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Alpha Yes, Terra No! by Emil Petaja

PART ONE THE SEARCH

I

Francisco is a great town for tourists and this tourist came a long way. He arrived about ten one brisk November night, without baggage, without notice. First there was only the silent fog and the low wind mourning through the bulky pier sheds along the *Embarkadero*. Then he was there. He looked out at the dark befogged waters, listened to tugboat hoots and a symphony of foghorns from Hunter's Point to the Farallons, smelled the salt chemical ocean smells, felt the windy wetness on the bare parts of his body. The fog, the waters gurgling in the piles below, the iodine tang, even the sharp wind—none of this was unpleasant to him.

It was incredible to be standing here like this. He could hardly believe he'd made it. A rustling and crunch of un-seen boots at the entrance to the large building with the tower clock on it reminded him with a thrill who he was— where he was, and that it wasn't prudent to stand here in the fog, gawking tourist-like. He'd better change, quickly. They must not see him as he was. The mission that had brought him here, in defiance of the High Tribunal itself, was too important for him to mess it up now. He had work to do.

He darted back into dark shadows for a final breath before the initial plunge into the life-stream of this sadistic, inimical world. At this moment he experienced a sudden clutch of cold fear. 'They were so *primitive*.

He must be careful. Nobody must suspect.

He decided on an amorphous all-purpose body just for now, setting a hypnotic aura to work in his immediate vicinity. Dodging a hurtling taxi and an empty Number 8 bus, he crossed the *Embarkadero* under the shadow of the overhead freeway and started down Market Street under the diffuse lemon glow of the street lamps. Like a chameleon, his appearance would be that which was expected in the milieu; soon he would have to take on a specific personality, for individual contact. Meanwhile, he would feel his way. Very carefully.

"Got a butt, buddy?"

The shadow that dragged out of a doorway wore a long faded topcoat against the November chill; its face was stub-bled and unwashed, its eyes rheumy. His first human.

"No. I'm sorry. I don't—"

His mind probed the floater's. Through a mist of dis-consolance and cheap wine he saw himself as the bum saw him: just what he expected to see in the nighttime waterfront—another bum. A bum who might have a cigarette to spare. You never missed the chance for a free butt, a dime, or a slug from a cheap bottle of port.

The tourist shrugged and moved away, earmarking the cigarette and the money concepts. It was easy to create illusion in a low intelligence creature, but to materialize concrete objects must come later. They had to come from somewhere to be actual. These were problems to be met. Moving away he was aware of a mechanical "Son-of-a-bitch!" flung after him. This world was an unkind place to this human; a cigarette would have helped.

It was a jolt, this first encounter.

Maybe Morko and the High Tribunal were right.

Next?

He shuffled his feet along, taking his cue from the floater, becoming one himself. Further down the long street, where the lights brightened, he would change again.

By the time he had reached Third Street he had learned a lot from his probing. There weren't many passersby; he became time-aware from their minds and from the big clock on the Ferry Building which boomed eleven times. Two drunk merchant marines on their way to sex, a whistling sailor headed for the Oakland Terminal and home leave, a painted woman sidling up to him and then flouncing off angrily when she saw his rags and dirty face.

Before turning to slouch down Third Street he reached his alien hand through a cigar store window and nipped out a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches from the neat multiple stacks. He must begin to talk to them, and these strange little tubes of narcotic engendered conversation. Probing their minds was not enough; he must share and *be*. His time was brief, his mission vital. And any moment the High Tribunal would be on his tail.

Under the red glow of a cross made out of lights and a sign reading *Crusade of Life Mission* he stopped and lit up a cigarette as he had seen the sailor do. As he dragged in the smoke and savored the idea of it, his glance moved across the dusty store-front window. In the window, instead of clothing or gadgets to buy, was a flyspecked sign, crudely hand-printed. *Inspirational talks nightly, it said. Free soup. Jesus Welcomes You.* It was signed, *Rev. Car-michael Jones.*

"Spare one of those, friend?"

Another request for a tube of narcotic, as he'd foreseen. The tourist formed a thin smile and passed the pack to grubby little hands. His vacuum glance revealed a small, bald, twitchy, hungry little creature. His fingers shook so that he had to be helped with a light; he sucked in eager gulps.

"Going in, friend?" he asked, jerking a thumb at the mission sign.

"What—what do they give you?"

"Soup. Mostly spuds, but not bad. Coffee's lousy, but it goes good on a night like this."

"The inspirational talks?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. They blab at you. You know. God, and all that crap. But it's warm in there. I doze off and get a few winks of sleep. The benches aren't too bad. Sing a couple songs about how nice it's going to be when you're dead."

The tourist nodded; a thrill cut through him at learning so much about Terran left-handed philosophies, a thrill tinged with defeat. Was there a chance?

"Preacher Jones ain't a bad guy," the panhandler went on conversationally. "He gave me four-bits one night. I used the telegram-home bit. I guess he caught on, but he gave it to me with some jazz about the Messiah coming soon. Any day, he keeps saying. The times is ripe for it. The sucker *believes* all that con!"

Two drifters slunk past them into the mission. The tourist caught a glimpse of a long slot of a room with wooden benches and a narrow aisle on one side. Toward the front was a plywood lectern and behind it a chrome tripod with a purple sateen banner on it fringed with gold braid. Fur-ther back was the kitchen door, glowing with warmth, a pungent onion smell of steaming soup drifting out from it.

"Another butt before we go in?" The drifter's cringe was purely professional now, his nicotine fit passed.

"Keep them." The tourist's hand closed on the doorknob.

"Hey, my name's Corky," the little man said. "How about if we stick together? I know where we can get a fifth of muscatel for only—"

The tourist had drained this miserably vacant mind of all interest, so as he took a seat near the rear*of the long low room he decided he must shake him loose as quickly as possible. Corky moved in close to him, buddy-like. The tourist ignored the implication and focused his attention on the other bits of humanity scattered about. They were disappointing; like Corky they were derelicts of a negative pattern.

A small pump organ in the front corner wheezed out a dolorous hymn; the woman playing it was gaunt, raw-boned, leper-pale; her hair was like strings of straw, her dark dress a bent stovepipe. A spare white-haired

man with a long saturnine face leaned across the lectern with closed eyes, blue-veined fingers on his forehead *a la Booth*.

The tourist's probe made him sit up with new interest. This was/ a man of education, a mixed-up but thinking man. He caught a muddling race of images, wild, warped, cut by brilliant flashes.

In a few moments Reverend Carmichael Jones dropped his pose and signaled his wife to stop her organ's wheezing. He stepped forward. There was magnetism in his sunken gray eyes, in the way he jerked up his bony arm.

"Friends." His voice was deep, rich with warm sincerity. "We live in a fantastic age. Day by day the powers who rule this world keep sending more men out into Space. More men, further and further out. The moon was just a taste. Then Mars and Venus and the rest. And what have they found, friends? Only primitive animals on Venus and Ganymede. True, on Mars they found the moldering remains of what was once a much greater civilization than ours. A civilization, my friends, which once flourished like the green bay tree the Bible tells us about, thrived like Sodom and Gomorrah. Then it vanished forever, faded forever into oblivion. And what brought about this terrible disaster? *Sin!* Sin and corruption!"

He wagged his head solemnly.

"Amen," somebody put in mechanically.

"But—I Has mankind learned a lesson from these poor dead Mars-folks! No, my friends. A thousand times no! They think not on the awe and mystery of the universe—they only push further out in their greed. We send men out to burrow like moles into the craters of the moon; we built the monstrous Hell-Bubble city of Port Mars, and that isn't enough! No, they want more, more, more! *Take*. Take—and give nothing. Never for one moment do they stop to consider spiritual meanings in their great grab for space. Next they will push out to grab the stars themselves!"

He glared wrathfully at his collection of vagrants, then heaved out a quivering sigh.

"Here in this warm little room we simple folks don't concern ourselves with what *they* are doing, with their giant spaceships. We are concerned rightly with the salvation of our own immortal souls. We know

Armageddon is close at hand. Any day or any night the new Messiah will appear among us. Yes, my friends! Any night! We may not recognize him at first; he may come dressed in humble garments and in the shape and substance of the most insignificant—"

He stopped cold. His eyes had roved and searched the crowd while he was talking, calculated to single out and inspire each one of his listeners personally. He stopped short on the tourist.

The tourist drew in his superhuman faculties a split second too late. The preacher's words had so fascinated him he forgot to keep up his guard. With a burst of terror he realized that the preacher had glimpsed something in him. Reverend Carmichael Jones was an hysteric, a frantic, *and a random telepath!*

His wife, at the organ, was in the habit of closing her ears to her husband's polemic bursts; now, when he stopped talking she started playing. Under her skinny fingers the windy drone of the organ filled the room. Her cracked voice led the congregation in *When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder*, and the bums brightened up and joined in to earn their forthcoming soup. They associated the preacher's sermon vaguely with the headlines they read searching the debris bins, but all that space-talk was too remote to hit deep. A couple of songs and a brief prayer—then eats.

Through it all, Reverend Jones kept staring at the Tourist, his sunken eyes flaming anxious wonder. His prayer was brief, perfunctory, then his look snapped back. With a look of set-lipped annoyance at her husband's preoccupation, his wife lifted her haunches off the organ stool and gestured the congregation to form a line at the soup kitchen. Corky nudged his new pal, then joined the others.

The tourist sat. Escape was his logical move, but he was tempted to learn just a little more about Reverend Jones. The things he had said and his admonishments of the great space-thrust were indicative, but on the whole less important than his random talents. These primitives had a history of such unpredictable lightning streaks, mostly among the religious or pseudo-religious groups, because scientific minds were inclined to dismiss them.

Now it was too late to run. The lanky preacher was at the end of the aisle, blocking his way. Quickly he put up a mental front, in case Jones had another random flash. There was no need. The preacher's random

leap was sparked by that pinnacle of ecstatic emotional fervor. Jones was a shaken and hopeful man. He believed what he preached, truly. He believed and waited for fulfillment.

"Who are you?" His voice quivered.

"Nobody." The tourist shrugged and tittered.

"Are you sure?" Jones extended a long hand toward him. "*Surer*

The tourist put on a sheepish look, nodding.

"Where do you come from?" Jones' voice was harsh and stubborn. "I saw something a while ago—like a blinding flash. It came from your direction!"

"I don't know nothin' about any flash."

"You come from far away," the preacher hissed. "I *knew* it—when that flash came. I *knew* so many things—but now they're gone." His voice rose in hysteria, then ended in a tormented moan. He had waited so long for this moment. This was what he had waited for all his life. *He—* Carmich-ael Jones! In his shabby Third and Howard mission. Not even properly ordained. Yet—why not him? Why *not* him?

"Where do you come from?" he demanded.

"Chicago." The Tourist picked a name he'd probed.

"Don't believe it. It's in your eyes. Deep down. You come from *someplace else.*"

The tourist shuffled on his feet.

"I was a swamper once—on a moon ship."

Jones blinked away tears.

"I don't mean that. Don't go!"

He mustn't let those groping fingers touch him.

"Stay! the preacher begged. "Have supper with me and my wife. Not

soup. A real meal. Please!"

"I don't need—"

Jones gave a convulsive shiver.

"I knew it! I knew!" He dropped to his knees between the benches, clasping his hands. He started spilling out all the torment and glory that had burned inside of him all of his god-hungry years. The tourist tried to leap the bench but those clutching hands moved after him. This patchwork of hysterical half-knowledge was dangerous. It was the sort of thing that could put the Tribunal on to him.

"Get up! Please!"

Carmichael Jones knelt his ground, transfixed. This was what he had prayed for; he must not lose it.

There were ways to kill. A sudden stricture of the heart muscles. The tourist was on the point of using one when a shrill voice removed the need.

"Carmichael Jones!"

His wife Alma, prosaically standing there in the kitchen doorway with a soup ladle in her hand and a severely vexed expression on her face, snapped the preacher back into the world of reality. With a doleful sob for his dream that died in birth, he pulled himself to his feet and trudged back to his duties.

The tourist smiled a faint smile after him; then he moved swiftly down between the benches, and back out into the fog-shrouded night.

II

Involvement was something he must avoid; he moved back to Market Street, crossed it, and became a businessman of forty out on a night's howl. A couple of blocks down Kearny Street he had a run-in with three drunks who asked if he was with the convention, too, and did he happen to know three blondes? He switched down to Mont-. gomery Street, where it was quieter.

The clock on Old St. Mary's bonged midnight. *Son*, said its legend,

observe the time and fly from evil.

The financial district, a lonely canyon of glass and steel, provided a haven where he could make an assessment of what he'd learned and decide what to do next.

His new body was strangely tired. He had copied too well. The heart pumped alcoholic blood wildly through his arteries. He was alarmed at the guilt thoughts churning around the brain. The status ulcers, the what-am-I-doing-to-my-wife guilt, the cirrhotic liver—too much. He decided on a younger man; again he must select a pattern.

Probing Panelli's restaurant bar he found what he wanted—a wide-shouldered young ex-marine just off a ship from an atoll along the Alaskan coast. The marine had only taken time to change into civies in one of the Market Street locker clubs before making the scene. He'd drunk two blurring jets and was as of now maneuvering a play for a redhead with prodigious curves and a responsive gleam in her green eyes. His surge of healthy glandular drive was refreshing, so the tourist became his doppelganger. But this time he retained a touch of the businessman's mental equipment and some of the vagrant, for balance. It was dangerous identifying completely; he might lose control to the physical body he was duplicating. These primitives sometimes gave way to completely irrational behavior.

Pausing in the doorway of a huge office building with heavy glass doors, he took account. In two hours, what had he learned?

. They were complex, these primes. They appeared mentally to be all the same. Sloppy thinking, miasmatic fears, muddled. Yet they were not all the same. Some possessed the ability to laugh at themselves and their overpopulated environment. These were healthiest. There were random flecks of genius in them, but these fragmentary hopes were all too often smothered by defeat and desperation. Should they escape, they still had a long way to go.

. He must keep clear of psychotics. And geniuses, too, might guess too close. Everyday plodders were the ones who would dismiss any slips he made, and that made them safest. And yet—it was not among the plodders that he would find what he sought...

Finding an immedio-print news machine, he had tripped the money

mechanism and set it whirring until a paper pushed out. He took it up and read it. The front page was taken up with space, politics, and murder, in that order. The most recent successes were in the Jupiter belt and Saturn. Mineral and other wealth was fantastic. It had not taken long, this incredible space thrust, once it got started. The scientists who were responsible for getting humans into space and pushing them out further and keeping them there—these were now lost out in left field. Now the money men and politicians took over. Soon as the wealth began to dribble back to the home planet, with the promise of infinitely more, the land-grab began. The costs were astronomical, but the resources they found spurred along the great space plunge. Seasoned spacemen could write their own ticket, and even ordinary miners who were willing to endure six-month stints of shocking terror and loneliness in strange out-worlds were paid fabulous wages. The paper had full-page ads for help wanted, skilled and unskilled. What it took mainly was guts and greed.

All day long these stock exchange buildings around him thrummed with this fantastic new trading, involving extraterrestrial empires which their owners and holders had never seen. Nation vied with nation for each slippery foothold. Company battled company, with long casualty lists. Heads rolled. These new pioneering days, with vast colonial empires in the making, made everything that had gone before in Terra's history seem like child's play.

And—so fast! A feeble rounding of the moon. A landing. New sources of mineral wealth. Now—*pandemonium*.

There were mentions of a mysterious figure known in the financial world as The Big Man. Apparently he was a key figure, having put up the money for most of the early gains, 'after the military significance of space flight faltered and national funds were reduced to a mere inanity to police out unsanctified grabbers. Capitalists and communists had decided to play nice, for the moment at least. There wasn't time for local squabbles, nor money. It was all going into the space push and for projected colonization.

The snowballing thrust laid its heavy hand on every phase of activity. School children were affected, with books being revised yearly. Politics was something of a shambles because of it, murder and suicide sprang from it, the religious leaders of all faiths put their gods into it, entertainment media frothed with it. A company called Interplanetary

Tours, Inc. announced weekly flights to the moon, Mars and Venus. *See the giant craters, Ghnaldi, Ty-cho, and Copernicus! See the fabulous Bubble City! See the Flower People of Venus!* Everyone hoped to make a buck out of it.

"Here—you! What you doin' here?"

The high glass door behind him slotted open and a bundle of flesh and bone bustled out. She was breathing hard, in little surprised snorts, to see this big plastic-jacketed youth blocking her way. Besides a worn reticule on her arm, the dumpy cleaning woman was burdened with a shopping bag of goodies taken from wastebins; she had to edge herself out by wriggling her hips. She was, he probed, tiddly from sampling the contents of office bottles—just enough out of each bottle to keep her night-work cheerful but not enough to induce them to lock up their supplies.

Mrs. Grummet had bogies that haunted her. She knew all about the street gangs of youths (products of overpopulation, automation, and drugs) who had lurked nightly around the crisscross subways of the '80s, and now hung around the aircar ramps of the new century. Some foggy night, she fretted, she'd be attacked by one of these plasto-pants boys. She'd had many nightmares about them; sometimes she would linger half an hour listening and peeking before daring to scramble over to her landbus.

This was the night. There he was!

"Don't touch me!"

"I'm not going to hurt you, you old hag." The seaman's rough voice was a laugh that skittered through the long steel canyon.

