

The Soul Buyer

The cards fell on the baize-topped table with a soft slap, slap. The fat man with the purple-veined nose reached out a meaty hand with rings, lifted the corner of his down-card. He puckered his lips, counted off bills, tossed them in.

"Up five hundred."

Tony Adair breathed a six-inch smoke ring across the table, propelled a tiny one through the center, not watching as rubber bands snapped against rolls, bills dropped on the green drift under the shaded billiard light.

"To you, Adair," said a freckle-blotched man with red hair like an eyebrow over each ear.

Behind Adair a small man, dapper in a yellow vest and black shirt leaned forward. "Take it easy, Tony boy."

Adair reached a slim wallet from an inner pocket, laid two crisp bills on the table.

"See the five and up a thousand."

The fat man beetled small eyes in a red face. "You're playing it cold as an eight-hour corpse, mister. You got a four-card flush working against three aces and kings over on the board, and you ain't even looked."

Adair smiled gently. The fat man snorted, counted out money. "Okay, smart man. I'm calling the grand—and up a grand."

Two players cursed and folded. The freckled man cursed and added money to the pot. Adair spread two more new bills on the table.

"And up another thousand."

The color drained from the fat man's jowls. He riffled his roll. "Table stakes," he snapped. "I got six cees that say you're lying." He tossed the money in.

"I hadda mix in this," the freckled player muttered. He turned his cards face down. The fat man grinned with one side of his face, flipped over his down-card and prodded four aces into a row.

"Tough I was short," he started, reaching for the heaped bills.

"Yeah," Adair cut in. "I could have used the money." Negligently he turned his down-card up. The fat man's mouth opened.

"Jeez, a king-high straight flush," someone muttered.

The fat man's eyes were glints behind puffed lids. His hand moved toward his hip pocket. "A cold-deck artist," he grated.

"Watch the lip, lard bucket," the freckled player said. "It's your deck—and I dealt it."

Adair gathered in the money. Behind him the small man rose, buttoning his jacket.

"That's enough for tonight, Tony. We got no time for sore losers."

"Sure, Jerry," Adair drawled.

"I get no chance to win it back, huh?" the fat man snarled.

Adair considered. "We'll cut the deck," he said. "You first. Look at your card and then name your bet."

"Hey, Tony—" Jerry Pearl began.

"Okay, you named the game, smart man." The fat man riffled, passed the deck for a cut, then lifted off cards, showed a king of hearts. He glanced at Adair, bright-eyed. "My check's good, everybody knows that." He took out a checkbook and pen, scribbled, tore off the green slip.

"King bets five grand," he purred.

Adair reached, eased the top card off the deck, dropped it before the fat man, face up: a black ace. He picked up the check, looked at it, then tore it in two and dropped it on the table. He rose, a big man with coal-black eyes.

"No hard feelings, I hope," he said softly. Nobody answered.

Outside, Adair lit a thin cigar, looked up past ragged roof-lines at a lop-sided moon the color of a bruise plowing through a dark sky bright with clouds. From somewhere down the street music murmured, as faint as old memories. Beside Adair, Jerry Pearl mopped at his face with a white-monogrammed black nylon handkerchief.

"That game was good for another ten gees, Tony," he complained. "You could have strung them rubes along for another hour."

"Why?" Adair said mildly.

"Why?" Pearl raised his shoulders. "Why does any guy gamble? For the dough . . ."

"How many card players do you know who fill inside straights like they were beer glasses?"

Jerry grinned, showing crooked teeth linked by gold bridge work. "Nobody, Tony. But nobody. You got a million-dollar talent there, kid."

"Uh-huh. It's a neat trick. How do I do it, Jerry? And why?"

"Jeezus, Tony, what's the difference? You're a guy with a permanent hot fist."

"I had a pretty fair education once, Jerry. By now I might have been a big-shot engineer—but I dropped it in favor of the galloping dominoes." He spread his hands, looked at the strong tanned fingers—skillful fingers. "Win or lose, it was my hand, my brain, my eyes—against the other guy."

"Sure, Tony—"

"That's finished now. I bet—I win. It's not me doing it, Jerry. I'm like a rigged slot machine; I come up three bells every time."

"So you got lucky; why knock it? Look, we can still hit Maxies."

"Forget it, I said no more."

"Tony, you were always a guy that loved the action—"

"It was the game, Jerry—not just the money. Now—the game's dead."

"Look, Tony, when I took you on to manage—"

Adair smiled at the small man. "I need a manager like Heinz needs a pickle. I haven't lost a bet since the night that old geezer sold me the Bolita ticket . . ."

"Come on, Tony. We'll have a drink—"

Adair looked at Jerry Pearl thoughtfully. "Funny about that ticket. The old bird headed straight for me like a Salvation Army lassie for the two-dollar window."

"I remember, Tony. A bum, a Bowery grifter. That overcoat—down to here—and smelling like a dog's bed. You only bought the ticket so he'd go breathe on somebody else."

"Uh-huh. But why did he pick me to breathe on?"

"He liked your looks, Tony."

"It was in a joint on 26th. What was the name of it?"

"I couldn't tell you, Tony—"

"Angelo's."

"Maybe. So what? Since then you've made real dough—"

"I think I'd like to talk to that old fellow, Jerry."

"Huh? Cripes, Tony, that's a couple of months ago. The town is full of pan-handlers—"

"You've got contacts. Ask around. There can't be too many hustlers in the business sporting a beard, eyes like cherry gumdrops, a nose like two fresh bullet holes in yesterday's corpse, and trailing an aroma of over-aged gorgonzola."

"Forget it, Tony. You're riding a hot streak. Don't louse it up."

"What's the matter, Jerry? Superstitious?"

"All I know is, leave it lie, Tony."

"Will you find the old boy—or shall I?"

"Okay, okay, Tony. But I ain't guaranteeing nothing . . ."

"That suits me, Jerry. I never asked life for a guarantee."

The telephone woke Tony Adair from a light doze. He blinked at the clock on the table. Eleven A.M.—about time Jerry was reporting in . . .

"Mr. Adair?" a brisk female voice stated. "You're an acquaintance of Mr. J. Pearl?"

"That's right."

"This is the supervisor at All Saints'. There has been an accident. I'm sorry to alarm you, but your name was among—

"I'm sorry, Mr. Adair. Perhaps if you'd come down . . . ?"

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

A plump woman in white looked up as Adair entered Jerry Pearl's room.

"Ah. . .are you . . . ?"

