone started to chuckle; then it was laughter, and everyone was joining in. Again, except Long himself, and Alida.

Under her breath she found herself forming words. She listened, oddly detached. She heard: "But Hans is on Azrael. Could they have made him leave?"

She thrust her way through the throng, to catch van Heemskirk.

"Whose idea do you think it was?" van Heemskirk said. "I wasn't so clever."

"Then where is Hans?" Alida demanded.

For a moment or two longer van Heemskirk seemed to be concentrating on the luxury of his private car. Then he said, "On Azrael."

"You left him there?"

"Part of a kind of duel, if you like." His voice was uncharacteristically edgy. "That was how Hans Demetrios saw it, anyway. He on Azrael, Lancaster Long here. To the victor the spoils."

"If he wins, he loses," Alida said.

"I know," van Heemskirk said with unusual gentleness. "Alida, I realize that most people think of me as a career politician—I am!—whose business is to oil the wheels—it is!—and whose interest in life ends there—it doesn't!"

Alida made a vague hopeless gesture.

"The man who oils the wheels, surely, is the man most concerned when someone comes and tries to throw a bucketful of sand into the machine. You've fallen for Hans, haven't you?"

"Is it so obvious?" Alida said dispiritedly.

"Oh, I think so. I see a faint resemblance to Saxena in him. I hope you don't mind people talking of Saxena now. There was a time, I recall, when you found it unbearable."

"He's dead," Alida said.

"Except in your mind, and Jorgen Thorkild's. It's about time he died there too. Oh, I think in Jorgen's mind he is now dying. I've spoken to Lorenzo about this."

He rubbed his plump hands together, round and round, with maddening slowness.

"Somehow," he said, "we've put ourselves in the position of a man who's obsessed by a fear of failure. In that state you can't face someone whose avowed intention is to wreck your handiwork. More subtly, you also cannot face someone who has tried the same work, and failed at it. Not unless you can convince yourself that you're better than he is."

"Are you talking about Jorgen?" Alida said.

"In a sense. Why did Saxena kill himself, Alida? If anyone knows, you should."

"He never told me."

"Perhaps it would help him to die in your mind if you tried to work out why. Let me make another suggestion. Our life is... you could call it in a sense incestuous. Out of all the millions of people on Earth we form a kind of interlocked family group. In succeeding Saxena, Jorgen was called upon to take the place of a quasi-father. His demands on you were Oedipal. Had that struck you?"

For some moments she sat silent, her face whitening. Then she said, "It fits, Moses. Thank you. That will help me with Hans, too."

"Oh yes. He asked me to mention it to you. At the same meeting where he told me what to do if all negotiations with Long failed."

"What did he actually say?"

"That our only hope, if Long was adamant, was to make it appear for the benefit of the public at large that we were in the right and Azrael was behaving in a petty, foolish manner. He told me that he foresaw a partial failure whatever we did; a wave of suicides from boredom, a wave of willful deaths in dangerous pastimes. Like Rungley's snake-handling, on which Long has bestowed the blessing of publicity."

"So he told you to withdraw the ship from Azrael and leave Long here, stranded."

"In the hope of reducing him from a mysterious, awe-inspiring figure, spuming our best achievements on good grounds, to a familiar and rather silly, ordinary person. While Hans remains on Azrael. He foresaw everything, including a legalistic argument to satisfy Shrigg."

"Which would be?"

"That he is completing the investigation into the death of Jacob Chen."

"But how about getting him home?"

"It's all planned. The ship has been withdrawn from normal duty; it will stay in the Azrael system till he is killed, or till he calls for it. You faced

that better. You're getting things in perspective."

Alida nodded. "Does Jorgen know about his attitude to me?"

"Lorenzo said he did. Unfortunately it was only a symptom of his disorder, and doesn't touch the heart of the problem." He hesitated. "Which is hardly surprising. Alida, would you say you knew Hans Demetrios very well?"

"No one will ever know him well," she answered.

"Perhaps you're right. Did you know he had a streak of... mysticism, let me say?"

"I wouldn't have thought so," Alida demurred.

"But he has. You see, the sickness which Jorgen is suffering—the sickness which he caught from Lancaster Long, and which is beginning to spread—is a very ancient one. We've almost forgotten about it. But Hans knew of it, and told me. I guess you expect a programmer to have *recherché* data like that. Ever hear of *accidia*?"

"Is that the name of a disease?"

"A kind of disease. It used to be called 'the black night of the soul'. It isn't depression. It goes beyond melancholia and misery to a point at which you have to ask the unanswerable question: what's the point of it all? Jorgen is asking that question, by being as he is."

"It sounds like one of the problems the medievals used to pose."

"Oh, it is. Hence *accidia* was a sin; it involved a denial of divine purpose. It was considered one of the inescapable burdens of possessing a soul. A non-rational creature could not have asked the question, and once asked it could not be answered without—in their terms—faith. But with faith, you didn't ask it."

"This is double-talk," Alida said angrily. "Are you trying to tell me that Hans is taking it seriously?"

"What do you think?"

Alida shook her head.

"Now let me tell you something which you will find still worse," van

Heemskirk said. "These fur hats which the men of Azrael wear—you've seen them?"