Sudden alarm struck. There was somebody walking within a block's radius. When he probed the-hard-breathing old biddy the tourist found out who. It was Frank Berduc-ci, a district night watchman. Berducci knew about Mrs. Grummet's haunting fear and he made a point of walking her to her bus whenever he could. These gangs, with their skintight pants and their needle-knives, got worse all the time, since automation kept cutting down the jobs earlier generations of school graduates had had waiting for them, and—what with the concentration on space these days nobody had time for their problems.

He heard Mrs. Grummet's shriek. Heard the rough young laugh that followed.

"Don't you touch me!" The old woman shrank onto the glass.

Something happened inside the tourist's human glands. Maybe it was the war-trained marine, maybe the vagrant. But suddenly he was possessed with an animal thrill—predatory, mindless. To cause fear. To *hurt*.

"Shut up, you stupid old—"

She sucked in a bleat when he came at her; her bag of obscure loot plopped to the concrete. Her mouth worked for a scream. The youth's muscles were as a tiger's as he hung over her for a long moment, shivering in the grip of primitive animal forces. He didn't even probe the footsteps slapping the pavement toward them.

Then his own mind took control and he heard.

"Get going!" he gritted, and stepped aside so that she could. Mrs. Grummet grabbed up her bags and fled. For less than an eye-flick her mind knew that something in the night-creature was not human and that he could kill her easily as drawing a breath.

The watchman panted up, moving more carefully as he reached the dark doorway. From the deepest shadow the tourist considered killing the man. But just for a moment. He must not kill him. That would only draw attention. He watched Frank Berducci pull out his blaster. As the weapon jabbed the air in his direction he saw the barrel glint in the misty lamp glow.

Now the watchman hugged the wall and poked the blaster ahead of him into the doorway. *Hey? Where the hell was the guy?* Berducci yanked out his torch, and bounced a ring of light across the doorway and then through the glass.

Nothing.

"Old witch is seeing things. Sucking at those office bottles too free and easy." He grumbled back out into the street to find the cleaning woman and see that she caught her landbus.

Moments later a black beetle scuttled out from under the glass door of the office complex and made its way arduously to the corner.

The Cracked Mug (from its antique name alone) was a North Beach coffee house conceived in an older generation; for some reason it persisted. It harked way back to Kerouac-Ginsberg days, and even further; it hinted at Jack London and Bret Harte when they lived and moved through these streets. Thrill pills and drugs were in common use, they went with the coffee in the little mugs. Girls in lank hair and black stockings (studies in anachronism) drifted aimlessly down here, and found male companionship. This was old-time arty. These aimless products of the new space-driven Terra took refuge by harking back to a past; a past not so much better than what they had now in their 'standing room only' world, but at least there'd been room to breath then.

From his corner table the tourist took it in.

He had nipped out some small-money from shop tills and tele-booths on the way from Montgomery Street; now he sat sipping espresso (artificial, of course) from his mug and surveying the bare gray walls of the basement restaurant. Off to one side, through smoke-haze, he saw a row of tri-dimensional nude photos, and over the battered ancient oak bar there was a collection of collage art, including half an old chamber pot with wire flowers growing out. The flowers were caricatures of current politicians and big shots; the large one in the center was very fat and he was titled 'The Big One'.

The tourist thought about The Big Man. J.K.R. Pallent. Top dog in the space-thrust, and from his early exploitations, incredibly rich. Incredibly powerful, too. Somehow he personified all that was corrupt and evil on this planet. Not only had the newspaper out of the self-printer spoken his name with care and genuflection, but the tourist kept probing his name at the back of all the minds he encountered, finding a sort of respectful detestation.

"Hi!"

The girl in the loose yellow sweater and black capris gave the wooden chair opposite him a twirl and slid onto it. She had the lithe grace of a jungle cat, soft violet eyes, and a wide friendly smile that showed white teeth that gleamed like a toothpaste ad against her golden skin.

She let her chin drop easily on her hands and looked at him over the curved chair-back. Her smile made the human blood rush and pound in him, her odd-colored eyes made his alien self sit up in a taut burst of hope.

"Hi, yourself." He grinned back.

Could what he probed behind those smoky eyes be what he was seeking? He probed deeper. He saw poverty, wretched poverty. Somehow she had risen out of it, not let it kill her spirit, only make her vow to help others discriminated against, when and where she could. She had brains, this girl, yet she had chosen North Beach for this reason. She had managed to elude those who would seduce her and make her what her mother had been—a prostitute. Her easy smile and disarming sexiness made her look like an easy mark, but he saw that she was not. She had warmth and empathy for the ill-used, which she gave freely to anyone who needed it, but not her body. She was looking for something to give direction and meaning to her life, but not anything commonplace. This was no ordinary girl.

The spark was there.

This golden child was it!

"You look kind of familiar," she was saying. "I don't think I ever saw you here before. Are you from L.A.?"

"No."

"Long way from home?"

"Yes."

Her delicately arched brows puckered. "You said that kind of odd."

He took a quick gulp of tepid coffee. His new beatnik's body had naturally flipped for this gorgeous little creature. He must watch it. "I'm from Europe. Estonia. Ever been to Estonia?"

She laughed.

"Never been to Reno, even. I was born in an L.A. back alley off Main street and left there for the rats. I'd like to visit Merida, Yucatan. My

mother came from there. Oh, yes, I did get to the races in Caliente once. I've taught myself Spanish."

"Good for you."

He watched her eyes wander to the table she'd left, where a crowd of earnest college students were sounding off.

"—like a pack of lemmings rushing out into the great ocean of space to die."

"And for what?"

"Progress. Can't stop progress."

"But what they're doing with it! Exploiting the natives, degrading them. Why don't they use some of this new wealth to clean things up here? Mankind—the average man, that is—is no better off. They should clean things up here before throwing all that resource and manpower into bigger and wilder space-thrusts."

"Progress isn't always neat. It doesn't follow a straight line."

"Why not? The ethos of man's peregrinations is screwy. The rationale—"

The girl pulled her eyes away, gave a low musical laugh.

"I don't understand words like 'ethos' and 'rationale'," she sighed.

"Don't envy them, Kora," he said. "You have qualities that are much more important. The basic concepts are really simple. They're groping toward a better world; big words don't mean much."

"Thanks. Hey. How'd you know I was Kora? With a 'K' please."

"I heard one of them call you that," he lied.

She looked doubtful. "You know, it's funny you don't have any accent. Don't look much like a foreigner." She added hastily, "I like your eyes and your cheekbones. I like high cheekbones. And that brown pointed beard. Makes you look kind of elfish. Now—tell me about Estonia."

He reached back for something he'd casually probed.

"Estonia's right in the middle of several other countries, so a businessman, like my father, has to learn Russian, Finnish, and German to get along. And everybody learns English these days. So with that mish-mash," he grinned, "no wonder I haven't any specific accent."

"Gee. All I know is Spanish. *Nada mas*. Might a girl ask what you're doing here in San Francisco?"

"Studying life, mainly. I have a project cooking, an important one. Perhaps you would help me with it?"

Her eyes flicked up sharply. "Studying 'life', eh?"

"No, Kora. Nothing like that." He had to start somewhere, and there wasn't much time. "Please?"

"Sure."

"Wonderful. How about coffee? A sandwich, maybe?" He gave the waiter a wave. "Two fresh coffees. What kind of sandwiches do you like, Kora?"

"Pastrami?" the waiter suggested.

"Okay."

"Swell. That's all we got. Pastrami on rye, coming up."

Kora turned her chair around and smiled at him, chin on elbow on table. "You're a nice guy. What's your name?"

"Mark."

"Mark Time? Never mind," she laughed, "I'm not used to two names anyway. Sure. I'll help you study life, so long as it's not—you know—birds and bees."

The tourist decided on a careful plunge.

"Kora, I'm hunting for somebody. Somebody very special. I think you can help me, because—"

A Chinese girl and a stocky Negro wearing glasses moved up. The Negro gave Mark a suspicious look. "Kora, it's time to split. Remember? The new ballad singer over in Sausali-to. You promised to fall up there with Jenn and me."

Kora blinked. "Did I? You know, Ger—I've just about had it with folksingers. Up to here."

"This one's special, I clue you."

"Kora!" Jenn effused. "He is the most!" She tugged Kora up on her feet.

"Who—"

"Name's Oren Starr. Wait'll you check this cat, Kora! I tell you, you'll flip, just like all of us."

"Okay. If I promised. Sorry, Mark."

She grabbed up her pastrami sandwich from the waiter's tray and threaded with them through the smoke haze in the direction of the street stairway. Mark watched them go, frowning and wondering what had been said that turned on a solar light in his alien mind.

From the top of the stairs, Kora cupped her hand to her mouth and yelled back: "Tomorrow!"

Such a tomorrow never came.

III

Alone, Mark Time (he no longer considered himself a tourist) put his probes out to this table and that. He learned much. He learned that some of the artists and beatniks were poseurs, bums—but some of them had a lot on the ball. Some had flashes of profound insight into Terran problems.

The upswing economy engendered by hot wars, cold wars, defense wars and the "space race" had spilled over into a rat race toward the stars. Actually, hardly any progress was to be seen in aiding backward countries. The greed motivation was uppermost, along with spiraling power pyramids. Benefits from the tremendous new source of resources were not in evidence, they were slapped back into the insatiable maw of outerspace.

Colonization promised a lot, but it was just in the beginning stages. It ran a slow second to the Terran philosophy of greed and gain...

Threat of war was forever bubbling just under the surface. Space kept the nations busy for the moment, but it created new things to fight about and in the end the perimeter of battle might only be extended Out There. New minerals, new types of atomic weapons, threatened destruction of the whole Solar system.

But Mark knew all this already.

He remembered Morko thundering to the Tribunal: *How long, I ask you, can this go on? How far can we permit these predatory monsters to plunge? How far must this cancerous growth on the face of the universe spread before we take action? We know their appalling history of gore and mental corruption. We can interpolate their future—more vicious still. They have already reached the limits of their own system! We are next. The Intergalactic Council has left their dispensation to us. What are we waiting for? Act now!*

And the surging tide of voices from the great chamber: *Die, Terra!*

The Tribunal: *Racial suicide is the usual terminal in cases such as this. The signs were very promising, and still are.*

Morko: *We can't wait! They are working from two directions already on interstellar ships to Alpha Centauri. Our Barrier has already deflected one ship, but others will be on the way soon. Eventually they will get through our Barrier, to spread their evil seed throughout our suns and our planets. Act now! Now, now, now!*

And the Populace: *Die, Terra!*

Mark's probe flicked across the smoky room to a corner where there were beer cartons stacked up under an arrow "Toilet" sign. In this area he scented the sweet-pungent odor of inhaled drugs, and out in the alleyway a needle being jabbed into a quivering arm. Probing the drug users was like touching hot lightning. Nova-bright spears of brilliance cascaded through his mind, a seeming of knowledge and wisdom. Emotions transcending his alien experience. Yet—this was never-never land. Pitiful nepenthe, with no answers for anybody.

He had work to do.

He moved back into the dark street. The fog dripped wetly across his face. He shivered and dreamed up a coat. The thin body he was wearing wanted sleep, but there was no time.

Kora's beauty—especially the beauty shining deep in her mind—beckoned him out of the whirling fog. Kora had the spark. He was lucky to find her so soon. Yet, it wasn't all luck. While he was still out in space, hovering, vacillating and unsure where to touch in, he had probed those bright flecks like will-o-wisps, here in the northern Pacific Coast metropolis. He must find them. He must learn what lay behind those flecks of mental light. The total answer. There were a few others, but nebulous and uncertain—winking candleflames in a turgid ocean of black, gray-black, or blood-crimson evil.

Kora was his lead; he ought to have stuck with her. The big Negro loved her and radiated jealousy in all directions, even though he knew Kora could never love him. - He stopped. His mind turned to ice.

Morko's tracker was here, on this planet. Out there in the fog. Near. His orders: *find the traitor and kill him.*

He moved on warily. Every shadow, every human he met, was now a threat...

At the Broadway-Columbus airpark he waved down a hovering cab. "Take me to Sausalito."

"Across the Bay?" The little cabbie wrinkled his thin nose as he looked the tourist up and down. "Long pull. Ten credits."

Mark patted his pants. "Wait," he said.

He moved around the corner and probed to find money. That was what he must have. Credits. Money. Lots of money. Enough for whatever might become necessary. Money got things done here on this incredible world. And no need to be squeamish about helping himself. But he must be careful where and how he got it. He must not leave a trail for his stalker.

Where did Terrans get their credits? Banks. Their society depended on banks. And here was one, ahead of him on the side street. A modest

branch complex, but adequate to his purpose. He swept his mind in a wide arc. The drizzly street was empty at this hour.

Thinning himself to an atom's width he slipped through the near-invisible door-crack. He probed false mahogany desks and also the rows of drawers behind the tellers' cages. Ah! Further back was the big vault. That was what he wanted.

Inside the shiny chrome doors, the time-lock whirring complacent and secure, he ignored the obvious stacks of high-credit bills and turned to the wall of safe deposit boxes. Open disappearances of money would point to him; Morko's spy would be alert for just such clues. He probed the larger boxes by aura residue left by their owners; he found what he was looking for—ill-gotten monies, awaiting court probate decisions. Levitating the banded money outside the vault by rearranging its molecular structure, he stuffed it into his pockets. This would keep him going.

The air-hack driver was still waiting. Fares were far between, sweating out the night run. Mark jumped in the bubble behind him, handing him a ten-note.

With a yelped yawn the airman put his machine's gyro to work and they lifted rapidly into a top airplane. Through the drizzle of rain Mark watched the city lights dwindle and then looked down at the old bridge across the Gate. The windshield wiper thucked away rain as the cab pushed air northward toward the Marin bayside suburb, over the webbing of the bridge's arched cables; then swiftly down past the old Fort, to skim over Sausalito's baywalk.

"You know the boats?" Mark asked.

"Other end of town."

"So, go."

"Address?"

"No address. A big ex-yacht. It's a party. Just watch for the lights."

"Don't you characters ever sleep?"

"What's special about sleep?" Mark countered, with a chuckle.

He had probed that the song soiree was taking place in one of the old millionaires' yachts huddled at the unpopular end of the Bayside, left to rot and be lived in by those who could not afford the glass apartments lifting skyward on the once-green hills. Mark flipped the cabbie a coin and moved down the boardwalk between the boats toward the one with the diffuse yellow light spilling out of its ports. Nearing the gangway of its peeling deck, he heard music coming from it.

He paused in the shadow of the main cabin, wondering if he should change and to what. He had no time to decide, because a pair of hands took hold of him from behind. Soft feminine hands.

"New talent!" the girl giggled, pulling him out into the light with satisfaction. "We can use it! How about a kiss?"

Mark looked down at her and half-grinned. She was pretty and blonde and medium-drunk. He allowed her to press close to him and put her lips on his; then, for the experience, he helped out. It was physically satisfying, her soft warmth, her eager youth. It was very pleasant, with the tide slapping the sides of the boat and sea gulls bleating up in the spars.

But he had work to do, so he pulled her away.

"What's inside?" he asked her.

Her nose wrinkled. "I didn't know it was going to be like that."

"Like what?"

"Singing. Nothing but singing. If there was some dancing and grappling along with it, I wouldn't mind. But those doleful ancient ballads. Yuck!"

"Are you leaving, then??"

"Twist my arm and I'll stay."

He pulled her toward the double-doors.

The brief stairway was steep and his head just missed the crossbeam overhead. The little blonde found them seats and Mark probed the dim-lit gathering for Kora—and the other. The large cabin was emptied of its

sea-going furniture, was lighted by candles stuck in green wine bottles and by three antique lanterns hung on pegs. The pattern of the past held here, too. There were twenty or so youths and girls sitting casually around on nail kegs or plastic cushions, paired off for the most part, and they formed a loose circle. In the center of the circle was a young man and a young girl, dressed quaintly and casually, and they were wailing an old mountain lament about love and murder.

Mark found the Negro and Jenn, the Chinese girl, but not Kora. Then, probing, he found her way in the back behind a bulkhead, deeply engrossed in conversation with a young man who was holding a guitar.

The blonde introduced Mark with a handsweep; they nodded at him, without words, shushing the girl. Mark swung his probe back to Kora and her young man.

Yes.

It was there. The second time. And this time even stronger!

His alien being leaped with new hope.

The duo sang a second ballad and Mark listened to the earthy saga of love and despair while he sipped coffee from a cup somebody shoved into his hands. There was cheap wine, and he probed that pungent marijuana smoke he'd found at the North Beach bar, too.

A lanky fellow with reddish hair stepped into the ring. "Oren! Where are you, Oren Starr? Now it's your turn!"

The young man with Kora moved forward.

In the wash of lantern light Mark saw a thin, very brown face, even featured, but dramatized by a shock of untidy white-blond hair that curled around his sunburned ears, and by eyes that looked like no other Terran eyes he had seen or imagined he would see: they were sharp and fluid as quicksilver.

As he swung his long legs and his guitar into the ring Mark saw that under the sleeveless open-necked shirt was a strong neck like a post and from the sheathe of muscles on his bony frame and the slope of his shoulders, this young man had done a lot of heavy physical work when he

was very young.

He perched himself on a nail keg and planted his tennis shoes firmly against the planking. He smiled a frank outgiving grin as he strummed tentatively.