"That's right, Mrs. Umnnn. Leave me alone with the patient, please." Jerry Pearl's eyes fluttered as Adair swung a chair around and sat down beside the bed.

"What happened, Jerry?" he said softly.

"The . . . driver." Pearl's voice was a whisper through bandages. He moved his head from side to side, eyes closed. "His face . . ."

"Take it easy, Jerry . . ."

"Red eyes. Red eyes . . ."

A step sounded at the door. A portly man in broad grey lapels and rimless glasses blinked at Adair over pursed lips.

"How bad is he?" Adair asked.

"Who are you? You're not a physician . . . ?"

"My name's Adair—"

"Visiting hours are from two to four." The man stepped back, inviting Adair to precede him from the room.

Adair rose, assumed a grave expression. "I should think a hundred-thousand-dollar contribution to the hospital fund ought to buy a man an answer to a civil question."

"Eh?" The portly man whipped off his glasses, cleared his throat, smiled without gaiety, replaced the glasses.

"I understand a car hit him," Adair said. "Do you know the details?"

The portly man frowned. "There are some curious aspects to the case. Mr. .

. . . ah . . . Pearl was in shock. He was difficult to handle, hence the sedative. Quite frankly, he was raving. He seemed to feel he'd been—ha ha—run down intentionally."

"How do you know he was not?"

"What? Why, the car crashed and the driver was at least as badly injured as this . . . Mr. Pearl."

"You've got the driver here too?"

"Why, yes. Three twenty-three, if I'm not mistaken."

Heels clicked in the corridor. A starched nurse in a tight grey permanent appeared at the door, whispered in the portly man's inclined ear.

"Eh? What's that, Miss Perch?"

The nurse nodded grimly, lips pressed tight.

Adair followed along the corridor, around a corner, past a screen, into a small room with pale green walls and curtains that fluttered at an open window. The rumpled bed was empty. A faint miasmatic odor hung in the air.

"Where is he?"

"Why, doctor, I can't imagine . . . !"

"Get Leonardi up here immediately! And call Johnson in Admissions . . ."

Miss Perch hurried away. The portly man turned to Adair. "The woman's gone mad," he snapped. "My apologies, Mr. Adair. I assure you we operate a modern medical facility here, not a bedlam—"

"Some people are allergic to hospitals," Adair said. "He was not badly hurt, I take it?"

The man snorted. "Heaven knows. Miss Perch's report was incoherent."

"How do you mean?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss case histories—" He broke off, showed Adair the painted smile, let it fall. "Grateful though we are for the endowment—"

"Don't waste any diplomacy on me, Doc. I never gave the hospital a nickel. I just queried the price of a civil answer in this pill factory."

On the ground floor Adair encountered Miss Perch. "I was most interested in your observations on the driver," he said. "Very unusual. The doctor seemed rather skeptical . . ."

Miss Perch raised her eyebrows. "In twenty-eight years no one has ever before questioned my competence—"

Adair raised a hand. "I would not dream of doubting you, Miss Perch. If you said—what was it again . . . ?"

Miss Perch set her jaw. "Body temperature fifty-two," she said. "And no pulse."

Adair drove four blocks west to the precinct station house, asked for the patrolman who had been the first on the scene.

"The Chevy was making an illegal U-turn, for my money," the cop said. "I helped get the driver out. The ambulance guys took him and that's the last I seen of him. Wow, did that guy need a bath! Even the car stinks."

"Where's the car now?"

"In the lot. I figure it for a hot car. I—"

"I'd like to take a look at it."

"You the owner?"

"I'm a friend of the pedestrian that was hurt."

"Well . . ." The cop led Adair along a dark corridor, out into a cindered car park lined with rusty hulks, some with crumpled fenders and broken glass, one with a bullet-starred windshield. He pointed to a late-model sedan with a crushed grill and a flat-tired wheel twisted out of line. Adair went across, opened the door on the passenger's side. An odor of moldy wool and long-dead fish struck his nostrils. Behind him the cop snorted. "See what I mean?"

"What have you got on the driver?"

"Like I said: the ambulance guys took him to the hospital. They won't release him without we say so."

"Prints?"

"Beats me."

"Mind if I dig around?"

"Nix, buddy. If it's a hot car . . . you know how it is."

A glint of metal caught Adair's eye. He leaned into the car, casually scooped a tiny ring of keys from the floor, dropped it in his pocket. "You'd better start checking that hot car angle," he said. "The driver left the hospital via the fire escape about half an hour ago."

The lobby lights were on when Adair entered his hotel an hour later. The desk clerk called, "Oh, Mr. Adair. Will you call this number . . .?"

Adair dialed. A female voice said, "All Saints'. Oh, Mr. Adair? Doctor Pherson wants to speak to you . . ." There was a long pause, then a male voice cut in:

"Sir, I assume you're aware of the gravity of interfering in the routine of this institution?"

"What's the matter, Doc, still sore about that hundred grand I didn't give

you?"

"Your impertinence is intolerable, sir! I'm warning you, I'll have the law on you—"

"Give me a break, Doc. I'm already a three-time loser on library fines—"

"Kidnapping is a considerably more serious crime than book theft, you wiseacre."

"If you think I stole your smelly patient, you're barking up the wrong fireplug."

"I'm warning you: Mr. Pearl is in serious condition. I don't know what your game is, but the consequences—"

"What's that about Pearl?" Adair cut in sharply.

"The man has probable internal injuries; I suggest you tell me his whereabouts at once—"

"You mean Jerry Pearl has left the hospital?"

"You know as well as I that you spirited him away—for what fantastic reason, I fail to imagine—"

"The last I saw of Pearl he was flat on his back in room 305—supposedly too doped up to talk. Get the police, fast. I'll check back with you in an hour."

"Key, Mr. Adair?" the clerk offered as he hung up.

Adair shook his head. "I'll be back in an hour. If the hospital calls, take a message."

It was a ten-minute drive to the blighted area of second-hand stores and sagging warehouses between which Angelo's showed a narrow façade of crumbling brown paint. A grimy window was blanked off by a green cloth shade. Through a triangular tear in one corner a dim light glowed.

Adair tried the door, stepped into the sour-smelling gloom of a long room lit by a neon beer sign behind a zinc-topped bar. A thin man with an acne-scarred face under lifeless blond hair looked up, shifted a frayed toothpick in the corner of his mouth, made a quick motion with his hands out of sight.

"We ain't open," he said flatly. Adair nudged the door shut behind him.

