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Cosmic Checkmate by Charles V. DeVet and Katherine MacLean

I

The sign was big, with black letters that read: I'll Beat You the Second Game.

I eased myself into a seat behind the play board, straightened the pitchman's cloak about my shoulders, took a final deep breath, let it out—and waited.

A nearby Fair visitor glanced at the sign as he hurried by. His eyes widened with anticipated pleasure and he shifted his gaze to me, weighing me with the glance.

I knew I had him.

The man changed direction and came over to where I sat. "Are you giving any odds?" he asked.

"Ten to one," I answered.

"A dronker." He wrote on a blue slip with a white stylus, dropped it at my elbow, and sat down.

"We play the first game for feel," I said. "Second game pays."

Gradually I let my body relax. Its weight pulled at the muscles of my back and shoulders, and I slouched into a half-slump. I could feel my

eyelids droop as I released them, and the corners of my mouth pulled down. I probably appeared tired and melancholy. Or like a man operating in a gravity heavier than normal for him.

Which I was.

I had come to this world called Velda two weeks earlier. My job was to find why its humanoid inhabitants refused all contacts with the Federation. Earth's colonies had expanded during the last several centuries until they now comprised a loose alliance known as The Ten Thousand Worlds. They were normally peaceful—and wanted peace with Velda. But you cannot talk peace with a people who won't talk back. Worse, they had obliterated the fleet bringing our initial peace overtures. As a final gesture I had been smuggled in—in an attempt to breach that stand-off stubbornness. This booth at their Fair was my best chance—as I saw it—to secure audience with the men in authority. And with luck it would serve a double purpose.

Several Veldians gathered around the booth and watched with interest as my opponent and I chose colors. He took the red; I the black, We arranged our fifty-two pieces on their squares and I nodded to him to make the first move.

He was an anemic oldster with an air of nervous energy, and he played the same way, with intense concentration. By the fourth move I knew he would not win. On each play he had to consult the value board suspended between us before deciding what his next move would be. On a play board with one hundred and sixty nine squares, each with a different value—in fact one set of values for offense, and another for defense—only a brilliant player could keep them all in mind. But no man without that ability was going to beat me.

I let him win the first game. Deliberately. The "second game counts" gimmick was not only to attract attention, but to give me a chance to test a player's strength—and find his weakness.

At the start of the second game the oldster moved his front row center pukt three squares forward and one left oblique. I checked it with an end pukt, and waited.

The contest was not going to be exacting enough to hold my complete attention. Already an eidetic portion of my mind—which I always thought

of as a small machine, ticking away in one corner of my skull, independent of any control or direction from me—was moving its interest out to the spectators around my booth.

Every object about me, every passing face, would make its picture in the memory banks of that machine and wait there to be recalled. Further, it catalogued each fact learned or observed in its proper relation with others already there. Sometimes the addition of one new fact caused it to give an almost audible click, and a conclusion, or answer, seemingly unrelated to the original fact, lay clear before me. The best simile I knew was that of a penny scale, spitting out a card of fortune as a penny was dropped inside. It constantly amazed me.

Most men, I presume, would regard an eidetic-recall memory as a very desirable faculty. Some, a bit more introspective, might wonder if it might not be a curse. The latter would be more nearly correct. To me it was like another mouth—a hungry mouth, that had to be constantly fed. At times I felt like a man with a load on his shoulders,, being piled higher and higher, until some day I would slowly fold beneath the weight of it.

The other part of my mind idly carried on the action of the game and in three short moves I maneuvered a pukt four rows forward. From the particular square on which it now rested it could be moved a maximum of three paces forward, two left oblique, or three right oblique—with unlimited side and backward movement.

The old one moved to intercept my pukt, and I split his force apart with two men I had set in strategic positions on either side.

The roving portion of my mind caught a half-completed gesture of admiration at the sudden completion of the trap from a youth directly ahead of me. And with the motion, and the glimpse of the youth's face, something slipped into place in my memory. Some subconscious counting finished itself, and I knew that there had been too many of these youths, with faces like this one, finely boned and smooth, with slender delicate necks and slim hands and movements that were cool and detached. Far too many to be a normal number in a population of adults and children.

As if drawn, my glance went past the forms of the watchers around the booth and plumbed the passing crowd to the figure of a man, a magnificent masculine type of the Vel-dian race, thick-shouldered and strong, thoughtful in motion, yet with something of the swagger of a

gladiator, who, as he walked, spoke to the woman who held his arm, leaning toward her cherishingly as if he protected a great prize.

She was wearing a concealing cloak, but her face was beautiful, her hair semi-long, and in spite of the cloak, I could see that her body was full-fleshed and almost voluptuously feminine. I had seen few such women on Velda.

Two of the slim, delicately built youths went by arm in arm, walking with a slight defiant sway of bodies, and looked at the couple as they passed, with pleasure in the way the man's fascinated attention clove to the woman, and looked at the beauty of the woman possessively without lust, and passed by, their heads held higher in pride as if they shared a secret triumph with her. Yet they were strangers.

I had an answer to my counting. The "youths" with the large eyes and smooth delicate heads, with the slim straight asexual bodies, thought of themselves as women. I had not seen them treated with the subdued attraction and conscious avoidance one sex gives another, but by numbers... My memory added the number of these "youths" to the number of figures and faces that had been obviously female. It totaled to almost half the population I had seen. No matter what the biological explanation, it seemed reasonable that half...

I bent my head, to not see the enigma of the boy-woman face watching me, and braced my elbow to steady my hand as I moved. For two weeks I had been on Velda and during the second week I had come out of hiding and passed as a Veldian. It was incredible that I had been operating under a misunderstanding as to which were women, and which men, and not blundered openly. The luck that saved me had been undeserved.

Opposite me, across the board, the bleach-skinned hand of the oldster was beginning to waver with indecision as each pukt was placed. He was seeing defeat, and not wishing to see it.

In eight more minutes I completed the route of his forces and closed out the game. In winning I had lost only two pukts. The other's defeat was crushing, but my ruthlessness had been deliberate. I wanted my reputation to spread.

My sign, and the game in progress, by now had attracted a line of challengers, but as the oldster left the line broke and most of the others

shook their heads and moved back, then crowded around the booth and good-naturedly elbowed their way to positions of better vantage.

I knew then that I had set my lure with an irresistible bait. On a world where the Game was played from earliest childhood—was in fact a vital aspect of their culture—my challenge could not be ignored. I pocketed the loser's blue slip and nodded to the first in line of the four men who still waited to try me.

This second man played a better game than the old one. He had a fine tight-knit offensive, with a good grasp of values, but his weakness showed early in the game when I saw him hesitate and waver before making a simple move in a defensive play. He was not skilled in the strategy of retreat and defense, or not suited to it by temperament. He would be unable to cope with a swift forward press, I decided.

I was right.

Some challengers bet more, some less; all lost on the second game. I purchased a nut and fruit confection from a passing food vender and ate it for a sparse lunch while I played through the late afternoon hours.

By the time Velda's distant sun had begun to print long shadows across the Fair grounds, I was certain that word of my booth had spread well.

The crowd about the railing of my stand was larger—but the players were fewer. Sometimes I had a break of several minutes before one made a decision to try his skill. And there were no more challenges from ordinary players. Still the results were the same. None had sufficient adroitness to give me more than a passing contest. Until Caertin Vlosmin made his appearance.

At the beginning of the game with Vlosmin I had no way of knowing that his game would be different. I noted only casually that he introduced himself rather formally before sitting, but I marked it as merely the exact manners of a conservative man, or a desire for ostentation. I was little interested in which.

I did realize from the first that he was a shrewd man, probably with a system. He lost the first game—without struggle. That, of course, was to keep me from learning anything about what he could do. I heeded the warning only enough to keep my attention more closely to the board as the

second game began.

Vlosmin kept his pukts well back and closely grouped, making only a perfunctory display of aggressiveness. After a few minutes of innocuous interplay I tried him out by exposing a pukt at the edge of the board to my right. When he ignored it my estimation of his ability took one step upward. He had easily recognized that a pukt, protected on one side by the playing edge, was not as vulnerable as it might seem to be.

I made several other feints—which he ignored. He would not come out to meet a pass, yet he tried no offensive forays of his own.

I presented three more tentative exposures, all ignored, before I deliberately sent a pukt a bit too deep. I had made a pretense of setting up a defense for it in advance, but had left a small avenue of vulnerability. A man with an exceptionally good grasp of the positions of the board would have spotted it. Vlosmin studied the pieces for a long time, glancing twice at the value board, before he passed the pukt by.

I had found his weaknesses—both of them.

The man played a game intended to be impregnably defensive, to remain untouchable until an opponent made a misplay or an over-zealous drive, of which he would then take advantage. But his mental prowess was not quite great enough to be certain of a sufficiently concealed or complex weakness in the approach of an adversary, and he would not hazard an attack on an uncertainty. Excess caution was his first weakness.

His second was exposed by his glances at the value board. They were not long enough for actual study. I'm certain that he did not even see what he glanced at: He had all the values well in mind. But they were the expression of a small lack of confidence.

I would be able to exploit both.

Play by careful play I moved the entire body of my pukts forward, presenting him with the necessity of planning a completely new defense. The potency of the pukts being determined, not by an intrinsic value of their own, but by the position of the squares on which they rested, made the forward shift of the mass of my pukts a vast problem of realignment—for him. Each new pukt now had a new value,, and Vlosmin had to adjust to that complete new set of factors.

During the play I sensed that the crowd about us was very intent and still. On the outskirts, newcomers inquiring cheerfully were silenced by whispered exclamations.

Vlosmin's limited ability showed at my first pass in the new alignment. He became confused, hesitated too long before the pukt I exposed, and made a misplay in passing it up. I took the man he had used in passing. A minute later he lost another. He saw that he was losing, and tried a total reversal of tactics, the desperate gamble of a V penetration at center.

Though it required all my concentration the game was soon over. I looked as Vlosmin rose to his feet, and noted with surprise that a fine spotting of moisture brightened his upper lip. Only then did I recognize the strain and effort he had invested into the attempt to defeat me.

"You are an exceptional craftsman," he said. There was a grave emphasis he put on the "exceptional" which I could not miss, and I saw that his face was whiter.

His formal introduction of himself earlier as "Caertin Vlosmin" had meant more than I realized at the time.

I had just played against, and defeated, one of the Great Players!

The sun set a short time later and floating particles of light-reflecting air-foam drifted out over the Fair grounds. Someway they were held suspended above the grounds while air currents tossed them about and intermingled them in the radiance of vari-hued spotlights. The grounds were still light as day, but filled with light, shifting shadows that seemed to heighten the byplay of sound and excitement from the Fair visitors.

Around my booth all was quiet; the spectators subdued— as though waiting for the next act in a tense drama. I was very tired now, but I knew by the tenseness I observed around me that I did not have much longer to wait.

By the bubbles' light I watched as new spectators took their positions about my booth. And as time went by I saw that some did not move on, as my earlier visitors had done.

The weight that rode my stomach muscles grew abruptly heavier. I had set my net with all the audacity of a spider waiting for a fly, yet I knew

that when my anticipated victim arrived he would more likely resemble a spider hawk. Still the weight was not caused by fear: It was excitement—the excitement of the larger game about to begin.

II

I was playing an opponent of recognizably less ability than Vlosmin when I heard a stirring and murmuring in the crowd around my stand. It was punctuated by my opponent rising to his feet.

I glanced up.

The big man who had walked into my booth was neither arrogant nor condescending, yet the confidence in his manner was like an aura of strength. He had a deep reserve of vitality, I noted as I studied him carefully, but it was a leashed, controlled *vitality*. Like most of the men of the Vel-dian race he wore a uniform, cut severely plain, and un-decorated. No flowing robes or tunics for these men. They were a warrior race, unconcerned with the esthetic touches of personal dress, and left that strictly to their women.

The newcomer turned to my late opponent. His voice was impressive, controlled. "Please finish your game," he said courteously.

The other shook his head. "The game is already as good as over. My sword is broken. You are welcome to my place."

The tall man turned to me. "If you don't mind?"

"My pleasure," I answered. "Please be seated."

This was it.

My visitor shrugged his close-wrapped cloak back from his shoulders and took the chair opposite me. "I am Kalin Trobt," he said. As if he knew I had been expecting him,

In reply I came near telling him my correct name. But Robert O. Lang was a name that would have been alien to Velda. Using it would have been as good as a confession. "Claustil Anteer," I said, giving a name I had invented earlier.

We played the first game as children play it, taking each other's pukts as the opportunity presented, making no attempt at finesse. Trobt won, two up. Neither of us had made mention of a wager, There would be more than money involved in this Game.

I noticed, when I glanced up before the second game, that the spectators had been cleared from around the booth. Only the inner, unmoving ring I had observed earlier remained now. They watched calmly—professionally.

Fortunately I had no intention of trying to escape.

During the early part of the second game Trobt and I tested each other carefully, as skilled swordsmen, probing, feinting, and shamming attack, but never actually exposing ourselves. I detected what could have been a slight tendency to gamble in Trobt's game, but there was no concrete situation to confirm it.

After a short period of watchful stalking Trobt made a move that I was totally unprepared for—a four-across-the-board exposed pukt. I could have taken it, of course, but to do so would have meant that I had to break formation and plan a new gambit. It took me several minutes before I decided against the reply. The exposure was just too obvious. After I countered cautiously he moved a second pukt, and a third, up beside the first—spaced three squares apart. The pattern began to form.

The formation he had drawn up was almost unique—an intricate variation of the diversified decoy gambit. I knew then that I would have to give my best to win. And my best might not be good enough!

I had learned the greater part of what I knew of the Game in the stalls of the market place. Most of the players there had been quite average, but better players made frequent visits in search of a contest, and I had learned much from them. They had often discussed the various systems of play, and the one most discussed had been that of the decoy gambits. But they had been single decoy gambits. These were intricate enough to take the normal player to the limits of his ability.

Double decoy gambits had been mentioned in passing but they had not been gone into deeply. Their ramifications were too involved to be employed by any other than the Masters, and then only after years of expert supervision—and backed by great mental perspective.

They involved the use of abstract and negative reasoning that reminded me of the old Earth puzzler of the red and green circles painted on the foreheads of the three wise men.

Yet Trobt was presenting a *triple* decoy gambit. The involvements of threat and counterthreat, action and counteraction; the permutations of thrust and reply—and counter-reply—were so numerous that it was impossible for me to conceive of a mind that could evaluate, control, and select the moves to employ it properly. In my experience I was certain no Human on the Ten Thousand Worlds could have effectively deployed such a gambit. Was it possible that these non-Humans could?

It would be foolhardy, I decided, to plunge ahead of an unverified assumption. I held back, grouping my side pukts into two wedges—facing oblique—in what I had privately named my Rock-of-Gibraltar defense. With this there was very little flexibility: a single pukt, operating at the mouth formed by the wedges, was my only mobile unit of offense.

But as a defense it was very nearly impregnable—except perhaps to a triple decoy gambit.

Trobt made several further moves before he abruptly shifted the formation of his forces and assumed another pattern. I saw immediately then that what I had suspected earlier was true. His center decoy had been a blind. His actual play would be made around the two outside points. The triple decoy attack with which it seemed I had been threatened had been a trap within a trap.

Only then did I allow myself to think of tactics and replies. If I had responded to his first ruse, taking the triple decoy formation seriously, I would by this time have been weltering in half-begun, wasted, formations of defense. It had taken self-restraint to wait, and make no reply to the first threat, but my caution had been vindicated.

I flattened out my right peak and moved my side pukts up to a position from which they could maneuver, or attack.

My first moves were entirely passive. Alertly passive. If I had judged correctly the character of the big man opposite me, I had only to ignore the bait he offered to draw me out, to disregard his openings and apparent—too apparent—errors, until he became convinced that I was un-shakably cautious, and not to be tempted into making the first thrusts.

For this was his weakness as I had guessed it: that his was a gambling temperament—that when he saw an opportunity he would strike—without the caution necessary to insure safety.

Pretending to move with timidity, and pausing with great deliberation over even the most obvious plays, I maneuvered only to defend. Each time Trobt shifted to a new position of attack I covered—until finally I detected the use of slightly more arm force than necessary when he moved a pukt. It was the only sign of impatience he gave, but I knew it was there.

Then it was that I left one—thin—opening.

Trobt streaked a pukt through and cut out one of my middle defenders.

Instead of making the obvious counter of taking his piece I played a pukt far removed from his invading man. He frowned in concentration, lifted his arm—and his hand hung suspended over the board.

Suddenly his eyes widened. His glance swept upward to my face and what he saw there caused his expression to change to one of mingled dismay and astonishment. There was but one move he could make. When he made it his entire left flank would be exposed. He had lost the game.

Abruptly he reached forward, touched his index finger to the tip of my nose and pressed gently.

After a minute during which neither of us spoke, I said, "You know?"

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "You're a Human."

There was a stir and rustle of motion around me. The ring of spectators had leaned forward a little as they heard his words. I looked up and saw that they were smiling, inspecting me with curiosity and something that could have been called admiration. In the dusk the clearest view was the ring of teeth, gleaming—the view a rabbit might get of a circle of grinning foxes. Foxes might feel friendly toward rabbits, and admire a good big one. Why not?

I suppressed an ineffectual impulse to deny what I was. The time was past for that. "How did you find out?" I asked Trobt.