"Who wants what?" His voice was low but deep. Hearing it Mark *knew*. This voice moved in, below the surface.

Nobody said anything for about a minute and Mark knew why this, too. Oren Starr was special and they all sensed it. These humans were unusually responsive, a cut over the norm; intuitively they knew Oren was different and that they had something here. The mind Mark probed behind those silver eyes was like a clean-blue mountain lake, or perhaps a wide space-field powered with stars.

"Sing, Oren!"

"One of your own ballads."

Mark watched Kora move gracefully, shyly, to take a seat half behind the balladeer. There was something new in those violet eyes and behind them.

As Oren moved his glance around easily, he met Mark's eyes and stopped. A thoughtful flicker crossed between them; Mark pulled in his probe.

"How about you stranger? What would you like?"

Mark chuckled and worried his elfish beard.

"Sing us about space, man. Way out, man!"

Oren grinned and nodded.

"Maybe you've got something to tell us, stranger?"

"Don't put me on, man!" Mark wailed. "Kora! Make him sing!"

Kora shot him a smile and touched Oren's shoulder lightly.

^He's my friend, Oren. Sing him a space song."

Oren took time to grab her hand before she pulled away and took her seat. Then he closed his silver eyes and sang.

I don't know who is out there,

But he's there,

And I'm hoping when I get there

He will take me by the hand,

Take me by the hand and say:

"Welcome to the sun, my funny friend!

Take hold of my hand and I'll show you to the stars;

It's black and it's bright

Out there beyond the sun,

But don't be afraid, my funny little friend,

I've got hold of your hand..."

Strange words spilled out of him, random, awkward. Out of some deep well. And the melodic line that went with them had a curious unworldly quality, was punctuated in counterpoint with thrums along the eight strings of his guitar.

Oren Starr put them in a spell. They forgot to drink, to smoke, to move their hands across soft yielding bodies.

An abrupt thudding of heavy feet overhead muddied the space-cleanness of Oren's song. The cabin's door smashed inward. Before anyone could half-rise the police were scrambling down the stairway, the only exit.

Mark spun a look at Oren. The ballad-singer lifted from the nail keg and Kora moved into the crook of his arm; he dangled his guitar by the other. Mark probed a bad thing but there was no time to remedy it, in the panicky jumble.

"It's a pinch 1" a red-faced police Sergeant declared. "We've had our eye on you. You're under arrest, all of you!"

Mark probed run-of-the-mill indignation in this man. He equated artists of all kinds with dope-users and queers; he despised them all. Three other cops began rounding them up.

"What's this all about?" the lanky redhead, Christian, demanded. "This is my boat! I don't understand—"

"You will when you get to the station."

A sallow teen-ager in a striped sweater made a mad jump for the stairs. One of the cops grabbed him, rammed an elbow across his face, leaving a red smear.

Mark made for Oren and put a hand on his guitar.

"Can I hold this, hey? While you help the lady?"

"Nope. Thanks, all the same."

Mark dropped back while the others were shoved topside. He must think now for his own skin, remain free, if he was to accomplish anything. Time was running out.

On deck a smudgy false dawn glimmered over the dark lumps of Belvedere and Angel islands. A line of querulous sea gulls maundered complaints and fluttered tentatively on the railing. Cops shoved the party-givers noisily over the deck to the pier. Mark saw a prowler car and three black marias backed up to the dock, back doors open for business.

He lingered, counting gulls. There were nine gulls.

Just ahead of him the blonde shrieked and stumbled. The coil of rope on the deck in front of her looked just like a snake waiting to spring.

The last cop grabbed her when she tripped.

Ten gulls flapped up from the railing at her shrill scream, squawking their disgust at the whole proceedings. For nine of them the mast-spars and the quiet of the boat next door sufficed, the tenth beat the chill morning sea wind around the Bridgeway bend in the direction of the old

ferry dock.

IV

What had been, in days that seemed impossibly ancient, the old Sausalito ferry wharf, was now a deluxe bistro known as *The Naiad*. A playboy with a ruffled-up suit and severe-looking hangover stopped the restaurant's night porter, who looked like a sandy weightlifter gone to pot, from his swabbing of the entrance. The man's dog, an enormous St. Bernard, lay nearby on the deck planking, watching the rhythmic strokes of the mop.

"Good morning, my good man." The playboy put a briskness into the greeting.

The swamper stopped and eyed the cigarette burn in the playboy's lapel. "I'm nobody's good man. Especially in Sausalito."

"Sure not, Jerry. I only stopped to ask—"

"How'd you know my name?" The dog got up and sniffed at the playboy suspiciously.

"Lived up on that glass hill once. You're quite a well-known fellow, Jer. Since your boxing days." He added, with a hopeful gleam, "Could you fix me up with a drink, maybe?"

"I only work here. I don't own the joint."

"Sure, sure, Jerry. But God I need a drink, and all the Other bars are shut tight. Every damn place on the Bridge-way." He gave a bursting confidential laugh. "What happened was I met this dame over in the city last night. One thing and another and she invited me over to her apartment at the Cote D'Azur up the line. Well, I got soused and she threw me out. I walked all the way down to the cab stand. Not a damn thing's open. I'm freezing my—"

"What you need is coffee." Jerry's wide lips wore a faraway grin. "Got some made inside. Best I can do. They lock up the likker."

"Thanks, Jer."

Over an inky mug of steaming coffee at the bar the playboy went to work.

"What happened down at the Arques? I saw three patrol cars picking up a bunch of characters off that big boat moored down there. What's up?"

Jerry scowled over his mug rim.

"The wife phoned me. Can't nothing happen in Sausalito without it's all over the hill in ten minutes. Her neice, Judy, was one of the kids picked up. Good kid. Just out of school, nothing much to do. I guess that's why she horses around with that art crowd."

"What happened?"

"Not a hell of a lot, is my guess. Them damn cops just like to show off. Maybe it's to see nothing does get out of hand. The kids Judy runs with are nice kids. Take Christian who owns the *Lassen*. You couldn't find nicer more law-abiding people than him and his wife, even if they are both artists. Make good money at it, too."

"Then they had nothing on these kids?"

"Only a rubber band of pot cigarettes somebody stuffed inside Oren's guitar."

"Oren?"

"Oren^tarr. Sings. I heard him once, at a private party upstairs. Got a damn nice personality. I never figured him for a pot hound."

"Maybe somebody planted it on him."

Jerry shrugged. "A marijuana rap's not so bad. It's not like he was peddling the junk. Six months, maybe."

"Six months!" The playboy whistled.

"Depends on his lawyer, if he can afford one."

"The others?"

"Let 'em go in the morning, I guess."

The playboy perked up astonishingly from Jerry's coffee. "Got to get going. The cab stand'U be open by now. Thanks, Jerry." He turned in the doorway. "By the way, where are they holding Oren?"

"San Raphael. County jail."

The yawning cab driver blinked when his fare stepped briskly out on the pavement in front of the Marin Hall of Justice building. Seemed like he was kind of haggard and seedy when he'd jumped quickly in at the Sausalito station; now he wore an expensive perfectly-tailored suit and a hom-burg. He had a salt-and-pepper moustache which fit his sharp fortyish features perfectly, and the brown calfskin briefcase under his arm seemed to belong there by legal decree. The cabbie was something of a student of human foibles and he found himself musing on the gals in the video ads who, by using a certain deodorant, were glamorous sirens instead of frowsy housefraus, expanded their chests, and repapered the wall behind them. What kind of deodorant did this cat use?

"I am Morris J. Phelps, Attorney at Law."

The big sergeant behind the desk yawned and took a glance at the expensive card the lawyer flashed.

"So what must I do?" Sergeant Killigan wondered. "Curtsey, or bow from the waist?"

"I am Oren Starr's attorney. I require to see him at once."

"I>o, ehF' Killigan turned and yelled through the half-open door behind him. "Hey, Mast! Anybody tell you about Starr's attorney?" He whirled his chair back to the high desk and drummed on it with his fingers. "Kind of early, isn't it, Mr.-ah-Phelps?"

"Naw," Mast yawned back from the back recesses. "Starr didn't make any phone call yet. He ain't got no lawyer."

"Oh, yes he has." Phelps countered crisply. "Judy Bran-nan phoned her aunt and she phoned—doesn't matter. I must see my client right away!"

"Dunno," Killigan scowled glumly. "The Lieutenant—"

"I woke Lieutenant Ball once already this morning. I don't suggest that you wake him again. Give me ten minutes with Starr and I'll be on my way."

"Can't you wait a couple hours? He's sleeping."

"I can't wait even a couple of minutes."

Something that sprang invisibly out of his eyes did it. Sergeant Killigan hiked off his chair and went in the back, grumbling.

Attorney Phelps drummed his fingers on his briefcase while he waited in the little visitors' cubicle. In a moment Oren Starr's lanky frame filled the narrow doorway. Phelps gestured him to sit opposite him at the small table. The cop who brought him out of his cell left the door open a crack.

In an eye-flick the lawyer took in the balladeer's appearance and pattern under stress. His silver eyes showed weariness, his mouth was a little grim, but behind the taut muscles and needling hurt was still that vast billowing empathy and urgent hope. No bitterness; a wash of impatience, perhaps.

"You like people," Phelps said.

"Sure I do." Oren was looking down at his long fingers on the table, his lids still heavy with sleep.

"Even when they do things like this to you."

"They're only doing their job. People do what they have to, what they've been trained to. It's what's behind things— a fear, a desire to be accepted."

"Confusing, no?"

"Damn right. Everyday I'm trying to find some answers. I guess we all are."

"Suppose you could live in a less untidy climate. How would that suit you?"

Oren blinked and looked up, straight into his eyes. For a second the silver seemed to glow. "They said you were my lawyer."

"Morris J. Phelps. Never mind about me. None of this is important at the moment. We must get you out of here. There's so little time." Oren's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"Just now I can't say, Oren. Believe me, I'd like to tell you much—so much. There's a reason why I can't. Now." He unsnapped his briefcase to take notes. "What did you tell the police when they found the marijuana in your guitar?"

Oren was staring. He snapped his eyes away with effort. "I just told them I didn't know anything about it or how it got there."

"Which you didn't."

"How do you—"

"I heard you sing once, Oren. You aren't the type. However, they did find it and it's very incriminating. Our problem is time. You must not go to jail."

Oren's brow creased. "There was a girl—"

"Kora."

"Yeah. Anyway, she tried to say she put it there, the little nut. They didn't believe her but then I said—"

"To keep her out of it you admitted it was yours."

"Not exactly."

"Never mind. What about the other one—the one who *did* plant it on you."

"I think I know. Just a panicked kid. He didn't want to get anybody in trouble. It was the first thing he thought of. He's a good kid," he added defensively.

"They're all good," Phelps said flatly. "You are willing to take the—the rap for him?"

Oren shrugged, his face clouded. "It's just that it might as well have been me. He could be my kid brother; he's only eighteen. Hell! You lawyers

can't afford to have feelings. You wouldn't understand how I feel. Sometimes I don't myself." He put his tow head down on his arms, pushing out a sigh.

Phelps reached over and touched him. "I will tell you. Don't look up, just listen and listen well. Oren Starr—there have been only a handful of really exceptional human beings in your—our—history. Some were religious figures, some scientists, some thinkers. But all of them had a spark—a touch of true cosmic beauty, call it soul if you want to— and you have got that, Oren. It includes things like innate compassion and intuitive knowledge of what is really important in the universe, and a lot more. Only a spark, mind you. But it's there in you.

"Oren, I *am* an attorney. A very important one. I'm on a case now, a case so important that—" He broke off sharply. "I can't say more now. Somebody else might find out. I won't be able to handle your case personally, but I'll hire the best attorney in San Francisco to defend you. You won't see me. But think of me, Oren, especially when you go to that lonely place of yours where the stars seem closer."

The balladeer's shoulder quivered as the lawyer pulled his hand away. Oren Jifted his head and his eyes leaped as if searching for something.

"Tell me."

"No, Oren. What about yourself? What started you singing these songs?"

"My grandfather, I guess. My parents were Finns. I grew up there, on a farm by a blue lake. My grandfather didn't live with us. He came down out of the north every summer, from a Lapp village. I was nine the last time, but I never forgot him. He'd made a harp out of birch, he called it a *kantele*. That's a sort of magic harp from the hero legends of Finland. He'd sing the old songs to me, elemental songs about the storms and the rocks and the sky. They were very real to me. I was sorry when we left Finland and came to America."

"What happened to your grandfather?"

"I don't know. One summer while I was in college I went up to our farm, Rauutakoski, to try and find out. They said he had just disappeared. But he left me his *kantele*. I still have it. Funny, the strings on it won't break.

He said they were magic, they'd last forever."

"You put them on your guitar."

"How'd you know?"

"A guess."

"They took my guitar. Evidence, they said."

"You'll get it back," Phelps promised.

The door creaked open and the cop outside coughed significantly.

"One more thing—Kora."

"What about her?" Oren bridled up a trifle. "You like her. You feel a special affinity between you. A depth of total understanding. It was there, right away, before you even had a chance to talk." Oren got up in a hurry. "How did you know? *Who are you?*"

The attorney put his briefcase under his arm, smiling a faint casual smile. "Stay away from her, Oren. Don't go to North Beach and don't contact Kora in any way. Just remember what I told you about the stars."

"What about the-?"

Morris J. Phelps moved swiftly past the cop in the doorway and out of the building, like a man with a long way to travel and little time.

V

Among the passengers on the Icelandic Lines jet to Stockholm and points north was a pushy young student of Scandinavian languages who took a seat by a plump Finnish-American widow whose children were all grown up and married and who was now treating herself to a visit with relatives in Turko. She was reading a weekly paper called *Autajja*.

"Finnish is sure tricky to learn," the student offered, owlish behind his thick glasses. "In fact, Finns are kind of a mystery. Racially, I mean."

Her placid face lifted grudgingly. "Are they?"

"It's the racial origin that's in doubt," the student told her brightly. "Some anthropologists relate Finns to an oriental branch, others find the language akin to the Magyars. I don't think anybody is sure. But the Finns are completely different from their neighbors, any of them. Am I right?"

Mrs. Karkinen nodded and smiled, flattered by his interest in the country of her people. "Not like the Swedes, that's for sure. Swedes are more—stuck-up, like. Or the Russians." She grimaced.

"People think of Finns as horny-handed farmers and fishermen. Fine athletes. They pay their debts, and try hard to stay neutral politically; but they're a lot more subtle and interesting than that. Take the composer, Jean Sibelius—and the epic *Kalevala*"

"You have read the *Kalevala*?" Mrs. Karkinen laughed. "I haven't."

"*Land of Heroes*. Stories in song. Sure have. There's one about Leminkainen and the girl sitting on the rainbow, and—"

Mrs. Karkinen went back to her paper with a rattle. She wished the young man would shut up and leave her alone. Why was he looking at her so funny? Those magnified eyes of his seemed to be looking right into her head.

By the time the super-jet landed at the Stockholm airport, in mid-afternoon, the student has assimilated Mrs. Karkinen's knowledge of Finnish. He helped her with her gift bundles when they transferred to the Helsinki plane, and, having deposited her with her exuberant cousins he took a cab to the Central Tourist Information Bureau.

"I'm trying to locate my Aunt," Private First Class Harvey Jensen told them. "I've been stationed in West Germany for the past two months but this is the first leave I've had. My mother's worried about Aunt Silia. She hasn't heard from her in over six months, we're scared she might be ill. She lives on a farm near Rauutakosld."

"That's pretty far north. This time of year the storms are—"

"Won't bother me," Harvey grinned. "I spent the last fourteen months above the Arctic Circle at a radar station. How do I get to Rauutakosld?"

The last stage of his journey was by dog-sledge. Nothing else, short of

teleportation, was feasible in the constant darkness and tormented snow-wastes. He couldn't teleport without a clue as to where he might end up. There were no sparks to follow. Nothing.

The howling storm diminished to a nagging whistle that grew and ebbed as the dogs slashed the runners through the blue-cruled drifts. He mushed through a forest of pines, heavy with snow, then stopped for a moment at the edge of a lake, where gales had driven the November snow into patchy ribbon patterns. A few words of elementary mental magic to the spent animals, to keep them from digging in for a sleep, and they yelped on across the frozen lake, toward the glimmers of light on the dark horizon.

Dismal yowls from the village dogs floated over the icy air, announcing his arrival. A knot of curious Lapps muffled up in dark blue and bright-red wool trimmed with ermine tails bundled out of log huts. They yelled for some youngsters to come out and care for the huskies, while Harvey was led to the central cabin, a long communal affair.

The roaring fire in the huge stone fireplace melted the ice on his eyebrows and lashes. Harvey took off his mittens and his leggings with a vast sigh, while his nose turned its attention to the savory cooking smells.

Their innate sense of hospitality held the nightly gathering around the fire from voicing their curiosity until Harvey had eaten and warmed himself. He gnawed his charcoal-cooked reindeer steak and cleaned up a heaping mound of potatoes in a thin milk sauce, and heavy chunks of black rye bread. The steaming mug the stolid cook brought him looked like coffee, but had a bitter bark flavor.

The solemn polite ring of faces having their usual community winter's night fireside get-together, followed his movements with interested satisfaction. Save small children and babies, the entire population of the village was here. They had heard of his arrival and all hurried to see and hear the stranger talk of outside things. The old *mummu*s could tend the babies.