"Pour four ounces of the best Scotch in the house into a clean water glass," he said. He glanced around the room. There was a narrow rear door with a new Yale lock, another door with a chipped white-enameled plaque lettered TOILET, and a dozen wire-legged tables still showing the rings of yesterday's beers. The bartender poured out a four-finger jolt.

"A buck."

Adair picked up the glass, sniffed it, put it back on the bar.

"I met a man here three months ago. Long black overcoat, Smith Brothers beard, hat down over his eyes . . ."

The bartender's eyes shifted left, right. . . "So?"

"Seen him lately?"

The bartender reached for a towel, began mopping at the bar. "You think I keep track of all the bums hustling drinks in the joint?"

"About five-three," Adair said. "Snub nose, enflamed eyes, and a breath you could saw up and nail to the wall."

"Get lost, Mac. Must be some other bar—"

"For ten you could try a plausible lie," Adair said softly. "What's got you scared, Slim?"

The bartender tilted his head toward the street door. "On your way, Jack," he growled.

"What about a man of forty-five, five-six, thin hair, wearing a black shirt, yellow vest, and a brown suit. He could have had a bandaged head."

"He could've had sideburns and a monocle. I ain't seen him."

"Thanks, pal. You've been a big help. Okay if I use the phone?"

"It's your dime, brother."

Adair dialed his hotel. "Any calls for me?"

"My, Mr. Adair, but we're popular tonight. I have a call for you on the line right now. If you'll hold on, I'll tie it in . . ."

There was a loud pop on the line. Then—

"Tony . . ." There was a sound of heavy breathing.

"Jerry! Where are you?"

"It's . . . a hotel. Around . . . the corner . . . from that joint, Angelo's . . ."

"What's going on, Jerry? What's the idea of jumping the hospital?"

"Tony . . . can you come . . . right away . . . ?"

"Sure. Stay put. Don't go anywhere."

"And, Tony . . . don't . . . bring anybody with you . . ."

A mercury vapor lamp on a tall pole shed a wan light on drab store fronts and empty pavement as Adair walked the fifty yards to the corner, and along to a sagging marquee edged with dead forty-watt bulbs. He pushed through a grease-blurred glass-paneled door into a dim, cluttered lobby full of the odor of failure and cheap cigars smoked long ago. A strip of worn red carpet led across scuffed brown linoleum to a black varnished counter with a battered goose-neck lamp and an edge-curved register anchored by a

length of knotted twine. A gnome-like ancient in armbands and a warped wicker eye-shade darted a look at Adair.

"Got a telephone here?" Adair asked.

The gnome tipped his head toward a shadowy corner. Adair went to the booth, glanced in at scribbled walls, came back to the desk.

"Friend of mine made a call from here—just a couple of minutes ago. Five-six, bandaged head, brown suit with no gravy stains. Which way did he go?"

The man pushed the book toward Adair. "Clean bed cost you four dollars."

"Not tonight, pop. How about my friend?"

The old man plucked at a flaccid, veined cheek with fingers like a wooden Indian's. "I don't remember so good these days." He flicked a crafty look at Adair. "I remember better for paying guests."

"I've got a room. Where did he go?"

"Ain't no law says you got to use the room . . ."

Adair took four singles from his wallet, folded them longways, tapped them on the counter-top.

"He was nervous," the gnome said, watching the bills. "Prob'ly up to something crooked. Walked up and down, looking at a strap-watch. Then the other feller come along, and they left. Didn't make no call from here. But that was no couple of minutes ago. More like an hour."

"What did this other fellow look like?"

"Looked like some kind of foreigner. Overcoat down to here, beard, mean-looking eyes. Would not have him in the hotel." He reached for the bills suddenly. Adair moved the money out of reach. The old man stooped, came up with a sawed-off ball bat.

"You gimme my money, you chiseler," he shrilled.

"Your ball-playing days are over, pop. Did the man with the beard have a gun?"

"I'll call a cop, your chiseler—"

"Skip it. We know all about you at Headquarters."

"Huh?" The bat disappeared. "You never showed me no buzzer," he said reproachfully. "Naw, I didn't see no gun."

"Thanks." Adair dropped a single on the counter. "And by the way, better make book from another phone from now on; you're running out of wall space."

* * *

A light rain was falling in the dark street as Adair pushed through the heavy doors. Fifty feet away, a round-shouldered figure in shabby black detached itself from the gloom of an alley mouth, shuffled forward, holding up an arthritically curled hand.

"Mr. Adair," a voice like burning straw hissed.

Adair halted, eyed the broad-brimmed hat, pulled low over the wizened face, red-edged eyes, an unkempt beard.

"Mr. Adair, for you I have advice—good advice, worth a small payment, perhaps . . ."

Adair looked both ways along the street; in the bleak light from the lamp at the far corner, nothing moved.

"Maybe I could use some advice at that," he said.

"Luck good these days, eh, Mr. Adair?" The voice was a thin rasp.

"I can't complain." Adair moved casually between the bearded man and the street. The other pivoted to face him.

"A sad thing, when a man's luck turns . . ."

"You know a lot about luck, do you?"

A wheeze that might have been laughter came from the direction of the beard.

"It is enough," the thin voice went on, "perhaps to cause a man to think."

"Think about what?"

The clawed hands spread in a wide gesture. "The wisdom of . . . complacency." The bearded man edged closer. Adair caught the reek from the moldy overcoat. "But let us step out of the wind and the harsh light." The hunched shoulders twisted to indicate the dark mouth of the alley. Adair looked past the other into the opening, black and narrow.

"Don't be afraid . . ." the hunched man said.

"You're right. I hate to do business in the street. After you."

The man backed past a rank of overflowing garbage cans; Adair followed. The scarred bricks underfoot gave back an oily glistening. Thirty feet from the street, the alley ended in a brick wall. Adair's guide turned, his face dark under the wide hat.

"Now, we can deal in peace."

"Start talking," Adair challenged.

"Do I detect a note of concern in your voice, Mr. Adair? You find the surroundings . . . disturbing?"

Adair shook his head. "I was raised in dark alleys. Now where's Jerry Pearl?"

"Don't trouble your head, Mr. Adair. Just take the old peddler's advice: drift with the tides and let fortune come your way untroubled by unwholesome curiosity."

"You've put your finger on it; my unwholesome curiosity is aroused by a couple of things—"

"Much as poor Mr. Jerry Pearl's was, I fear . . ."