"Your Game. No one could play like that and not be well known. And

now your nose."

"My nose?" I repeated.

"Only one physical difference between a Human and a Veldian is apparent on the surface. The nose cartilage. Yours is split—mine is single." He rose to his feet. "Will you come with me, please?"

It was not a request.

My guards walked singly and in couples, sometimes passing Trobt and myself, sometimes letting us pass them, and sometimes lingering at a booth, like any other walkers, and yet, unobtrusively they held me encircled, always in the center of the group. I had already learned enough of the Veldian personality to realize that this was simply a habit of tact. Tact to prevent an arrest from being conspicuous, so as not to add the gaze of his fellows to whatever punishment would be decided for a culprit's offense. Apparently they considered humiliation too deep a punishment to use indiscriminately.

At first thought it seemed incongruous that a race which I had found to be excessively proud, warlike, merciless in conflict, and often downright irascible should be so courteous. However, the answer was obvious with a bit more consideration. On Velda, unless one deliberately sought lethal contention, he was wise to make certain that his manners were irreproachable. And this consideration for others had by now become a part of their natures. We had had similar periods of high courtesy in our Earth history. Gallantry and courteous behavior were never greater than when dueling had been the fashion in ancient France and England.

The Veldians had an almost dogmatic insistence on the rigid observance of social rites and customs. And there lay perhaps my greatest danger. My eidetic memory could be of exceptional aid to me in learning another race's language, and in many other ways here, but unless a person has lived in and with a culture for many years he can never understand all its nuances and inflections. A dozen times a day in the past two weeks I had used words or expressions that caused my listeners to raise their eyebrows. Probably the only reason I had gotten by was that they were not expecting to find anyone such as myself among them—and marked my speech to mere idiosyncrasy.

At the edge of the Fair grounds some of the watchers bunched around

me while others went to get the tricars. I stood and looked across the park to the City. That was what it was called. The City, The Citadel, The Hearthplace,. the homeplace where one's family is kept safe, the sanctuary whose walls have never been pierced. All these connotations had been in the name and use of the name; in the voices of those who spoke it. Sometimes they called it The Hearth, and sometimes The Market, always *The* as if it were the only one. Yet the speakers lived in other places and named them as the homes of their ancestors.

It was a puzzle.

Some part of it I did understand. Most Veldians were born here. Their history was colored, I might say even shaped, by their long era of struggle with the dleeth, a four-footed, hairy carnivore, physically little different from the big cats of Earth, but intelligent. They had battled the Veldians in a struggle for survival from the Veldians' earliest memories until a couple centuries before my visit. Now the last few surviving dleeth had found refuge in the frigid region of the north pole. With their physical superiority they probably would have won the struggle against the Veldians, except that they had no hands and could not develop technology. Also their instincts had been purely predatory, while the Veldians had fought with a pride in their race, and its ultimate future, that had always been their first consideration.

The City had been the one strong point that the dleeth had never been able to breach. It had been held by one of the stronger clans, and there was seldom unity among the tribes, yet any family about to bear a child was given sanctuary within its walls.

The clans were nomads—made so by the aggression of the dleeth—but they always made every effort to reach The City when childbirth was imminent. This explained, at least partly, why even strangers from foreign areas regarded The City as their homeplace.

They had a saying about it—"all roads take you to Cha-Dan," which sounds like a saying used in an early stage of Earth history, and it had meant something important to them, although its precise emotional meaning was not something I had heard explained.

Standing there I absently used the twitch code in my tissues to make a note of it on tape. If it were reported to an anthropologist, he might learn something from the similarity.

I could see the Games building from where I stood. In the walled city called Hearth it was the highest point. Big and red, it towered above the others, and the city around it rose to it like a wave, its consort of surrounding smaller buildings matched to each other in size and shape in concentric rings. Around each building wound the ramps of elevator runways, harmonious and useful, each of different colored stone, blending beautifully with background and surroundings, lending variety and warmth. Nowhere was there a clash of either proportion or color. Sometimes I wondered if the Veldians did not build more for the joy of creating symmetry, than for utility.

I climbed into Trobt's three-wheeled car as it stopped before me, and the minute I settled into the bucket seat and gripped the bracing handles, Trobt spun the car and it dived into the highway and rushed toward the city. The vehicle seemed unstable, being about the width of a motor bike, with side car in front, and having nothing behind except a metal box that must have housed a powerful battery, and a shaft with the rear wheel that did the steering. It was an arrangement that made possible sudden wrenching turns that were battering to any passenger as unused to it as I. To my conditioning it seemed that the Veldians on the highway drove like madmen; the traffic rules were incomprehensible or nonexistent, and all drivers seemed determined to drive Only in gull-like sweeping lines, giving no obvious change of course for other such cars, brushing by tricars from the opposite direction with an inch or less of clearance.

Apparently the maneuverability of the cars and the skill of the drivers were enough to prevent accidents, and I had to force my totally illogical driver's reflexes to relax and stop tensing against the nonexistent peril.

I watched Trobt's hands moving on the controls, empathizing with him as he drove, letting the technique and co-ordination of steering the three-wheeled vehicle imprint itself on my memory where I might soon find a use for it.

I studied Trobt as he drove, noting the casual way he held the wheel, and the assurance in the set of his shoulders. I tried to form a picture in my mind of the kind of man he was, and just what were the motivations that would move or drive him. Knowing that would be more important than learning to drive the tricar.

Physically he was a long-faced man, with a smooth muscular symmetry,

and an Asiatic cast to his eyes. I was certain that he excelled at whatever job he held. In fact I was prepared to believe that he would excel at anything he tried. He was undoubtedly one of those amazing men for whom the exceptional was mere routine. If he were to be cast in the role of my opponent, be the person in whom the opposition of this race would be actualized—as I now anticipated—I would not have wanted to bet against him. The big skilled man was silent for several minutes, weaving the tricar with smooth swerves through a three-way tangle at an intersection, but twice he glanced at my expression with evident curiosity. Finally, as a man would state an obvious fact he said, "I presume you know you will be executed."

III

Trobt's face reflected surprise at the shock he must have read in mine. I had known the risk I would be taking in coming here, of course, and of the very real danger that it might end in my death. But this had come up on me too fast. I had not realized that the affair had progressed to the point where my death was already assured. I had thought that there would be negotiations, consultations, and perhaps ultimatums. But only if they failed did I believe that the repercussions might carry me along to my death. However, there was the possibility, I reasoned, that Trobt was merely testing my courage, perhaps even toying with me to watch my reactions. During the last few days I had prepared several arguments to use when needed—the time might never be more appropriate.

"No," I said. "I do not expect to be executed." Trobt raised his eyebrows and slowed, presumably to gain more time to talk. With sudden decision he swung the tricar from the rfiad into one of the small parks spread at regular intervals along the roadway.

"Surely you don't think we would "let you live? There's a state of war between Velda and your Ten Thousand Worlds. You admit you're Human, and obviously you are here to spy. Yet when you're captured, you do not expect to be executed?"

"Was I captured?" I asked, emphasizing the last word.

He pondered on that a moment, but apparently did not come up with an answer that satisfied him. "I presume your question means something," he said.

"If I had wanted to keep my presence here a secret, would I have set up a booth at the Fair and invited inspection?" I asked.

He waved one hand irritably, as though to brush aside a picayune argument. "Obviously you did it to test yourself against us, to draw the great under your eye, and perhaps become a friend, treated as an equal with access to knowledge of our plans and weapons. Certainly! Your tactics drew two members of the Council into your net before it was understood. If we had accepted you as a previously unknown Great, you would have won. You are a gambling man, and you played a gambler's hand. You lost."

Partly he was right. I *had* hoped that—but I hadn't expected it. I glanced at the road to the side of us, at Trobt's hands resting on the steering shaft, wondering if it might not be better to seize control of the tricar and escape. But the Veldian was big, and catlike in motion, and not weakened by an unaccustomed weight of gravity as I was. There was also the question of how quickly I would be picked -up by a city-wide or planet-wide search. Even as I rejected the temptation to run I wondered idly—was there a criminal minority here among whom I could lose myself?

"My deliberate purpose was to reach you," I said, "or someone else with sufficient authority to listen to what I have to say."

Trobt pulled the vehicle deeper into the park. He watched the cars of our escort settling to rest before and behind us. I detected a slight unease and rigidity in his stillness as he said, "Speak then, I will listen."

"I've come to negotiate," I told him. *

Something like a flash of puzzlement crossed his features before they returned to tighter immobility. Unexpectedly he spoke in Earthian, my own language!

"Then why did you chose this method? Would it not have been better simply to announce yourself?"

Earthian. The implications rushed through me and plucked at my nerves. We Humans had supposed that there had been no contact between Velda and the Ten Thousand Worlds federation. Then how had Trobt learned our language? Very apparently we had based our premise on a false assumption. This forced-feeding of understanding left me with the

necessity of realigning my strategy. The next steps I took must all be different from what I had planned.

Doing my best to hide my reaction to his change of language, I replied, still speaking Veldian, "Would it have been that simple? Or would some minor official, on capturing me, perhaps have had me imprisoned, or tortured to extract information?"

Again the suppressed puzzlement in the shift of position as he looked at me. "They would have treated you as an envoy, representing your Ten Thousand Worlds. You could have spoken to the Council immediately." He spoke in Veldian now.

"I did not know that," I said. "You refused our fleet; why should I expect you to accept me any more readily?"

The brief play of motion on his face was something I wanted desperately to be able to interpret. If I knew what emotion it was reflecting I could guide my next words by his response to the first. I suspected he might be suppressing anger, but I was not certain, nor did I know the reason. However, I knew it was nothing shallow.

Trobt started to speak, made himself calm, and turned in his seat to regard me levelly and steadily, his expression unreadable. "Tell me what you have to say then. I will judge whether or not the Council will listen."

"To begin..." I looked away from the expressionless eyes, out the windshield, down the vistas of brown short trees that grew between each small park and the next. "Until an exploring party of ours found signs of extensive mining operations on a small, metal-rich planet, we knew nothing of your existence. We were not even aware that another race in the Galaxy had discovered faster than light space travel. But after that first clue we were alert for other signs, and found them. Our discovery of your planet was bound to come. However, we did not expect to be met on our first visit with an attack of such hostility as you displayed."

"When we learned that you had found us," Troht said, without expression, "we sent a message to your Ten Thousand Worlds, warning that we wanted no contact with you. Yet you sent a fleet of spaceships against us."

I hesitated before answering. "That phrase, 'sent against us,' is hardly

the correct one," I said. "The fleet was sent for a diplomatic visit, and was not meant as an aggressive action." I thought, *But obviously the display of force was intended "diplomatically" to frighten you people into being polite.* In diplomacy the smile, the extended hand—and the big stick visible in the other hand—had obviated many a war, by giving the stranger a chance to choose a hand, in full understanding of the alternative. *We showed our muscle to your little planet—you showed your muscle. And now we are ready to be polite.*

I hoped these people would understand the face-saving ritual of negotiation, the disclaimers of intent, that would enable each side to claim that there had been no war, merely accident.

"We did not at all feel that you were justified in wiping the fleet from space," I said, "but it was probably a legitimate misunderstanding..."

"You had been warned!" Trobt's voice was grim, his expression not inviting of further discussion. I thought I detected a bunching of the muscles in his arms.

For a moment I said nothing, made no gesture, letting the subject go by. Apparently this angle of approach was unproductive—and probably explosive. Also trying to explain and justify the behavior of the Federation politicians could possibly become rather taxing. /

"Surely you don't intend to postpone negotiations indefinitely?" I asked tentatively. "One planet cannot conquer the entire Federation."

The bunched muscles of his arms strained until they pulled his shoulders up, and his lips whitened with the effort of controlling some savage anger. Apparently my question had impugned his pride.

This, I decided quickly, was not the time to make an enemy. "I apologize if I have insulted you," I said in Earthian. "I do not yet always understand what I am saying, in your language."

He hesitated, made some kind of effort, and shifted to Earthian. "It is not a matter of strength or weakness," he said, letting his words ride out on his released breath, "but of behavior, courtesy. We would have left you alone, but now it is too late. We will drive your faces into the ground. I am certain that we can, but if we could not, still we would try. To imply that we would not try, from fear, seems to me words to soil the mouth, not

worthy of a man speaking to a man. We are converting our ships of commerce to war. Your people will see soon that we will fight."

"Is it too late then for negotiation?" I asked.

His forehead wrinkled into a frown and he stared at me in an effort of concentration. When he spoke it was with a considered hesitation. ^ "If I make an effort, a great effort, I can feel that you are sincere, and not speaking to mock or insult. It is strange that beings who look so much like ourselves can..." He rubbed a hand across his eyes. "Pause a moment. When I say *yag loogb' n 'bait* what does it mean to you in Earthian?"

"I must play." I hesitated as he turned one hand palm down, signifying that I was wrong. "I must duel," I said, finding another meaning in the way I had heard the phrase expressed. It was a strong meaning, judging by the tone and inflection the speaker had used. I had mimicked the tone without full understanding. The verb was perhaps stronger than *must*, meaning something inescapable, fated, but I could find no Earthian verb for it. I understood why Trobt dropped his hand to the seat without turning it palm up to signify that I was correct.

"There must be no such thought on the Human worlds," he said resignedly. "I have to explain as to a child or a mad-man. I cannot explain in Veldian, it has no word to explain what needs no explanation."

He shifted to Earthian, his controlled voice sounding less firm when moving with the more fluid inflections of my own tongue. "We said we did not want further contact. Nevertheless you sent the ships—deliberately in disregard of our expressed desire. That was an insult, a deep insult, meaning we have not the strength to defend our world, meaning we are so helpless that we can be treated with impoliteness, like prisoners, or infants.

"Now we must show you which of us is helpless, which is the weakling. Since you would not respect our wishes, then in order to not be further insulted we must make of your people a captive or a child in helplessness, so that you will be without power to affront us another time."

"If apologies are in order..."

He interrupted with raised hand, still looking at me very earnestly with forehead wrinkled, thought half turned inward in difficult introspection of

his own meaning, as well as a grasping for my viewpoint.

"The insult of the fleet can be wiped out only in the blood of testing—of battle—and the test will not stop until one or the other shows he is too weak to struggle, lying without defense. There is no other way."

He was demanding total surrender!

I saw that it was a subject which could not be debated. The Federation had taken on a bearcat this time!

Night was well along now and very dim yellow lights shone in some of the windows of the big buildings, but there were no lights along the shadowy street where we parked our convoy.

Kalin Trobt, military strategist, member of the advisory council of Velda, looked along the street in the direction we were to go.

"I stopped because I wanted to understand you," he said, "because others will not understand how you could be an envoy—how your Federation could send an envoy—except as an insult. I have seen enough of Human strangeness to be not maddened by the insolence of an emissary coming to us, or by your people expecting us to exchange words when we carry your first insult still unwashed from our face. I can even see how it could perhaps be considered *not* an insult, for I have seen your people living on their planets and they suffered insult from each other without striking, until finally I saw that they did not know when they were insulted, as a deaf man does not know when his name is called."

I listened to the quiet tone of his voice, trying to recognize the attitude that made it different from his previous tones—calm, slow and deep—certainty that what he was saying was important—conscious tolerance—generosity.

He turned on the tricar's motor and put his hands on the steering shaft. "You are a man worthy of respect," he said, looking down the dark empty road ahead. "I wanted you to understand us. To see the difference between us. So that you will not think us without justice." The car began to move.

"I wanted you to understand why you will die."

I said nothing—having nothing to say. But I began immediately to

bring my report up to date, recording the observations during the games, and recording with care this last conversation, with the explanation it carried of the Veldian reactions, that had previously been obscure.

I used nerve-twitch code, "typing" on a tape somewhere inside myself the coded record of everything that had passed since the last time I brought the report up to date. This was valuable information.

The typing was easy, like flexing a finger in code jerks, but I did not know exactly where the recorder was located. It was some form of transparent plastic which would not show up on X-ray. The surgeons had imbedded it in my flesh while I was unconscious, and had implanted a mental block against my noticing which small muscle had been linked into the contrivance for the typing.

It would be worth a hazard to find out something about the Veldian war equipment, and try to find a power source to broadcast the report back, but I did not see any immediate chance of access to that power source.

If I should die before I wake...

If I died before I was able to return to Earth, I had been informed there were several capsuled chemicals buried at various places in my body, that intermingled would temporarily convert my body to a battery for a high powered broadcast of the tape report, destroying the tape and my body together. This would go into action only if my temperature fell fifteen degrees below the temperature of life.

The thought of the chemicals was disturbing. I had informed my friend Mark that I wanted to look in on Velda, to see if our mutual problem could be solved by logic, and informed him that by...

I became aware that Kalin Trobt was speaking again, and that I had let my attention wander while recording, and taped some subjective material. The code twitches easily became an unconscious accompaniment to memory and thought, and this was the second time I had found myself recording more than necessary.

Trobt watched the dark road, threading among buildings and past darkened vehicles. His voice was thoughtful. "In the early days, Miklas of Danlee, when he had the Oman family surrounded and outnumbered,

wished not to destroy them, for he needed good warriors, and in another circumstance they could have been his friends. Therefore he sent a slave to them with an offer of terms of peace. The Oman family had the slave skinned while alive, smeared with salt and grease so that he would not bleed, and sent back, tied in a bag of his own skin, with a message of no. The chroniclers agree that since the Oman family was known to be honorable, Miklas should not have made the offer.