Their peripatetic life, following the reindeer herds, allowed few permanent possessions, no radios, no video, no daily newspapers. The youngsters who ventured south to see the fabled cities and fantastic, machines they had heard about seldom returned to the fold. This clutch of log huts was their home until spring budded the birch trees along the

lakes and the herd went on the move. Strangers were welcome brothers; there were no locks on the doors. The sharp *pukko* every man and boy carried was for skinning, gutting and eating.

An old man with a fierce red beard passed Harvey a great wooden mug. The foamy brew tasted something like stout.

"It is called *kallia*" the old man said, with a grin. "It is made of roots and mountain berries. Three of these mugs and you will be merry as a goat in May!" He laughed a roaring laugh, which the others joined, lifting their own drinks.

"Thank you, old man." Harvey squatted where they had made room, sipping with relish.

"My name is Toivo Tekkila." The red-beard shook his hand in a strong grip. "How may we help you?"

Harvey's mind jumped to what he most often probed in the great cities. *Here's a new pigeon. What can we take him for?*

What he saw behind these eager blue eyes on every side was refreshing. There was a glimmer, as of a spark reflected. In their simple lives they had touched the star-born light. This was the first time he felt any tug of diffidence at manufacturing plausible lies; the bombardment of falsity in the cities seemed to require them.

He made his story brief, then asked, "Do any of you remember a family called Starr?"

Toivo scratched his beard. "Starr. No-o."

An old crone near the fire moved. Her deep-sunk eyes came open, glittering in the raw yellow flame. A palsied hand like a brown spider rattled the gnarled stick off her lap.

"You mean Tahti. Uryo Tahti. Uryo's wife died giving birth to their boy-child. There was only the one. The father and the boy lived alone on their farm."

"Of course!" His eyes went eagerly to the crone. "*Suomi* names are places and things. Tahti means *star*"

The old woman closed her eyes and sank back.

"There you have it, friend. The Tahtis are gone from here, many years ago. They went to America." Toivo drank deep.

"I know. I just want to find out about the old grandfather. He was a Lapp. He lived up here with your people."

"He came out of the north," the crone mumbled, "where the world ends and the stars begin."

Harvey pounced.

"You saw him? You heard him sing?"

She crackled and weaved back and forth on her pine-needle pillow. "I was a pretty little thing then. I heard all the songs. The young men all wanted to dance with me on midsummer night." She started to cry, a low baby's wail.

Toivo stroked her white head. "That's all right, Aiti. Everything's all right. We can remember and dream by the fire, can't we?" He whispered to Harvey, "The old Aiti hasn't many days left. Don't hurt her." He raised his mug to the others. "Now we will all sing—something lively!"

The high rafters rang with their songs.

Harvey moved closer to the old crone's fire seat as soon as he could; he projected his urgency into her wandering mind. It was like a bowl of gruel; he caught vague glimpses, nothing tangible.

"The old songs," he whispered. Tahti's grandfather had a magic *kantele*. He sang one special song. *One special song.*"

She mumbled her toothless gums, her hand quivered for the comforting feel of her crooked stick. Harvey put it in her time-seared hands and gripped them firmly.

The tactile magic succeeded In a quavering toneless ripple the song spilled out from a rift in her failing mind.

*From the heath a stick she lifted, That she might pull down the berry,
This strange and silver star-berry*

Then from the ground the berry mounfed, Upward to her shoes so dainty, Upward to her knees of whiteness, Upward to her skirts of woolen. To her buckled belt of leather, To her budding breasts and neck, To her lips so red and youthful; Then into her mouth U glided, From her tongue to throat it glided, To the maiden's womb that waited ...

The robust voices of the others went silent while Aiti droned her song; the huge pine logs in the stone fire cracked and the low night wind fumbled at the mud-sealed crevices.

Harvey grasped hold of her slipping mind before it could fall apart again.

"Who was she? The girl who found the berry?"

"Marjatta."

"The great-grandmother! The old man's mother!"

"What old man? Tahti was young as a fawn in the spring. He danced with me on the night when there is no dark." Aiti's white head drooped to her drool-specked dress. Her voice was all but silent. "Where did he go, you ask? He must search for others who knew The Song. Like Wainomoinen in his birch canoe, he sailed away to the West, to find a warm country where snakes fly and the gods are gods of stone."

Aiti sighed one more time for her lost dreams, then breathing stopped.

Janet Colfax almost missed the Aztec Tours flight out of Mexico City to Merida. A garrulous retired schoolteacher from Providence, she had firm opinions on all subjects and her peckish birdlike glance hopped from one thing to an-other; she had waited a long time and read every book published on the Mayans and she didn't intend to miss one thing, not one single thing. She wore low heels and sometimes tennis shoes and rinsed her seersucker ensemble out every night. She stayed nearest their guide so she wouldn't miss a word and could correct him when he got careless in his little lectures.

"One in every crowd," a tall Oklahoman observed to his wife, on the dusty car ride from Merida to Chichen-Itza.

"This," said Guillermo, their guide, lavishly, "was once a great thriving

city—the capital of the Mayan Empire. The large pyramid just ahead of us is El Castillo."

Under the hot yellow sun the ancient gray monuments loomed in splendor against a sky so blue it was like a child's painting. Everybody gaped and gasped.

"Now we will see the great Temple of Kukul-Kan," the guide told them, swabbing his wide *indio* face.

"And the Court of the Thousand Columns," Miss Colfax chortled. "And the House of Dark Writing, the Akat-Tzib, La Casa de las Monjas, Chican Chob—and don't forget the ball court where they played those ritualistic bloody games, the one with the incredible acoustics where you can hear a whisper clear across!"

"Yes, Miss Colfax." The guide added something in the old Mayan tongue, little dreaming...

On the bushy path, once an important roadway to El Cenote Sagrado, the Sacred Well, the old maid remarked, "To think of the bustling avenue this once was!"

"Indeed," Guillermo smiled widely. "My ancestors, the Mayans, were a great scientific people."

"They weren't vicious, like some of the others," she added, schoolteacher-like. "They had their religious foibles, but they never made war on the other tribes. It was always the others who made war on them. That was why the Mayan civilization rose to such heights, in architecture and the arts—and in science."

"Wait until you see the observatory, where they studied the stars and discovered many astronomical laws."

"I'm looking forward to it." Janet Colfax bobbed her bird's beak, then pointed. "Look! Here we are at the Sacred Well. Look how deep! The virgins they chose for the Well were to deliver their messages to the gods. How deep would you say this one is, Guillermo?"

"Very deep."

"You know," Miss Colfax expounded, "Guillermo's people still build little altars at the edges of the *hoyos* and put sacrifices of corn and twists of herbs on them."

"This is true," Guillermo said.

"I read a story once about one of the chosen virgins, a very lovely young girl, who had a baby just before she..." Miss Colfax gestured at the murky-green water a hundred feet below.

"Not possible! The girls chosen were well-guarded, they died untouched."

"But there was *one*—" she insisted.

"Where did you read this story?"

"I can't remember, but I did."

Guillermo swabbed his forehead, scowling. There is some land of an old legend. It was never believed. I've read all the books myself. I never saw it written down."

"There! I told you!"

"This child, only fourteen, was walking in the gardens, as they were permitted. A jaguar leaped over the wall and frightened her. She climbed up a mango tree. While she waited in terror for the jaguar to go away she found a strange mango, it shone like silver. She took this mango in her hands and ate it. She became pregnant soon after. A young priest was blamed, but he swore by the gods he had not touched her. Since he was a priest and known to be honorable, the girl was allowed to deliver the message to the Well-God."

"What happened to the child?" Miss Colfax demanded.

Guillermo laughed. "What child? Who knows what happened? Now, if you would all like to buy a *refresco* before we cross over the road to see the observatory—"

After a cooling orange drink they followed the guide down a narrow path to the steps of the great round dome where astrologer-priests had

once plotted the course of the planets and the stars.

"There was a god who came out of the East in a boat and gave the Mayans powers and knowledge," Janet Colfax rattled on in her chalk-and-blackboard manner. "Too bad all the books were destroyed by Cortez and the rest. Heaven knows what strange knowledge the priests kept tucked away, of space and time! If only—what was that?"

Guillermo winked at the others.

'What, *senorita*?"

"A figure. I saw it dart out of that triangular door at the top of the steps. No—to the left! He's gone now, behind that maze of broken columns."

"I don't think—"

"I saw him, Guillermo! A boy, I think, in dirty-white pants. Bare feet. No shirt. See? He's peeking out at us!"

The guide shrugged. "Oh, that. Loco Tomas."

"Who is Loco Tomas?" Miss Colfax rapped.

"He likes it here in the ruins of the Old City. He won't sleep down in the huts with the others. Most of them work for the big Mayaland Hotel. Tomas likes to come up here and wander around and sleep under the stars. Sometimes tourists from the hotel who come here by moonlight catch a glimpse of him at the top of the tower, singing to himself."

"Singing?"

Guillermo chuckled. "The poor boy is a *Juan de dios*. He is—how you say?—touched. He says that the stones sing back to him. Only at night, when the stars are just right.

He's wild and shy. He doesn't like people."

"This Mayaland Hotel. Could I get a room there?"

"Of course. But you have paid already for your room and meals with the Tour. We can't wait for you, *senorita*.

Tomorrow we fly to—"

"Never mind about me, Guillermo. I think I'll just stay here in Chichen-Itza tonight. Perhaps the stars are in the right place tonight and the stones will sing for me. *Quien*

sabe?"

High and higher up the tortuous path winding at the edge of the ragged rock-wall, Kaplavastu toiled his way. He stopped to catch a breath, his brown splotch of a body whipped toward the precipice by the trampish wind. He looked back at the verdant mass of jungle far below, then grasped his staff more firmly and moved on.

Finally he reached the cave. It was pitch black inside. No. There was a faint glow deep in the damp coolness, a mind glowing warmth and humility.

Kaplavastu crouched, sighing. His skin and bones were weary. He didn't presume to speak until the Holy Man stirred in the blackness and finally moved toward him in a barefooted shuffle. A candle stub bloomed and weaved toward his gaunt face.

"It is pleasant in your shadow, Holy Man," Kaplavastu said.

"I am here with my mind for one thousand days," the Jina, the Most Holy Man in all Pradish, managed, his voice a cracked wonder to himself. "Why do you intrude?"

"I have brought food. Rice and dried figs."

"I want no food."

"You will die." When the candleflame traced patterns on the dark, Kaplavastu glimpsed a creature like a leprous wraith, a fleshless face with burning eyes and a tangle of wild beard. The effluvium surrounding the Holy One and his cave was cruel to his nostrils.

"I seek Nirvana."

"So do we all."

"Take your food and leave me to my thinking."

"To your dying. Perhaps the gods have sent me because they are not ready for you to die."

Mahavira, All-wise, All-good, as the villagers had told Kaplavastu with awe in their voices, sobbed.

"What the gods wish must be."

In a moment he put food to his lips and chewed it, a painful duty. When he had eaten a bare handful of rice he looked in Kaplavastu's eyes and said, "You are not a man." ,

"No."

"You have clothed yourself in the body of a man."

"Yes."

"You are Prajapati Himself?"

"No. I am not a god."

"Why do you come to me, then?" Mahavira chided. "I have nothing to offer you but my thoughts."

"Your world?"

"Evil in thought and deed. I want none of it."

"Yet you would not let it be destroyed?"

"If the gods will it."

"They are powerful, but not gods."

The Holy Man ruminated a shred of fig between his gums. "Why would you help the world? You are not a man!"

"I am of the Law. I search for fragments of a fine truth."

The Jina considered. "What must I say to you?"

"Sing. There is a song-legend of India. I have been told you might know

it, no one *else* knows this Song."

The Holy man sang:

Comes this spark out of the earth?

Comes this spark out of the sky?

Piercing and all-pervading?

Seeds were soivn across the stars

And mystic power,

Earth below

And power and will aboves

What is this Hand that sows the Seed?

The hard bit of fig lodged in his skinny craw and caused a spasm of racking coughs. "Perhaps you know the secret?" he choked.

"What I know at this moment cannot give you peace, Holy Man. Sing me a tale about a strange silver fig and of the Rajah's daughter who found the fig and ate it. There is such a song, is there not?"

"Ai, there is such a song." The wraith's pale head plopped down to his bony drawn-up knees. "Some say the Song is one of the *Sama-veda*, Knowledge of the Melodies. Others, that it is one of the *Vedas*, so ancient that it has been lost in the mists of time. My mahatma, at whose feet I spent my young years, taught me this song. But it must not be confused with the glory of Buddha's birth, lest it detract."

"This dreamy-souled child-girl of the vanished Pradish kingdom gave birth, did she not?" Kaplavastu hinted.

"Even so. The child of her sinless union had silver hair and silver eyes, and his songs charmed the birds down out of the trees in the palace gardens, and tamed even the tigers in the surrounding jungles. All who heard him sing became transfigured."

"His name?"

"Chauna."

"And what became of Chauna?"

"He grew very tall and very wise. But he left his grandfather's kingdom and traveled. He studied religion and sci-ence in all the countries of the world. He grew old, but his eyes did not grow old. After a while he would not sing anymore. Our legends say he wished for nothing but to become all-pure and all-knowing, so that he could journey to the land of his unknown father."

"This land?"

"Beyond the sun. Once my mahatma heard Chauna sing about this land. It was so beautiful that my mahatma cried to even hear about it. Then Chauna sang about the sciences and transcendental knowledge he must acquire from all the great minds in the world, so that he could go to this land beyond the sun. He used up all the wealth of his ancestors in his search after this knowledge."

"Then-r

"They say that at last Chauna, or someone very like him, came back in secret to the northern mountains here. With foreigners to help, he went up into the highest mountains on the earth, where stars burn against the everlasting snow. From the knowledge he had gained Chauna created a strange device, a machine, and snatched power down out of the lightning. After a while the foreigners went away.

"Villagers down in our valley remember the starry night when the burst of fire sprang into the sky from Chauna's mountain-top. Fire so bright that those who saw it were half-blind the rest of their days. The great palaces of the Rajah of Pradish crumbled into ruin, and the gardens returned to jungle. As for Chauna, it was plain to us all that Chauna and his songs must have perished that long-ago night, perished in that blinding lightning-flame."

VI

Makk Time stepped out of the fog onto the brief stairs-landing of the Cracked Mug. Danger smote him, a palpa-ble force. He *knew* he must run,

evaporate, teleport, *anything*. Morko's spy was down there in that smoke-screened huddle of perspiring human flesh.

First he must find Kora. It was the next step.

He probed her back of the beer-carton stack, but it was the man sitting with her who shot up his defensive mind-blocks. He was a pale emaciated cadaver of a creature with a scraggle of black beard and haunted eyes. A picked-on sort of character, the kind sure to appeal to Kora's sharp sense of compassion for fragile minds and bodies. He was leaning over the table and playing on her sympathies with some plausible tale about him and his sister in Los Angeles and was there any hope short of the Golden Gate Bridge?

Mark probed the spy's finesse with admiration. To him, Kora's mind was like a vibraharp; he even called himself David. Behind the piteous facade was smug self righteousness. *I will find that traitor and I will erase him. It won't be hard. He's as good as dead now.*

Kora's pretty head bobbed around the corner, her face swept across the room hopefully, while she continued to listen to David's sad story. She was looking for Oren. Her mind rippled with eager desperation. Where was he? Oren was out of jail but he hadn't contacted her—and she was sure he'd felt what she had—that overwhelming sense of belonging together. Why hadn't he made any effort to see her? She had told him where he could find her. She had left messages.

Why?

Cheers for Oren, Mark applauded. He had done as he was told. Had he not, the spy would have them both in the control of his mind by now. And Terra would be as good as lost. Kora was important, *si*. Her Mayan ancestry had given her the spark, but Oren Starr was the important one. By some genetic fluke the flame was unbelievably bright in him. Untutored, but argent. It spilled out of those silver Alphan eyes, out of his soul-catching songs.

Kora might be spared, but Morko would have to erase Oren. He was as dangerous to Morko as Mark was.

Kora's eyes saw him.

They strained across the smoke, remembering. David, the spy, climbed to his feet. Mark's mind-block could keep him out of his mind but it could not remove the aura his presence created, the same aura that had warned him another Alphan was among them. In the dismal primitive mind-chaos their two minds shone out like beacons.

Run!

For just a few seconds Mark thought the spy was going to toss aside the David front like an old rag, and take him, with whatever powerful weapons Morko had provided him with. But Mark had his defenses, too. What could reduce a primitive to an ash in a split second couldn't touch him, a matter largely of training and of mental control.

Instead, David was up and weaving toward the stairs.

Mark whirled back into the night, while Kora called, "Wait!"

A twitchy junkie hopped down to the dark alley halfway down the block, then in. He slunk like a shadow as far back as he could, plastering himself leach-like against the damp smelly wall behind a toilet pipe. His mind probed the alley-mouth.

David was coming. He hadn't bothered to change. *This is too easy.* Then he was there, limned by pale street light, blocking the narrow opening.

Mark probed the other end of the alley. It was a *cul-de-sac*. A dead-end. He probed urgently for doors—win-downs. Nothing.

Nothing but a row of stinking spilled-over garbage cans.

You might as well come out, traitor. I've got you, and

you know it. I've got the girl and tomorrow Til find the other one—the singer.