"Of course I have."

"Have you ever seen Long without his?"

"No, I haven't!"

"I visited him in the hospital where they took him after the snake-bite affair," van Heemskirk said. "I confirmed this with the doctors, by the way. When his hat is off, and the fringe around the front of the hat doesn't cover his forehead, you see on each side, just below the hairline, a little puckered excrescence of hardened skin. The doctor who attended Long said it was almost as hard as a finger-nail. In other words, Alida, Lancaster Long has horns."

## XI

If that one moment in the life of a suicide between the decision and the death could be stretched to days, weeks and years, Hans Demetrios thought, it would become a little like what he was now experiencing. The hung-in-space instant after the chair is kicked away, before the rope constricts the throat; the terrible infinity of falling between the cliff-top and the rocks; the hiss of air escaping irrevocably into space, making its own sound, carrying its own sound to ears that will never hear anything again.

The people were puzzled at first when the scoutship, giving no warning, lifted from the port, leaving only the dwarfed figure of Hans Demetrios standing on the arid concrete like a lone mourner. He felt at that moment curiously divided, between regret at what he was losing and eagerness to know if he was justified in his sacrifice. He compared himself to a man starving to death, who could find no food except a bitter fruit which twisted his mouth as he choked it down to assuage his hunger.

It was a little while before the silent men came to bring him before a local official. They handled him roughly, but he was prepared for that. In a room walled with bare, planed planks the official demanded to know what

had happened.

Hans answered meekly, hiding his true feelings.

"Your representative, Lancaster Long, refused to permit a Bridge on Azrael, and demanded that we leave your world alone. We would not try and force acceptance on you."

"And you?" the official said.

"I stayed to tell you of the decision."

"But what about Long?" the official pressed him. Hans gave a measured shrug.

"What he does is of no concern to us," he answered. "He is still on Earth, I presume. Certainly he did not come back by way of the ship's Bridge."

The official uttered barking orders, and the guards took Hans to a cell. Squatting on the hard floor, his back into a corner to find what support he could, Hans reviewed in imagination what must be happening outside.

The exact status of Lancaster Long, which conferred on him the power to speak for Azrael in negotiating with Earth, was one of the things that even Jacob Chen had not been able to establish. Ipewell had been far simpler; there was the quasi-religious foundation of the matriarchy, the legend of the Greatest Mother of All whose personification was Uskia in this generation, a whole interlocking society to which the key was readily available.

But on Azrael—

It was clear that there was a kind of caste system. If you could compare it with anything, perhaps the structure of ancient Japanese society was an analogy. More than pedigree, what counted in the highest caste of all was a code of behavior. You could not push the comparison, but as a sketch it served.

For that code suggestions of a key could be found in certain legendary acts. In classical Greece, they said, an artist who had created a master-work would flaw it deliberately, for fear its very perfection might excite the jealousy of the gods. Also, in many cultures, men had taken their most prized possessions and burned them on altars as a sacrifice.

Even to an only son.

Even to life itself.

But Captain Inkoos and the others who had come in the ship *Hunting Dog* had no knowledge of divine jealousy or sacrifices. The fact of existence made its own demands on them, which they were satisfied to fulfil. They landed, after broadcasting the usual warnings. They spoke with officials like the man who had just questioned Hans himself. It was not their business to interfere in the affairs of this newly contacted planet, but only to make their offer of a Bridge and then to find out what they could about the society here so that when Azrael was linked into the rest of the System there would be no friction.

By the time Captain Inkoos's staff programmer had found the work too much for him, so that Jacob Chen had to be sent for, the close-mouthed natives had selected Long as their delegate, and chosen those who were to go with him to Earth, and they were already being received by Moses van Heemskirk on behalf of the people of the mother world.

Hans sat in the corner of the chilly cell and thought of the rumors that might be expected to start. Whoever Lancaster Long, might be, he was important on Azrael, and trusted. Why else would he have been selected? And now that the scoutship had gone, there was only one person who could say what had become of him.

He had refused the Bridge. So far, so good.

Why had he not come home? Because he had betrayed his code and did not dare let the fact be known on Azrael? Because, for all his outward scoffing at the ways of Earth, he had been tempted by them? Let those questions once be asked, and there would be hellish results.

"Why did Long not come back before the ship went away? He, and those who were with him?"

This was more than a local official; he was a man almost as tall as Long, with the same cast of features and the same piercing gaze. They had taken Hans to see him in a huge hall of rough-dressed stone, seated on a tall wooden chair. Four secretaries attended him, and several other aides stood by.

"He could doubtless have come back at any time he wished," Hans shrugged. "But as you must know, in discussions with those in charge of the Bridge System he refused to permit a Bridge on Azrael. When he made the refusal final, we withdrew the ship."

The man in the tall chair conferred behind his hand with one of his aides. Hans could see that what he had said was being confirmed. Why not? Day-by-day accounts of the negotiations with van Heemskirk had been passed back to Azrael by the ship's Bridge.

"Why were you left here?" the man on the chair said.

"To conduct an investigation into the death of Jacob Chen," Hans answered.