"Keep talking."

"You didn't know? Alas, he . . . had an accident."

Adair stepped close, caught the smaller man by the coat, pushed him back against the wall. The hat fell off, rolled away.

"I don't know who you are—or what . . ." Something crunched under Adair's hand. He choked at the odor that came in waves. "You come apart easy," he grated. "Better get gabby while you're still in one filthy piece."

The matted head twisted; angry red eyes glared up at Adair. "I laugh at pain, foolish Tony Adair! Is not your skill with dice, with cards, your incomparable knack of selecting the fleetest quadruped enough? The gift is yours alone, among the faceless masses. Take it and go in peace."

Abruptly the small man twisted, lashed out with a thin arm. Adair saw a tiny glint of glass, felt a blow, a sharp sting in his forearm. He thrust the other back, struck at the wizened face, saw the overcoated figure go down. A small silvery cylinder flopped against the left sleeve of his jacket; he jerked the hypodermic free, pulled back his sleeve, sucked at the minute wound. A pervasive, bitter taste filled his mouth. He spat, sucked again, then pressed a thumb deep into the great vein of the upper arm, leaning against the wall as a wave of vertigo rocked the pavement underfoot. From a remote distance, an ache crept along his arm. Before him the dark-coated man scrambled to his feet.

"Adair, can you hear me?"

Adair grunted. A needle-like tingling had begun in the hand, starved of blood circulation.

"Be at peace, Tony Adair," the hissing voice went on. "The drug kills slowly, first robbing the limbs of will, while keening the senses. . ." The bearded, insect-like face waggled in mock commiseration. The baleful eyes were a glint of crimson from deep sockets.

"Wealth and good fortune would have been yours, Tony Adair, but, monkey-like, curiosity gnawed at you . . ."

Adair moved his left hand, as heavy as an anvil, inside his coat, felt the cold butt of the Mauser 6.35 automatic. With an effort he curled numbing fingers, brought the gun out and up, jammed it hard into the muffling layers of the other's garments, and squeezed the trigger. The shock kicked his arm back hard against the brick wall as the figure before him lurched, rictal mouth gaping pinkly, fell in a swirl of coat-skirts, kicking lean black-bristled ankles in the muck of the alley, then lay still. Adair dropped

the gun in his coat pocket, fumbled out a pen knife. The keen blade made a one-inch cut across the bluish puncture wound; crimson blood welled. He sucked hard, spat, massaging the forearm toward the wound.

He bound a handkerchief tightly above the cut, pushed away from the wall, and moved with painful slowness past the inert body toward the alley mouth.

The street glistened, empty in the night rain. Adair swayed, feeling the working of the drug. Over the pain of the numbed arm, he was aware of an unnatural sharpness of the senses: his ears caught the stealthy rustle of a rat, the tap and ping of raindrops in a thousand keys, the minute creak of masonry under the pressure of the wind. Far away, horns blew, machines whined and muttered, elevator doors clashed, music tootled and thumped. Nearer, there was the rustle of clothing, hoarse breathing. Adair slitted his eyes against the actinic glare of the street lamp's multi-colored corona, walked toward the marquee of the hotel. Ahead, door hinges screeched, shoe leather rasped on grit. Jerry Pearl stepped into view. His head jerked as he saw Adair.

"Tony boy . . ." The bandages were gone from his head. He came toward Adair, his feet clapping loud against the pavement. Adair felt the wet coat across his shoulders, hair damp against his forehead. He drew a breath and steadied himself against the wall.

"I ran into a little delay, Jerry," he said briskly. "What's up?"

"Ah . . . what kind of delay, Tony?"

"I met our friend, the numbers peddler . . ."

Jerry's eyes met Adair's—and slipped aside. "Oh, yeah? What'd he have to say, Tony?"

"I didn't pay too much attention. You're looking better, Jerry; a fast recovery."

"Ahhh, them medics; they doped me, Tony. I'm okay. Say, ah, where'd he go?"

"Who?"

"You know. The . . . uh . . . old man."

"He didn't go anywhere, Jerry. I shot him."

Jerry Pearl stared at Adair. Arcs as black as mascara marked the hollows under his eyes. "Dead . . . ?" His voice was a strained whisper.

Adair didn't answer. Pearl stepped past him, walked quickly to the alley, turned in. Adair followed, watched as Pearl knelt by the huddled figure. A matted wig had fallen away, revealing a flaccid, leathery crest. A tongue like a scarlet worm trailed from one corner of the puckered mouth.

"I guess maybe it's time for some law, Jerry," Adair said. "After the cops are through scratching their heads over this, we'll pass it along to the

medical boys to pickle in a bottle of alcohol."

Pearl looked up quickly. "No. No police, Tony. This had gone too far already—"

"Uh-huh. I guess I messed things up by getting here a few minutes early. It happened I was just around the corner when you phoned. Mr. Smelly here wasn't quite ready."

"You're wrong, Tony. It's not what you think—"

"How do you know what I think, Jerry? And your Bronx dialect has slipped. Maybe you'd better tell me what it's all about."

"Tony, what do you mean . . . ?"

"You were here an hour ago casing the set-up with our pal. And I don't remember telling you which garbage can he was back of—but you went to it like a rat to cheese."

Pearl rose. "I was careless," he said slowly. "I'm sorry, Tony—but you shouldn't have killed him." He looked at Adair. "You may have killed your luck."

"Luck wouldn't interest a dead man."

"What do you mean? He only meant to talk to you—frighten you—"

"I guess he forgot to tell you; there was a change in plan."

"I see . . ." Pearl straightened his back. "I see how it must look to you, Tony—"

"Yeah. Now let's go find that copper."

"Tony . . . there are some things I have to tell you now. It would be better for you if I did not, but I can hardly expect you to trust me after . . . this."

Adair said nothing; Pearl shook his head impatiently.

"You're a stubborn fool, Adair. You have the gift of wealth in your hands; why not forget what's happened here, and just go on winning at cards?"

"Maybe I'm tired of cards, Jerry. And maybe I'm tired of being the counter in somebody else's game."

The two men stood toe to toe. "You have no conception of what you're meddling in, Tony."

"Why don't you explain it to me, Jerry?"

Pearl sighed. "Tony, I have to admire you; you're a fighter. But the forces that oppose you are—unconquerable."

"Meaning . . . you, Jerry?"

Pearl shook his head. "I've neither opposed nor helped you, Tony. I'm an

observer—nothing more."