He kept his mind-block tightly sealed. No shred of thought escaped. Only the aura betrayed him. Close. Very close.

His stalker waited, chuckling mentally.

Don't be afraid. I won't erase you. Morko will have you made over at

the Institute for Mental Regrouping. You're obviously psycho, you and your little group of do-gooders! But don't worry about it. It doesn't hurt a bit. I—

The thought snapped off. The spy hadn't meant to say quite so much, even to someone as good as dead. What he had revealed unconsciously was what had been long suspected in the small secret group that had sent him to Terra: Morko used psychos for his spies; and when he couldn't find the right kind, he *made* them...

Come out, come out!

No sound. No tendril of thought.

After all, Vm lonely. You must be too, after many days in this mental wasteland. I never realized until now how terrible it must be to be a primitive. Nothing but lies and guesses and endless confusion.

He wasn't fooled. What the spy said about the terrors of mind-loneliness was all too true. But under it Mark Time probed a crafty suffusion of sadism, artificially bred into him by Morko's Institute scientists, against all laws, written and unwritten, that governed the civilized universe. Morko would justify: Traitors are beneath the law, *ergo*, snuff them out the easiest quickest way you can. Eventually Morko's infamies, his own psychotic pattern, would be revealed and he would be deposed. But by that time Terra...

Cat and mouse. The spy was playing with him, enjoying his pseudo-primitive game. He had been re-patterned for this particular job; his ego had been so bolstered that he knew he *could not* fail. The traitor to all the glorious Universe must die, and he was privileged to be the knife...

For a moment, hanging on the lip of eternity, Mark Time felt the lash of utter despair.

Then...

There was a way. One way of escape. A way shrouded with infinite peril.

When the decision had been made, and Mark had been chosen he had undergone a rigid mind-shattering regimen of cerebral control that explored areas never employed before because there had never been the

need. The device of donning a primitive's body like a mantle was toward this direction, but this device had been used often in the colonization of primitive planets in the Alpha system. It was, in effect, an advanced form of hypnotism. But it was a sham, no more.

There was another, untried, way. That was to surrender his ego into another creature's body to the point of non-recognition of self. He would *become* that other creature, incognizant of any other existence. This would erase his mind, diffuse his aura, so that the spy would sense him only as something-that-has-been. It would be like mental death.

He would inject a time limit, but would the time limit work? It had never been tried before, so he had no way of knowing. And in this deathness-of-self he would be vulnerable to all the dangers and horrors that the creature itself knew.

Even in this guise he could never be sure Morko's spy might not find him. Perhaps he had had similar training? One of the concomitants of the supermind was that there was no end to what it might do, or so it seemed. Morko had the dedication of a mathematical equation: *Terra must die! I'm tired of waiting, traitor. This is it.*

There was a cockroach crawling under the nearest garbage can. In a twinkle he turned from dirty brown to a kind of dusty silver. His old self died in glory.

Night was long, a long feeding-time, for the silver cockroach. He darted through a rusty hole in the dark bottom of the great food-place that bulked above him and addressed himself to the beautiful, beautiful smells and the wonderful bits of smorgasbord supper. He gorged. Another male cockroach lumbered over to the crust of French bread he was attacking and started in on the other side. The silver cockroach made noises and lunged at him. There was a small battle, but neither one put his heart into it. The great round food-place was particularly redolent of scraped spaghetti leavings, scallopini fragments, and other tidbits from the Italian restaurant around the corner. Enough for all.

The silver one found a female and they desported themselves, rubbing antenni and finding a cushy corner to hole up in briefly. Then the female went away and the silver cockroach slept...

He was awakened by a blast of bumping noises, then experienced a

lifting and tumbling sensation. The great food-place was being spilled out into a larger world of food and debris, a world that rumbled underneath. He had a vague flash of lead-gray morning sky before a ringing clang brought more darkness. He blundered around the dazzling smells, nibbling bits of breakfast.

An old ragpicker was poking querulously at the rubbish bins behind the ancient apartment house (she appeared out of nowhere while the garbage man was braking his lumbering conveyance) and she scuttled darkly away, snarling, when he stepped around the back to empty the row of bins. She vanished, and a schoolboy whistled his way out of the alley. There was a slight blur between the whist-ling schoolboy and the ragged newsboy who picked up his papers where the *Chronicle* truck dumped them on the corner.

December dawn dripped with more rain; the men and women darting out of the arched entrance of the Union Apartments wore heavy expressions as they hurried for their landbuses. Another miserable workday.

"Paper, mister?" the newsboy asked at the apartment's door.

The man he asked scowled as he fished out a coin. "You're not Tip. Where's the regular boy?"

"Tip's sick. I'm Johnny." He grinned, showing missing teeth. "Kora Miller live here?"

"See for yourself. How'd I know?" The man ran to make his bus and Johnny stepped over to the mailbox registry of the tenants. While his eyes whipped over it his mind probed the rainy street.

So far so good. The whole-transformation had worked. Morko's spy had probably imagined he committed suicide, erased himself when defeat seemed inevitable. But he couldn't be sure of this and, anyway, the spy's job was not over. There was still Oren.

When the next worker opened the click-open door Johnny slipped inside before it could bump shut. The sloppy hodgepodge of penciled, typed, and hand-printed names in this old apartment dwelling (already doomed for tear-down) had told him Kora lived on the top floor. Four. The elevator had a sign on it, *Out Of Order*. Johnny loped up the stairs two or

three at a clip and found Apartment 20B way in the back, by the rear fire escape.

He buzzed. After a while the door opened on its chain.

"Hi, Miss Martin!" he grinned. "I'm your new paper boy, Johnny."

Kora's large eyes were smudged from a toss-and-turn night worrying about Oren.

"Okay. Give me the paper." Then she blinked. "Wait! I don't get the paper anymore."

Johnny's tennis shoe poked through the door crack.

"It's free, Miss Martin."

Kora frowned. "I don't think—"

"Can I come in a minute? It's about the *Star*."

Something in the way he emphasized the last word made her reach up and unchain the door. "All right. Just for a minute. I was just fixing a cup of coffee. How about a glass of milk?"

He trailed close behind her red house coat into the kitchenette and Kora poured out his milk without waiting for an answer. She fed stray kittens, too.

Johnny perched on the chair, slapping his papers down on the table and taking up the glass.

"What's this *Star* business? There's no paper called the *Star* in San Francisco."

"Nope."

"Finish your milk and git."

Johnny blinked at her, grinning. "I got a message for you. Guy named Starr. He told me to give it to you when nobody's around. Anybody around?"

"Not right now. My new roommate is moving in this morning. Any minute."

"Bet you just met her lately."

"I've never met her. She's David's sister. Just met David last night. Say, what—"

"You met David at the Cracked Mug."

Kora nodded. "What—"

"Oh, I get around," Johnny bragged over his milk. "This sister—she's from L.A. too?"

"Yes. They've had some really tough luck. She's got no place to stay, getting in on the early morning bus. There's a job coming up tomorrow or the next day and David thinks that maybe—hey! What am I telling you all this for?"

"It's on your mind, that's why," Johnny philosophized, folding back the top paper thoughtfully.

Kora sipped her coffee, then got up. "Listen, Johnny. I got things to do. What's the message you've got for me?"

"Lemme think. Yeah. Starr says he can't see you right away. He says not to worry about him—you will see him soon. Oh, yeah. He says be a good girl. Be good to your new friends and stick close. Wait for, him. He'll show up soon."

"Where is he?" Kora wailed.

"Dunno."

"Why can't I go to him? Why can't I see him?"

"Dunno," Johnny wagged. "But it's serious business. He says do these things and keep good thoughts about him. Maybe you can go to him soon."

Kora whipped around the table, her nails digging into his jacket shoulder. "Johnny, you find Oren and tell him I *can't* stop worrying and

that if he doesn't come soon 111—"

The door buzzer made a snake-rattle. Johnny went stiff and stepped back. "Gotta go now."

"Wait!" Kora moved into the other room to let in her new roommate.

Johnny flashed her a grin and turned to the kitchenette window; it opened on the fire escape that zigzagged down into the alley.

"Sit down. Make yourself at home," she told David's sister from Los Angeles, wondering why the girl's nose twitched, as if she smelled something she didn't like. "I'll get you a cup of coffee and tell the paper boy—"

But Johnny was gone. Kora glanced out of the window and down the fire escape. No Johnny. While she was pouring out a cup of coffee for her new roommate her eye caught a large ad on the back of the morning paper, where Johnny had happened to fold it.

"YOU CAN WIN A FREE TRIP TO MARS! FILL IN THE COUPON!"

Oren stepped out of his little cabin on the headland halfway between San Francisco and Stinson Beach to gulp in the fresh damp morning air. The rain had stopped, but the December sky was slugged with gray, two hours into sun. A low wind plucked at his colorful Pendleton shirt as he strode over the lichened rocks to the cliff's brow. A hundred feet below the morning tide smashed on a welter of black rock and sucked through a blowhole; further out on the Pacific whitecaps dabbled the blue-black water. Oren's silver eyes moved from the little ponds where the ocean had painstakingly gathered together herds of sea-dreck, out and out to where sea turned into sky.

He breathed in great lungfuls of air with relish.

There was a pulsing content within him for a moment, just to be alive and standing here this chill whipping morning. Then he raked his long fingers through his wheat-white mop in a rapid, impatient gesture.

Something wouldn't let him be happy more than a minute at a time. Something churned and seethed down inside of him, a nagging finger that pointed the way to some out-world destiny that hurt to think about. Why

him? Why— and what?

Was it a thing? A place? A person? What, in the name of all consciousness, plagued him and drove him to the brink of insanity?

He had discovered this tumbled weatherbeaten shack on the Marin headland over a year ago and it had become his special place to come and think things out—when the world and its pattern of phoniness got too much for him. He hadn't fixed up the shack; if he did somebody was sure to drive him off. At best, it was a temporary retreat. He hadn't told anybody about it. Nobody.

The restless drive inside him had driven him half around the world, singing his songs. Mexico. Alaska. The lush islands of the South Pacific. None of this seemed to quench the strange fires burning deep within him; nor had his studies of the sciences and ancient religions. He looked everywhere, flung his songs to the stars here on the headland; he learned to pilot a spacecraft, but rebelled at the restrictions imposed by the owners and quit. Now it seemed as if even his music only intensified a cosmic tugging, made it more inevitable, more poignant.

Kora. The thought of her warmed his blood and put a happy cloak around his heart. She was special as no woman ever had been or could be, for him. Her beatnik uniform of sloppy sweater and black pants, her over-mascaraed eyes, all a facade. Window-dressing. Behind her compulsion to help those who needed help was a longing that matched his, or nearly, at least.

That was why they'd clicked in that first shattering look.

But the curious longing and ahuman emptiness that he felt was in Kora, too. She couldn't help him because she had to find the answer, too. They must find it together.

On bright nights he would stand right here in the wind hour after hour, looking up into the flinted blackness of space and yearn toward it, as if just by wishing he could send his body spinning up into it—somewhere. Then he would go back into the shack and play his guitar with the unbreakable strings, his modern *kantele*. Sometimes words would push themselves out of the deepest gulfs inside him. There would be bright moments like quicksilver. Secret, all-personal moments, when he nearly touched—something.

That was why he hadn't told anybody about this place. He would have told Kora only-Yes. It was that strange lawyer fellow who called himself Morris J. Phelps. Phelps had told him some strange, strange things. He had no way of knowing what the law-yer meant by the things he said, but now he held those words inside of his mind like a litany of hope.

There have only been a handful of exceptional humans ...A touch of true cosmic beauty. That spark is in you

He thought about the trial and the little weasel-nosed attorney from San Francisco who appeared in his defense. His name was Quale and he knew about the ins and outs of the Law, all the little legal tricks. Quale would not, Oren guessed, be above a small bribe here and there. The District Attorney had tried to make Oren a whipping boy for all the many others in the area involved with drugs—all the poor misguided punks who had ever sucked nepenthe out of a marijuana cigarette, not to mention their predators. Feeling ran high. But Quale seemed to have an infinite amount of money at his disposal and he pulled some sleight-of-hand tricks, and justice was swift. Oren received the option of jail or a stiff fine. Quale pulled the money out of his briefcase like a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat.

Don't contact Kora in any way.

Oren had obeyed. Perhaps it was all that money. Or something in Morris J. Phelps' eyes when he said it.

The place where the stars are close.

He shivered and went back inside the shack to fix some breakfast. Stepping across the sagging threshold he thought he heard a twig snap in the manzanita that overhung the lost path to his hideout. A rabbit, maybe.

Oren was lifting the soot-blackened tin coffee pot off the rusty stove when he heard scratching at the door. Scratching, and a low compelling whine^

PART TWO

THE DISCOVERY

I

Port Mabs was a bubble of putrescent smells. An avant-garde writer had likened it to a gas globule a doctor sees drifting down his patient's alimentary canal under the fluoro-scope. Flatulence on a dead planet.

The cramped city was a bubble to contain the air its inhabitants needed to survive; it was a stench because it was monstrously overpopulated for the proportion of cleansing and renewal of gases the machines down under those narrow red streets could provide. Like the freeways of Terra a generation ago, its capacities were insufficient even before completion.

Its population was largely an impermanent one; miners who couldn't make it home between stints on the more productive planets, a scattering of organization men and promoters, some freelancers out to make a buck, con-men prostitutes. Whatever was needed close at hand for the big space push, and the inevitable predators and hangers-on.

Automation and overpopulation had long since made Terra a sorry home for countless millions: colonization to other planets was the obvious answer, but on the only two planets capable of sustaining human life, Venus, and the Jupiter satellite Ganymede, the advance-guard colonials endured unspeakable privations; the cost per colonist was impractical, too. Mars had been sucked dry by its dying races centuries before and everything had to be shipped in. The old fictional romances of establishing fantastic cities on the (to humans) hot or cold whirling hells just wouldn't work. Mining, exploiting, yes. Permanent colonization would require a good deal of brand new technological and physiological advances.

The ultimate answer was the push into another solar system—Alpha Centauri—where, hopefully, Earth-like conditions might be found; The Big Man was not particularly concerned with the unemployed and unfed millions who needed this new survival space. The money and human blood spilled out into Sol's system meant only wealth and power to him; he dangled mineral-rich planets and planetoids from his belt like trophies.

Waddling down the steps from the spacer that brought him to Port Mars, his sparrow-like lady secretary moving in his shadow, he screwed up his fleshy face under his helmet. This was his first trip into outer space and all two-fifty pounds of him shivered distaste. He gave a sour glance at

the Bubble some five miles from the landing Port itself. The Mayor and a small honor guard bobbed their helme-ted heads in greeting.

Pallent didn't even give them a nod. Inside the plastic-top limousine that was to whisk him into the bubble-city he permitted his sparrow-secretary, Miss Pink, to unfasten and remove his air-helmet.

"What a hole!" he snorted. He indicated that he needed a drink at once and Miss Pink poured one out for him from the miniature bar.

Lattimer, the Mayor, rode along. He was a little soft ball of a human with eyebrows that rose and fell nervous-ly. Especially now. He'd done very well for himself as J.K.R. Pallent's agent on Port Mars, but always there was the fearful knowledge that someday he would have to encounter The Big Man and his well-known cantankerous foibles face to face. He and his underlings had been carefully screened on Pallent's sybaritic whims, his exact preferences in scotch, his personal masseur, his perfumes, his loud taste in clothes.

He watched The Big Man put his glass of scotch and water up to his heavy lips, and Lattimer swallowed along with him. And when Pallent leaned back on the cushioned seat with a relaxed puff, the Mayor took the liberty of breathing, too.

Pallent's pinched eyes glanced critically out at the flat reddish plain and the blue midday sky. Suddenly everything went dark; the limousine stopped.

"What's that? What happenedr

Mayor Lattimer made a nervous smile. "Eclipse. We have a lot of them. Diemos isn't so bad. Phobos gives us a thousand a year, something like that. You get used to them."

"Should have arranged not to have one now." He snarled and wobbled his heavy shoulders. "Delay!"

"Sorry about that, J. K. R."

"Careful next time."

"I'll see to it that Phobos—" The Mayor stopped short with a gurgle. For

a moment he had actually thought...

"Every minute of my time is worth ten thousand world credits," Pallent grumbled.

"I know, J. K. R.!"

The Big Man sipped and then the offending satellite moved off the sun. It shone cold and distant on the dusty red world, refracting dully from the Bubble.

Mayor Lattimer spied some figures on the Bubble as they shot into the air-lock, but The Big Man's only reaction was a burst of profanity at his first whiff of the air.

"My God! Smells like a latrine in Port Said!"

The Mayor ushered him and the sparrow secretary off the narrow circular street into an aircar. There were police and plainclothes guards everywhere to keep the rabble away; The Big Man's visit was supposed to be secret but Mayor Lattimer wasn't taking any chances. As the copter plummeted up to the penthouse apartment which had been redecorated and perfumed for this event, Pallent grimaced down at the narrow vehicleless streets, which formed concentric circles to the Core, made up of shops, restaurants and bordellos.

"I thought you'd like to fresh up first, J.K.R.," the Mayor burbled when the air-car cushioned down in the center of the lanai roof garden. "Your masseur is waiting." He hadn't missed a trick, at least he hoped he hadn't.