"What needs to be investigated there?"

"Some men," Hans said deliberately—here he had to be very cautious—"would say that the urge to destroy springs from small jealousy. Wanton killing is like the act of a child who breaks a plaything belonging to another child, for no better reason than that it is not his own. If you have on Azrael no one whose life is of any value, then perhaps you do not suffer by this habit."

Behind the tall chair one of the aides moved to whisper in the ear of the man seated. Hans saw that he was elderly, with a grizzled gray beard; his thin lips were set in a smile. Some intuition told him that this was one of the men he had been looking for. More than the man on the chair, he counted.

The man on the chair grunted some word of permission, and the man with the gray beard stepped forward. He said, "I am Casimir Yard. You touch on philosophical matters, like the child you refer to—without understanding."

Hans gave him a steady look. He said, "Age does not always bring wisdom."

"On your world men grow old without wisdom. Which accounts for your being able to believe what you say." Yard's thin lips twisted a little further, so that the smile became a sneer.

"As you will," Hans said indifferently. "Nonetheless Jacob Chen was a man of very great wisdom as we regard wisdom, and his death was simple



waste. We treat men as they would wish to be treated. Perhaps Lancaster Long discovered this; I was not in his confidence when he made his decision."

Another turn of the knife of suspicion.

Yard felt it, and hesitated. Then he said, "All men die. The agent is immaterial."

"Yet when a man has killed, you execute him."

"True." Yard paused a moment. "Ah, I see what you would imply. It is to be presumed that the wish of one who kills in ritual is for death. To execute him is not to exact payment, but to grant the wish."

"This system may be apposite on Azrael," Hans allowed magnanimously, "where your people are of such little account that their deaths can occur at random and cause no ill effects."

"Your rudeness is only excused by your ignorance," Yard snapped.

"What else am I to think?" Hans countered. "If you had men who are valuable to you, how could you permit their wanton killing? Or do you confer beforehand, and set aside those you can spare, and brand them for slaughter?"

"Enough!" the man on the chair barked. "Clearly things are as Long reported, where you hail from. You are a wit-old, and we are well rid of interference by your people."

"Lancaster Long," Hans said delicately, "has not come home."

Yard exchanged a glance with the man on the chair. All the other people in the hall had sunk in Hans's mind to mere shadows; they did not matter.

"Let me state clearly what the facts are," he said loudly. "Either your view held on Azrael is wrong, and mine is right, in which case your delegate's decision to decline the Bridge was due to a small-minded unwillingness to confess the truth—"

A sudden shout went up around him, angry and threatening. He paused calmly until it died away, then continued.

"Or my view is wrong, and yours is right. In which case— and I quote—" He bowed ironically to Casimir Yard. "In which case, we are to take it that

your wish is for death."

In dead silence, Yard seemed to begin to understand. Hans went on, for the benefit of those whose minds worked slowly.

"We too can kill," he said. "By any of a hundred different methods, we can kill you."

And there it was. The same dilemma which had impaled himself, translated into terms that spiked an entire planet. It was not for the people of Azrael to know that the threat was not a threat.

Are we wrong? Then we have lived a lie, and our existence is mere foolishness, our attempts to bring reality into our lives by confronting ourselves with death are childish nonsense.

Are we right? Then we have given those, out there, more powerful than ourselves, the justification for putting an end to us as some among us have put an end to one of them.

Hans looked at the face of Casimir Yard. It had gone almost as gray as his beard. The man on the chair was likewise pale, and there was a grumbling of worry among the others listening in the hall.

This was revenge, perhaps. Not against the people of Azrael as such. Against the universe which had so cruelly defined his own predicament.

Assumption: that the people of Azrael are dedicated to what the ancients called the powers of darkness.

Am I right? Then by the act of refusing the Bridge, Lancaster Long is able to call in question what has become the mainspring of life for the people of Earth, to shake the minds of everyone who depends on it until cracks appear like cracks in the walls of buildings during an earthquake.

Am I wrong? But to be wrong, for a programmer, is to be dead.

No one had found words to answer him when he spoke again.

"The ship did not leave this system when it took off," he said. "It is standing by in orbit. It waits for me. I can—and must—report to it at regular intervals. As I said, I am here to investigate the death of Jacob Chen. Were you to hinder my investigation, it would be possible for that ship to call others. Hundreds of others. It would be possible for such ships to make this whole planet a desert."

With a certain grim humor, he added, "As a matter of fact, that ship alone could do the job. But it would take rather a long time."

Yard turned slowly to face the man on the tall chair. He said, "It is as he says. We must conduct this investigation, not into the death of the Earthman only, but into—"

His voice tailed away, as though the formulation of the whole thought was too much for him.

"Into your own stupidity," Hans said coldly. "And now, if we have done with this logic-chopping for the moment, I must make my first report to the orbiting ship."

## XII

If it had not been for one thing, Jorgen Thorkild would have been content to sit away his days in the pleasant garden, among the flowered bushes and the lily-ponds. He wanted to. For some time, he managed to.

But there was this hammering echo in his mind, striking responses from memories he could not deliberately forget, to remind him that Azrael had refused the Bridge.