"In another time and battle, the Cheldos were offered terms of surrender by an envoy. Nevertheless they won against superior forces, and gave their captives to eat of a stew whose meat was the envoy of the offer to surrender. Made to eat their own words, as you'd say in Earthian. Such things are not done often, because the offer is not given."

He wrenched the steering post sideways and the tricar turned almost at right angles, balanced on one wheel for a dizzy moment, and fled up a great spiral ramp winding around the outside of the red Games building.

Trobt still looked ahead, not glancing at me. "I understand, from observing them, that you Earthians will lie without soiling the mouth. What are you here for, actually?"

"I came from interest, but I intend, given the opportunity, to observe and to report my observations back to my government. They should not enter a war without knowing anything about you."

"Good." He wrenched the car around another abrupt turn into a red archway in the side of the building, bringing it to a stop inside. The sound of the other tricars entering the tunnel echoed hollowly from the walls and died as they came to a stop around us. "You are a spy then."

"Yes," I said, getting out. I had silently resigned my commission as envoy some five minutes earlier. There was little point in delivering political messages, if they have no result except to have one skinned or made into a stew.

IV

A heavy door with the seal of an important official engraved upon it opened before us. In the forepart of the room we entered, a slim-bodied creature with the face of a girl sat with crossed legs on a platform like a

long coffee table, sorting vellum marked with the dots and dashes, arrows and pictures, of the Veldian language.

She had green eyes, honeyed-olive complexion, a red mouth, and purple-black hair. She stopped to work an abacus, made a notation on one of the stiff sheets of vellum, then glanced up to see who had come in. She saw us, and glanced away again, as if she had coolly made a note of our presence and gone back to her work, sorting the vellum sheets and stacking them in thin shelves with quick graceful motions.

"Kalin Trobt of Pagael," a man on the far side of the room said, a man sitting cross-legged on a dais covered with brown fur and scattered papers. He accepted the hand Trobt extended and they gripped wrists in a locked gesture of friendship. "And how survive the other sons of the citadel of Pagael?"

"Well, and continuing in friendship to the house of Ly-agin." Trobt replied carefully. "I have seen little of my kin. There are many farlanders all around us, and between myself and my hearthfolk swarm the adopted."

"It is not like the old days, Kalin Trobt. In a dream I saw a rock sink from the weight of sons, and I longed for the sight of a land that is without strangers."

"We are all kinfolk now, Lyagin."

"My hearth pledged it."

Lyagin put his hand on a stack of missives which he had been considering, his face thoughtful, sparsely fleshed, mostly skull and tendon, his hair bound back from his face, and wearing a short white cotton dress beneath a light fur cape. A communicator stylus and a vision screen of some sort rested on the table top around his dais, and a short sword and long glaive crossed on the wall behind him. They seemed to be of bronze, or some bronze-colored metal.

I felt the annotator in my mind jump as it noted the bronze weapons. I waited a minute, but nothing more came and my attention shifted to the vision screens.

»I had seen them before, but I had not yet been able to find the opportunity to open one and learn if it worked on the same principles as

our own communication of pictures. The sets were remarkably compact, being almost a flat screen, with a depth of only four inches behind the picture, and had no other attachments. All those I had seen were of the same size, their use universal, and almost entirely for practical purposes, seldom for viewing entertainment of any sort. Lyagin was an old man, already in his senility, and now he was lost in a lapse of awareness of what he had been doing a moment before. By no sign did Trobt show impatience, or even consciousness of the other's pause.

Lyagin raised his head after a minute and brought his rheumy eyes into focus on us. "You bring someone in regard to an inquiry?" he asked.

"The one from the Ten Thousand Worlds," Trobt replied.

Lyagin nodded apologetically. "I received word that he would be brought," he said. He inspected my physique and stance with meager interest. "He seems to be outwardly like a man, this outworlder. We will soon see if he be actually a man. How did you capture him?"

"He came."

The expression must have had some connotation that I did not recognize for the official let his glance cross mine, and I caught one slight flicker of recognition to acknowledge that I was a person.

"He has the bearing of a hunter," Lyagin said. "Perhaps he may even prove to be a Man. If you want him questioned, we shall soon learn." Apparently his words were meant as a compliment. Their opinion of Humans was not high. However, his words had other implications which were not pleasant. Again I thought: *This is moving too fast—and perhaps my time is running out.*

"You say these Humans lie?" Lyagin asked Trobt.

"Frequently. It is considered almost honorable to lie to an enemy in circumstances where one may profit by it."

"You brought back from his worlds some poison which insures their speaking truth, I believe?"

"Not a poison, a drug, which affects one like strong drink, dulling a man and changing what he might do. Under its influence he loses his

initiative of decision."

Trobt apparently had brought the truth drug back from the Worlds in anticipation of taking Human prisoners. He was a farsighted man.

"You have this with you?" Lyagin asked.

"I left it with Vay of the Hunt department," Trobt replied.

Despite my own mental discomfort I marked yet another point of admiration for him. He was going to waste no time using me. I had much that he wanted to know, and he intended to get from me anything that might be of value to them. Inwardly I resolved that it would not be as easy as he might suppose.

Lyagin gripped a double handle on the side of the vision screen and squeezed, at the same time looking me over thoughtfully. "I had such information," he said to Trobt. "I'd allowed myself to forget it. I see now what its use will be. I have always distrusted torture for breaking a silence, and with such as he, there would be no surety that he spoke the truth—even with torture. It will be interesting having an enemy co-operate. If he finds no way to kill himself, he can be very useful to us." So far my contact with the Vel-dians had not been going at all as I had planned.

But I was not whipped yet. They would find that out. Lyagin held a note against the screen, which had begun flashing red. "It is ready," he said.

The boy-girl at the opposite side of the room finished a problem on the abacus, noted the answer, and glanced directly at my face, at my expression, then locked eyes with mine for a brief moment. The iris of her eyes shaded to a darker green, then quickly lightened again. When she glanced down to the vellum it was as if she had seen whatever she had looked up to see, and was content. She sat a little straighter as she worked, and moved with an action that was a little less supple and compliant. I believe she had seen me as a man. They injected the truth serum into my left hip. I had little fear—even after I found that I was unable to tell a direct untruth under the drug's influence.

I answered each question they gave me. Questions that were intended to use my knowledge of the Ten Thousand Worlds against my own race.

Most of the late evening they probed for answers to our military strength, numbers of ships of war, potency of our weapons, and devices of strategy and tactics.

I made no attempt to resist the drug. I answered truthfully—but literally. Many times my answers were undecipherable—I did not know the answers, or lacked the data to give them. And the others were cloaked under a full literal subtlety that made most of them useless to the Veldians. Questions such as the degree of unity existing between the Worlds: I answered—truthfully—that they were united under an authority with supreme power of decision. The fact that that authority had no actual force behind it; that it was subject to the whims and fluctuations of sentiment and politics of inter-alliances; that it had deteriorated into a mere supernumerary body of impractical theorists, that occupied itself, in a practical sphere, only with picayune matters, I did not explain. It was not asked of me.

Would our Worlds fight? I answered that they would fight to the death to defend their liberty and independence. I did not add that that will to fight would evidence itself first in internal bickering, procrastinations, and jockeying to avoid the worst thrusts of the enemy—before it finally resolved itself into a united front against attack.

Trobt took no part in the early questioning. It was conducted by Veldians trained in that work. However, I could sense his mounting dissatisfaction. He realized what was happening, but he realized also that only someone with a background of culture the same as my own would know how to phrase the questions so as to get the answers he wanted—and to grasp the full meaning of the answers when he got them.

By early morning Trobt could no longer contain his impatience. For the past hour he had been watching with his legs spread wide and his face expressionless. However, his hands showed his mounting frustration—toward the end they were always closed into fists, or spread wide open. Finally he walked to where I sat.

"We're going to learn one thing," he said, and his voice was harsh. "Why did you come here?"

"To learn all that I could about you," I answered.

"You came to find a way to whip us!?"

It was not a question and I had no necessity to answer.

"Have you found the way?"

"No."

"If you do, and you are able, will you use that knowledge to kill us?"

"No."

Trobt's eyebrows raised. "No?" he repeated. "Then why do you want it?"

"I hope to find a solution that will not harm either side."

"But if you find that a solution is not possible, you will use your knowledge to defeat us?"

"Yes."

"Even if it meant that you had to exterminate us—man, woman, and child?"

"Yes."

"Why? Are you so certain that you are right, that you walk with God, and that we are knaves?"

"If the necessity to destroy one civilization or the other arose and the decision were mine to make, I would rule against you because of the number of sentient beings involved."

Trobt cut the argument out from under me. "What if the situation were reversed, and your side was in the minority? Would you chose to let them die?"

I bowed my head as I gave him the truthful answer. "I would choose for my own side, no matter what the circumstances." ,

"I knew so." The interrogation was over.

On the drive to his home Trobt was once again the courteous, considerate captor. There was no trace in his tone and manner of the harshness during the interrogation. He talked much, and asked some

questions, but they were— apparently—prompted only by friendly curiosity.

"How did you learn to play the Game so well?" he asked.

"I'm a player of the Human game called chess. Considered an adept."

"I know," Trobt said. "You explained that under the drugs."

For the first time then I realized that I did not have complete recall of everything I had said at the questioning. I had a moment of acute unease. However, it did not last. Whatever I had said, I was certain that my resolve to give them nothing of value had held firm throughout. And Trobt's manner indicated that I was right.

Not that it was an attitude of defeat. Rather that more was to come.

By his time I was dead tired, and barely able to keep my eyes open. I would not be able to stay awake much longer. I realized with a start of surprise that Trobt was still talking. "... that a man with ability enough to be a Games-chess—master of nine planets is given no authority over his people, but merely consulted on occasional abstract questions of tactics."

"It is the nature of the problem." I caught the gist of his comment from his last words and did my best to answer it. I wanted nothing less than to engage in conversation, but I realized that the interest he was showing now was just the kind I had tried to guide him to, earlier in the evening. If I could get him to understand us better, our motivations and ideals, perhaps even our frailties, there would be more hope of a compatible meeting of minds. "Among peoples of such mixed natures, such diverse histories and philosophies, and different ways of life, most administrative problems are problems't)f a choice of whims, of changing and conflicting goals; not *how* to do what a people want done, but *what* they want done, and whether their next generation will want it enough to make work on it, now, worthwhile."

"They sound insane," Trobt said. "Are your administrators supposed to serve the flickering goals of demented minds?"

"We must weigh values. What is considered good may be a matter of viewpoint, and may change from place to place, from generation to generation. In determining what people feel and what their unvoiced

wants are, a talent of strategy, and an impatience with the illogic of others, are not qualifications."

"The good is good, how can it change?" Trobt asked. "I do not understand."

I saw that truly he could not understand, since he had seen nothing of the clash of philosophies among a mixed people. I tried to think of ways it could be explained; how to show him that a people who let their emotions control them more than their logic, would unavoidably do many things they could not justify or take pride in—but that that emotional predominance was what had enabled them to grow, and spread throughout their part of the galaxy—and be, in the main, happy.

I was tired, achingly tired. More, the events of the long day, and Velda's heavier gravity had taken me to the last stages of exhaustion. Yet I wanted to keep that weakness from Trobt. It was possible that he, and the other Veldians, would judge the Humans by what they observed in me.

Trobt's attention was on his driving and he did not notice that I followed his conversation only with difficulty. "Have you had only the two weeks of practice in the Game, since you came?" he asked.

I kept my eyes open with an effort and breathed deeply. Velda's one continent, capping the planet on its upper third, merely touched what would have been a temperate zone. During its sTiort summer its mean temperature hung in the low sixties. At night it dropped to near freezing. The cold night air bit into my lungs and drove the fog of exhaustion from my brain.

"No," I answered Trobt's question, "I learned it before I came. A chess adept wrote me, in answer to an article on chess, that a man from one of the outworlds had shown him a game of greater richness and flexibility than chess, with much the same feeling to the player, and had beaten him in three games of chess after only two games to learn it, and had said that on his own planet this chess-like game was the basis for the amount of authority with which a man is invested. The stranger would not name his planet.

"I hired an investigating agency to learn the whereabouts of this planet. There was none in the Ten Thousand Worlds. That means that the man had been a very ingenious liar, or—that he had come from Velda."

"It was I, of course," Trobt acknowledged.

"I realized that from your conversation. The sender of the letter," I resumed, "was known to me as a chess champion of two Worlds. The matter tantalized my thoughts for weeks, and finally I decided to visit Velda. If you had this game, I wanted to try myself against your skilled ones."

"I understand that desire very well," Trobt said. "The same temptation caused me to be indiscreet when I visited your Worlds. I have seldom been able to resist the opportunity for an intellectual gambit.

"Even if you came intending to challenge, you had little enough time to learn to play as you have—against men who have spent lifetimes learning. I'd like to try you again soon, if I may."

"Certainly." I was in little mood or condition to welcome any further polite conversation. And I did not appreciate the irony of his request—to the best of my knowledge I was still under a sentence of early death.

Trobt must have caught the bleakness of my reply for he glanced quickly over his shoulder at me. "There will be time," he said, gently for him. "Several days at least. You will be my guest." I knew he was doing his best to be kind. His decision that I must die was not prompted by any meanness of nature. To him it was only—inevitable.

I could tell that Trobt had more to say, but he paused, as though slightly embarrassed. "You and I are much alike in our natures," he said, carefully selecting each word. "In different circumstances I am certain we would have been friends. I wish that we could be friends now."

I was surprised to find myself feeling the same.

The household had retired when we arrived at Trobt's home, but he served me from dishes which had been left heated, and ate at the same table with me, and in all ways treated me as a guest.

I was too weary to respond well to Trobt's conversation and after a short time he showed me to a bedroom, where I slept on a pallet raised high from the floor, as were all their beds.

V

The next day I expected Trobt to bring up my request for meeting the other members of the Council, or at least to question me further, but instead he led me to a side room of his home and showed me his recreation room. It was beautifully laid out with murals of Veldian wild life on the walls, and swords and glaives crossed between them. The dominating evidence of recreation in the room was the Game board, and large value boards on each end wall. They were electrically wired in such a way that the squares occupied on the play board showed in colored lights—with a different color for each contestant.

"If you are willing, I would like another try at beating you," Trobt said in his invariably polite manner.

"I am quite willing." There was undoubtedly more to the request than the desire to defeat me. He had a deeper motive, and I thought I knew what it was. For a time I debated whether or not it might be wise to let him win, but decided against it.

I took a seat at one end of the Games table—I assumed he wanted to play—but Trobt seemed in no hurry to begin. He leaned against the wall to my left. He had his arms folded across his chest and his weight rested on one leg. He was making a deliberate attempt to appear casual—and I would have been convinced that he was—except that at his first words the annotator in the back of my brain warned me to be cautious. His questions would not be as casual as he wanted them to seem.

"Having a like nature I can well understand the impulse that brought you here," he said. "The supreme gamble. Playing—with your Me the stake in the game. Nothing you've ever experienced can compare with it. And even now—when you have lost, and will die—you do not regret it, I'm certain."

"I'm afraid you're overestimating my courage and under-estimating my intentions," I told him, feeling instinctively that this would be a good time to again present my arguments. "I came because I hoped we could reach a better understanding. We feel that an absolutely unnecessary war, with its resulting death and destruction, would be foolhardy. And I fail to see your viewpoint. Much of it strikes me as stupid racial pride."

It took him only a minute to see through what I was trying to do: To

throw him on the defensive, to make him angry and upset the plan of interrogation he had probably prepared. For a moment I thought I had succeeded. At my last words he straightened and let his arms drop to his sides. His lips made a slight change, growing narrower, and his eyes became bleak. But his self-control was too rigid to allow a break. He walked to the seat opposite me at the Game board and sat down. He began arranging his pieces on their starting squares.

"The news of your coming is the first topic of conversation in the City," he said, disregarding my taunt and going doggedly ahead with his original conversation. "The clans understand that you have come to challenge; one man against a nation. They greatly admire your audacity. Many are wagering that you will go farther in the Final Game than any Veldian has done. It is a great compliment."

"Look," I said, becoming angry and slipping into Earthian. "I don't know whether you consider me a fool or not. But if you think I came here expecting to die; that I'm looking forward to it with pleasure—"

He stopped me with an idle gesture of, one hand. "You deceive yourself if you believe what you say," he commented. "Tell me this, would you have stayed away if you had known just how great the risk was to be?"

I was surprised to find that I did not have a ready answer to his question.

"Shall we play?" Trobt asked.

We played three games; Trobt with great skill, employing diversified and ingenious attacks. But he still had that bit too much audacity in his execution.

I could hardly call it a weakness. In most circumstances it would serve him as a weapon in routing players of lesser or almost equal skill—or less courage. However, my being aware of his impulsiveness as a potential weakness—and deliberately playing to bring it out—set him at a disadvantage. I won each time.

"You're undoubtedly a Master," Trobt said at the end of the third game. "But that isn't all of it. Would you like me to tell you why I can't beat you?"

"Can you?" I asked.