After he had wasted a three-day normal ration of precious water bathing and had been pummeled and kneaded into an enormous pink loaf, Pallent wrapped himself in a flashy purple and orange robe (he affected weird patterns and color combinations) and went out to the meeting room across the hall.

There was a guard at the door and two more uniformed guards inside. At the oval table ten people waited expectantly. This was a big moment for them, for Pallent, for Terra.

"Out!" The Big Man told the Mayor.

"But, J.K.R.-!"

"This doesn't concern you." The booming voice was threaded with menace. "Take those two guards with you."

"There have been rumors," Mayor Lattimer protested. "In spite of all our secrecy, I've already had two notes threatening your life, J.K.R.!"

"Rumors-schmoomers. Always trying to kill me. Why don't they do it or shut up!" Pallent waited for the Mayor to scuttle out, then let his secretary help him into his chair at the head of the conference table.

They waited, the filtered air roiling with suspense, while Pallent lit up a big cigar. The Big Man puffed as he squinted at the faces around the polished table.

"I've decided not to die." He gave a barking chuckle. "Got a whole Foundation working on it, night and day. Cells. Glands. The whole ball of wax."

The ten grave faces put on faint smiles, in case this was supposed to be a funny. Pallent's mood whipped away from humor and pampered petulance to the steel-and-ice facet of his personality, which had thrust him out of a minor factory in Jackson, Mississippi to absolute control of a banking complex. Under a dozen names and trademarks, The Big Man's corporations ruled nearly half of Terra, including the new political United World. His status as overlord, Great Lord Jehovah, King-Pm, etc., was felt even among the peasants who took his name in vain on the walls of public toilets.

"Who is first?" he snapped.

The group glanced at each other, vacillating. Pallent pointed at his secretary.

"Pick one. I haven't got all day."

Pink unzipped his briefcase and dipped her nose in it.

"Vern Teel, coordinator of Project Out."

"Well, Teel?"

A stocky man with blunt fingers stood up.

"First, a brief outline of the progress we have made since the last meeting. It hasn't been any picnic. Dr. P. L. Corwin, our esteemed physicist, who originated the Space-Warp theory that makes the Project feasible, has worked in close conjunction with the space engineering team in charge of actually building the ship. The fact that we had to work in such secrecy, constructing it piecemeal in a dozen locations, added to the coordinating difficulties. But now that the ship and all its components is at Project City near the polar cap—"

"Skip all that!" Pallent's wave of impatience shook his fat under that flash of silk yardage. "Get to the meat! When's takeoff? When, when, when?"

Teel sputtered, his phlegmatic wide face twitched.

"Dr. Corwin?"

The physicist was a gnome of a man with wispy frizzles of snow-white hair, almost a caricature of his breed. Behind those robin egg blue eyes was one of the keenest mathematics-oriented brains Terra had produced since Einstein, perhaps *the* brain. His lack of interest in the pompous conclave was obvious.

He faced The Big Man with mild reproach.

"Sir, I don't believe you appreciate the enormity of what we are trying to accomplish. Interstellar flight by ordinary ships and fuels would take several lifetimes. This thing we are concerned with is a whole new science in itself. The Space-Time theory is irrefutable, in my opinion. But putting it into actual use is something else again."

The Big Man waved all this away.

"Don't bug me with egghead talk. I don't give a hoot in hell how you do it. That's your department, and the engineers who are building the ship. God! The money I've poured into the Project would fill Tycho!"

"Exactly my point, sir. That is why we can't afford to fail! Everything must be perfection itself, down to the last micromillimeter and down to the last microsecond. Failure the first time would mean more money,

more lives wasted-more time. Normal tests and tracking just don't work here."

Pallent gave him a look resembling respect as he sat down and, encouraged, the space medico and the security chief had something to say about their own problems. The surgeon-psychiatrist feared that while the new technology, along with Dr. Corwin's time-warp thrust, might get the crew into Alpha Centauri all in one piece, they might be dead or have their brains scrambled by the time-lurch. The Chief of Security bragged with a wide bland smile that for his part the Polar Project Base was the best kept secret since Project Manhattan. The cover of an archeological study of one of the latter day Martian cities (the polar caps with their thin layer of atmosphere and water were the last-ditch stand of the ancient civilization, and since they'd burrowed underground it followed that large-scale mining operations were an archeological prerequisite) was perfect. Since the long-dead Martians had stripped their planet of every vestige of mineral wealth, during their local wars and fights for survival, nobody but historians took the trouble to journey down the long silent canals or across the endless red wastes.

The Big Man's face turned mauve while the Securities Chief boasted.

"How come Soviet Allied knows all about it and is building an Alpha ship of their own?"

Ten gasps followed.

"No!"

"Naturally. One of you is a spy. Never mind about that. Just keep an eye out for sabotage." He gave his jowls a little wrench as he stuck out his palm for Miss Pink to hand him a pill and a glass of water. He gulped it down. "I might as well advise you—all of you—that I have my own devices for taking care of saboteurs and sellouts to Allied. Just a friendly warning." He paused to let this sink in. "Now—what I want to know before we disperse is—*when?*"

Teel looked at Dr. Cdrwin for help. "We hope that takeoff will be within the week. We're working night and day."

Pallent groaned, then stood. "Make it five days. I don't think I can stand more than five days in this—this pesthole."

He spent the next day at the construction, prodding, examining, putting forth the amazing knowledge he had acquired through the years and the acumen that was a watchword in the realms of finance on the pinnacle level. His metier was dealing with men. He was never satisfied with anything short of the best in any given field, and part of his raw psychology was to infuriate and insult and tongue-lash underlings until hidden reserves of glandular secretions gushed into their heated bloodstreams and promoted superhuman effort. Quite a wild twisted kind of genius.

As his Chief of Security had pointed out, the Project was neatly concealed beneath a cliff and a huddle of archeologist's shacks. Its varied technicians and workmen had arrived separately and under careful screening.

The Project breathed a sigh of relief when his aircar took off and left them to their tasks.

For The Big Man's own safety the Mayor kept him from leaving the hotel by the expedient of laying down the law to hotel employees and all the guards; nobody was to take him anywhere or accompany him. In the Bubble only hard cash signified, and The Big Man never carried cash.

Pallent was ready to explode after two days. There were a thousand things he could be doing on Terra. Empires to create. Enemies to smash. He kept in touch as best he could but interworld communication was, at best, no easy matter. J.K.R. was a giant in a cage.

The third evening, Terr an time, The Big Man vanished.

The service maid who let herself in the penthouse service door to lay out his night things and check his wants found him gone. She hurried downstairs to tell the Mayor.

Mayor Lattimer stared at her, mouth agape, before he went to change his trousers. A room-by-room search produced nothing. Panic mounted.

"Can't understand it." The chief guard shook his head and flexed his pectorals. "All that blubber just couldn't disappear into thin air!"

"It did, though," the Mayor snapped. "Nobody's seen him for hours. Nobody saw anything. Nobody- knows anything. No visitors. Everybody in

or out of the hotel has been screened to the gills. Every exit's been covered—from the time he got here."

"How about the service entrance to his bedroom?"

"Covered."

"Sure?"

The side-door guard was sent for.

"I was only gone five minutes," he justified, under grilling. "He wanted some cigars. I buzzed for the man at the service desk but nobody showed. You know J.K.R. He wanted them cigars *now!*"

Mayor Lattimer moaned. "Five minutes. That's all they needed."

"Who's they?"

"Allied. God knows. Plenty of people would cut him down if they had the chance. Kidnappers, maybe!"

The young redhead who operated the back service elevator put in his two-cents. "Maybe he just went out for a little walk." He sauntered off, oblivious to their scorn, patting his uniform pocket that contained the check with the famous signature.

A general alarm was deemed inadvisable. This would only alert the populace to The Big Man's presence somewhere in the Bubble. There were thousands of citizens with long-festering grievances who might want to kill The Big Man.

"One thing's sure," the big security guard said. "He won't get out of the Bubble tonight. The Port's air-lock is buttoned up tight until tomorrow morning at seven."

Mayor Lattimer shivered.

"Then he's out there—someplace."

"We'll find him."

"Yes, but alive-or dead?"

The tight little complex of humanity that moved along the circular street of the Bubble was made up, to a high percentage, of workers from outplanet mines. They came to Port Mars as a relief from long stints on barren rocks, to raise some hell. There were also those who provided that relief and the necessities of life. Necessities often included drugs; narcotic addiction among miners was high, due to the unnatural rigors of their existence.

Among the humans was a smattering of alien life. Ven-urian plant-animals with their curious green-yellow topknots. They stayed mainly to themselves and were imported for menial labor. Then there were the Ganymede beast-men; these provided rough combat sport in the entertainment arenas. They fought each other to the death on command. There were spasmodic protests against "inhuman" treatment of primitives, but here on Mars no proper policing existed; also it was deemed legitimate sport among colonists to use Gannys for gun practice.

Flamboyant disguises and masks were commonplace in the Bubble. One more fat human in a purple cloak and a red-fringed mask passed unheeded in the motley welter. Because of the lesser gravity-pull, Terrans who stayed long ran to fat, and in any case there wasn't much room for active outdoor exercise.

The mines employed just about anybody they could get, which argued a high percentage of criminals fleeing Terran justice. With the low-intelligence levels predominant, it was scarcely surprising that miners and colonists who got to Port Mars were hardly human, and they took their fleeting pleasures furiously and sometimes strangely.

Then there were rich Terrans who came here slumming or because of the moral freedom. They put on masks and costumes and added a picturesque atmosphere to the otherwise drab and confined climate of the Bubble.

Through all of this The Big Man wended.

The red-paved pedestrian streets curved downward toward what was called the Core. The Bubble accrued an engineering advantage from being shaped like a bowl; in effect it *was* a giant air bubble with one-third of it under sand. The Core was a series of arcades; shops, restaurants, bars, entertainment centers of all kinds including, of course, gambling. It had three levels to it. Level One was cafeterias and the better bars, gambling

casinos, and harlotries. Level Two had more bars and entertainments of a much rawer nature, some untenable on Terra. Level Three contained mainly the sealed-off machinery rooms and sewage ducts; but somehow over the years sordid other rooms got scooped out and, in these, the drug-crazed dregs of the Bubble carried on the tattered remnants of unwholesome existence until they died. It was a saying among seasoned spacemen to Tyros: "Don't go down those Third Steps. You'll never get back up."

Pallent sniffed the close air with a wry grimace; ran his tongue across dry lips. He needed a drink. Even water would do. As he moved between the arcades he smiled at the way he'd outwitted Mayor Lattimer and all those guards.

Bribing the elevator boy and trading a check for cash, two-to-one, was easy. But the rest of it was like a game of chess, restationing a guard here and another one there, until he finally made it out into the street. It wasn't just for diversion, although he did sicken periodically over all that fawning. He hadn't brought the cloak-and-mask here, as did slummers from Terra, just for fun and games.

This was secret, dead-important business. J.K.R. liked his pleasures—they were hedonistic and many—but always at the top of his sharp mind was—gainful, promotional business. He was playing for high stakes—higher than any ever conceived before in the mind of any man. He found the down ramp to Level Two. First he stopped in a cafeteria and fingered an unfamiliar small coin into a slot. He grinned, watching the plas-to-cup drop and the machine urinate some sickly pink liquid into it. These machines were his. The whole line-up of them; and the millions of them on Earth. Yet he'd never used one before in his life.

He drank, winced. Still, he was thirsty and that was a novelty in itself. He drank it all, then tried one of the slot sandwiches. This proved inedible to his pampered pallet. He tossed it in a nearby trash can and went back out into the corridor.

He hunted until he found the nightclub called *The Purple Mouse*, hiked his cloak up around his dewlaps and went in.

He blinked in the dusky purplish light that flickered rhythmically around and around the black walls from a device in the ceiling, playing on the evening crush of miners and colonists. The overpowering fake-violet

perfume they used to mask the close atmosphere offended his nostrils.

He went straight to the bar, to the big Greek with the fierce handlebar moustache.

"You are Korkalis," he said. "You manage this bar."

The big Greek stared fiercely, frowning. "So?"

"You also take care of the—uh—pharmaceuticals for the Core." His voice was a hissed breath.

"I do?" Karakalis gulped. There weren't many men who knew this. He squinted very carefully at the fat man's face behind that red mask, the fringe of which shivered when the fat man spoke.

Pallent lifted his left hand; there was a heavy emerald ring on his little finger. Korkalis gulped; his moustache quivered as he swabbed the bar in front of Pallent.

"Would you like a table, sir?"

Pallent nodded. "In the back. I'm waiting for someone."

"I'll send him right over when he shows." Korkalis snapped his fingers at a curvy waitress in a bikini-brief costume that included enormous purple mouse ears. "Find this gentleman a table in the back."

"But there aren't any—"

"In the back." Korkalis gave his big shoulders an impatient shake. "I'll get you one. Please follow me."

Pallent ordered his own brand of scotch and was surprised when he actually got it.

"Here you are, handsome," the curvy redhead with the mouse ears smiled. Women treated The Big Man as if he was Tarzan and Casanova combined, but these genuflections bored him. He tipped her and waved her away.

He sipped his drink and watched the floor show. First two emaciated Venurians prepared the round stage to the right of his semi-concealed

table with tropical foliage, brilliant plastic trees and ferns, and the band reseated themselves from their break. A trumpet blast, then the band eased in with a syncopated version of a missionary hymn. A young girl moved in a mock-prim dance until something behind the shrubbery startled her. The tree-fronds shook, then parted; a near-naked beast-man from Ganymede leaped out in her path. He was big, ugly, hairy. While normally rather shy of humans, this one had been coached for his sadistic part.

Drums pounded. The cute missionary girl stifled a scream and tried to run. The beast-man prowled after. A dance routine followed, with the girl evading the beast-man's clumsy passes. The drunken miners and tourists roared their approval and made raucous comments.

Pallent drank and yawned and drummed his fingers on the table impatiently. Where the hell was he?

"Hello, Uncle Jason."

He whirled. The young man who moved up to his table was tall, thin to the point of emaciation; there was a sardonic down-tilt to his lips, and his lean unshaven face had an ascetic monkish cast to the hollowed jawline, matched by the ironic glint in his somber brown eyes.

"Sit down," Pallent said.

The young man twisted a chair over from another table and slid onto it. "Buy me a drink, Uncle Jason?"

Pallent snapped his fingers at a passing waitress. "Don't call me that!" he growled in a whisper.

"Sorry, boss."

Over the rim of his glass The Big Man let his eyes run over his nephew, from the indifferently combed brown hair down to his worn seedy clothes and dirty fingernails. He looked like a typical space-bum, on the run from the law, perhaps, and broke.

"Quite a makeup job." He smiled thinly. "How are you, Rick?"

"Fine and dandy, un—boss. Now, about all this cloak-and-dagger

routine. Just where do I fit in?"

Pallent nodded, his eyes ice-cold behind the absurd mask. "First—you followed my instructions? Nobody knows who you are?"

"Nobody. I conned a job on one of your ships, just the way you told me. I even brought along another space-bum, for cover."

Pallent scowled. "That's not so smart. We don't want any outsiders in on this. Not any! Who is this other space-bum?"

"See for yourself. That's him with the guitar, going up on the stage. He talked Korkalis into letting him sing, for food and whatever they throw at him."

Pallent moved his eyes in the direction of the round raised area. The band was gone again, the shrubbery was cleared, and a soft blue spot showed down on a backless stool somebody had shoved into the circle. Moving into the light was a long-stride youth with a shock of wheat-blond hair and white pants. Under his brief white tunic Pallent could see rangy muscles. He looked tanned and healthy and chapped from intimacy with hot suns. He and his guitar were somehow grotesque in this dive and not the least incongruous thing about him was that perky little shag of a dog trailing along at his heels.

"Who is he?"

"Name's Oren Starr. One of those old ballad singers, only he writes his own. New songs, about space. Quite a man. He can use his fists, I found out."

Pallent peered again. This Oren Starr was taking his seat casually on the stool and, since nobody was paying much attention to him right now, he strummed his guitar idly and leaned down to make comments to his little dog.

"What has he got to do with my orders? Where'd you pick up this bum—and why?"

"For one thing he kept me from making a rash decision, one night—in the fog."

"Go on."

Rick shrugged, his brooding eyes stared past The Big Man across the table, at something nobody else saw. "I'd about had it, Uncle Jason." He used the name deliberately. "Stooging for you since I was knee-high. Running your -dirty errands. I was going to kill myself." He took a long sip of his scotch. "Starr stopped me. Him and that little dog. Then, I don't know exactly how, he persuaded me I did have a reason to keep breathing. That maybe it was you, after all. Maybe your new project did hold some promise, some goodness, behind it. Something beyond—greed."

Pallent grunted. "So you took him along."

"Somebody took somebody," Rick grinned. "I'm not sure just who."

"I don't like this. Get rid of him." It was an order.

"I'm already rid of him. He's got a job here. Me? I've got a job—"

The Big Man nodded, gestured. "Get going, then. You're expected at the Project tomorrow. You'll be put to work as a routine crew member, to take the place of the one who took sick."

He watched Rick move slowly out of his chair in the direction of the corridors. There was reluctance in his cool sardonic look, in the way he pushed through the crowd. Indifference. Pallent watched him go and swore silently. Rick was an oddball, a well-trained well-disciplined member of The Big Man's most secret staff, but still an oddball.