"What about this?" Adair jerked a thumb toward the corpse. "What is it? and why?"

"Merely a tool: a slave of a powerful master."

"Why the interest in me?"

"You were a thread in the pattern; someone else would have served as well."

"Maybe better; I don't take kindly to serving."

"You would have lost nothing, Tony. It was in the interest of the grand design that you prosper."

"What does this grand design have to do with brownies with B.O. peddling Bolita and handing out free advice in dark alleys?"

Pearl's face tightened. "I've told you too much already, too much for your good as well as mine."

"But not quite enough to soothe my curiosity, Jerry. Where does this leather-upholstered freak come from? And why should my luck at the track interest anyone outside of me and the Internal Revenue boys?"

"You wouldn't understand, Tony. As for the Niss, it's a native of . . . a very distant place."

"It must have some kind of quarters—probably near here, I'd say. Let's take a look at them."

Pearl considered. "If I show you the Niss headquarters, will you take it as an indication that I'm . . . not working against you?"

"I don't know. Try me."

"I don't want you to believe I was involved in a plan to kill you, Tony. I'd like you to accept the fact that I'm at least neutral. But for your own sake, I wish you'd walk away and put what you've seen out of your mind."

"Not a chance, Jerry. I'd just sit around and brood."

"Come along, then. But you won't like what you see."

Pearl led the way past dusty store fronts to a blind-eyed godown, rattled a chained hasp, stepped into darkness and the smell of moldy burlap. Adair followed, glanced around at sagging board shelving, drifted litter, a scurry of bright-eyed rats. Pearl moved suddenly. Adair pivoted, facing him. Pearl laughed softly. "Just checking your vision, Tony. Not bad, for a . . . city man."

"Just consider me one of the night people, Jerry. And don't bother testing my nerves; just lead the way."

Pearl crossed the rubbish-strewn room to a metal-covered fire door, threw a

bolt, pushed the door open. He stepped through, moved his hands over the wall near the door; a section of the partition folded back. Through the narrow opening, Adair saw a red-lit passage. Pearl gestured him in. Adair stood fast.

"After you, Jerry." Pearl smiled sourly and stepped through. At once he took four quick strides, reached out and passed a hand over a metal plate set in the wall. The dusky crimson glow faded. Adair watched as Pearl's dimly glowing figure flattened itself against the wall. He listened to the other's breath sigh out, once, then stop.

Half a minute passed. Adair stood quietly, waiting. Pearl moved from the wall, stepped carefully across to the opposite side. The rustle of cloth against skin, the creak of muscles, the rasp of feet against concrete were loud to Adair's ears. Pearl's hands scraped as he moved them over the wall. Adair glanced along the rough-plastered surface, saw a small button set in a round plastic plate. He stepped forward quietly, pressed the button. A panel like the first folded back with a clatter. Pearl froze.

"Was that what you were looking for?" Adair asked.

Pearl took out a lighter, thumbed it aflame. He stared at Adair.

"I see you've made a fool of me, Tony. How the devil you can see here is beyond me . . ."

"I'm full of little surprises, Jerry. Now let's make another try at finding that Niss headquarters."

"Tony—you're not . . . another observer . . . ?"

"Just a local boy, trying to get along."

"Listen to me, Tony. This is no place for you. You were always decent to me. I don't want to see you hurt—"

"You didn't intend to lead me anywhere, did you, Jerry? This was just a gag to get me in off the street and ditch me."

"That's right. For your own good, Tony."

"Nice try. Now let's cut out the kidding and get down to business. Lead on, Jerry."

"Tony, you're meddling with forces that can destroy you as effortlessly as you'd swat a fly."

"You seem safe enough, Jerry. What's your secret?"

"Try to understand, Tony. I am the agent of a mighty power—an empire of a vastness inconceivable to you. And even I have to move with the utmost care." As Pearl spoke, his hand moved behind his back; Adair heard the rustle of fingers on the rough wall, then the clatter of static as an electric circuit closed. Far off, a bell shrilled supersonically.

"Somehow your explanation doesn't seem to simplify matters, Jerry," Adair

said.

"The less you know, the safer you'll be, Tony," Pearl said smoothly. Over the background sighing of moving air, the crackle as the surrounding walls flexed under load, Adair picked out the vibration of distant footfalls.

"Why did he run you down, Jerry? Didn't you tell him you're neutral?"

"A little disagreement. I was wrong. I should have listened."

* * *

From beyond the board partition at his side, Adair caught the tiny whisper of breathing, the stealthy movement of feet. He scanned the wall, made out the hairline rim of a hinged panel. He moved forward a step, waiting . . .

The section of wall snapped aside. Through the opening a spider-lean figure in tight-fitting black leaped with a hiss, crouched, poised, rounded shoulders hunched, long arms spread. For an instant, Adair looked into pupilless red eyes in a puckered face; then the Niss sprang, hands clawed—

Adair's shot was a vivid stab of flame across the gloom, a roar in the closed tunnel. He saw a mouth like a wound gape, the flick of a crimson tongue past needle-like white teeth. Then the creature was down, bucking scorpion legs in the dust of the floor.

"It looks like Mr. Friendly was twins," he said. "Any more in the family?"

"You murderous fool!" Pearl burst out. "You'll have the horde down on us . . ."

"We'll surprise them and meet them halfway."

"That wouldn't be convenient for me." Pearl moved to step past Adair. Adair blocked his path.

"Don't attempt force with me." Jerry Pearl stared up at Adair. "Remember the car that ran me down? If you'd examine the wreck, you'd find the left front wheel nearly torn off. I did that with my hands as the wheels passed over my chest."

"I wondered about the car crashing. Funny, that explanation never occurred to me." Adair brought the gun up to cover Jerry Pearl's chest. Pearl shook his head impatiently.

"That won't help you, Tony. Don't you understand yet?"

"Sure, I understand, Jerry. You're no more human than—that thing is."

"Then stand aside."

"These steel-jacketed slugs pack a wallop. Want to bet I can't poke a hole through whatever it is you're made of?"

"I'm trying to protect you, Tony—to keep you out of this. My reflexes are twice as fast as yours. I could knock the gun from your hand before you

could pull the trigger."

"Want to gamble on it, Jerry?" Adair said softly.

Pearl half-smiled. "I doubt that you'd have the cold-blooded nerve to shoot me—"

He spun, fell to his knees as the shot slammed in the narrow way. Dazedly Pearl shook his head, climbed to his feet, holding his arm close to his side. He looked at Adair warily, then laughed shortly.