"I think so," he said. "I wanted to try against you again and again, because each time it did not seem that you had defeated me, but only that I had played badly, made childish blunders, and that I lost each game before we ever came to grips. Yet when I entered the duel against you a further time, I'd begin to blunder again."

He shoved his hands more deeply under his weapons belt, leaning back and observing me with his direct inspection. "My blundering then has to do with you, rather than myself," he said. "Your play is excellent, of course, but there is more beneath the surface than above. This is your talent: you lose the first game to see an opponent's weakness—and play it against him."

I could not deny it. But neither would I concede it. Any small advantage I might hold would be sorely needed.

"I understand Humans a little," Trobt said. "Enough to know that very few of them would come to challenge us without some other purpose. They have no taste for death, with glory or without." His gaze was penetrating.

Again I did not reply. ,

"I believe," Trobt said, "that you came here to challenge in your own way, which is to find any weakness we might have, either in our military, or in some odd way, in our very selves."

Once again—with a minimum of help from me—he had arrived in his reasoning at a correct answer. From here on— against this man—I would have to walk a narrow line.

"I think," Trobt said more slowly, glancing down at the board between us, then back at my expression, "that this may be the *First Game*, and that you are more dangerous than you seem, that you are accepting the humiliation of allowing yourself to be thought of as weaker than you are, in actuality. You intend to find our weakness, and you expect somehow to tell your states what you find."

I looked across at him without moving. "What weakness do you fear I've seen?" I countered.

Trobt placed his hands carefully on the board in front of him and rose to his feet. Before he could say what he intended a small boy pulling

something like a toy riding horse behind him came into the game room and grabbed Trobt's trouser leg. He was the first blond child I had seen on Velda.

The boy pointed at the swords on the wall. "Da," he said beseechingly, making reaching motions. "Da."

Trobt kept his attention on me. After a moment a faint humorless smile moved his lips. He seemed to grow taller, with the impression a strong man gives when he remembers his strength. "You will find no weakness," he said. He sat down again and placed the child on his lap.

The boy grabbed immediately at the abacus hanging on Trobt's belt and began playing with it, while Trobt stroked his hair. All the Veldians dearly loved children, I had noticed.

"Do you have any idea how many of our ships were used to wipe out your fleet," Trobt asked abruptly.

As I allowed myself to show the interest I felt he put a hand on the boy's shoulder and leaned forward. "One," he said.

I very nearly called Trobt a liar—one ship obliterating a thousand—before I remembered that Veldians were not liars, and that Trobt obviously was not lying. Somehow this small underpopulated planet had developed a science of weapons that vastly surpassed that of the Ten Thousand Worlds.

I had thought that perhaps my vacation on this Games-mad planet would result in some mutual information that would bring quick negotiation, or conciliation, that players of a chess-like game would be easy enough to approach, that I would meet men intelligent enough to see the absurdity of such an ill-fated war against the overwhelming odds of the

Ten Thousand Worlds Federation—intelligent enough to foresee the disaster that would result from such a fight. It began to look as if the disaster might be to the Ten Thousand and not to the One.

Thinking, I walked alone in Trobt's roof garden.

Walking in Velda's heavy gravity took more energy than I cared to

expend, but too long a period without exercise brought a dull ache to the muscles of my shoulders and at the base of my neck.

This was my third evening in the house. I had slept at least ten hours each night since I arrived, and found myself exhausted at day's end, unless I was able to take a nap or lie down during the afternoon.

The flowers and shrubbery in the garden seemed to feel the weight of gravity also, for most of them grew low, and many sent creepers out along the ground. Overhead strange formations of stars clustered thickly and shed a glow on the garden very like Earth's moonlight.

I was just beginning to feel the heavy drag in my legs tendons when a woman's voice said, "Why don't you rest a while?" It spun me around and I looked for the source of the voice.

I found her in a nook in the bushes, seated on a contour chair that allowed her to stretch out in a half-reclining position. She must have weighed near to two hundred— Earth-weight—pounds.

But the thing that had startled me more than the sound of her voice was that she had spoken in the universal language of the Ten Thousand Worlds. And without accent!

"You're . . . *I P*" I started to ask.

"Human," she finished for me.

"How did you get here?" I inquired eagerly.

"With my husband." She was obviously enjoying my astonishment. She was a beautiful woman, in a gentle bovine way, and very friendly. Her blond hair was done up in tight ringlets.

"You mean-Trobt?" I asked.

"Yes." As I stood trying to phrase my wonderment into more questions she asked, "You're the Earthman, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Where did you learn to speak our language?"

"It's my native tongue." I knew a quick delight when she gave the answer I had expected.

"Are you from Earth?"

"No. My home world is Mandel's Planet, in the Thumb group."

She indicated a low hassock of a pair, and I seated myself on the lower and leaned an elbow on the higher, beginning to smile. It would have been difficult not to smile in the presence of anyone so contented. "How did you meet Trobt?" I asked.

"It's a simple love story. Kalin visited Mandel,—without revealing his true identity, of course—met, and courted me. I learned to love him, and agreed to come to his world as his wife."

"Did you know that he wasn't... That he..." I stumbled over just how to phrase the question. And wondered if I should have started it.

Her teeth showed white and even as she smiled. She propped a pillow under one plump pretty arm and finished my sentence for me. "... that he wasn't Human?" I was grateful for the way she put me at ease— almost as though we had been old friends.

I nodded.

"I didn't know." For a moment she seemed to draw back into her thoughts, as though searching for something she had almost forgotten. "He couldn't tell me. It was a secret he had to keep. When I arrived here and learned that his planet wasn't a charted world, was not even Human, I was a little uncertain and lonesome. But not frightened. I knew Kalin would never let me be hurt. Even my lonesomeness left quickly. Kalin and I love each other very deeply. I couldn't be more happy than I am now."

She seemed to see I did not consider that my question had been answered—completely. "You're wondering still if I mind that he isn't Human, aren't you?" she asked. "Why should I? After all, what does it mean to be 'Human? It is only a word that differentiates one group of people from another. I seldom think of the Veldians as being different—and certainly never that they're beneath me."

"Does it bother you—if you'll pardon this curiosity of mine—that you will never bear Kalin's children?"

"The child you saw the first morning is my son," she answered

complacently.

"But that's impossible," I blurted.

"Is it?" she asked. "You saw the proof."

"I'm no expert at that sort of tiling," I said slowly, "but I've always understood that the possibility of two separate species producing offspring was a million to one."

"Greater than that, probably," she agreed. "But whatever the odds, sooner or later the number is bound to come up. This was it."

I shook my head, but there was no arguing a fact. "Wasn't it a bit unusual that Kalin didn't marry a Veldian woman?"

"He has married—two of them," she answered. "I'm his third wife." I realized suddenly that her warmth was as much because she was homesick, and that she longed to see and speak with someone from the Ten Thousand Worlds, as it was interest.

"Then they do practice polygamy," I said. "Are you content with such a marriage?"

"Oh yes," she answered. "You see, besides being very much loved, I occupy a rather enviable position here—I, ah—" She grew slightly flustered. "Well—the other women—the Veldian women—can bear children only once every eight years, and during the other seven..." She hesitated again and I saw a tinge of red creep into her cheeks. She was obviously embarrassed, but she laughed and resolutely went on.

"During the other seven, they lose their feminine appearance, and don't think of themselves as women. While I—" I watched with amusement as her color deepened and her glance dropped. "I am always, of the same sex, as you might say, always a woman. My husband is the envy of all his friends."

After her first reticence she talked freely, and I learned then the answer to the riddle of the boy-girls of Velda. And at least one reason for their great affection for children.

One year of fertility in eight...

Once again I saw the imprint of the voracious dleeth on this people's culture. In their age-old struggle with their cold planet and its short growing seasons—and more particularly with the dleeth—the Veldian women had been shaped by evolution to better fit their environment. The women's strength could not be spared for frequent child-bearing—childbearing had been limited. Further, one small child could be carried in the frequent flights from the dleeth, but not more than one. Nature had done its best to cope with the problem. In the off seven years she tightened the women's flesh, atrophying glands and organs—making them nonfunctional—and changing their bodies to be more fit to labor and survive—and to fight, if necessary. It was an excellent adaptation—for a time and environment where a low birth rate was an asset to survival.

But this adaptation had left only a narrow margin for race perpetuation. Each woman could bear only four children in her lifetime. That, I realized as we talked, was the reason why the Veldians had not colonized other planets, even though they had space flight—and why they probably never would, without a drastic change in their biological make-up. That left so little ground for a quarrel between them and the Federation. Yet here we were, poised to spring into a death struggle.

And what of the Veldians today, I wondered. That early survival asset was no longer necessary, now that the dleeth had been all but eliminated. It could only be a drag on the culture—and a social tinder pot.

"You are a very unusual woman." My attention returned to Trobt's spouse. "In a very unusual situation."

"Thank you," she accepted it as a compliment. She made ready to rise. "I hope you enjoy your visit here. And that I may see you again before you return to Earth." /

I saw then that she did not know of my peculiar position in her home. I wondered if she knew even of the threat of war between us and her adopted people. I decided not, or she would surely have spoken of it. Either Trobt had deliberately avoided telling her, perhaps to spare her the pain it would have caused, or she had noted that the topic of my presence was disturbing to him and had tactfully refrained from inquiring. For just a moment I wondered if I should explain everything to her, and have her use the influence she must have with Trobt. I dismissed the idea as unworthy—and useless.

"Good night," I said.

VI

I never did ask Trobt for details of the Final Game. There would be little point. No matter how much one knew about it, in the end he would die. I preferred to let it come as something unknown.

Conversely, I never discouraged Trobt from talking about it. I would show as little timidity as possible. Once he spoke of it at some length while we walked in his gardens.

"The near prospect of entering the Final Game, I would imagine, must heighten a man's awareness of all about him," he said. "I do not know if he would see things more clearly, or whether he would merely see them in a different light. Perhaps a bit of both. Certainly everything he observed would be colored by it."

He waited for no comment from me. "It would be a time for a man to sum up his philosophy, to review his life, and decide which of his past conduct had been right and which wrong. That last would be difficult. I suppose the most he could ask was that he had followed his philosophy to the best of his ability—even though he might never have put it into words.

"Then there is the decision of how he will meet his final test. Will he give it his best—knowing that the best can have only the same inevitable result? Or will he decide to lose early? To avoid the trial and pain, and end the suspense before his last reserve of moral stamina is gone, and he is left a coward in the eyes of his fellow men who watch?

"Strangely enough, something about you," Trobt continued, "has aroused an empathy in me which I have never felt before, even when former friends faced the tests." He mused, almost to himself, "Perhaps I should guard against that feeling. I'm convinced by now that you are a man whom other men instinctively like. My allowing it to affect me could very well hinder me in the task I must perform."

He coughed and went on briskly. "I have always felt that a man, to prove himself a man, must give the last iota of his skill and strength in the Final Game. That the man who quit before he had to was a craven. Now I see it differently, and I am not so certain. Perhaps the man I considered a

coward had seen the test in the new light I mentioned; perhaps he had a new wisdom; perhaps he then saw something that I did not see.

"I do know that I have never pitied a man so much as I have those who fought the hardest. Who fought up to and beyond their strength—until they broke. Then they had nothing left with which to hold up their pride. Some stood and cried—strong men, I knew—some ran, and others begged to be spared. I was sick with the humiliation I saw in them."

I did not need to hear this from Trobt to make my choice. I had already decided that I would give the best I had in the Final -Game, but that above all else, I would die like a man. They would never see me crawl or beg. This was an innate determination, above and apart from any consideration of how my behavior would reflect on the Human race. It was something that had to be done. For the first time then I had a clear understanding of Trobt's '*yag loogt'nbalt*'. I must fight.

But also I recognized fear. Fear of the breaking of spirit he had mentioned. Back on Earth I had had a very dear friend who had died of the one form of cancer that science had never been able to conquer. My friend was as brave a man as I have ever known. When he learned that he had contracted the fatal disease he had not complained. He faced the coming end without flinching, and bore its steadily increasing pain certainly better than I knew I could have done. But as the final crisis grew nearer, as the continual, agonizing torture persisted and increased, as his mind grew less coherent, I watched his distress tear something out of his spirit. The hard core of courage which he had possessed before was gone, and he had nothing left with which to fight. He was not the same man he had been before. What he had been was no longer there. When they touched him then to move him he screamed for them to be gentle. He would not eat because of the pain. Between spasms of agony—that drugs could no longer hold back—tears of self-pity would flow from his eyes, and he would beg us, his impotent friends, to help him. The place that Trobt had touched was still raw from the memory of him. Could I hope to be any stronger? , '

"I doubt whether one is doing a man a kindness to warn him in advance of the time of his Final Game," Trobt broke into my introspection. "Perhaps it is better to wait until the last minute. I do not know. I suppose it depends on the man." I recognized only then that he had been speaking Earthian. For a moment I wondered why. Then a

second thought came. The whole tenor of his talk had held some overtone of sadness. Was he trying to tell me something? Or ask me something. Could he mean... ?

I turned sharply to face him. Perhaps he read fright in my eyes; I know there must have been at least apprehension there. For I saw the pity in his eyes as he nodded.

"It begins tomorrow," he said.

VII

The night after Trobt informed me I was to undergo the Final Game I slept only the last few hours before dawn. The first hours after retiring I spent recording the events of the day on the nerve tape. I had difficulty restraining myself from recording reactions that were merely the result of my own emotional over-charge. And that I wanted very much not to do. ^N

Because—I was ashamed to admit it, even to myself—I was morbidly afraid. The certainty that I would die before the Final Game was completed was more than I could face with steady nerves.

And yet my fear was a purely physical reaction. My mind was, if not unafraid, calm. Mentally I was satisfied that my life had been a good one. It had been stimulating, with perhaps more peaks of pleasure and enjoyment than the average man experienced. If I died now I could not feel cheated. I was very nearly content. But my body...

My body persisted in exuding a cold perspiration that made it cling to the bed covering as I turned restlessly. My bowels forced me to make frequent trips to the lavatory, and each time I rose I detected a faint odor of fear that made me want to retch in self-disgust.

I knew that only the stupid man has no fear, yet I violently resented the inability of my mind to maintain its control over my body and its functioning. I no longer felt one with it, and watched it as would a stranger who stood at my side. When I moved, it was as if I were operating a machine with rigid mechanical controls. And as the night wore on the numbness in my body washed up a wave of black despair into my brain. When I was able to think at all coherently it was with a desperate effort to find a way to escape the ordeal before me.

Father, if it be...

The next morning my bodily misbehavior was gone, but it was replaced by a frigidity of emotional response to everything around me. I felt drained of sensation, and dry, like old paper that crumbles at a touch.

As I met Trobt and we walked toward the tricar tunnel, I noted without caring the three guardsmen who fell into step with us. On the active level of my mind I was thinking of—nothing. The annotator in the corner of my skull alone was observing everything about me. But then it always did.

It watched and made note of every speech and action of Trobt and the guardsmen, their reactions to me, whether favorable, unfavorable, embarrassed, uneasy, or whether concealed or unreadable. Likewise it set down any reaction of one to the other, briefly marking smiles, gestures, and significant voice tones.

Yet I felt and showed no reaction to anything I observed. Even to myself I never specified any response to the words and expressions of those beside me, merely let them silently take their place in the memory banks of my annotator.

"Pardon." Trobt's words broke into my mental paralysis. *I've forgotten my side piece." He smiled stiffly. "It's a weakness of vanity perhaps," he said, "but I am undressed without it." He turned and retraced his steps.

As we waited a guard flexed his shoulder irritably and pulled at an arm strap. He spoke something to a second guard that I couldn't hear. The other helped him make an adjustment on the strap. The third guard watched idly. For just an instant all three were turned away from me—and the time had come!

I had not known that I intended to escape until I made my move. Only then I understood that the annotator had been waiting until all data was in before making its decision. With that kind of mind the last possible moment is the right time to solve precisely the situation as it presents itself, and not be hampered by earlier decisions fitted to a half understanding of the upcoming arrangement of the game.

The opening into a side hall was only a few feet from my side. I stepped quickly around its corner. To the spring door of a disposal chute.

Holding the door back with my shoulders I kicked once and I was inside, and sliding down a surface made slick by the juices of discarded refuse.

For an instant a small doubt irked at my mind. Had the escape been too easy? Something like the single opening I had left Trobt in the first Game? If the man learned as rapidly and efficiently as I had seen him do in small things... Was he still playing the Game with me? I decided against it. Very likely the thought that I might try to escape and take refuge in the City hadn't occurred to him. And if I were wrong, and he had planned this—for a purpose I could not see—I might turn my freedom to my own advantage. And finally, what did I have to lose?

I could not stop my descent but after a few experiments I found that I could slow it by pressing my hands and knees against the side of the chute. Despite this I hit the water with force enough to carry me under.

I came up into almost complete darkness. The odor around me was foul, and unsavory chunks of garbage bumped against my face and body.

I made no effort to swim, merely keeping my head above water and letting the current carry me along. I rounded a bend and ahead I could see the dim light of an opening. With slow easy strokes I guided myself toward it.

I stayed under Hearth City for two days. At first I had intended to go out through the breach in the wall that served as an exit for the river that flowed beneath its ramparts—River Widd, it was called—but decided against it. Out in the open they could easily run me down, while this made a perfect hiding place. I fully expected them to send men to hunt for me, but I saw readily that it would be an almost impossible task to find me. Most of the vast underground was in darkness and its innumerable foundations, pillars, mud flats, and disposal exits would require an army to explore adequately.