Yet he was the only man Pallent had ever felt he could completely trust.

II

His preoccupation with his dead sister's quixotic progeny (How could any young man resent making all that money?) carried him through another drink. When he snapped his head up and got ready to take off he noticed that the miners and tourists of the *Purple Mouse* had diminished in number, off in search of more personalized amusements. The mood of the club had changed; those who were still drinking were drinking in a kind of cold desperation. The perfumed room was hung over with grim hard-core silence.

Out of this silence came a clear voice.

Pallent turned to its source.

The ballad singer in the pool of blue light had decided now was the time to earn his bread. What was the bum's name? Oh, yes. Oren. Oren Starr. Well, Pallent brooded, he had this character to thank for his nephew being here at all. The singer's long legs were folded half-under the stool and his little white dog snoozed between them. His strumming and his singing were like a gentle wind from off the sea.

Pallent cared little for music of any kind, but now he forgot his nagging worries about Rick, noticing what was happening around him. This singer, Oren Starr, was giving the patrons of the *Purple Mouse* the soft sell and they were buying. They strained to hear him. His lyrics were folksy, banal. A few tossed-out phrases made pictures: pictures of Terran oceans and mountains, of chickens pecking around a peasant's mountain cabin. It was something Oren was able to put into the simple words, a quiet tugging haunt.

Even the ice-eyed waitresses and Korkalis behind the bar stopped to listen.

Oren's songs swarmed right out of the blood-drenched soil and rock of Terra; they moved across this smoky silence like a velvet slap.

Pallant smiled thinly. What suckers!

Still. There was power in Oren's soft-sell. Power to twist these space-jaded hearts. The Big Man knew power when he saw it, heard it, smelled it. This cottonpicker had it. Just what he had wasn't easy to pin down, but even Pal-lent's flint-hard soul felt it. Power like this was worth money.

Never one to miss opportunity wherever and whenever it knocked, Pallent told himself: *This young bum might prove useful*. He'd work on it.

Oren sang about Earth's green hills, about waves crashing on rocky shores, about shimmering spears of moonlight on a dark lake, about elfin horns heard faintly on the misty wind, about lush forests, about love.

For just a moment, closing his eyes, Pallent smelled the wine-sweet air

of Earth; then the magic was gone and that heavy cloying perfume they used here to mask the sweat and the stench washed over him again.

When Oren stopped singing they gaped and shuffled in a kind of embarrassment.

"How about a handout for the guy?" The big Greek behind the bar tossed a credit bill into the ring of light. "He's here on his own. Guy's broke."

An old hag with purple eyes and a mouth like a wound blubbered up to the stage, flung a handful of bills toward Oren, then staggered drunkenly out. Coins and credits rained down for a moment.

The singer's silver eyes flashed as he grinned and scooped up the loot. He said something to his dog, then gave the guitar a triple twang. He sang a happy nonsense song that made them tap their tables. Then, abruptly, he sang about an old peasant woman sitting in the packed earth doorstep of her hut, cradling her dead baby in her arms, crooning a soft lullaby.

A drunk in back slumped over his table, sobbing.

Pallent scowled. This he didn't like. It touched on things he didn't want to think about, stirred dead ashes of compassion deep inside his mountainous carcass. The waitress was gone so he motioned the moustached bartender for another scotch.

Korkalis wandered over to the table.

"What do you think? I just hired the guy off the street. Hard to get acts up here. Not a bad voice, only now he makes them sad, they don't drink."

"They will, after," Pallent advised him. He pushed a credit note across the table. "Let him sing."

The moustache shrugged and pocketed the money.

Oren noticed the byplay. His strange silver eyes held onto The Big Man's for a long second. Something in them an overtone. Not that he recognized Pallent, but it made The

Big Man uneasy; he wondered if he really did have horns and a forked

tail. Again Oren sang.

Why does a man have to rob and to kill?

Why does a dream have to die?

Why do so many people have to starve?

Who taught our world how to cry?

The answer, my friend, is blowing through the stars,

The answer is blowing through the stars.

Like he told Korkalis, they would drink later. And Pallent was one of them.

Outside, an hour later, the long windless corridor was empty. Pallent's footsteps made hollow echoes, even his cloak made a sinister rustling sound in the vacuum-quiet. No police, not that the Bubble offered much in the way of protection. Nobody. Just that long curve of bad-smelling corridor, and the up-ramp humming very faintly a long way off, around the far bend.

He passed a yawning gulp of stairs leading down to Level Three, the level of the air-machines and sewage disposal plants, the level of those who had gone one step too far down the primrose paths of drugs and degradation. He shivered and hurried.

But not fast enough.

They caught him here.

There were three of them. Fear rivered over him like an iced shower when he saw their faces. They were animals, predatory animals, with drug-crazed eyes, and claws.

He tried to run.

They caught up easily. One blocked his way, snorting an eager hyena-laugh. He put out his arms to ward off the fists when they came, but it was futile. He fell back, cried out as he fell to his knees. There was something of IBM precision in the way they went to work on him. They

had come up from the lowest depths to find a mark, and tonight he was it.

"Help!" he shrieked. "Help! Murder!"

The walls, with their patina of scum, spun his feeble cry down empty corridors.

A knife glinted in the heavy gloom. He weaved back and forth to avoid it, making little pleading moans. From where he huddled, his head slapping and bumping the concrete, came a pitter-patter sound, like tiny padded feet. Then fifteen pounds of white fur leaped on top of him, between him and the knife, yapping a cascade of fury.

The shadow with the knife made a vicious swipe at the dog, missed. Then it straightened with a livid curse. The Big Man rolled off until he hit wall, then flashed his terrified eyes around to see what was happening.

Beside the fur-ball was a man, splashing his fists in all directions. One of the muggers was bent double, trying to get the dog's teeth out of his leg. The one with the knife came at the long-legged man in a rapid lunge. When the man twisted, the knife caught the third mugger in the guts. He went down, coughing curses and blood. The tow-head whipped behind the knifer and caught his wrist in a muscular wrench that snapped bone.

The knife clattered to the floor. Pallent scuttled to grab it. When the dog-bit mugger looked up the tall man caught his jaw roundly, wickedly. He went down without a sound.

Pallent clawed up the wall and put the knife he held into the back of the mugger with the shattered wrist. Over and over, while blood squirted in his face.

"You're the singer—Oren," Pallent panted and swabbed blood on his cloak with a fine grimace.

The tall youth nodded. "You heard me sing. I saw you in the club."

"You just happened along?"

"Stranger and I were trying to find someplace to sleep. We were halfway up the escalator when Stranger heard something I didn't. He jumped the railing between the ramps and ran back. I followed him and

found he was right, as usual."

The dog nosed close to the singer, wagging pride.

Pallent was beginning to regain some dignity. He gave the bloody corpse at his feet a kick, watching the third mugger leap and run for the down stairway with a lethal curse.

"Maybe you'd like me to see you home," Oren suggested, frowning faintly.

"Come on, minstrel." The Big Man gave his bloody cloak a toss and started for the up-ramp. "I got a job for you."

"I'm not sure I want to work for you," Oren told him.

Stranger was already following Pallent. The singer whistled for him to come back, but the dog only stopped, gave him a cocked look, then trotted after The Big Man.

Oren shrugged and followed.

III

Pallent bypassed his premature wake being held in the Mayor's little office near the front door of the hotel; engineers and officers from the Project had moved in for a hushed and secret conference. The Big Man gave them a nod as he moved by the door toward the elevator. The Mayor saw him and shrieked. He hustled out and down the hall after Pallent, Oren, and the tiny dog.

At the elevator Pallent told the Mayor, "This is my new bodyguard. Just hired him." He gestured Oren to get in. "He'll have die suite next to mine."

Mayor Lattimer sputtered: "But that's *my*—"

"Next to mine."

"Right now?"

"Now."

At one-thirty the next afternoon, during his breakfast, Pallent required that Oren Starr be brought into his presence. Oren sank his dusty shoes into the white penthouse carpet, and whistled. The opulence of the tycoon's apartment, with its translucent green walls and white appointments, was a shock after the dreary Core, everything covered with red smut. Luxury had little or no meaning to him, even though he'd never had any. He hadn't even thought about it much. But last night he had slept in an enormous bed with silk sheets and been fed exotic tidbits while the Mayor's wife was being routed out of it. His protests were ignored. He told Mrs. Lattimer, who was hustling out her personal toiletries, he didn't want all this— any shakedown would do for him and Stranger—but she shuddered and backed out with a terrified bleat.

So now he knew. He and Stranger had saved the life of The Big Man himself...

Pallent was sprawled across a couch like Caracalla, dipping his fat hands into silver dishes.

"Breakfast?"

"No, thanks. I had some an hour ago."

Pallent fed noisily. Oren waited, Stranger's black eyes staring gravely from his usual post between Oren's long legs. The sight of *11 that succulent food being pushed indelicately into that flesh-mountain got to be too much. Stranger gave a wet yip.

"Must you have that mongrel with you all the time?" The Big Man tossed the dog a morsel and watched him gulp it down with a pettish grimace.

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"He's my mascot, my friend."

"He's a flea-bit mongrel."

"He saved your life," Or en countered.

"Hmm. Why do you call him Stranger?"

"Dunno, except that's what he is. He came scratching at my shack door early one morning, half-starved, torn up from a fight with some animal or other. About one inch from dead." Oren bent and ran his long fingers over the curly white back and under Stranger's collar. "Didn't you, boy?"

Stranger made a happy noise.

"I was all mixed up. Somehow Stranger helped. My problems don't make much sense, even to me. It helped talking them over with the little guy."

Pallent belched. "Bull," he said. "Don't give me any of that mystic crap. We do what we want to do. It's all up here; some got it, some haven't." He tapped his sloping forehead. "Get rid of the mutt!"

Oren's smile vanished. "No, sir."

"You want to work for me?"

"Don't much give a damn, one way or another."

Pallent chuckled and met his eyes. Those odd silver eyes didn't flicker. "Won't do it, eh?"

"No, sir."

"No chance?"

"No chance."

The Big Man swabbed his hands on a silk napkin. "I'm beginning to wonder if I want a kook working for me or not. Fitting a mutt like that with a space suit, and all the other nuisances he'd be on a Mars flight. That's for wacky old maids!"

Oren grinned. "Bet if you wanted to bring along a bull elephant you'd have brought one."

ALPHA YES, TERRA NO

"I'm The Big Man. I've got the power to do any damn thing I want."

Oren picked up Stranger. "I know, Big Man. I don't have any power or money. But I live the way I feel it. So long, J.K.R. Thank you for the taste of caviar."

He started out.

"Come on back, minstrel!"

Oren turned. "Stranger too?"

Pallent winced. "Okay. Just keep him down where he belongs. Sit down over there. We'll talk."

Stranger seemed to understand; he crawled down under Oren's chair and vanished into the white carpet. While the maid was removing the remains of his meal, Pallent gave Oren a critical look-over, from his worn boots, dirty jeans and faded shirt, to the way his tow hair curled down on his brown muscular neck.

He rang for his secretary.

"Miss Pink. Take a good look at my new bodyguard. What do you think?"

"He needs new clothes."

"These suit me fine," Oren said.

Pallent snorted. "I like things neat. I let you keep your dog, now you can humor me by dressing to suit me. Well, Miss Pink?"

"I heard you call him a minstrel," the sparrow suggested. "The guitar and all. How about a close-fitting doublet and hose. Like the ancient troubadours. With a flare, of course. Dark green and rust. Soft calfskin boots. A touch of yellow."

Pallent smiled his approval. "Get on it, Miss Pink."

"Yes, sir." She left.

Oren tightened his lips at the idea of being Pallent's trained monkey in silk britches; but all the same, that far-off echo of a voice inside of him said he was pointed in the right direction. Port Mars was just the first

stop.

Now Pallent showed muscle. "I want you to tell me all about Rick. How you met and just what happened. The whole thing, and no bull."

Oren nodded.

"I was staying in my shack on the Marin headland, with Stranger. One evening, hiking along the cliff line, I lost sight of Stranger running on ahead of me, with the fog rolling in off the sea, swift, like it does this time of year. When I heard him barking up a storm I hurried to see what was up. He had Rick by the pants-leg and was pulling him away from the brow of the cliff. I had to circle around a wide cove. I could see across it—see Stranger had his teeth clamped into Rick's trousers and he just wouldn't give up. When Rick tried to jump again it looked like Stranger was going over with him.

"I yelled out for him to wait and I'd get my dog off him; then, if he wanted to kill himself, go ahead. He waited. I got Stranger away and we sat down a ways back on a hillock and just watched." Oren grinned faintly. "I guess Rick couldn't jump for an audience. Naturally, I hoped he wouldn't, but you can't stop a determined suicide. Hell find some way to do it, sooner or later.

"I got Rick to come back to the shack with me, and we drank some cheap wine while he told me about himself. I didn't dig; I just let him get around to unloading what he had on his mind, in his own way."

Pallent went to the bar at the far end of the room and poured himself a neat scotch. He drank it and nodded for Oren to continue.

"I guess you know why he wanted to die," Oren said.

"Because of me?" Pallent's voice was oddly soft.

"Not exactly. It's what he'd done with his own life. What he's let you make out of him, ever since he was a kid. Rick's a sensitive man. All his life he's put himself out to build up the Pallent Empire and he hates himself for it. He blames you for a lot of evil things, and he blames himself for not having the guts to break out. He's not interested in money or power, yours or his. You stripped the ideals and goodness from him before it ever had the chance to get started. It's not a good thing to do to a man—make him

into something he can't stomach."

Pallent met his eyes. The Big Man's eyes turned to ice. "Think he'll try it again?"

Oren sighed. "Maybe it depends on you. He's got to have something to hang on to. Such as self-respect."

Pallent smashed down his glass and swore. Oren watched in silence, knowing something of the maelstrom that seethed inside that complex but one-directional mind. Unbelieving dismay that he was unable to mold Rick into a counterpart of himself, someone who would eventually carry the Pallent dynasty far out into the stars. Regret at having tried? No, unless the kind that asks itself: what could he have done to pull his nephew in line that he had not done?

The stubborn strength underneath those pampered rolls of fat was a drive that matched Oren's own fanaticism-like something that had been set into motion and couldn't be stopped, something demanding continuance even after his own death.

He shot Oren a deep look. "Long as you know part you might as well be in on the whole smear."

Oren perked up, listening with mounting excitement, while The Big Man told him all about the Project—the push into a new solar system. Deep within Oren his tumultuous dreams formed patterns, and now the patterns began to intermesh...

"Only one thing can stop me now," Pallent said.

"What?"

"Sabotage. It's around me, in the air. I can smell it. That's why I sent for Richard. I arranged to have one of the trainees for the deep-push to get sick. Yes, I planned it. The trainee's being sent back to Terra and Richard will take his place. Nobody knows. Nobody except you."

Oren sensed soft menace. "Yes. I know."

"Right. From now on you'll be watched; every minute of your time will be accounted for. If you spit sideways you'll disappear." He stared, as if

through the translucent wall. "There's a lot of red sand out there, lot of grave room."

Oren put in what was bursting in his mind.

"I want on that ship."

Pallent laughed sourly. "Just like that?"

"That's all there is to, it. I've got to be on that ship."

"Aside from suicidal sabotage, the chances of hitting our mark first time out are hardly good betting odds. Why?"

Oren shrugged his wide shoulders. "I've got to go." He moved closer and put his silver eyes in line with Pallent's. "Got to!"

Pallent scratched at his haunch. "Damn mutt of yours has got fleas, I tell you." He waved a fat hand impatiently. "Why should I put you on that ship? Every ounce has been carefully computed."

"I'd help Rick," Oren told him. "I'd keep him from— keep him in line, too."

Pallent blinked at him thoughtfully. "Maybe. Maybe. I'll sleep on it."

IV

Unsleeping, Oren stared into the dark and saw strange suns and planets projected there from out of his churning mind. Then he thought about Kora and his heart pumped faster; down at the foot of his bed Stranger whined. He knew. He seemed to always know. He understood the wild destiny-driven struggle that put Oren further and further away from her; and the urgent fear that he would never see Kora again.

How could he have left her like that? Didn't make sense. She was like rain on parched ground, lightning to thunder. Having once met, the two of them had to be together. Yet this other compulsion pushed him out toward the stars, away from her.

Finally the wall of sleep came down.

Oren woke when he heard the low single *yip*. He yawned and strained grudgingly up to a half-sit.

"Stranger?"

Nothing. Just that one faint sound. Oren slumped back for a minute or two, but his mind wouldn't go back into oblivion. It rankled, waiting for more sound. There was none. He wrenched up again and groped for Stranger. He flayed his arms in all the corners of the silk-covered bed, but felt no familiar furry warmth.

He snapped the light on. The hall door was a crack open, but he knew he hadn't left it that way. Anger began, anger against Pallent. The Big Man didn't like Stranger, and he was the kind of egomaniac who resents any balking of his Own will to the point of action. Trivial, or no.

Oren got up, dressed quickly. Out in the hall, he listened. The corridor was a tomb, the hush accentuated by a gusty sigh of fans thrusting revitalized air through the ceiling vents.

He moved down-hall, down the dizzy circle of unused stairs to the front lobby. No guard at the front door. Strange. Moving up, he found the door-guard, shoved behind an ornamental grill of plastic shrubbery. The guard's head was crumpled, oozing fresh blood. He was extremely dead.