Knowledge of the likely consequences of that decision kept coming between him and the books he tried to read, the recordings which he tried to lose himself in. He was aware that there was a world outside, and that breached his defences hopelessly.

He had not raised the subject with Lorenzo again; so far he could preserve his pose of total indifference. But a pose it had become. He thought this must be what men called conscience—irrational.

As a child he had had some musical ability. He obtained a small harmonium from the hospital stores and sat by his favorite pond playing from memory or improvising. Sometimes the other patients came and listened, sitting around him on the grass.

Today there were none, for a very long time, and he played to himself for more than an hour. At last his hands were growing stiff, and he let

them lapse into a sort of slow lament, feeling after each note without conscious direction.

Suddenly he hit a raucous polychord and slammed the lid of the keyboard shut. No, it was no use any more! He could not escape from knowledge in his own mind. Long had spurned the offer of the Bridge, as he had dismissed Thorkild. An act so contrary to the ordinary run suggested a sort of purpose. It might not be a valid one, but it was a purpose, and that was what he lacked.

He would have to go back.

As the decision crystallized, he looked up. He did not at first recognize the girl facing him, for she was clothed and he had never seen her clothed before. Then he realized.

"Nefret!" he said.

She stood with her hands folded demurely in front of her. Her long dark hair was knotted on her nape. Her face was calm. But out of her eyes looked something pathetic, like the spirit of a caged wild beast.

She said nothing in the next few seconds, and he went on, "Are you leaving? Are you cured?"

"Yes, they cured me," she said. She turned a chair standing nearby so that it faced him at the instrument, and sat down. "I am allowed to go away today."

"What are you going to do?"

He had put the question for politeness. The answer came with such terrible directness that it lashed his dormant mind awake.

"I shall kill myself," Nefret said.

He stared at her. Her face became that of Saxena, for a moment as in life, then twisted by the corrosive poison which had given him release. And then the Saxena-face, as so often before in nightmare, became his own.

The illusion passed, leaving him shivering although the sun and air were warm. "But why?" he heard himself cry.

"Because it's the only way to stop the world." She plucked at the hem of her unaccustomed shirt, which she wore uncomfortably, like a splint. "Do

you remember that I once came out and talked to you here? I said I thought I was soft, like clay, and you were hard, and they would break you before they changed you. I've been watching you, listening to your music. I know now that I was wrong."

"How? Why?"

"You're being gnawed at from within. You fidget without cause. You lapse suddenly into silence and stare at nothing. One day soon you're going to give in, and you'll go back to where you were, and you'll stay there, and you won't be able to remember why you left. I thought you were hard. No one is hard. So I have let them shape me the way they want, and when I die it won't be me I've killed, but this stranger."

She made an unhappy gesture up and down her body.

"We are all strangers to ourselves," Thorkild said after a long silence. "Nefret, why did they bring you here?"

"Because of what I wanted. Because I didn't want what I was offered."

"What did you want, then?"

She gave him a curious look. "You know, it's strange!" she said. "I have the feeling that I know you so well, and yet I know nothing about you except your name, and you know nothing about me. It's all very simple. I'm uncontracted. My father was on the Earthside staff from Glory, and my mother refused to join him when he left, and the contract was dissolved and my legal guardian is a man in an office in a big government building."

"Still?" Thorkild said.

"For two more years."

"And the first time he had you sent here?"

"Oh, it's not a *he* that does it!" She gave a bitter laugh. "It's a *they*. I could fight one person. But the huge imponderable shadowy force behind him—you can't escape that. I tried. The first time I ran off with a spaceman to Indonesia. I tried to explain why I did it, because I knew it was silly, though it was fun for a while, but they'd made up their minds beforehand that I was crazy and they sent me here. And the second time I think I was crazy. But this time it was because I tried to go by Bridge."

"I remember!" Thorkild said. "That was... the day Saxena died!"

"That was why I tried it then. I thought maybe there would be some confusion. But they caught me and sent me here again."

Thorkild was silent for a long time, thinking over the case as he had seen it from the impersonal heights of top administrative level. He remembered looking down from the vantage platform before Long and Uskia and van Heemskirk arrived.

He had wondered then what became of human importance down there, two hundred feet below. Well, he had his answer. But whether it was any use he couldn't tell.

"What do you really want, Nefret?" he said.

"To stop," she answered. "To be turned off. That's all I have left that I can want. There's no reason to do anything else."

"I don't mean that. I mean... well, assuming it became possible for you to do what you liked, without having to die, what would you do? Go to Glory?"

"I wasn't trying to get to my father," she said wearily. "They kept trying to tell me that I was, because it was a tidy capsule explanation and helped to justify what they did to frustrate me. What's my father to me? A biological accident! I wouldn't know him if I met him!"

"Stop listing what you don't want," Thorkild said. "Tell me something you do want."

The girl looked at him with puzzled eyes. She was silent for several seconds. Finally she said in an altered voice, "I guess if I want anything, I want... anything that will matter."

"That's it," Thorkild said. "That's the right desire."