The first several hours of freedom I took the risk of shedding my heavy cloak and clothing and spreading them in the sun that came in through the gap in the wall. When they were passably dry I put them on again and crawled back into the darkness. I found a semi-dry spot high on a mud bank, and waited. My heavy cloak held off most of the cold. I was not too uncomfortable.

There was no sign of pursuit during the morning and twice I napped. Late in the day the sound of dripping water, perhaps fifty yards to my right, reminded me that I was thirsty. I crawled to the spot from which the sound came and found a leak in a pipe that brought fresh water into the city. I caught the dripping water in my hands and drank my fill.

For all of the two days and nights under the city I stayed near the leaking pipe, and water was my only sustenance. The nights were miserably cold and even my cloak could not keep me warm. Each morning I crawled back to the sunny spot and allowed the warmth to creep back into my flesh.

By the second morning I knew I could wait no longer. I had to have food, and a better place to sleep. I had explored, the part of the underground made visible by the light from the gap and found a stairway leading up to the city. They might be expecting me at the top, but it was a chance I had to take.

No one waited for me as I came out of the passageway. The hardest part was over.

My chances of remaining free should not be too bad, I decided. I looked enough like the Veldians to pass readily as one of them, and securing my needs would not be difficult.

I stopped at a street stall a short distance from the ramp exit with just the semblance of a plan in mind. One of the reasons I had stayed the two days underground was to give my beard time to grow. It was tough and dark and the two days had brought a short but thick stubble. It was a bit skimpy as a beard, but if I could get by a few days more it would serve.

Most Veldians wore beards, but they covered only the ridges of their jaws and their neck fronts. For some reason hair did not grow on their cheeks. While of course on mine it did. This apparently small difference would make me quite conspicuous. I had rubbed a handful of dirt on my cheeks, hoping it would hide the whiskers.

I bought a knife-razor and toilet articles, food, and a change of clothing, and paid for them by signing a name to a blue slip. These slips would be their best chance of tracing me.

A Veldian reaching adulthood served one year in the public

services—police, maintenance, clerk, or others. At the end of the service period he was free to seek other occupation. Until he was able to find it he was permitted to obtain his needs by the simple process by signing his name to the blue script in the amount of his purchase. If he was unable to redeem them when they reached a certain maximum he simply returned to the public services for another year. After which he began again. Credit was established by depositing slips acquired from others.

The more responsible civil service jobs were filled from successful Games aspirants. I do not know if the system would be adequate in a larger unit of government, but here it worked very well.

Most Veldians are psychologically incapable of falsehood and there was very little cheating—until I came into contact with the system. The names I used on the slips would not be registered and quite probably the authorities would readily guess their source. It would have been wiser to use the name of an actual citizen of the City—but I couldn't quite bring myself to do it. Somewhere a man has to draw his line.

I intended to limit my purchases to necessities, and perhaps it would take time for the slips to go through the bookkeeping routine.

I debated whether or not to hire a tricar and get as far as possible from the sector of the city where the search would most likely center, but decided that the tricar might be another way to trace me. Sooner or later I would have to abandon it. I would be wiser to walk. Hearth's ramparts stretched along the river for probably a dozen miles. I could reach the center on foot without difficulty.

I rented a room just off Hearth's central market place, and for the time being felt I was safe. By then I very much needed rest.

The next day I did not go out at all. I wanted to give my beard an opportunity to grow, and more important, I needed to weigh my situation, and if possible plan future action.

Now that I had time to view my escape without the pressure of sudden decision, I decided that there was much to be hopeful about—despite the handicaps I would still have. True, there was small possibility that I could remain free for any great length of time. Eventually they would find me, by tracing the blue money, or through errors I was bound to make. Then I would probably have the choice of forcing them to kill me immediately, or

await the time of their pleasure.

But I intended to make good use of my time until then. My primary object was to learn more of the workings of Veldian society, and to find a power source to send my twitch-tape report back to the Worlds.

My fear was completely gone by this time. When I searched for the reason I was astounded by what I saw. I had already counted myself a dead man, and there is little that can frighten a man who has resigned himself to death. With it also I discovered that I had acquired an additional weapon—desperation. A desperation that would make me all the more deadly when pressed.

Very early the following day the stark raw savagery that was so much a part of the Veldian nature was brought vividly to my attention.

I left my room at the break of day to scout the city, to find, if I could, the source of the power that supplied Hearth. Or the factories where their implements of war would be manufactured. It would be worth more than my life to learn the secret of their superior space weapon.

Only a short block from the market place I came to a wooden wall of a temporary storage building. On the wall hung the bleeding carcass of a man!

He had been lifted until his feet cleared the ground and a short-bladed knife driven through his throat and buried into the boards behind him. The knife had entered at the base of the throat, sharp edge upward, and the weight of the body had forced the blade through the flesh and tendons until it came to rest against the bone of the jaw.

Beside the head was scrawled: COWARD.

This poor wretch had violated some taboo, and had not had the courage to defend himself. On Velda a man without courage is without Honor—capital H—and without Honor, not fit to live. There would be no attempt to punish the man or men who had killed him.

Honor. On that word, and their conception of it, the Veldians hang their right to life—much as they had hung this poor brute on his knife.

For my own safety, I reflected ruefully, it would be well to keep that

conception of Honor closely in mind.

The City's powerhouse I found without difficulty. It was located at the edge of the Citadel where the River Widd entered. I did not risk an entry but searched unobtrusively for outside leads.

Either they were buried, or the Veldians had a different method of transmission than I sought, for I found none. I decided to return the next day and search for them beneath the walls.

I found no slightest evidence of a weapons technocracy. There was much of the city that I had not yet covered, and I would do that, but I felt that I would not find them in Hearth.

The probability was that every citizen knew where the weapons were manufactured—but how was I to learn it? I couldn't simply ask. My not knowing would, itself, arouse suspicion. A better method would be to steer a casual conversation around to the subject. But I dared not enter into any extended conversation. My accent alone would give me away. It had been safe enough before they had known of my existence: then they had probably marked it as the way of speaking of an outlander clansman. But now they would be looking for me.

I hired a room in a different section of the market district the next day. I wanted to leave a cold trail for any pursuers.

In the afternoon I engaged a merchant in a Game during his slack period. He was a talking man, and we gossiped as we played. I learned quite a bit of Velda's early history.

In ancient times Hearth, the impregnable fortress, the Heart City, was held by the Danlee. They were ruled by Miklas of Danlee, a wise and foresighted chieftain, and they grew strong and conquered other tribes. Miklas, when he defeated his foes, gave them the choice of leaving their sons enemies of the Danlee—and therefore as prisoners to be slain or slaves to be used as animals, spent and allowed to die—or to use their absolute parental authority and swear them to eternal loyalty to Danlee, and allow them to be adopted into the Hearth of Danlee as sons and blood brothers, to be treated as kin and to expect and owe all the gentleness of kin to each of the Danlee and the adopted of Danlee.

Though the principles of honor and vengeance stood high, life of

children and respect for strength stood higher, and few parents refused to give their children to the Danlee.

Therefore all the clansmen of Velda, except a few savage tribes not worth the conquest, call themselves the Danlee and the Danlee citadel their Hearth and home of their fathers, in the sense that Father means the protector and commander of their children.

Which was quite interesting, except that it was not the information I sought.

VIII

That evening I went out into the city for my usual exercising stroll—and came near to disaster! I was returning to my room, striding with my head lowered into a cold wind and paying little attention to what went on around me.

Brittle bits of sleet rode the wind and stung my face, bringing tears to my eyes. I was thinking with anticipation of my warm room when a hard shoulder struck against mine and knocked me into the middle of the roadway.

I looked up. "What...P'l began.

A man stood perhaps three paces from me, He was short and thick with a brush-browed face and a permanent scowl on his forehead. The typical Velda traits of impetuosity and audacity were very evident in his expression, and were heightened by a nature obviously mean. He was standing with his legs spread and his lips pulled back from his teeth. Evidently it was he with whom I had collided.

"Your forgiveness," I murmured and made to pass him and go on.

He reached out a hairy hand and gripped my cloak where it met at the throat. "You would run?" he asked gently.

At the moment he spoke I understood why I was being challenged. I had been, walking on the wrong side of the road!

To do that on Velda exposes ignorance; to do it, and jostle another

going the correct way, is an insult. I did not know whether an apology would be accepted or not, but I made a try.

*I beg you to forgive a stupid one," I said.

Instead of replying he dug his other hand into my cloak front and jerked, with all the weight of his body behind it. The unexpectedness of the action swung me around in a half-circle and my back and the side of my head struck the wall of a building at the road edge.

A scattering of pedestrians collected around us, commenting eagerly, and asking questions. Others came running up to join them. I spotted the face of a boy-girl that looked familiar.

My attention did not stay with her long for my assailant still held me by the throat. With his free hand he had drawn a short-bladed knife. "He tried to run!" he shouted over his shoulder at the absorbed onlookers. His voice was hoarse with excitement—pleased excitement.

"Kill him!" several of the spectators shouted back.

The blow on my head had momentarily dazed me, but now it cleared and I saw that the time for apologies had passed. I set myself and made ready to meet the man's next move.

A tall Veldian in the uniform of the military shouldered his way through the crowd. "What is this?" he asked.

The onlookers quieted instantly. The military act as police in the City, and citizens show them strict respect—with good cause. Anyone opposing them is automatically assigned to the Final Game.

"He tried to run," the short man at my side said. His face had taken on a bone hardness, and his voice was wicked and quiet.

The officer raised inquiring eyebrows at me. I noted that the short man had not had to state my offense; the accusation that I had tried to run summed up the situation to the officer's complete satisfaction.

There was nothing left but to fight. The gentleman has misconceived, guardian," I said, giving him his formal address. "Will you be kind enough to indicate the offending party?"

Several of the first men to reach us gave their version of what had happened; the short man gave his. The guardian turned to me. "I am prepared to give him satisfaction," I said, disdaining to argue.

The guardian found the short man to be the injured party. That gave him the choice of weapons.

"The short knife," he said.

The Veldians live with their short knife. They use it in games, contests, hunting, and even for eating. I'd. have Little chance fighting such a one with the unfamiliar weapon.

The guardian turned to me. "Conditions?" he asked.

The annotator, as usual, had been busy. "Blindfold us," I said firmly.

I surprised myself as much as our onlookers. I sought for the reason why I had chosen thus. Somewhere I had read a novel of Earth's historical past where a man with no proficiency with weapons was challenged to a meeting by a skilled duelist. He had chosen blindfolds and pistols. He had found an equalizer.

There was a moment of silence around us, then shouts of approval. Variety lent savor to a contest, apparently. The guardian nodded his consent. My opponent was allowed no protest.

The boy-girl I had noted at the edge of the crowd stepped forward and tore strips of cloth from her cloak lining and handed them to the guardian, while I studied her face, trying to recall where I had seen it before. I did not remember, only I knew by the look in her eyes that she was very much on my side.

The guardian bound the strips of cloth about our eyes. As he worked he said, "To insure proper opportunity for each I will call 'now' at regular intervals. You will then make a sound clearly audible to your opponent." He quieted the crowd and told them to keep the silence until the contest ended.

This, I knew, would be no meeting where the mere drawing of blood decided the winner. The Velda code demanded the death or complete disability of at least one of the fighters. I would have to put aside any

thoughts of showing mercy should I gain an advantage. Showing mercy would consign me to death as quickly as refusing to fight would have done. I would have to kill him, if I could.

Someone took me by the arm and led me a few paces backward. As I stood waiting for the signal I pushed my knife into my belt and tugged the cloak from my shoulders. I wrapped it around my left forearm, where it made a thick bundle. I heard a murmur run through the crowd. It must have been of approval, for there was no protest.

The guardian barked, "Now!" and I took the short knife in my right hand. I heard my opponent grunt—I judged about fifteen feet away—and I whistled sharply. A whistle is more difficult to locate exactly than the sound of a voice.

Three times we answered the signal, and each time the short man's reply came from a different area. I held my same position from the first. Remembering what I had heard of Velda knife fighting I knew their favorite stroke is an uppercut that rips through belly muscles. I held my cloaked arm across my lower abdomen.

The short man's third call came from only a few paces to my side. I had deliberately waited for him to sound first. Now I whistled and whirled to face him. I had judged right!

I heard a small scuffle of pebbles as he sprang forward, and felt the savage thrust of a knife blade as it went through the fabric of my cloak and buried its point in the flesh of my forearm.

For an instant the blade stuck and I brought my right arm around, overhand, and felt the knife bury itself in flesh.

He gave a half cough and a groan and jerked back as I pulled my knife free. His stayed buried where it had stuck in my arm.

"It is over," the guardian said.

I took the blindfold from my eyes and turned away, not wanting to see the thing that lay on the ground. I was sick to my stomach. This blind, stupid, pointless savagery!

A small warm hand slipped into mine as I began to walk away and I

turned and saw the boy-girl looking up at me, her eyes bright with excitement and—I swear it—adoration. "A dleeth!" she exclaimed.

It was impossible to remain unmoved before her admiration, and I felt my morbid mood lift slightly, though accompanied by a pang of conscience. "Who are you?" I asked.

She pouted prettily. "Yasi," she said. Then she laughed at my puzzlement, and added, "I work in Lyagin's offices. He is my father."

Of course. I remembered well the way she had looked at me then, and I was as happy to see her now as though she had been an old friend. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"To my home," she answered. "They will not think to look for you there."

"You know then that I escaped?" I asked.

"I fully expected it," she said very soberly. "I was sure you were a man who would not die easily."

We walked to her home, an apartment in one of the stone buildings, and she made me strip to the waist as she treated my arm. She tisk-tisked sympathetically as she washed the wound with rough soap, but it really wasn't too bad. It had not even bled much. The knife blade had grazed the bone and cut deep into the flesh, but it had been a sideward cut and missed the larger veins and tendons.

There was no thought of calling a doctor, for Velda has none. All adults are given elementary training in bone setting, and the care of wounds, but there was no vocational training as such. This spurning of medical practice had some tie-in with their social outlook that I did not yet fathom.

Yasi made me a thick porridge and I ate lightly, noting as I did that she waited, obviously impatient for me to finish. When I put my spoon down she sprang to her feet. "And now me!" she exclaimed. She stood in front of me and pirouetted slowly, an expectant smile on her face.

I frowned, puzzled at what she expected of me, and she paused in her posing. "You tease me," she cried. "Surely you notice?" She ran slim hands

down the sides of her body and across her hips. "My *msst!*" she threw at me. "It began nine days before now."

And at last my obtuseness lifted. *Msst*. The eighth year, when the woman's sterility leaves. I noted the signs about Yasi, the soft flesh ripening her body, the slight rounding of her hips, and the small breasts beginning to push at her blouse.

"Oh, you are stupid," she taunted, but the softness of her tone belied the words, and she ran to where I sat and climbed like a child into my lap. "You will like me even more when it is complete," she promised, putting both arms around my shoulders and squeezing mightily.

Veldian impetuosity is not confined to the males, I told myself as I sat with some embarrassment, not knowing quite what to do or say.

Yasi was oblivious to my silence, content to carry the conversational burden. "I marked you at the top," she said, looking up at me coquettishly through her long lashes.

Again I was without comprehension. "You—big—big—stupid," she crooned, punctuating each word with a kiss on my cheek. She drew back her head, obviously very happy and contented. "I should not be telling you women's secrets," she said, "but we all observe you foolish men during our long period, and when we are ready, we have made our choice." Then abruptly her mood changed and she buried her face against my neck and I could feel its dampness. "I was afraid you would not live till then." She shifted position in my arms, which, unaware, I had put around her. "But you are alive, alive, alive." She kissed me three times, quickly, hungrily.

I wonder if any man could have reacted other than numbly before the lightning vagaries of her moods. Apparently their women's transformation period is one of emotional fluctuation. The only self-assertion I could present was to follow my instinct. I took her sweet child's face in both my hands and kissed her tenderly.

I stayed with Yasi several days, and each day brought further delightful advances in her womanhood. The complete process involved approximately six weeks, I believe.

I did not let her mercurial, absorbing presence keep me from my work. Each day I went out, going on with my business. My opinion of the

Veldians as being brutal, savage, and sadistic found many instances of confirmation. I watched them fight over some woman in her *msst*, who was no more than casually interested in either of the contestants; and their rigid mores that were no longer functional.

I did detect what might have been a universal discontent in their young men. They had a warrior heritage and nature which, with the unity of the tribes, left them with an unrecognized futility of purpose. Also the custom of polygamy—necessary in the old days, and desired still by those able to attain it—left them sexually frustrated. I saw that they did not even know the reason for their discontent, let alone what its solution should be.

They had an admiration of pointless courage, and a striving for emulation, that saddened me with its emptiness whenever I was forced to witness it. They engaged in games of conflict—with no ill-will on either side, merely for the thrill and the pseudo-Honor of victory—that often left one or the other maimed or crippled. They fought because of their need to share exhilarating conflict. They were the spawn of generations of fighters who, with the passing of the *dleeth*, had no one to fight except each other.