"You see how easy it is to subvert a being? The threat of pain and death—and I do your bidding. Come, then. I'll lead you to the Niss. But I wish you'd turn back."

"It's too late to turn back now, Jerry. I was dealt into this game; I'll play my hand out."

They were in a low, earth-floored tunnel, walled with time-stained masonry, shored with ancient timbers that glowed with a dim greenish light. The clay underfoot was thickly patterned with strangely narrow footprints with prominent heels. A rhythmic thumping sounded monotonously at the threshold of audibility. A draft of icy air carried a faint, foul odor.

"We're two hundred feet under the streets now," Jerry Pearl said. "We've been lucky—but we won't get much farther without blundering into a party of Niss."

"Maybe I can take one alive. He might even part with some information if I find the right place to squeeze."

"You're talking like a madman. You'll be lucky to get out of here alive. The main assembly area is just ahead. Move quietly now . . ."

Adair followed, listening to the rising level of sound. The clay underfoot gave way to a glossy dark paving, beaded with moisture. The walls here were narrow, high, meeting in an arch ten feet overhead. The passage curved; ahead, a ruddy glow shone. Pearl halted. Adair moved up beside him.

"There they are," Pearl whispered softly.

It was a domed chamber, ribbed with lime-encrusted buttresses, floored with a glossy slime of clay, lit by spheres of blackish-red light atop ornate stands, divided by a murmuring streamlet of dark liquid and pervaded by a stench of raw sewage. From the dark side tunnel Adair and Jerry Pearl watched a dozen or more black-uniformed Niss, devoid of false hair, some with long knives strapped to their sides, who prowled the cave restlessly or stood in nervous groups, hissing among themselves.

"This is the club house, eh?" Adair breathed. "A charming air of informality and bad drains."

"I think you can see that it would hardly reward you to charge in, gun blazing. They're as vicious as ferrets."

"You might find it expedient to pitch in on my side, Jerry—under the circumstances."

"I've spent a great deal of time building my position here; I'm hardly likely to throw it away now."

"They don't know the truth about you, eh, Jerry? Your disguise has them fooled—just like it did me."

"They accept me as a Terrestrial. Otherwise they'd have known better than to try to eliminate me with feeble methods."

"They almost succeeded. You were out cold when they hauled you into the hospital."

"Yes—I was stunned—but don't let it give you false ideas."

"Let's both avoid false ideas."

"Yes. Underestimating you could be dangerous—for both of us. Now come away—before we're caught here . . ."

"I think I'd like to stick around, Jerry. One of them might just wander over this way. They're as nervous as a roomful of expectant fathers."

"At least withdraw to a better position," Pearl urged. "There's a small alcove a few yards back."

Pearl moved back, indicated a side chamber eight feet square, with closed doors set in its three walls. "In here . . ."

Adair stepped in, noting a faint line of discontinuity across the floor and up the walls. At his side, Pearl moved quickly; Adair whirled—

A grill of one-inch bars slammed down an inch from his foot; beyond the barrier, Pearl dived for the cover of the corridor. Adair fired from the hip, spattered masonry chips beside Pearl's hand.

"Next one's in, Jerry!"

Pearl froze, crouched two feet from safety. "Don't shoot again, Tony! Wait until you've heard me . . .!"

"I've got five left in the clip. Better talk fast before the neighbors get here . . ."

"No. The Niss are totally deaf in our sound range without their hearing aids." Pearl straightened, eyes on the gun. "I would have come back and released you, Tony. After—"

"Do it now."

"No. You'll have to believe me, Tony. If you shoot me, you're trapped permanently. There is something I have to do—the culmination of years of work. Then I'll return for you."

"You can do better than that, Jerry."

"You asked what it was the Niss and I fell out over. It was you, Tony. They planned to kill you for your curiosity. I argued. They turned on me. I was neutral, Tony—but not any more!"

"So you're launching a vendetta against the Niss—"

"The Niss are nothing. Once they were a power in the Galaxy; now—they're slaves—as your people will be slaves—and mine as well, in the end."

"Oh? Who's our new owner going to be?"

"A creature who manipulates the lesser breeds as man manipulates fruit-flies. That's what you're challenging, Tony—not the Niss. But no living being can stand against the Norn."

"I don't believe in bogey-men. Nobody's that tough."

"Tough? Oh, no; the Norn's no tougher physically than many another species. It can't wreak destruction even as well as you Men, with the raw violence of your H-bomb. Its power is a subtler one—against which there can be no defense."

"Keep talking—and don't make the mistake of thinking I'm too spellbound to shoot."

"The Norn's power is the power over the human soul. It offers no punishment—only reward: wealth, power, the woman of your dreams—subject only to . . . the Norn."

"The woman of my dreams wouldn't be for sale, Jerry."

"Tony, the time is running out; minutes could make the difference between abject slavery and a . . . more limited form of submission—for my race, and yours too. Let the explanations wait."

"Not a chance, Jerry. Show your cards or fold."

"What kind of man are you?" Pearl stared with agonized eyes at the gun. "After so much—to be balked by a puny human and his primitive weapon . . ."

"A Neanderthal with a stone axe could put up a pretty potent argument too, Jerry. Give."

Pearl's shoulders slumped. "Very well. Listen to me, Tony. I'll try to make you understand. Then I'm going. You may shoot if you wish; if I wait any longer everything's lost anyway."

"The Norn lives in a different world of awareness than you or I—or the Niss. It perceives the universe as a tangled skein of lines of living force. Past, future—these are only parts of a pattern; a confused fabric of the potential and the actual."

"The Norn has the power to manipulate these strands; it lies in its den—like your spiders in their webs—and rearranges the pattern to suit its needs. By human standards, it has near-moronic intelligence. Its drives are

simple: food and a nesting place. But it eats, Tony. It eats enormously—and burgeons.

"Your world was chosen as a nesting place long ago. The Norn came here as a miniscule spore; it drifted, altering the microscopic lives around it, drawing the unwary amoeba within reach. It grew—and its radius of effectiveness grew. It led beetles and mice into its den, tempting them with food and ripe females. The time came when it needed better concealment, more elaborate arrangements. It summoned a slave race—the Niss—as its attendants. Now it worked on a larger scale, diverting a workman from his duties, while the Niss slaves moved about its business; or delaying a watchman for the moments needed to allow necessary supplies to be pilfered."

"How many of these Norns are there?"