There was a footfall on gravel behind his chair, and he turned to see Lorenzo approaching. The doctor's eyes were as usual narrowed against the sunlight. He nodded to Thorkild, but addressed himself to Nefret.

"They're waiting for you at the entrance," he said. "You can go now."

Obediently, like a puppet, Nefret got to her feet. As she moved, however, Thorkild gestured at her to wait. He raised his eyes to Lorenzo's face.

"I don't seem to have seen you so often these past few days, doctor," he said.

"Why should you?" Lorenzo answered cuttingly. "I've been busy. In case you didn't notice, there's been a rush of new patients, people who've had the foundations of their lives questioned and who haven't got your advantages which would let them help themselves."

"A consequence of Azrael's refusal to splice into the Bridge System?"

"Of course. We knew this was coming. You aren't unique, you know."

Standing in front of her chair, Nefret waited passively. Thorkild indicated her. He said, "You told her that 'they' were waiting to take her away. Who are 'they'?"

"I don't know," Lorenzo said irritably. "Somebody sent by her legal guardian."

"Tell *them* to go away," Thorkild said. He got to his feet. "I've just made an interesting discovery. I'm one of *them*, and I'm ashamed of myself."

Lorenzo began to smile, very slowly. He said, "Go on. I don't quite see—"

"*They* committed Nefret in your care, didn't they? She was caught trying to get off Earth by Bridge, the day Saxena killed himself. I was his deputy then; I was the owner of an arm that stamped the official seal on an order for her arrest. I didn't take the slightest personal interest in the case; I'd already gone too far towards dehumanization. As I recall the law in this respect, since she was committed for this particular offence, her guardian was acting legally as an agent for the Bridge City authorities—for me, in other words, in my capacity as Saxena's successor. Nefret is my legal ward."

Lorenzo's smile was turning into a grin. Bewildered, the girl looked from one to the other of the two men.

"Is this true?" she said after a pause.

"I imagine so," Lorenzo confirmed. "In which case, what do you propose to do, Thorkild?"

"I'm going to exercise my legal rights," Thorkild said, getting to his feet. "You haven't officially discharged Nefret, have you?"

"No, I have to discharge her into the care of a fit person, as the jargon goes."

"Then I'm your fit person," Thorkild said briskly. "I'm going to try and provide Nefret with what she wants—a simple enough thing, you'd imagine, because all she wants is anything that matters. I can't think of anything I want more than that. Maybe we can help each other find it."

"Purely out of curiosity," Lorenzo said slowly, "what are your present feelings towards Lancaster Long?"

"That bastard!" Thorkild said, and after a moment laughed. "It finally broke through to me how he'd insulted me—he and his whole damned planet—by calling the work I've devoted my life to a piece of foolishness. It isn't. I'm not that stupid. I can't think of any way to prove it to him except by beating him over the head, but I will. I swear, I will."

"I remember telling you that so long as you could still be angry, you weren't past hope," Lorenzo said. "All it took was finding a rational object for your anger. You've got one, and provided you can stay angry for a while, you'll have no more trouble."

Nefret had not been following the last exchanges with much comprehension; now she broke in. "Does this mean that Jorgen is going to be my guardian—somebody I actually know, instead of that... b-bureaucrat who's plagued me for so long?"

"That's the idea," Thorkild said, nodding. "Like it?"

"It sounds like a major improvement," Nefret said with misplaced dignity. "Thank you, Jorgen."

"Thank you," Thorkild echoed. "Doctor, get me some transport, will you? Notify my office that I'm coming in; have a digest of current problems ready for me; and you might be kind enough to call my home and activate the servos against my arrival this evening."

"It's a pleasure," Lorenzo said. "But I don't know what the man will say who's been waiting so long to collect Nefret."

On the way back from the hospital to the Bridge City, Thorkild said very little. His mind was preoccupied by the problem he had mentioned to



Lorenzo: how to show Lancaster Long that he and his whole planetful of people were wrong in their view of the universe.

But, after all, were they? Didn't he at least owe them a debt of gratitude for reminding him that life wasn't just a series of mechanical responses to stimuli, but something into which the human mind was capable of reading subjective, but nonetheless real, significance? Lancaster Long had done that if nothing else, just by an act of refusal.

He set his jaw grimly. He was going to get Azrael tied into the Bridge System. Somehow. Some day. And *damn* Lancaster Long.

Having been badly out of touch with the news during his stay in hospital, he stopped the car on the way into the city at a public newsfax and bought a copy of the current sheet. He got back into the car before spreading it out and looking at the headings. He got no further, for his head began to spin and his mind reeled. Across the newsfax the words were blazoned:

AZRAEL ACCEPTS BRIDGE.

## XIII

Hans had been correct in his early assumption that Casimir Yard was a man who mattered, more than anyone else he had encountered in the days following his own arrival on Azrael and the departure of the starship for orbit. Yard was one of a select clique of philosopher-priests who provided the intellectual impetus for the pain-cult around which the society of the planet focused. The emotional aspect required no outside impetus; on a dismal planet like this, such a cult did little more than objectify natural feelings of depression and despair. It offered an infallible means for the individual to make his existence significant, and hence was ultimately satisfying.