They had not quite been able to achieve a successful sublimation of their post-warrior need to fight in the Games. It was not enough—the biological needs of their natures were too strong—and the Games served only as temporary stop-gaps. Their male frustration was potentially explosive.

Gradually, however, the picture I had of them in my mind altered. • As new facts and understanding entered, the lines and pattern shifted and the picture changed. The murky hole began to reveal patches of light; shadows faded into the background; other shadows showed the gray of sadness, where before there had been the black of ugliness.

The first realization I had of the change in the picture came when I became satisfied that Velda had no crime, other than in rare individual instances. Lying, theft, and deceit were practically unknown. And this because of fineness of racial character, rather than effective legal restraint.

With the near completion of the picture my dislike for them changed to admiration—tempered by touches of pity and sorrow. Pity when I saw their dissatisfaction, their discontent with their lives, and their not knowing what caused it, or what they could do to combat it.

And, weighing what I observed of the tide that carried them, I decided that I liked them. The manners and organization of the Veldians—within the framework of their culture—were as simple and effective as their architecture. There was a strong emphasis on pride, on strength and honor, on skill, and on living a dangerous life with a gambler's self-command, on rectitude, on truth, and the unbreakable bond of loyalty among family and friends. All this I saw and admired.

I weighed all these observations in my reactions to the Veldians, and toward the end a strange feeling—a kind of wistfulness—came as I observed. I felt kin to them, as if these people had much in common with myself. And I felt that it was too bad that life was not fundamentally so simple that one could discard the awareness of other ways of life, of other values and philosophies that bid against one another for one's attention, and made one cynical of the philosophy he lives by, and dies for. Too bad that I could not see and take life that directly, and that simply.

I returned to the power station, and this time I abandoned all caution and examined it thoroughly, both above and below ground. I found no cables, and no way to enter. There was one door at the upper level but it was sealed. I might have realized the small possibility of finding anything there. There were no waterfalls or swift current to supply power, and no evidence of a fuel being consumed. The station was merely a transmitter.

I climbed a spiral ramp that went around the outside of the station until I reached the top. My thought was that I might see other cities in the distance, or evidence of agriculture, or even points of interest within Hearth that I had missed.

The top of the tower, I found, was concave, with a four-bladed propeller—parallel to the roof—turning slowly on a spindly rod at its center. The impression I received was of a huge ornamental windmill lying on its side. I had no idea what its purpose might be.

I sat on the foot wide railing at the edge of the roof and looked out over the wall of the city. There was no evidence of agriculture. On all sides—as far as I could see—was nothing but red sand. Trackless red sand, making small whirlpools in the cold wind, and coming right up to the walls of the city.

On all sides except one. To my left, stretching out from Hearth until lost in the distance^ was a long ribbon of concrete road. On the road were

dozens of slowly crawling vehicles that might have been caterpillar trucks of Earth!

In my mind the pattern clicked into place. Hearth was not typical of the cities of Velda!

It was an anachronism, a revered Homeplace, a symbol of their past, untainted by the technocracy that was pursued elsewhere. This was the capitol city, from which the heads of government still ruled, perhaps for sentimental reasons, but it was not typical. That also was why I had seen so little evidence of an advanced technocracy.

There was nothing more to be learned on the power station roof. I climbed slowly down the ramp. This then was the end of my quest. I would see and find nothing in Hearth except what Trobt and his Council had probably allowed me to see. For any further search to be effective I would have to leave Hearth, and find the cities where the Veldians had their factories. I wasn't certain how it would be done, but I would find a way. Perhaps I'd take a tricar and set out along the highway until I reached another city. Even though I had no idea of the range of the small cars, for the present that seemed the best plan. I spent some time bringing my tape record up to date.

I had a vague sense of foreboding, of feeling that I would never leave Hearth, that this would be my last day of freedom.

My depression led me to stop in one of the drinking stalls in the market place. I found an empty couch against a far wall, ignoring a loungeer who eyed me't hopefully, wanting a Game, I knew.

I was served the one product they sold, a thick, honey-colored liquor that I had never heard named. I tried one tentative swallow. The liquor burned a path across my tongue and down my throat, bringing tears to my eyes. It was certainly not as mild as it appeared. The second swallow was easier.

The voices around me had quieted while I drank. I looked up apprehensively, but everyone's attention was directed toward the front of the room. About them all was an air of expectancy, a beneath-the-surface excitement. I followed their gaze—to a woman who stood just within the entrance.

She was dressed all in white, and stood cool and poised, very sure of herself. Her figure had none of the sterile bleakness of the boy-girls. It was rounded firmly, slim at the waist and swelling ripely above and below. Her body was well fleshed, and sensuous. As she walked now across the front of the room a thin slit running down the length of her blouse alternately parted and closed, exposing a narrow section of her breasts and diaphragm. It was a quite stimulating revelation.

This, it developed, was their entertainment, their floor show, except that the woman did not dance or act, she merely walked, which obviously was entertainment enough. I followed her every movement with fascination, and when once her glance idly paused on mine I became suddenly shy, awkward, and excited. I was glad when she moved on for I was certain that otherwise my carefully contained reserve would have broken.

Now she came down the center isle and as she neared me I caught a sweet delicate scent of musk that instinctively I knew came from the very pores of her flesh.

On Earth certain rather prissy mores forbid mention of the part the female scent plays in sexual stimulation, though everyone knows of it. Here it is not cloaked behind pseudo-gentility. The woman's eighth year, her fertility period, is called her *msst*, from the name of the scent she exudes.

And now I was exposed to it for the first time, and a slow pulse began to throb thickly in my throat, from within came a rush of stimulation, and a sudden hunger grew in my tissues. With amazement I realized that it was all the biological response of my glands to her mere presence—and her scent. I reached out blindly for my goblet and drained it.

I left the drinking place soon after—and outside found Trobt waiting for me

IX

As I might have expected, Trobt showed no sign of anger with me for having evaded his guards and fleeing into the City. His was the universal Veldian viewpoint. To them all life was the Game—with the difference that it was played on an infinitely larger Board. Every man and every woman

with whom the player had contact, direct or indirect, were pucks on the Board. The player made his decisions, and his plays, and how well he made them determined whether he won or lost. His every move, his every joining of strength with those who could help him, his every maneuver against those who would oppose him, was his choice to make, and he rose and fell on the wisdom of his choice. Game, in Velda, means Duel, means struggle and the test of man against the opponent, Life. I had made my escape as the best play as I saw it. Trobt would have no recriminations.

Neither of us discussed the coming Final Game. I was prepared, mentally to meet it anytime; however, Trobt's attitude seemed to indicate that it had been indefinitely postponed. Why, I could not tell.

The following day Trobt did not return to his government offices. He shut himself in his recreation room and stayed until early evening. His meals were served him there.

When finally he came out he was pale and his face, not tense, but appearing as though it had only that moment relaxed after a long strain. He had the look of a man who after a prolonged struggle has just made a difficult decision.

"Would you care to play the Game?" he asked. I stood perplexed. Why the evidence of stress, if it led to such a simple request? I would have been happy to play him anytime. "This will be the most difficult game you've ever had— Game or chess," he finished.

There had been something more behind the request then. When I nodded he surprised me again by calling for our cloaks. I pulled mine on and followed him out to the tricar ramp.

We drove diagonally away from the River Widd. Hearth is quite narrow so our journey was short. However, the section in which we stopped was old and poorly lighted. Many of the houses were abandoned, and most of the others were run down.

We parked our tricar on a side avenue and walked perhaps a hundred yards. "If you can win this Game perhaps we will have to change our opinion of you Humans," Trobt said on the way. He spoke as though in jest, but I saw more behind his words than he intended me to see. Here might be a chance, at last, to do a positive service for my side.

We stopped at the door of a small one-story stone house and Trobt tapped with his fingernails on a hollow gong buried in the wood.

After a minute a curtain over the door glass was drawn back and an old woman with straggly gray hair peered out at us. She recognized Trobt and opened the door.

We went in. Neither Trobt nor the old woman spoke. She turned her back after closing the door and went to stir embers in a stone grate.

Trobt motioned with his head for me to follow and led the way into a back room.

"Robert O. Lang," he said, "I would like you to meet Yondtl."

I looked across the room to where Trobt indicated. My first impression was of a great white blob, propped up on a couch and supported by the wall at its back.

Then the thing moved. Moved its eyes. It was alive. Its eyes told me also that it was a man. If I could call it a man.

His head was large and bloated, with blue eyes, washed almost colorless, peering out of deep pouches of flesh. He seemed to have no neck; almost as though his great head were merely an extension of the trunk, and separated only by puffy folds of fat. Other lappings of flesh hung from his body in great thick rolls.

It took another minute of absorbed inspection before I saw that he had no arms, and that no legs reached from his body to the floor. The entire sight of him made me want to leave the room and be sick.

"Robert O. Lang is an Earthian who would challenge you, sir," Trobt addressed the monstrosity.

The other gave no sign that I could see but Trobt went to pull a Games table at the side of the room toward us. "I will serve as his hands," Trobt said.

The pale blue eyes never left my face.

I stood without conscious thought until Trobt pushed a chair under me.

Mentally I shook myself. With unsteady hands—I had to do something with them—I reached for the pukts before me. "Do you... Do you have a choice— of colors, sir?" I stammered, trying to make up for my earlier rudeness of staring.

The lips of the monstrosity quivered, but he made no reply.

All this while Trobt had been watching me with amusement. "He is deaf and speechless," Trobt said. "Take either set. He will use the other."

Absently I pulled the red pieces toward me and placed them on their squares.

"In deference to you as a visitor, you will play 'second game counts,' " Trobt continued. He was still enjoying my consternation. "He always allows his opponent the first move. You may begin when you are ready."

With an effort I forced myself to concentrate on the playing board. My start, I decided, must be orthodox. I had to learn something of the type of game this—Yondtl—played. I moved the first row right hand pukt its two oblique and one left squares.

Yondtl inclined his head slightly. His lips moved. Trobt put his hand to a pukt and pushed it forward. Evidently Trobt read his lips. Very probably Yondtl could read ours plso.

We played for almost an hour with neither of us losing a man.

I had tried several gambits; gambits that invited a mis-play on Yondtl's part. He made none. When he offered I was careful to make no mistake of my own. We both played as though this first game were the whole contest.

Another hour went by. I had deliberately traded three pukts with Yondtl, in an attempt to trick him into a misplay. None came.

I tried a single decoy gambit, and when nothing happened, followed with a second decoy. Yondtl countered each play. I marveled that he gave so little of his attention to the board. Always he seemed to be watching me. I played. He played. He watched me.

I perspired.

Yondtl set up an overt side pass that forced me to draw my pukts back into the main body. Somehow I received the impression that he was teasing me. It made me want to beat him down.

I decided on a crossed-force double decoy gambit. I had never seen it employed: Because, I suspect, it is too involved, and open to error by its user. Slowly and painstakingly I set it up and pressed forward.

The Caliban in the seat opposite me never paused. He matched me play for play. And though his features had long since lost the power of expression, his pale eyes seemed to develop a blue luster. I realized, almost with a shock of surprise, that that fat caricature of a man was happy—intensely happy.

I came out of my brief reverie with a start. Yondtl had made an obvious play. I made an obvious counter. I was startled to hear him sound a cry somewhere between a muffled shout and an idiot's laugh, and my attention jerked back to the board.

I had lost the game!

My brief moment of abstraction had given Yondtl the opportunity to make a pass too subtle to be detected with part of my faculties occupied elsewhere.

We began the second game—and still I hadn't found a weakness in my opponent. Worse, I had learned that any slight lapse of attention on my own part would be fatal.

Now I had to play a flawless game, while still searching for Yondtl's weak point. The obvious course, I decided, would be to try a play of elimination. I had used it often before to find an opponent's weakness. I could play it in such a way as to be almost certain not to make a mistake. The worst I could get would be a stand-off. And perhaps Yondtl could not play as perfect a game with fewer pieces. I'd find out.

Slowly, carefully, I moved my pukts, taking every opportunity for a safe exchange. After each play, and particularly after each exchange, I looked for signs of error, or at least uncertainty, in Yondtl's play. I found none. With each lessening of pukt numbers I tried new gambits. Always Yondtl matched them.

The game ended when we had each one pukt left. It was no game.

I admitted to myself that for some time I had been looking for signs of weariness in Yondtl. I was exhausted, and would have liked an excuse to quit for the night. The glisten of happiness in his eyes burned unwearily.

I pushed back my chair. "I've had enough for tonight," I told Trobt. If I were to do the Humans a service I would have to rest before trying Yondtl the next time.

We made arrangements to meet again the following evening, and let ourselves out. The old woman was nowhere in sight.

On the drive back it was I who was silent. I had a fairly definite presentiment that I had met my match, and perhaps more.

When we reached Trobt's home he left me for a minute and came back with a flagon of liquor and two goblets. He filled both and gave one to me. I held my glass wonderingly as he raised his in a silent toast, then drained it. He was as near to showing exhilaration as I'd ever seen him.

"Tonight," he said, speaking Earthian, "I feel a need to talk. Will you bear with me?"

I smiled my agreement.

"Why am I happy?" he asked. "Because you have met a Veldian you can't beat," he answered himself. "Always before there was this small doubt in my mind. Here, I said, is this Earthian, whipping us at our own Game. True, he may be the best of the Earthians. But he is beating the best of the Veldians. Are the Humans then more intelligent? Tonight it was answered. Our best is better than your best!"

He raised his hand to stop me when he thought I would speak. "Oh, I know. You have not lost yet. But you will. Yondtl will beat you!"

It was not a subject I cared to debate. "What is Yondtl?" I asked. "An *idiot savant*?"

Trobt shook his head. "Yondtl is the most intelligent man on Velda."

"How does it happen that he still lives?" I asked. "If I understand your

ways, he should have been smothered in his cradle."

Trobt was on his feet by the time I'd finished speaking. But he seemed to change his mind in mid-rising, and poured himself a second goblet of liquor.

He was more sober now and I could tell by his short clipped speech that he was feeling some emotion that would have been anger against anyone else. But we two had by this time arrived at such an understanding of each Other that anger was unknown.

"Do you remember when I stopped in the park with you and explained why you would die?" he asked. "It is very unusual for me to do. If you recall I spoke low. I did not want the others to hear me. They would not have understood." His sentences came out sharp and direct. "On Velda it is an insult to ask a man his reasons. He does what he believes right. He will never explain his actions. If you question them you are impugning his Honor. I did something very disagreeable for me. I wanted you to see us as we are. To not think us savages. What you ask me now is that kind of insult."

This was a part of their nature I still did not understand. "But why?" I asked. "It was a matter of mere curiosity. You know I meant no offense. Why should you object to answering?"

"What you say is true. But it is..." He hesitated. "What is your word for it? Indelicate! That is it."

He saw that the explanation meant little to me.

"Wait. One minute," he said. "I understand your ways even less than you do ours, but I should be able to find some situation of your Worlds to demonstrate what I mean.

"Here," he resumed after a minute. "You visit a friend when he returns from his first marriage journey. Perhaps there are other friends there. You are introduced to his mate, and admire her beauty. You ask, 'And did you find her a virgin?'

"You mean no harm. You are not unduly curious. You are certain that he did find her such, and will be happy to tell you." He paused. "Do you see the indelicacy of it, the insult, even though he may recognize your good

intentions?

"Are you surprised then," Trobt went on, "when he does not tell you, joyfully, that she was a virgin? Or that he does not explain, that while she was not a virgin, there had been only two others, whereas the average..."

The laughter I could not hold back halted him. He looked at me in surprise. Even when I realized that he wasn't joking, by his nature couldn't be joking, I was unable to stop.

"I am convinced," I said finally.

"Now." Truly Trobt felt like talking tonight. "You ask why Yondtl still lives. I will tell you.

"Yondtl is my shame. Others' also—but mine more. And I do not know how to erase the shame.

"You are correct in believing that he should have been removed at birth. But his mother loved him too much. She hid him and we never heard of his inception. For years she fed and cared for him, and kept her secret.

"As Yondtl grew older his need for intellectual stimulation led him to make a few friends, with whom he conversed and played the Game. The circle of those who knew of him grew as his genius evidenced itself. Eventually the knowledge reached the Council.

"I went down with several guardians to take him to a place of painless sleep. It was a disagreeable task, but I could not shirk it because of that.

"When I arrived, and the guardians made ready to take him, his old mother—you saw her—fell on her knees and clutched my cloak, begging me not to do it.

"Can you picture it?" Trobt was visibly moved. "This old woman, on her knees, groveling at my feet, kissing my boots, deliberately debasing herself, weeping and begging me not to take her son?"

"The embarrassment of it, the humiliation I felt because of what I was forced to watch her do. Can you imagine my emotions? My shame? What was I to do? Could I push this miserable old wretch aside, tear her hands

from my cloak, and carry the only thing she loved from her house?

"I ran, actually ran, out into the street." When he had finished Trobt sat with head bent.

"You did right," I said softly.

"Right?" He was indignant. "Could I let him live, and not be forced in conscience to allow every miserable misfit on Velda to live also? In a few generations the strength of our clansmen would be dissipated by my folly!"

I reached to touch his shoulder. He jerked away and strode from the room. He would do no more talking that night.

This time I understood him. Completely. Yondtl was Trobt's scarlet letter.