"Only one; the presence of another Norn disrupts the pattern. Now, it's entering the second phase of its life cycle. It's growing rapidly, and requires more nourishment than can be supplied by a casual herding of rat packs or stray dogs or derelicts. A massive logistical program will be necessary—soon. This will require measures that can no longer be concealed. Human servants will be recruited—in every walk of life. Nourishing the Norn will become the chief business of the planet—until the day when the planetary resources can no longer support it. Then it will spore. Its seed will be flung into space—and new worlds will be colonized from the husk of the old."

"I see. Help wanted, male, to loot planet—"

"It will take a while, Tony, the looting. Perhaps a thousand years. And the Norn can offer its servants the fulfillment of every dream of avarice that's haunted man since he crept down from the treetops."

"Why was I collecting goodies? I hadn't signed a contract."

"The Norn works blindly; it was in its interest that you prosper—for reasons buried in the pattern."

"If its workings are blind, how does it manage the payoff?"

"Picture the Norn mind, suspended in a net of awareness, surrounded by the filaments of the fabric. Its only aim is a cozy nest. Here's a line that threatens its comfort: Snap it short, or shunt it away. Here's a line that means food, security; weave that thread close and strong. The Norn smoothes away the irritation—and the slave gains its dearest wish; it becomes your servant forever."

"My heart desires a slice of this Norn."

Pearl's laugh was a humorless bark. "Could you cut that slice—knowing you were turning your back on all the treasures of the world—for yourself, and your descendants, for a thousand years?"

"Where is the Norn's nest?"

"I've said all I'm going to say, Tony. I'm going now—and hope I'm not too

late. Shoot if you must—and you'll rot here—unless the Niss find you first." He turned and walked away.

Adair felt over his jacket pockets for the key ring he had palmed from the floor of the car that had run down Jerry Pearl. The doors facing him on three sides were featureless, tight-set in the plain wall. Half a minute's search turned up a tiny hole at the edge of each. Adair tried the center door; with the third key the lock snicked open on a narrow corridor like the one he and Pearl had followed, empty and dark to normal eyes. Adair stepped out, followed the passage as it meandered, then turned abruptly to open into the Niss common-room. He watched, narrow-eyed, as the lean uniformed Niss paced and muttered: What were they waiting for . . . ?

Adair's ears caught a sharp sound from the far side of the chamber. The Niss ignored it. In the gloom of a dark corner, a figure stirred. It was Pearl, unnoticed in the shadows, leaning forward over something held in his hands. He stooped, working quickly, then stood, faded back out of sight. A harsh hissing cut across the background sounds. Adair sniffed, caught a faint hint of a half-familiar odor . . .

A Niss near the corner where Pearl had appeared tottered suddenly, fell, kicking its legs convulsively. Nearby, others turned to gape. One of them raised its knife, dropped it, and fell backwards; another took two drunken steps and pitched on its face. A hiss of alarm spread across the room. Those Niss who had surged forward toward the fallen ones collapsed, twitching. Others sprang toward dark exits, hammered vainly on closed doors—and reeled, fell, and lay still.

Adair jumped back, sprinted for the cage he had escaped, snorting the reek of cyanide from his sensitized nostrils. He slammed the door, tried keys, swung the left-hand door wide, and moved off quickly along the tunnel, visible to him by the minute glow from the natural infra-phosphorescence of the walls. The passage branched; Adair took the right turning, working his way toward Jerry Pearl's last position. There were more branches, an intersection with a wider corridor. Adair stopped, listened; there was no sound other than the steady rustle of the air and the muffled, rhythmic thumping. He went on, reviewing in his mind the turnings of the passage. He was, he estimated, very close to the point where Jerry Pearl had tossed his canister in among the Niss. Ahead, a hairline marked a closed door. The odor of cyanide was sharp in the air.

Fifty feet farther, an interesting tunnel led sharply down. Adair studied the wet clay of the floor; in the maze of footprints, Pearl's were not discernible. He turned, started down the descending way.

It dropped in a sharp spiral, debouched into a circular room a hundred feet across. Far above, sounds whispered back from a vaulted ceiling festooned with stalagmites, from the tips of which water drops fell in a restless tattoo. A water-filled pit ten yards wide filled the center of the room. Adair took a step, his feet sinking into soft clay; then he froze. The black surface of the pool stirred; liquid mud streamed back from a great bloated form that rose up like a surfacing corpse, with a hissing sigh of released air. Two flaccid, boneless arms lay coiled like dead-white cobras across the swollen slope of a body like black jelly. Two other limbs, multi-jointed, black and

shiny like the chitinous tail of a king crab, lay folded, claws parted. One twitched, moved out, groped among heaped carcasses of small animals at the edge of the pool, popped a dainty into a loose-lipped mouth bisecting an otherwise featureless head the size of a washtub.

Abruptly, the great body rippled, heaved its bulk around to face Adair. One of the boneless arms moved out, slapped mud, sent small bones flying. Then:

"Come closer, Tony Adair," called a voice like footsteps in deep mud. "Tell me of your dreams . . ."

In the muck rimming the oily pool, bristly rats the size of rabbits played among the heaped debris of the Norn's feeding, indifferent to the blind arms that groped among them.

"Come closer, Tony Adair," the Norn's voice rumbled. "Have no fear. You are more pleasing than the Niss-things: ugly creatures, and evil-smelling . . ."

Gun in hand, Adair studied the sheer walls that rose around him; the shadowy recesses of the chamber were almost totally dark, even to his drug-sharpened vision. High up among the arches of the vaulted ceiling, he caught a hint of furtive movement. Nearer at hand, there was a quick rasp of horny joints; Adair stepped back; with a snap of pincers, a chitinous limb spattered mud at his feet.

"What is your fancy?" the heavy voice droned as though unaware of the murderous blow. "The crown of a kingdom? Power of life and death . . .?"

"Maybe I've already got it . . ." Adair raised his voice. "Come down and join the party, Jerry."

The Norn stirred in its mud-bath. The snake-like arms gathered in tidbits, feeding the great mouth. Water drops pattered in an incessant restless rain. Adair raised the gun, took aim, fired. Muck spattered beside the bulbous, eyeless head. The Norn gobbled, waving a horny arm.

"The next one will poke an eye in that head, Jerry," Adair called. "You've got sixty seconds to make it down here; and I think I ought to tell you: this gun is kind of special. I reworked the action myself. If I release the trigger, it fires—and at this range, I can hardly miss."

"You're lying . . ." Pearl's voice echoed from above.