But Yard was not alone on a strange world; he did not have to maintain his logic and determination despite intolerable weariness, against subtle attack from a dozen sides. There were others, equally intelligent, equally well trained in the strange casuistry of the cult. Hans thought sometimes of the ancient philosophical dictum that "solipsism is the only ultimately

defensible philosophical standpoint," and added a rider to it: the objective futility of existence could be defended pretty well, too.

But he had his own impregnable advantage. He was a cleft stick, and the men of Azrael knew it. He was a dilemma, and they were between his horns. The fact brought him a warm comfortable reassurance when his defences were at their lowest ebb.

What he was saying over and over to those who argued with him could be reduced to plain alternatives. Either the men of Azrael were wrong (and here the example of Lancaster Long was useful), in which case they were behaving ridiculously to refuse the Bridge, or they were right, in which case Earth and the Bridge worlds were entitled to avenge the futile killing of Jacob Chen, on any scale they wished.

"Chen did not matter to you," Hans said over and over. "He mattered to us. You say that a killing is the expression of a wish to be killed, which you then fulfil. You must then accept the right of Earth to kill your planet. If you deny this right you deny your premises and... and you are fools."

They countered him. Some of them were bearded, like Casimir Yard; some were saturnine, like Lancaster Long; some were aggressive and some thoughtful, some emotional and some cold as ice. There seemed to be no end to them.

He waited patiently, and when he could he took time to consider his own dilemma. He believed that these people believed what they said. If they didn't, and finally yielded to the offer of the Bridge, unable to endure their own logic when applied to their whole world, he would have been wrong, and for him this too would be disastrous.

But if he were right, he would have to order the destruction of the planet, and Earth would never do this thing. He had to act a lie in order to kill himself by proving himself wrong—for the sake of others.

He dared not look to the moment when he would have to resolve that problem. Let it happen.

The day came, finally. He was summoned from the cell where he had been confined since his first encounter with Casimir Yard, to the same hall where the encounter had taken place. This time he recognized among

those present all the sages who had fought with words against him, and sensed from their attitudes that the decision had been taken.

There was no pretence this time; it was Yard, advancing to a point beside the tall wooden chair, who spoke to him.

"It is our decision," Yard said slowly, his mouth contorting as though every word was painful, "that we must consent to your crude blackmail and accept the imposition of this Bridge."

Wrong then. Hans felt his mind swirl in his skull, but he kept his voice calm somehow, trying to think of all the people who had made the Bridge system their justification for living— Alida, Jorgen Thorkild, everyone else—as he said, "And the condition attached?"

Yard nodded, and then spat forcefully on the floor. The others present looked as though they would have copied him, but did not.

"Report this to the starship," Yard said. "You will be taken to the spaceport at once, and presumably the ship will come down to fetch you. I hope very much that I never see you again."

After that, things happened to Hans in a blur: being escorted to the spaceport, standing in a gray drizzle watching the ship come down, thinking indistinctly of the emptiness of his life now that he had proved himself wrong... until the ship grounded, and the ramps slid down to make a pathway to the lock. Urged by his guards, he stumbled forward up the slippery metal steps, and into the opening airlock.

There were two women waiting for him. He had expected Captain Inkoos, of course, but he had not anticipated the presence of Alida Marquis. Taken aback, he knew he had to say something.

"I—" he began, and had to moisten his lips, "I was wrong," he said finally.

A look of horror crossed Alida's face, wiping off the expression of glad greeting like writing on a slate when the sponge passes over it. She said, "They... refused the Bridge, again?"

Bewildered, Hans shook his head. "No... no, I was sure they could not yield, that they were dedicated to what used to be called the powers of darkness, and—"

"They are, they are!" Alida cut in. "Did they not tell you what changed their minds for them? No, of course they wouldn't; they're evil creatures, and that would give them a certain pleasure. So long as they thought you didn't mean what you said, they would be able to cling to their beliefs. We saw it with Lancaster Long, didn't we?"

"Did we?" Hans said wonderingly.

"You pointed it out yourself—that Long could let himself be bitten on the arm because he didn't know whether he was immune or not. But if he'd known, really known, in the guts, from past experience, that he wasn't immune, he wouldn't have done it. If he'd desired to die, he would have expressed the desire by killing someone else. That's his pattern. He *didn't* want to die, logically."

"I had all this," Hans said. "I was still wrong. What was it that persuaded the people of Azrael to accept the Bridge?"

"You haven't yet told him, Alida," Captain Inkoos said, standing apart in the airlock with her arms crossed on her breast. "It was a megaton torpedo exploded in their northern ocean. It convinced them that you meant what you said."

"I... I still don't see—" Hans put his hand to his face, as though by touching his forehead he could still the whirling of his brain. "I ought to have thought of that, but it wasn't *like* that at all!"

"Of course," Alida whispered suddenly, and the expression of dismay faded from her face. "You didn't know! Hans, you *weren't* wrong; you must accept that! You weren't wrong, but you didn't have a crucial piece of data. Did you know that Lancaster Long has horns?"

There was a long, trembling silence. Eventually Hans shook his head, and a hesitant smile crept on to his face.