After Trobt left I dropped quickly to sleep. I awoke at daylight, however, with all my senses alert. I had much thinking to do before evening came. Trobt had told me, on the ride back the night before, that to the best of his knowledge, Yondtl had never lost a Game. This only confirmed my earlier conviction that our next meeting would be the ultimate test of my ability. I would have to plan my stratagems as fully and well as I was able before I met him again. And they must be excellent. Anything less than my very best would not be good enough.

I considered first what Yondtl's weakness might be. It has always been my conviction that every man has at least one. In my mind I reviewed all our play, re-enacting the gambits he had used, mine, and the means he had employed to foil them. I tried to find moves he had made that might have been done better. My eventual conclusion was that if he had a weakness, he had not yet revealed it. I was almost ready to believe he had none.

Next I made a balance sheet in my mind and weighed our assets.

For Yondtl I put down a brilliant mind, cold logic, innate power of concentration, mental stamina, and faultless execution. A formidable array.

On my side I conceded equal logic and adeptness of execution. I had, in addition, my gift of perception—my ability to spot an opponent's

weakness. This to a greater degree than Yondtl—perhaps. But of what aid would it be to me against a player who gave no evidence of ever making a mistake?

Finally, though Yondtl had shown no weakness, I had! And this was my first knowledge of it. Yet I could see the fault very plainly, now that it had been exposed. My mind was too inquisitive—too eager to learn all it could about everything it saw—for the kind of competition I now had[^]to engage. In the Game it robbed me of just a fraction of the concentration I needed when I played Yondtl. There was the consolation, that having recognized the weakness I would be doubly careful to guard against it.

Also, there was the annotator. Its inquisitiveness might spoil my concentration if I allowed it, but to balance that, it should be my greatest strength. It had seldom failed me before.

In addition to the above I felt keen. My reflexes were primed, sharp and ready for the coming encounter. Having given the problem the best I had, I was satisfied. I lay on my pallet and slept soundly until Trobt aroused me in the evening.

When we began our game I found that I had made one other decision. Playing the way I had I would never beat Yondtl. A stand-off was the best I could hope for. Therefore the time had come for more consummate action. I would engage him in a triple decoy gambit!

I had no illusion that I could handle it—in the manner it should be handled. I doubt that any man, Human or Vel-dian, could. But at least I would play it with the greatest skill I had, giving my best to every move, and push the game up the scale of reason and involution—up and up—until either Yondtl or I became lost in its innumerable complexities, and fell.

As I attacked, the complexes and complications would grow gradually more numerous, become more and more difficult, until they embraced a span greater than one of us had the capacity to encompass, and the other would win.

The Game began and I forced it into the pattern I had planned. Each play, each maneuver, became all-important, demanding the greatest skill I could, command. Each pulled at the core of my brain, dragging out the last iota of sentient stuff that writhed there. Yondtl stayed with me,

complex gambit through complex gambit.

When the strain became too great I forced my mind to pause, to rest, and to be ready for the next clash. At the first break I searched the annotator. It was working steadily, with an almost smooth throb of efficiency, keeping the position of each pukt, and its value, strong in the forefront of visualization.

But something was missing!

A minute went by before I spotted the fault. The move of each pukt involved so many possibilities, so many avenues of choice, that no exact answer was predictable on any one. The number and variation of gambits open on every play, each subject to the multitude of Yondtl's counter-moves, stretched the possibilities beyond prediction. The annotator was a harmonizing, perceptive force, but not a creative, initiating one.

It was like an Earth computer, given a problem of the time a space ship would need to travel from one planet to another. It had the weight, volume, and fuel potentialities of the vessel, the drag of the planets' gravities, the course, and all other relevant factors, everything it needed. Except the distance between the planets.

The annotator, and the computer, operated in a statistical manner, and could not perform effectively where a crucial factor or factors were unknown, or concealed, as they were here.

My greatest asset was negated.

At the end of the third hour I began to feel a steady pain in my temples, as though a tight metal band pressed against my forehead and squeezed it inward. The only reaction I could discern in Yondtl was't^hat the blue glint in his eyes had become brighter. All his happiness seemed gathered there.

Soon my pauses became more frequent. Great waves of brain weariness had to be allowed to subside before I could play again.

And at last it came.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Yondtl threw a pukt across the board and took

my second decoy—and there was no way for me to retaliate I

I felt a kind of calm dismay. My shoulders sagged and I pushed the board away from me and slumped in my chair. I had been beaten.

X

The next two days were very quiet. Trobt made no effort to seek me out—I presume in deference to how I must feel. I had my meals in my room, and skipped my evening walks. I suppose it could have been said that I was sulking. But I had good reason. Not only had I lost to Yondtl, but I had a feeling of drowning, of becoming ever more entangled in the mesh of the trap into which I had gotten myself. I was able to do nothing to help the Ten Thousand Worlds, and my own crisis had but one predictable end.

Predictable because by now I understood quite well the culture that had ensnared me. This was a warrior nation, with warrior ethics.. They would pass on to their captives and enemies the strain most familiar to them. The endurance test. The test where a man is expected to go to his breaking point, and beyond. I had not even the consolation that I would refuse to fight that long. I knew that I would. For myself, and for the pride of the race from which I had sprung. Those two days were dreary.

The evening of the second day Trobt woke me.

"I know you do not fear this," he said without preliminary, "but I wish I could spare you."

Something in his constrained manner brought me to my feet. "The Final Game?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not yet. Tonight we must question you again."

"What do you think you will learn that you could not before?"

"We have given it much thought. I think we will learn more."

"The truth serum has its limitations," I said. I do not know why I argued. I knew it was useless. But my resistance had been so battered that I think I talked only to gain time, to postpone what must come.

"We will try our own methods this time," Trobt answered.

"Torture?"

"I doubt that that will be necessary. But if it is, we will use it. In the end you will talk."

The cloak I put about my shoulders covered a far heavier garment.

"I can give you this assurance," Trobt said as we left, "we will harm you no more than we must. We would be cheating both ourselves and you if we made you unfit to die like a man."

I was not alone with the two men who questioned me. Through a glass wall at the end of the room another dozen watched. I was certain they would have means of hearing us also. Trobt was among them.

I had only one fatalistic thought. One resolution. This would be a better time to die than later. At least it would be for a cause. I had come into the room prepared to be carried from it.

My questioners made no pretense of gentleness. They were rough-voiced, and evidently prepared to be rough-handed, if necessary. At the beginning their questions were much the same as under the serum drugging: the power and war potentials of the Ten Thousand Worlds. They threw their questions rapidly, unmercifully, beating at my brain with repetition, going over and over the same ground, hour after hour, asking the same questions, rephrasing and asking them again. I doubt if they learned much there. I was not influenced by the drug this time, and they still lacked the background for proper understanding of the answers I gave to mislead them.

They forced me to stand during the ordeal. At first when I tired they gave me brief rests and a cool drink—I was answering the questions they asked. But as it became apparent that they were learning little they gave me no more breaks. They kept me standing and pounded on and on with their questions.

By midnight I was near the end of my endurance. "I need rest," I said.

"Stand!" one of my interrogators barked. He was a broad, big-bellied man with a scar that smeared the line of his left eyebrow.

I felt the strength flow from my legs.

The big-bellied man slapped my face savagely with both hands. The wall against my back held me up for a moment, as I brushed at his hands, and he drove his fist into my stomach.

I reached for the last ragged threads of my vitality and hit him on the side of the head and he staggered back and fell to the floor. From the corner of my eye I saw the other inquisitor swing a padded weapon at my head—and I had my rest at last.

When consciousness returned I found that I was still on my feet. The inquisitors each held one arm and supported me against the wall. The questions resumed. This time they were different. Perhaps my questioners had been waiting for the sign of weakness I had shown.

"What did you learn in the eight days you were free in Hearth?" Now they were asking questions about their own side. They would understand the answers I gave.

I shook my head.

The short man released his hold on my arm and hit me on the cheekbone. "Will we win our war against the Ten Thousand Worlds?"

I shrugged.

He struck me twice more. Brutally. "Did you find a weakness?"

I would gladly have given my life if I could have avoided answering that. I struggled so hard to be silent that my brain sagged with my body. They jerked me upright. "Did you find a weakness?"

I heard the answer that came as objectively as though someone else had spoken it.

Yes.

"Ah..."

I noted then a frightening fact. The annotator—the thing in my mind that was a part of me, and yet apart from me— had assumed control. It had made its motion to take command at the moment when I had been

beaten into small resistance, and it found little opposition.

And I knew the reason it had made its play. It was not concerned with matters of emotion; with sentiments of patriotism, loyalty, honor, and self-respect. It was interested only in my—and its own—survival. Its logic told it that unless I gave the answers my tormentors wanted they would beat me until I did. Until I died, if necessary. And that it had set out to prevent.

I made one last desperate effort to stop that other part of my mind from retaining control—and sank lower into my physical and mental impotence.

"What is our weakness?"

Waves of sound coming from within the head itself blurred my hearing and I could barely make out the question. But I heard the answer very clearly.

Your society is doomed.

The annotator had answered again as I stood helpless. And with the answer I understood that I had known it all the while, but that I had never quite put the thought into concrete form.

"Why?" The questions went on as I stood with eyes tightly closed.

There are many reasons.

"Give one."

Your culture is based on a need to struggle, for combat. When there is no one to fight it must fall.

My questioners were shrewd. They knew the questions to ask now. They were dealing with a familiar culture.

"Explain that."

I could exercise no restraint—as I had when there was only the truth serum to fight. Now I had a pent-up flood of knowledge within that would no longer be held back.

Your culture is based on its impetuous need to battle—

it is armed and set against dangers and the expectation of danger—fostering the pride of courage under stress—There is no danger now—nothing to fight, no place to spend your over-aggressiveness, except against each other in personal duels. Already your decline is about to enter the bloody circus and religion stage, already crumbling in the heart while expanding at the outside. And this is your first civilization—you have no experience of a fall in your history before to have recourse to—no cushion of philosophy to accept it.

For a time I sensed a puzzled silence in my tormentors. I doubted that they had the intelligence, or the depth of understanding, to accept the truth and significance of what they heard. But they were competent men in their job. One of them went over to the glass wall and through a doorway in its side. He returned a few minutes later.

"Is there no solution?" he asked.

Only a temporary one. Now it was coming.

"Explain."

War with the Ten Thousand Worlds. I tasted the rusty tang of blood in my mouth where my teeth had bitten into my tongue.

"Explain."

Your willingness to hazard, and eagerness to battle is no weakness when you are armed with superior weapons, and fighting against an opponent as disorganized, and as incapable of effective organization as the Ten Thousand Worlds, against your long-range weapons and subtle traps.

"Why do you say the solution is only temporary?"

You cannot win the war. You will seem to win, but it will be an illusion. You will win the battles, kill billions, rape Worlds, take slaves, and destroy ships and weapons. But afterwards you will be forced to hold the subjection. Your numbers will not be expendable. You will be spread thin, exposed to other cultures that will influence you, change you. You will lose skirmishes, and in the end you will be forced back.

Then will come a loss of old ethics, corruption and opportunism will replace your honor and you will know shame and dishonor—your society will soon be weltering back into

a barbarism and disorganization which in its corruption and despair will be nothing like the proud tribal primitive life of its first barbarism—you will be aware of the change and unable to return.

They maneuvered about that answer for a long time. Going through it again and again. But this time they were not harsh or aggressive. They stopped often and went to the glass wall and returned and asked again, in a different way.

I understood their perplexity. They could not accept what I told them because to them winning was only a matter of a military victory, a victory of strength; they had not experienced defeat as a weakness from within. My words only made them uneasy.

The last time one of my questioners returned from the glass partition he asked, "Do we have any other weakness?"

Your women. Would I never stop? They were picking my brain to defeat my own race.

"Explain."

They are 'set' for the period when they greatly outnumbered their men. Your compatible ratio is eight women to one man. Yet their number is one to one. Further, they produce too few children. Your manpower must ever be in small supply. Worse, it sponsors a covert despair and sadism in your young men—a hunger and starvation to follow instinct, to win women by courage and conquest and battle against danger—that only a war can restrain.

"The solution?"

Beat the Federation. Be in a position of free access to their women.

But the final ignominy was yet to come.

Dimly I heard the sound of a question from the glass wall. "Do you have a means of reporting back to the Ten Thousand Worlds?"

The answer came. Yes. *Buried somewhere inside me is a nerve-twitch tape. Flesh pockets of chemicals are stored there also. When my body temperature drops fifteen degrees below normal the chemicals will be activated and will use the tissues of my body for fuel and generate sufficient*

energy to transmit the information on the tape back to the Ten Thousand Worlds.

Just before the black walls of oblivion that rimmed my vision closed in, I heard, "That will be enough."

I recognized the voice as Trobt's.

XI

I awoke in my bedroom in Trobt's home. I was tired, and very weak. The ordeal of the questioning lingered in my mind like fragments of a nightmare. Impressions of it came and went. I felt nothing, for my emotions had not yet been able to work their way up through my weariness. I had only the certainty that when they did my reaction would be bitter.

Trobt found me in this state of mental stasis. I looked at his face for some sign of triumph, or contempt. I read neither there.

I was past caring. I felt alone, more alone than I had ever been before. "Was I unconscious long?" I asked, only little interested in what the answer might be.

"This is the next evening," Trobt answered gently. "You were kept under sleep while the chemicals in your body were removed."

My first emotion reached the surface then. And with it went any last hope I might have had. Before, when the situation seemed hopeless, I had had the consolation of knowing that my death would at least benefit the Ten Thousand Worlds. Now even that was gone. I had left only the nauseating knowledge that I was the worst kind of traitor.

Trobt read my thoughts correctly. "You had no power to prevent it," he said.

I turned my face from him.

In the space of the next few minutes a queer phantasm passed through my mind. With the realization that I had no slight hope left came what I recognized as shock. I knew then how a man could be physically unhurt, yet driven so hard that his mind was no longer able to face what it saw. It substituted a false knowledge then for the reality that was too harsh to bear. That way lay madness.

My mind became coldly logical. As clear, cool, and crisply logical as it is possible for a human mind to become. I began thinking new thoughts, savoring deliciously the wealth of wisdom behind them. I reviewed my past actions, my life, with its aspirations and frustrations, and I saw them as something that I understood fully now for the first time. Philosophies and problems of the universe that had been only dimly comprehended before were easily grasped with an idly passing thought. And too trivial for further contemplation. I had found the supreme wisdom—the only perfect happiness. Never again would I ever be perplexed or troubled. Before me lay serenity. The serenity of an infinity of knowledge and understanding. And behind it all lurked one other bit of perception: my thoughts were those that only a lunatic could have!

Trobt's perspicacity saved me. He had watched me those few minutes and now he said, "Only a coward runs."

He had seen what was happening, seen that I was fleeing back into my own mind. That the only way to stop that running was to sting me into staying and fighting.

I hung on grimly.

Two days later I visited Trobt at work.

At the car ramp I found a guardian leaning idly against a stone pillar. He smiled as I came up to him. "I will watch you die," he said.

The words were spoken with neither rancor or hate. But they did irritate. I shrugged. "Is there any reason why I can't leave here?" I asked.

"None," he answered, civilly enough. "I'd be happy to drive you anywhere you wish."

"Good," I answered. "Take me to the Games building."

He drove with the hairsbreadth impetuosity of all the Veldians.

At the entrance to the Games building a pedestrian snarled as I passed and spat on the ground. "I will watch you die," he grated. For some reason I seemed to be well-known now. Though hardly well liked.

We had to go through Lyagin's office to reach the inferior of the building. The old man glanced up as I entered behind the guardian. He rose when he recognized me and came toward me, "You are a man, sir," he said, gripping my wrist in a feeble hand.

I found myself standing, unable to answer. His greeting and manner were too unexpected. I had received too little respect on this world to accept it now without surprise. I stammered my thanks and went on.

Trobt put down a stylus when I entered his office and greeted me as though he had been expecting me.

I made no display of perfunctory conversation. I was in a mood for direct intercourse only. "I'd like to know if you still intend to kill me," I said.

"You need not fear," Trobt answered readily. "We will give you the torture whenever you ask."

"You mean that you won't do it until I tell you I'm ready?" I asked. He'd caught me unprepared, and I made a hasty change of plans.

"Why would we?"

Again I realized how much there still remained to learn of these people. And how I never would know them completely. The background necessary for that would take a lifetime of living—as one of them. Half in jest, I asked, "What if I postponed it forever?"

He smiled as though I had uttered an absurdity. "We both know you won't," he answered.

"How do you know that?" I challenged.

"You wouldn't permit it."

"Do you actually think I'm eager to die?" I asked.

"All Velda knows you are eager for the Final Game."

"Why?" I asked. "Do they see me as a madman?"

"They see you as you are. They cannot conceive of one man challenging a planet, except to win himself a bright and gory death on a page of history, the first man to deliberately strike and die in the coming war. Not an impersonal clash of battleships, but a *man* declaring battle against men. Every citizen is waiting to see you die—gloriously. We would not deprive you of that death. Our admiration is too great. We want the symbolism of your blood now just as greatly as you want it yourself."

Trobt too lacked the background to understand the other side. All this while he had interpreted my presence here in this fantastic way. And I suspected that I had no arguments to convince him differently. Was there anything more for me to say?