"Want to bet, Jerry?" Adair laughed softly. "No, you can't risk it, can you? Now get a move on."

Pearl moved into view on a platform twenty feet above.

"I'll summon the Niss," he said hoarsely. "If you've harmed the Norn, they'll tear you to living shreds."

"A good thought, Jerry—but I was watching from the wings when you gassed them all."

Pearl groaned. "Hold your fire, for God's sake, Tony; I'm coming down."

Standing before Adair, Pearl took an elaborate, long-barreled weapon from his pocket, tossed it aside.

"All right, Tony, you hold the initiative. But listen to me: I was sent here to find the Norn's weakness. It has none. There's a saying: The Universe was created for the pleasure of the Norn. I understand that now. It satisfies its enormous greed by feeding the lesser greeds of others. I wanted to make myself indispensable—to earn for my race the role of useful servants. It would have been better than death—"

"Would it?"

"You haven't seen a world in the last phases of the Norn lifecycle: the remaining populace, toiling like madmen to feed the immense maw that sprawls over continents, sea-bottoms, fills every cave and crevice. Then the final frenzy as the Norn, maddened by hunger, devours its slaves, then in convulsions that rive continents, spores—"

"And you wanted to MC the show, eh? What could it pay you that would make it worthwhile?"

"While I lived, every whim satisfied, every impulse indulged. Fame, glory, happiness, riches—for a thousand years. And if I could resist—then someone else would serve in my place. There's no escape, once the Norn chooses a nest-world."

"I could end that right now—with one bullet. It looks soft enough."

Pearl choked. "Throw the gun away, you fool! You don't know what you're saying. We can reach some agreement—" He moved toward Adair.

"Don't try any slick moves, Jerry. I'm full of some swell stuff the Niss slipped into my arm. I can practically hear your brains working."

"Tony . . ." Pearl's voice was shaken. "I understand now. You've been injected with Mus. No wonder you can see in the dark. You're dying, Tony; did you know that? But of course you do. That's why you're willing to threaten the Norn."

"Tony Adair," the Norn burbled. "I offer you a world—the wealth of all its mines, its fairest shes as slaves—and more: I pledge you life eternal . . ."

Pearl half sobbed, half laughed. "Life eternal—to a man who'll be dead in half an hour." He shook himself. "The only creature in the Universe who could be immune to the Norn's bribe—and I brought you here myself."

"Life eternal," Adair said. "I have to admit, that's quite an offer. If I wasn't already a dead man—could it do it?"

Pearl stared at Adair. "It can do anything, Tony—anything that serves its own survival."

"Yes, quite an offer," Adair repeated. "But still a little too stingy."

"What do you mean, Tony? What do you want?"

"I want it all . . ."

I don't understand, Tony." Sweat glistened on Pearl's face. "You blundered into this—"

"Your ideas about the natives die slow, don't they, Jerry? All right, we've wasted enough time. Let's get moving. Go back into the room where you left the Niss breathing cyanide. Bring me one of their knives."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll show you when you get back."

Adair waited, holding the gun. The Norn fed restlessly, muttering of gold and emeralds. Pearl returned carrying a two foot weighted blade.

"The part that's talking does not even know what the rest is doing, does it, Jerry?" Adair asked.

"It's almost mindless. It picks concepts from the minds around it and mouths them like a parrot—whatever it senses will please. It's blind, lying in its web of Psi, plucking at the strands of the fabric that only it can see—"

"Deaf, too. Move in closer, Jerry. Just out of reach of the arms."

"Tony—I have to know what you're planning."

"You say you have fast reflexes, Jerry. I want you to entice it to strike. When it does—cut off its arm."

"Are you mad—"

"Do as I say, or I'll put a bullet through the head."

"Wait, Tony. I . . . I'll do as you say . . ." Pearl edged closer to the multi-ton creature sunk in its wallow. With a sudden surge, a white arm lashed out—and in a motion too quick to follow, Pearl whipped the machete down—

With a bellow, the Norn coiled back the wounded member, churning the pool to a brown froth—and a two-foot section of severed tentacle lay twitching in the muck.

"Rake it over here," Adair snapped. With the knife, Pearl dragged the pale flesh back. It writhed, flopped, then began to contract on itself. The raw, yellowish flesh of the cut end puckered, drew in.

"It acts as though it were alive—"

In the pool, the violent activity ceased abruptly. The armored members went slack, sprawled out, claws lax. The boneless arms sagged. The wide mouth gaped, regurgitated a gallon or two of lumpy fluid. Then the head, with a sigh like gas escaping from a swamp, sank from sight, lifeless limbs trailing.

"It's . . . dead." Pearl turned on Adair, a wild look in his eyes.

"But this isn't." Adair nodded toward the severed tentacle tip. It had formed itself into a rough sphere now. A lump grew on the upper surface; four buds bulged lower down on the ten-inch globe of brownish jelly. Two buds burst and thin grey crab-legs poked forth. The other buds elongated, formed tiny pink fingers that coiled and probed the air. A slit formed in the dorsal bulge, opened.

"I will give you riches, Tony Adair," a tiny voice piped. "I will make you happy . . ."

"It was a guess," Adair said. "You told me how it propagated parthenogenetically when the parent dies. You also said there could be only one Norn to a world. Since nature favors the young at the expense of the old, it figured."

"Do you realize what this means, Tony? We can control the Norn, keep its growth within bounds—"

"We'll install it in a fancy private sewer with the kind of atmosphere it craves, and feed it plenty of raw meat. All it wants is food and a nest that smells like home. That's where it has it all over us, with our complicated desires. And it will attend to our needs—"

"Tony—have you forgotten—"

"What did you call that stuff? Mus? Don't let it bother you, Jerry. I bled most of it out of my system; I just got enough to put a fine edge on my night vision."

There was a pause. "Why don't you shoot me now, Tony? How do you know I won't wait my chance to kill you and take it all?"

"You need me, Jerry. I could kill the Norn if I had to; you couldn't. Kill me, and in the next breath you'll be back on your knees, begging it for favors. You haven't got what it takes to run the bluff."

There was a harsh laugh from Pearl. "You're right. You're willing to risk it all—to gain it all. And I'm not."

"There's another reason, too, Jerry. I need you. I've got a yen to see this galaxy you keep talking about; you've got the contacts . . ."

"Yes, you'll have the stars, Tony," said the being who had been Jerry Pearl. "The Norn made one fatal error. It tackled a race greedier than its own."