"Spell it out as you see it now," Captain Inkoos said, with a glance at Alida. "Make sure we know that you know."

"Horns," Hans said wonderingly. "If I'd known that— I *wish* I'd known, for it would have spared me so many hours of mental torture! They're not natural, are they?"

"No." Alida took a deep breath. "They're artificial excrescences, hardened by the repeated application of some skin irritant and probably

teased up by hand. They're about half an inch long, about as hard as a corn on the foot. You never saw them because they're usually hidden by the fringe of his fur hat. I didn't know about them, but Moses van Heemskirk saw them when Long was hospitalized, and told me, and I realized this was information you lacked."

"Artificial horns," Hans said, the smile spreading. "They never took themselves seriously; they knew they were cheating themselves all the time."

He pounded his fist into his palm. "Liars! Cheats! And I thought they were... oh, never mind what I thought, because I was right on the basis of what I knew. And you sent down a megaton torpedo, and they were shown something to which they knew they weren't immune. This set up a conflict between their shame, at being reluctant to face the extermination which the logic of their stand demanded, and their recognition that the extermination would serve nobody's purpose, not even their own." He started to chuckle. "If it had been a question of planet-for-planet, they wouldn't have been able to object; if they'd had the techniques to reduce Earth to a cinder rather than accept the imposition of the Bridge, they'd have done it. But this peculiar Earthly logic, which regarded Jacob Chen's death as a reason to kill the planet which killed him because he was a unique, irreplaceable individual—this was beyond their comprehension. Alida, do you realize you've saved my life?"

"Yes," Alida said. "I hope very much that you can be grateful. Do you know how?"

## XIV

Singing, Alida entered her office... and stopped dead in her tracks. Her hand flew to her throat, as though to encourage the words which would not otherwise come.

"Jorgen!" she said faintly. "I... I didn't expect to find you here. How—"

"I'm the Director of the Bridge System, remember?" Thorkild said. "All the doors in the Bridge City open for me."

He sat in a chair with sheets of newsfax spread over his knees, every one issued for the past several hours, by the thickness of the pile. And he had not come into the room alone. On another chair, behind him and to one side, was a slender girl, very young, with her hair knotted on the nape of her neck and wide, frightened eyes.

"This is Nefret," Thorkild said as an afterthought, gesturing at the girl. "She was in the hospital with me. She was the one who tried to escape from Earth the day Saxena killed himself; do you remember?"

Alida had recovered herself quickly enough to avoid showing a reaction to that probe. She walked forward steadily to take her place at her desk.

"I remember," she said lightly. "Well, Jorgen! I'm very glad to know you're better. I'm sorry if I seemed startled; it was just the fact of finding you here, of all places. I'm really delighted."

"You're in a fair way to putting me back where I came from," Thorkild said stonily. He tapped the newsfax sheets on his knees. "I came back from my... my state of depression, if you want a printable name for it, with the life-sustaining intention of beating Lancaster Long over the head till he agreed to tie Azrael into the Bridge System. And on the way to the city I saw that Azrael had changed its collective mind. I damned nearly turned right around and went back."

"Why?"

"Because it took the... the insult of Azrael refusing what *I* offered to make me sufficiently angry to want to come out of the hospital."

There was a faint sound from the girl in the other chair, almost a moan. Thorkild glanced at her and then back to Alida.

"Why I didn't," he said, "was because of Nefret. We have too much in common. So I made some inquiries, and found that just before the news came through you'd gone to the *Hunting Dog*, in orbit around Azrael, with data you thought Hans Demetrios ought to hear, and—"

"Are you jealous of Hans, Jorgen?" Alida cut in. For a long moment he stared at her.

"I guess maybe I am," he said finally. "The way I used to be jealous of Saxena. It's a hangover from past things."

Deliberately echoing Captain Inkoos a short time before, Alida said, "Spell it out for us. Go on."

"I don't have any reason to be jealous of Hans Demetrios," Thorkild said, sounding faintly surprised. "Not now. Anyone who got more attention from you than I did used to be a sort of Saxena in my mind, because you weren't a person to me, but the mistress of the former Director, the man whose standards I had to match. Damn it, he failed to match his standards, himself! I'm going to do better than that!"

"You're already doing better," Alida said with a smile.

"Alida," Thorkild said, "why did Saxena kill himself?"

There was a pause. Alida's face became drawn, and when she spoke, her voice was husky. She said, "He never told me. It took something that Moses said to show me the real reason."

"And that was?" Hungrily, Thorkild leaned forward on his chair.

"He was too small a man for his responsibilities," Alida said deliberately. "Now I know that, I know why I've fallen for Hans. Oh, I'm not trying to hide it. It's because he was willing to take on the job that killed Jacob Chen, knowing he might kill himself by doing so. For a reason, not out of inadequacy."

"You wasted yourself on Saxena," Thorkild said.

"Of course I did. But I didn't realize until he was dead. And then I didn't want to admit it, just as you didn't want to admit to the need to prove that Lancaster Long was wrong."

"For different reasons?"

"Yes."

"Fair enough." Thorkild got to his feet, rolling the news-fax sheets, and slid them into the mouth of the disposer.