From the time I had been captured in the City I'd suspected that Trobt had planned to let me escape. He had lured me to a different kind of maze test, allowed me freedom of search, so that I could learn about them. But what I had learned would never leave Velda. Instead he had subjected me to the questioning, to turn the knowledge I had gained to their own advantage. So that they might know what to guard against in themselves. Also, my actions must have given them better knowledge of their opponent in the upcoming duel of races.

This proved once again how well Trobt had learned my trick of the second game. He had used it, deliberately losing in his effort to hold a lone Human, so that I would expose myself, and the fighting weaknesses of my kind, before the real fight began.

And I was back where I had been at the beginning.

I thought of the old histories of Earth. Of the warrior race of North American Indians. A captured enemy must die. But if he had been an honorable enemy he was given an honorable death. He was allowed to die under the stress most familiar to them. Their strongest ethic was a cover-up for the defeated, the universal expressionless suppressa! of reaction in conquering or watching conquest, so as not to shame the defeated. Public torture—with the women, as well as warriors,

watching—the chance to exhibit fortitude. That was considered the honorable death, while it was a shameful trick to quietly slit a man's throat in his sleep without giving him a chance even to fight—to show his scorn of flinching under the torture.

"I would like to show you something that will interest you," Trobt said. He walked to a window. "Over here."

I went and stood at his side. Outside a crowd filled every square foot of a large courtyard and spilled out into the street. They all seemed to be staring up toward us, intently.

"What are they looking at?" I asked.

"There is a vision screen just below our window," Trobt answered. "They are watching it. They have been all day. There are hundreds of other screens about the City, all as crowded with spectators as this one."

"What do they watch?"

"Follow me." Trobt led the way through a corridor and out a side door of the building. We stood in the doorway at the edge of the crowd where we could see the vision screen.

Its picture showed a group of men circling two in the center. One was short and stocky; the other deep-chested and bearded. Both held short knives in their right hands— and both were blindfolded!

There was a brief flurry of sudden movement from the two men in the center and the shorter fell back clutching his neck at the juncture of his left shoulder. Blood poured out from between his fingers.

The crowd muttered and gave brief cheers. Here and there voices said, "A wounded dleeth! He makes big tracks! I will watch how far he goes in the Final Gamel"

The bearded man, of course, was I.

"What is this?" I asked Trobt.

"We had scanners everywhere when you escaped. Only at rare intervals were you out of our sight."

"You did allow me to escape then?"

"Of course. I thought you understood.

"I believe I- do," I said. "And those pictures?"

"Are a transcript of your actions during the time you were free in Hearth."

It had not been unexpected. This man had surprised me too often with his brilliant handling of me—and my situation—for me to be taken aback now. "Did the Veldians know that you had deliberately allowed me to escape?"

"They didn't while you were in the City. But now they do. The transcript has been shown repeatedly since. Yet they watch with undiminished fascination. Even parts such as your sleeping under the City, they watch with as much interest as if they were witnessing a great drama."

Someone in the crowd at our side said, "I will watch him die!"

"They hate me, don't they?" I asked Trobt.

"What you just heard was a compliment. Some do hate you, naturally. They hate you as the representative of their Enemy. But to the great majority you are a hero. The entire planet admires you, for you are the enemy, come to challenge us—alone; the test champion come to decide the battle, the best contesting the best. And so they want to see you when you fight to maintain your honor."

Here was this unshakable viewpoint again.

"You have captured the imagination," Trobt said. "And when you die in the manner I know you must, you will undoubtedly become the greatest Enemy-hero in our history."

I was a hero. Still they would kill me.

XII

That night I dreamed of the Veldians. I was surrounded by thousands of them, all speaking at the same time, shouting at me, explaining

themselves, in jumbled, broken phrases:

Honor ... courage... birthright... inherited ... old survival traits . . . the world belongs... strong ... love danger . . . hardship . . . not only to bear, but

to love... Danger ... harshness... violence . . . war... valuable factors... progress. Must be ... passionate. Without it... impotence.

Weaklings... inefficient... must perish. Struggle... existence ... strong and progeny . . . survive. Weak and progeny... die. Strong survive ... each birth . . strength increases. Weak cannot be allowed... survive ... society must excrete.

Mercy... pity... paralyzing luxury. Waste. Crippled ... diseased... incompetent . . . defectives . . . must not be allowed... or strength gone.

I awoke soaked with perspiration.

That afternoon a visitor lightened my day.

Yasi.

I had almost forgotten her, so much had happened in the few days since I left her. But the cool sweetness in her smile and her kiss brought back a flood of tenderness.

Trobt and I had found her waiting in his game room when we entered. He smiled now at our joyful meeting.

Yasi, however, had eyes only for me. "Observe," she commanded me, once again parading herself for my inspection.

The burgeoning of her womanhood was quite apparent in her body form, and in the creamy pinkness that had blossomed in her cheeks. She was not yet quite a complete woman. She reminded me of an Earth girl, in secondary school, pert, vivacious, and just beginning to recognize her imminent chrysalis. She would very soon be as much woman as any man could ask.

"Do you find me pleasing, Robert O. Lang?" she asked, with a kind of singing in her voice.

I answered by taking both her hands in mine, and letting her read in my eyes how I felt about her. The warmth of her came to me through our hands, and I was as happy as I could have been on this alien world.

"Why then did you not return for me?" she asked. "Is it that you do not think me proper?" She turned appealingly to Trobt. "Will you tell him that I am worthy?"

Trobt was enjoying my inability to keep up with her conversational sprightliness. He nodded solemnly, however. "She is the youngest of Lyagin," he said. "Long an honorable family of Velda. By our standards she is a very beautiful girl." He paused. "I consider you a most fortunate man."

"And so you see?" she demanded.

"Yasi. Yasi." I folded her slim body in my arms. "I needed no one to vouch for you," I told her. "To me you are everything that is wonderful." At that moment I was very sincere.

This time she was quiet, but I could feel her very much alive in her supple body.

I forgot my cares for the afternoon she spent with me.

The following morning the annotator awoke me. And the answer to everything was there—lying in my hands like a gift waiting to be opened!

I dressed hurriedly and went downstairs, where I found Trobt strolling in his gardens.

"One question," I said, ignoring his nod of greeting. "Do you still regard war between Velda and the Federation as inevitable?"

"Of course."

"There will be no war," I stated. "And you will not kill me."

He looked at me as though I had spoken gibberish.

My next words, I knew, would shock him. "I'm going to ask you to allow me to return to our worlds," I said. "I am going to recommend unconditional surrender."

Trobt's head which he had turned away swiveled sharply back to me. His mouth opened and he made several motions to speak before succeeding. "Are you serious?"

"Very," I answered.

Trobt's face grew gaunt and the skin pressed tight against his cheekbones—almost as though he were making the surrender rather than I. "Is this decision dictated by your logic," he asked dryly, "or by faintness of heart?"

I did not honor the question enough to answer it.

Neither did he apologize. "You understand that unconditional surrender is the only kind we will accept?"

I nodded wearily.

"Will they agree to your recommendation?"

"No," I answered. "Humans are not cowards, and they will fight—as long as there is any slightest hope of success. I will not be able to convince them that their defeat is inevitable. But I can prepare them for what is to come. I hope to shorten the conflict immeasurably."

"I can do nothing but accept," Trobt said, after a moment of thought. "I will arrange transportation back to Earth for you tomorrow." He paused and regarded me with expressionless eyes. "You realize that an enemy who surrenders without a struggle is beneath contempt?"

The blood crept slowly into my cheeks. It was difficult to ignore his taunt. "Will you give me six months before you move against us?" I asked. "The Federation is large. I will need time to bring my message to all."

"You have your six months." Trobt was still not through with me, personally. "On the exact day that period ends I will expect your return to Velda. We will see if you have any honor left."

"I will be back," I said.

Before I made my return to Earth known I bought a small farm near the Porcupine Mountains in Michigan's upper peninsula—under an assumed

name. Before too long I would be regarded as a traitor here; as a live coward when I might better have been a dead hero.

I had just enough influence with the politicians—and they had enough curiosity—to arrange a meeting with delegates from our sector of the Worlds. I presented them with what I had learned, and recommended unconditional surrender.

They laughed at me. These men were all descendants of pioneer stock, their nature was to fight—until it had been proven to them, incontrovertibly, that they could not win. Words would never do it.

However, I had expected as much. I gave them all the arguments I had, then moved on to the other Worlds and presented them with the same message.

The reaction was identical everywhere. No surrender. They were only convinced that they must make hasty preparations to fight. Still I continued my mission. Wherever possible I induced them to telecast our talks, so that as many people as possible could learn what I had to say. I covered as much territory as I was physically able in the first five months.

The last month I saved for the Jason's Fleece sector. They were the Worlds nearest the Veldians, and would be first to bleed in the coming conflict. They evidenced the greatest unease—a few delegates vacillated—but in the end all refused to take my recommendations at face value.

The last day I returned to Velda.

Two days later Velda's Council acted. They were going to give the Humans no more time to organize counteraction. I went in the same spaceship that carried Trobt. I intended to give him any advice he needed about the Worlds. I asked only that his first stop be at the Jason's Fleece fringe.

Beside us sailed a mighty armada of warships, spaced in a long line that would encompass the entire portion of the galaxy occupied by the Ten Thousand Worlds. For an hour we moved ponderously forward, then the stars about us winked out for an instant. The next moment a group of Worlds became visible on the ship's vision screen. I recognized them as Jason's Fleece.

One world expanded until it was the size of a baseball. "Quagman," Trobt said.

Quagman, the trouble spot of the Ten Thousand Worlds. Dominated by an unscrupulous clique that ruled by vendetta, it had been the source of much trouble and vexation to the other Worlds. Its leaders were considered little better than brigands. They had received me with much apparent courtesy. In the end they had even agreed to surrender to the Veldians—when and if they appeared. I had accepted their easy concurrence uneasily, but they were my main hope.

Two Veldians left the ship in a scooter. We waited. Few words were spoken. Trobt played idly with the "Child's Ring" on his belt. It was a favorite ornament of the Veldians, a carry-back to the time of the dleeth. In their flights from the beast a tiring child could cling to the ring in the father's belt and be helped along.

At the end of ten long, tense hours word came from the Quagmans themselves. The Veldians were being held captive. They would be released upon the delivery of two billion dollars—in the currency of any recognized World—and the promise of immunity.

The fools!

Trobt's face remained impassive as he received the message.

We waited several more hours. Both Trobt and I watched the green mottled baseball on the vision screen. It was Trobt who first pointed out a small, barely vdiscernible, black spot on the upper left hand corner of Quagman.

As the hours passed, and the black spot swung slowly to the right as the planet revolved, it grew almost imperceptibly larger. When it disappeared over the edge of the world we slept.

In the morning the spot appeared again, and now it covered half the face of the planet. Another ten hours and the entire planet became a blackened cinder.

Quagman was dead.

The ship moved next to Mican.

Mican was a sparsely populated prison planet. Criminals were usually sent to newly discovered Worlds on the edge of Human expansion, and allowed to make their own adjustments toward achieving a stable government. Men with restless natures that made them criminals on their own highly civilized Worlds often made excellent pioneers. However it always took them several generations to work their way up from anarchy to a co-operative government. Mican had not yet had that time. I had done my best in the week I spent with them to convince them to organize, and to be prepared to accept any terms the Veldians might offer. The gesture, I feared, was useless but I had given all the arguments I knew.

A second scooter left with two Veldian representatives. When it returned Trobt left the control room to speak with them.

He returned, and shook his head. I knew it was useless to argue.

Mican died.

At my request Trobt agreed to give the remaining Jason's Fleece Worlds a week to consider—on the condition that they made no offensive forays. I wanted them to have time to fully assess what had happened to the other two Worlds— to realize that that same stubbornness would result in the same disaster for them.

At the end of the third twenty-four hour period the Jason's Fleece Worlds surrendered—unconditionally. They had tasted blood; and recognized futility when faced with it. That had been the best I had been able to hope for, earlier.

Each sector held off surrendering until the one immediately ahead had given in. But the capitulation was complete at the finish. No more blood had had to be shed.

The Veldians' terms left the Worlds definitely subservient, but they were neither unnecessarily harsh, nor humiliating. Velda demanded specific limitations on weapons and war-making potentials; the obligation of reporting all technological and scientific progress, and colonial expansion only by prior consent.

There was little actual occupation of Federation Worlds, but the Veldians retained the right to inspect any and all functions of the various governments. Other aspects of social and economic methods would be

subject only to occasional checks and investigation. Projects considered questionable would be supervised by the Veldians at their own discretion.

The one provision that caused any vigorous protest from the Worlds was the Veldian demand for Human women. But even this was a purely emotional reaction, and died as soon as it was more fully understood. The Veldians were not barbarians. They used no coercion to obtain our women. They only demanded the same right to woo them as the citizens of the Worlds had. No woman would be taken without her free choice. There could be no valid protest to that.

In practice it worked quite well. On nearly all the Worlds there were more women than men, so that few men had to go without mates because of the Veldians' inroads. And—by Human standards—they seldom took our most desirable women. Because the acquiring of weight was corollary with the Veldian women becoming sexually attractive, their men had an almost universal preference for fleshy women. As a result many of our women who would have had difficulty securing Human husbands found themselves much in demand as mates of the Veldians.

Eight years passed after the Worlds' surrender before I saw Kalin Trobt again.

The pact between the Veldians and the Federation had worked out well, for both sides. The demands of the Veldians involved little sacrifice by the Federation, and the necessity of reporting to a superior authority made for less wrangling and jockeying for advantageous position among the Worlds themselves.

The fact that the Veldians had taken more than twenty million of our women—it was the custom for each Veldian male to take a Human woman for one mate—caused little dislocation or discontent. The number lost did less than balance the ratio of the sexes.

For the Veldians the pact solved the warrior-set frustrations, and the unrest and sexual starvation of their males. Those men who demanded action and adventure were given supervisory posts on the Worlds as an outlet for their drives. All could now obtain mates; mates whose biological make-up did not necessitate an eight to one ratio.

Each year it was easier for the Humans to understand the Veldians and to meet them on common grounds socially. Their natures became less

rigid, and they laughed more-even at themselves, when the occasion demanded.

This was especially noticeable among the younger Veldians, just reaching an adult status. In later years when the majority would have a mixture of Human blood, the differences between us would become even less pronounced.

How Trobt found me I did not learn. I was still living under my assumed name. The rancor that had accompanied the mention of Robert O. Lang through the early years of the peace had almost died out now. However, I had come to enjoy my isolation in the Porcupine Mountains, and I made no effort to return to my old friends and society.

Trobt made his appearance as I was weeding my garden. He had changed very little during those eight years. His hair had grayed some at the temples, and his movements were a bit less supple, but he looked well. Much of the in-i tensity had left his aquiline features, and he too seemed content.

We shook hands with very real pleasure. I led him to chairs under the shade of a nearby tree and brought drinks.

Yasi heard him from the kitchen and came out and they embraced warmly. "I see that there will be two springs this year," he quipped, referring to the embryo evidence of the coming of her second fertile period. It was the first time I had heard the semblance of a conscious joke from him.

Yasi inquired as to the health of Yondtl, and was told that he was very happy with his new limbs, and could speak as well now as any Veldian. Human surgical techniques had been very welcome there.

She left us a short time later and Trobt said, "I want to apologize for having thought you a coward. I know now I was very wrong. I did not realize for years, however, just what had happened." He gave his wry smile. "You know what I mean, I presume?"

I looked at him inquiringly.

"There was more to your decision to capitulate than was revealed. When you played the Game your forte was finding the weakness of an

opponent. And winning the second game. You made no attempt to win the first. I see now, that as on the boards, your surrender represented only the conclusion of the first game. You were keeping our fatal weakness to yourself, convinced that there would be a second game. And that your Ten Thousand Worlds would win it. As you have."

"What would you say your fatal weakness was?" By now I suspected he knew everything, but I wanted to be certain.

"Our desire and need for Human women, of course."

There was no need to dissemble further. "The solution came to me first," I explained, "when I remembered a formerly independent Earth country called China. They lost most of their wars, but in the end they always won."

"Through their women?"

"Indirectly. Actually it was done by absorbing their conquerors. The situation was similar between Velda and the Ten Thousand Worlds. Velda won the war, but in a thousand years there will be no Veldians, racially."

"That was my first realization," Trobt said. "I saw immediately then how you had us hopelessly trapped. The marriage of our men to your women will blend our bloods until—with your vastly greater numbers—in a dozen generations there will be only traces of our race left."

"And what can we do about it?" Trobt continued. "We can't kill our beloved wives—and our children. We can't stop further acquisition of Human women without disrupting our society. Each generation the tie between us will become closer, our blood thinner, yours more dominant, as the intermingling continues. We cannot even declare war against the people who are doing this to us. How do you fight an enemy that has surrendered unconditionally?"

"You do understand that for your side this was the only solution to the imminent chaos that faced you?" I asked.

"Yes." I watched Trobt's swift mind go through its reasoning. I was certain he saw that Velda was losing only an arbitrary distinction of race, very much like the absorbing of the early clans of Velda into the family of the Danlee. Their dislike of that was very definitely only an emotional

consideration. The blending of our bloods would benefit both; the resultant new race would be better and stronger because of that blending.

With a small smile Trobt raised his glass. "We will drink to the union of two great races," he said. "And to you—the winner of the Second Game!"