"Are you going?" Alida said, surprised. "Don't you want to hear about the reason for Azreal changing over and deciding to splice in to the System?"

"I've no doubt it will be on my desk in the form of an accurate digest," Thorkild said savagely. "I won't be around to bother you for a while, Alida."

If I come back, it'll be when I—" His voice trailed away.

She looked at him for some seconds. An expression blended of curiosity and interest came to her lovely face. At last she said, "Yes... yes, come back, Jorgen. I'm as much of a fool as you, but not so much that I don't know what programmers are like. All I can hope to do for Hans Demetrios is to give him a little extra of what's ordinary-human before he takes off for the intellectual stratosphere where Jacob Chen used to live. I'm not the first, but I'll likely be the last, and that's a compliment."

With sudden irrelevance, she added in a whisper, "The higher the fewer."

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

When he came out of the office into the corridor, Thorkild stood for a moment, breathing deeply, while Nefret's puzzled eyes studied him.

It hadn't happened as he'd expected. He'd been meaning to say what he felt about her forestalling his wish to show Long what a fool he was—and how about Long, anyway? But in the event, it had seemed too petty a thing to revile her, and here he was, with... what? A job to do, loose ends to tie up, a life to live. For its own sake, to make the best of it, to approximate as nearly as possible to his ambitions.

What it came down to, maybe, was that it had taken Azrael's refusal to join the Bridge System to make him wonder why he did what he did, and Azrael's agreement to join the System had shown him that he was, in some sense at least, not utterly wrong. Could anyone ask more?

He smiled at the newest of his responsibilities. "Sorry to have involved you in my personal troubles," he said.

A faraway look came to her young face. She said, "I like you to do it. They're... different problems from mine, you see. And" —she made a sweeping gesture that indicated the whole of the Bridge City surrounding them— "I never had anything like this, anything big and important, to be involved in."

"Why, you little darling," Thorkild said, and put his arms around her



and kissed her hard on the mouth. It was a long time before she slid her lips aside, wet on his cheek, and whispered, "I was wondering when you'd stop treating me like a baby, you know."

"Big and important," Thorkild said. "I don't know why it follows, but if you say so, it does. Now: what am I going to do with you? I could give you, here and now, authority to leave Earth for anywhere in the System. You have forty planets to choose from; if you wait a while, you'll have two more, but I don't recommend either Ipewell or Azrael. No, wait, why make up your mind on the spur of the moment? I can show you the worlds that are accepting colonists and sending back problems. Mad snake-handlers are the current fashion, I see from the newsfax, from Riger's World. We shall go and visit the Earthside representative of Riger's, and he will tell you about them, personally."

He put his arm around her shoulders and swept her laughing along corridors and so to the Riger's World level of the huge main building. He felt light-headed, almost delirious. He felt wonderful. The door named after KORIOT ANGOSS loomed before him, and he put his hand to it and it opened.

Angoss swung around. He was bending over a package on his desk, a sort of small cage, apparently, and the girl Maida Wenge was beside him. In the cage there was movement. A pet animal, Thorkild thought, and gave a wild shout.

"Angoss, damn you! Shall I never find you at work? What have you there, something to remind you of the fauna at home?"

Angoss stared at him. "I heard you were coming back," he said after a pause. "I have something here that ought to make you very pleased. Here!"

He lifted the package, letting the wrappings fall, and held it out. Thorkild saw that the moving thing inside the cage was a snake, and all at once he was calm.

He said, "The preacher Rungley is still giving trouble, isn't he? I've been... out of touch."

"As of now, yes, he is," said Angoss judiciously. "But not as of tomorrow, I can promise you. This snake here is poisonous in a big, big way. A present against your return, sort of. I had our chemists on Riger's develop an additive for snake venom which attacks this enzyme that protects

Rungley. Any other snake he can ignore, but not this one. This one will make him very sick, I tell you. Are you pleased?"

For an eternal moment Thorkild felt time stand still. A light seemed to dawn on him bright as the sun.

Insoluble problem: a snake-handler immune to venom, whom you need to make move over. Answer: give him a doctored snake he isn't immune to.

Insoluble problem: a planet full of people who reject your most attractive overtures. Answer: make an overture so nasty the others will seem attractive by comparison.

Insoluble problem: lack of incentive to go on living. Answer: impossibility of finding an incentive not to go on living. It figured. In a cockeyed, roundabout, upside-down way, it figured.

"Human beings aren't very logical creatures, are they?" he said aloud.

Angoss blinked. "Never have been," he said. "Not to my knowledge. Leave that to computers, I say. I got better things to do with my time."

"Yes," Thorkild nodded. "Yes, I think I have, too. Let me know when Rungley is due to get his hands on that snake, will you? I'd like to see his face when he catches on."

Nefret, who had been staring fascinated at the little creature writhing in its cage, glanced up. She said, "What are you going to do with it?"

"Permit it to be true to its nature," Thorkild said. "In order to straighten out a man who isn't being true to his. Which is about as much as any snake in history has done."

"The Garden of Eden?" said Angoss in a doubtful voice. "There was one there, they told me."

"It didn't do any more," Thorkild said.

**The End**