While this destroyed his first theory and exonerated Pallent, Oren decided not to wait. The trail was fresh. He mov-ed out into the street. Faint smudges of light at intervals pushed the night back a little; it was silent here, too, under the great blurred bubble. The moons were down. Oren prowled down the curved canyons into the Core; the canyons were sanitized slums, slums of prison-small sleep cells. Yet not so different from Terran cities, these days.

Something told him Stranger and his takers were seconds ahead. His mind heard his yipping in a ghostly echo.

There was still some activity in the bars and gambling casinos of Level Two as he stepped off the down-ramp. Level Two was never totally inactive. He passed the *Purple Mouse*, then, on impulse, went back and in. He still had a job here, far as he knew, and that extra-nagging-some-times sense of his told him this was it. He eased onto a stool and asked the bartender (it wasn't Korkalis; the moustached owner was probably off

duty) for a drink. It was , cheap stuff, artificial, near-lethal. One sip was plenty.

"Seen a dog around here?" he queried.

The big square-faced bartender stared blankly, but there was something flickering behind the blankness. On the face of it, this was a peculiar question. There were no dogs on Mars, no pets; previous water and air and bubble-space were reserved for humans and menial-quasis.

"Dog? What dog?" He swabbed down the bar to two heavy-muscled types who had drifted across the floor of empty tables from a back room. Oren sipped and let his eyes flick toward that door. Could be a back gambling room.

He was aware of covert eyes and conversation about him.

That "nth" sense of his prodded in his brain, as if trying to poke through a rubber screening.

The band was gone, the purple-eared waitress-mice were gone; it was that cranky unpleasant hour just before morning. So what were those two, who didn't look like miners and certainly weren't tourists, doing?

Oren sipped a little more of the unholy brew, then got up and walked toward the back, toward the service rooms. A few long strides from it, he switched and his tangent took him to the room the two uglies at the bar had quitted. He flung open the door. It was smallish, dark, malodorous. A joyful bark spilled out of the back corner.

"Stranger!"

The fur-ball yipped loud now and scrambled to nuzzle his ankles, wagging furiously. Then Stranger ran back toward something huddled on a corner bench.

"Take it easy, boy," Oren whispered. He groped for a light, fumbled around the wall until he found it by the door. This was a musty windowless storage room, piled with liquor cases, stage props, and miscellaneous objects. A girl in a gray space suit pressed fearfully into one corner. Oren stepped forward; her face lifted a few inches under a tangle of black hair.

"KoraT

With a wail of joy she started toward him, but the joy was cut-off in midstream. Oren whirled. They were right behind him in the doorway, the goons. They moved in.

He caught the first under the chin; with a grunt the goon splashed back into a pile of empty crates. The other one had a blaster jutting from his fist and his finger started whitening on the stud. The second that followed stretched out like rubber. Somewhere in the middle of it another face moved in behind the man with the blaster. A gaunt known face with deep-set eyes.

He caught the blaster's elbow and the ammo burned into the ceiling instead of into Oren. Now there was confusion and voices and some more shooting behind Rick, as Pal-lent's private army took over. "Thanks," Oren told Rick.

Rick looked better in his green-gray spacer uniform; he'd shaved, too. He smiled a somber down-tilt smile.

"Don't mention it."

Oren didn't; he forgot the commotion roiling through the club and into the store-room. He even forgot Stranger nipping at his legs. His mind and his arms were filled with Kora.

Pallent chewed his black cigar and paced the thick white carpet. Then, with a swish of his black-and-gold dressing gown, he whirled on Oren.

"You look better now."

Oren squirmed uncomfortably in the green and rust-brown troubadour's get-up he'd been forced to put on, his other clothes having been burned while he took a couple more hours of sleep.

"Where's Rick?" he asked. "I'd like some answers."

"So would I," Pallent chuckled. "Rick's story is he tailed two men from the Project to the *Purple Mouse*. There was no reason why two workmen would leave the cave in the middle of the night. Seems Korkalis' number two "boy is in on it, too. What they're planning exactly, dunno yet."

"Why'd they take Stranger?"

"That was another part of the operation. It was to get you down there. One of my guards gassed the mutt and took him."

"Why not me?"

"Not quite so easy. I do have a few honest guards, you know. They killed two as it was."

"They wanted me." Oren frowned. "Why me?"

"Maybe they hoped you would put in with them." Pallent shrugged. "Anyway, my men have got that phase bottled up."

"Rick?"

"Back at the Project. I need him there."

"Kora?"

Pallent put on a grin and rang for his secretary. "Miss

Pink, call the girl in. She's had her beauty sleep by now. Let's look her over." The way he said it made Oren bristle and Pallent rumbled a laugh. "So she's your weak point— this girl?"

Oren stared glumly at the wall.

"You have got a boiling point, minstrel. Glad to hear it. Fits in. You know, I've been thinking a lot about you. I've got plans."

"Plans?"

"Terran politics has reached the stage these days where the top figure who allegedly runs things is really an actor, picked for his public image. TV started it a long time ago. I don't qualify; I can't put on an act and I'm not pretty. But you, minstrel. All you have to be is your own sweet guitar-plucking self. The women will drool over your looks, the folksy set will think of you as one of the people, the lunatic fringe will fall for that hint of mystery in your eyes. And to top it all, you've got a hypnotic pull—a genuine emotional power—especially when you sing those space songs. You'll make a damn good UW President."

"President!" Oren laughed.

"Why not? Oh, I've been number one behind the scenes a long time now, but I want to be a President-maker. I want the top man here in my fist. Thought it might be Richard, but-" He sighed. "You'll do."

Oren bent and stroked Stranger, shaking his tow head. "You want a stooge. I'm not the type. You know that."

"You would be surprised what a man will do under the proper stimulus. Look!"

Oren straightened and turned. Kora stood framed in the curved doorway. But this was a new unbelievable Kora. Miss Pink had found her a chiffon gown, violet to match her eyes. It fell around her curves in soft waves; classic in line, its silver girdle flashed real diamonds as she moved excitedly toward him. Oren caught his breath in a sharp cry. He had only seen her in slacks and a sloppy sweater. Now this radiance. He couldn't believe it.

"Money does make a difference, minstrel." Pallent's voice was saying, sibilantly. "Women need money to keep them beautiful. Your Kora has got that Hellenic launch-a-thous-and-ships beauty, but takes money to keep it that way in these days of too many people and not enough of anything to go around. You want her to have it. Face it."

Kora moved into Oren's arms and he gulped. Her perfume, her shining fresh radiance. The Big Man's trap was straight out of *Faust*, and yet...

He forgot Pallent for a time.

"How'd you get here?" he demanded, still holding on to Kora. Before it had only mattered that she was here, not how or why.

Kora said it in a rush. "It was the newsboy, Johnny. I can't explain." She tried and her tumble of words didn't make much sense. "I kept remembering about that contest, something nagged at me until I entered it. I found out you were here. Then I won the contest! I *won*! Oren, it was like a miracle!"

Pallent's chuckle was sardonic. "That contest was rigged."

"What do you mean, rigged?"

"That's how we recruit girls for the Core. Miners want female companionship here more than anything else, and most girls wouldn't come here on their own. They pick pretty ones. You fell right in the trap when you wandered away from the Tour."

"I heard about the ballad-singer in the club. When I got there the bartender—" Kora shivered, remembering.

Oren's arm tightened around her. "Forget all that. The important thing is that you're here."

Pallent chuckled as he downed a scotch, then waddled out. "Could be. Could be perfect for both of you. On the other hand—like I told you, minstrel, there's a lot of sand out there." He closed the door behind him.

The next long moment was all theirs. There was nothing else in the universe, only the two of them. After a while, they went out on the balcony and Oren[^] told Kora everything that had happened. Everything, from the lawyer's visit at the San Raphael jail, to Stranger, to Rick, to Pal-lent.

"You're going on that ship," she said, with a sharp intake of breath. "Yes."

"Why? *Why?*"

"I don't know. But I've got to." Kora sighed tremulously. "Then I'm going, too."

"No!"

"Of course," she said evenly. "Whatever is driving you out there is telling me I have to stay with you, Oren. I can't sit here in a chiffon dress and *wait*. I can't. If there is danger I have to share it. We belong together, Oren, in some special way. *You* know that, just as I do. It's in me, too!" She pulled his face closer. "Look, Oren! It's in my eyes. Whatever happens, it's got to be both of us. You see that, don't you?"

He looked deep in her eyes. Then he nodded. It was there. Kora was involved in all of it. He went to tell The Big Man.

Pallent roared like a tempest. "What do you two think this is—a picnic?"

Oren was learning how to fence with him by now. "You need me on the *Alpha*, to keep an eye on Rick."

Pallent scowled and squirmed. "Damn it, I've got plans for you. I want you to be President."

"Think about it, Big Man. This first trip is to take somewhere in the neighborhood of six or eight months, you told me. When I come back I'm a big hero with my name all over the news media. Everybody knows my face. You've been doing a lot of promoting. Getting the public image prepared, the groundwork. Letting them know who I am. Right now nobody knows who I am. But after this trip, I'm a hero."

Pallent drywashed his jowls and snorted. Then he burst out with a raw laugh. "Damned if you aren't starting to learn already! After all, there's no election for a year. Heroes make good political fodder."

V

They looked down from the copter at the huddle of temporary archeological dig shacks. This camouflage couched against a brittle brown escarpment which later on in the mild season would be covered with blue-green lichen. Near the pole was thin atmosphere; under that great cliff was the Project.

Oren whistled through his teeth at his first look. The cave under the cliff was a great half-globe; above them self-illuminating plastic glowed on a circle of gray-reddish adobe living quarters, a hidden city; toward the center of the globe were worksheds and offices. But it was the shining spear of the ship itself, its nose nearly touching the retractable ceiling, that brought involuntary gasps.

Pallent showed Oren and Kora around the main lab, where Dr. Corwin, the blue-eyed elf with the brain of a superman, was hanging over his computations. The little mathematician greeted Kora warmly, but it was Oren who made him raise and lower his shaggy eyebrows in thoughtful puzzlement. Then he burst into a welter of equations, to explain his theories of space and non-space in relation to time.

"Take it easy, Doc," Oren grinned. "You lost me somewhere around Pluto."

The scientist clucked. "Yet there is something in your eyes. You have studied astrophysics, though?"

Oren nodded. "Some. Not on your level."

"My level?" the elf quipped. "There is no such level. We are rapidly approaching the transcendental. We muddle. We nibble around the edges of the truth. Then, to our astonishment we hit upon something. You have, I think, an intuitive feeling for these things. Perhaps on our trip you will allow me to teach you something of my space-time theories? I could use an assistant."

"An honor," Oren said, with emphasis.

The great moment came. The ship door spiraled shut on the seventeen crew members, three officers, Dr. Corwin, Kora, Oren—and Stranger. Already the stars seemed closer. The great roof above them opened. The spear of man-made lightning shot out.

Captain Myles Anderson was a lanky Swede with high cheekbones and a humorless manner that seemed to carp at their successful takeoff, inviting split-second imperfections. He made his resentment of Oren and Kora obvious. As for Stranger, oddly, he liked the dog. Stranger touched a thread of hominess as nothing had in his thirty years of black vacuums and handshakes with oblivion.

Rick was part of the crew, but Kora joined Oren's daily stints with the astrophysicist; both labored to catch on as he explained and diagrammed the *Alphas* unprecedented course from space into non-space and then back into their own space-time stream, only in Alpha Centauri. From then on it would be up to Captain Anderson to find and navigate them onto a Terra-like-planet under the new sun.

At times Oren sprawled out on his bunk with his guitar. Sometimes crew members would come to listen to him sing, or join him in vocal memories of the hard-pressed world that had given them birth. Mostly, though, it was only Kora— and Stranger.

One day Kora joined in softly;

Count five points of a star— No matter how far we may roam, Count east—west—north—south— And the fifth point will bring us home.

"Will it?" she wondered, stroking Stranger. "Will we ever get back home?"

Oren sighed. "Maybe it's like the song—the fifth point isn't any direction we know. Not even any time we know. It's a place where everything just *is*. Then, when Dr. Cor-win pushes the right buttons we move back off the 'all-directions, all-time' and back into the groove we belong in. Then we—hey, what's wrong with Stranger?"

Stranger had bounded off Kora's lap and was nosing at the closed door of the metal cubicle. His ears were straight up; he growled deep in his throat. Oren put down his guitar.

"I don't hear a thing," Kora said.

"Something's wrong. Stranger's ears hear things we—"

Now the dog bristled up every shaggy hair, yapping in wild agitation. Oren stepped into the hall, stopping short when the gravitized floor shuddered under his feet and the vibration lifted into the walls. The brief passageway was empty, silent, but from the main cabin came a tumble of crew voices that mounted to panic level while they listened.

"What's wrong?" Kora pulled close to him.

As Oren strained, one shrill voice was intelligible in a terrified yell. "He said something about the controls being bollixed."

Kora gave a soft cry, like a prayer.

The floors, the walls, were still shivering; then Oren pulled Kora to him when the ship seemed to drop. It was only seconds, but seemed hours. Then it stopped with a jolt. The shuddering stopped. Everything stopped, as if the universe held its breath.

"I'm going to find out. Stay."

He swung down the narrow passage; near the short upward staircase a little figure plunged down so fast Oren grabbed him to keep him on his

feet.

"Doc!" It was Dr. Corwin. His face was white ashes. Oren tightened his grip on the old man's arms. "What's up? What happened?"

"Rick!"

"What about Rick?"

"He came in the control room to talk to me. He told me about his uncle. He was—strange. A kind of forlorn desperation. He said his uncle had gone too far already. We must not reach Alpha. Then—before I could call help—he started pushing buttons, pulling levers. I cried out, but by the time Captain Anderson got hold of him it was too late."

"I should have kept a better eye on him!" Oren cried. "I knew he was unstable."

"No. I let him in the control room, where he didn't belong. It was my fault. But he sounded so—so interested. So self-effacing. I had the feeling of complete dedication while he was talking to me." He sobbed rawly. "It's my fault."

He pushed back into Oren's cubicle and sat, his hands shaking. "That one man—one suicidal fanatic could wreck all our glorious plans!"

"What can we do?" Oren clipped.

"Nothing. Captain Anderson will try to put us down, if there is any landing place here."

"Here?" Oren asked. "Where's that?"

Dr. Corwin looked at them with brooding hurt. "I don't know. Not in our proper dimension. It wasn't time yet."

We were too far. Normally it would have taken so many years. I couldn't have lived—"

"Where—" Kora gasped. "Where are we, then?"

Dr. Corwin crumpled and shook his head. "Not where we belong. No. We're in someplace else. Perhaps—nowhere."

VI

It was always cold here. Cold, misty, dark. The sun that gave the minor planet life glimmered distantly past the shroud-wrack like a pale ghost. The freezing, wind-whipped sleet that lashed the crusted snows gave the lost random world just enough atmosphere to sustain humanoid life.

The small hunting party trekking behind their sledge saw a fiery thing streak across their sky, leaving a trail of frothy white behind it, striking the frozen surface like a stone skimming on a lake. The hunters marked the spot where it made its final stop, then went back to their caves to tell the rest.

Oren kept hearing Stranger barking, barking, barking. When the barking got nowhere the dog's needle fangs nipped his hand. Oren resisted. The freezing death was so kind, so gentle.

When he at last forced his eyes open, wincing from Stranger's rakes and bites, he saw only blackness. There was no shred of light in this place, but there was the feel of Stranger pattering on top of him, growling, whining, nipping.

It was the furry warmth, with Stranger crouched on his chest, that nagged him back to life and reminded him that he was one long battered hurt. He moved his numbed fingers until he found Stranger.

"Why bother, boy?" he groaned.

Stranger nuzzled his neck, then raked a paw over his cheek. Stranger had no intention of letting him take the easy way. When nearby he heard a faint sigh he forced himself to crawl through the darkness, to find Kora. He pulled her to him. Her nearness put back his live-wish. He stroked her icy hands and her face.

"Kora!" he cried. Then he called into the darkness, where a far-off wind keened through twisted metal, "Dr. Corwin! Are you all right?"

Kora stirred at his yell, shivered closer. "He's near my foot, I think. I feel somebody."

Oren pulled his shrieking muscles to a sit, then clawed downward over

the frigid metal. He found the little doctor and shook his shoulder gently.

"Are you hurt, doctor?"

"No. I don't't-t-think so. Just f-f-frozen." His teeth played castanets.

Oren huddled the three of them together, with Stranger yapping joyfully. "We've got to move out of here, find out where we are. Another hour and we'd all be dead."

He pulled to his feet and found the hand-torch by groping up the wall, which was now slanted to a thirty-degree angle. The spurt of yellow light was heartening; it gave an illusion of warmth as he flashed it over their faces and across the tilted chamber into the corridor.

"Keep flexing your hands and feet," he told them. "Rub your faces. Anything to bring back the circulation. Must be below zero, Lord knows how much. I'm going to find out about the others and get heat suits."

He shoved aside the bent door and probed the light ahead of him down the narrow hatchway. The main cabin and control room were a shambles. He took only a moment to look for any sign of life, then went back to the others.

"Here's another torch. I'm going to find us suits. How's the doc?"

"I'm all right." The doctor managed a feeble smile, but hadn't managed to sit up. Kora was massaging his arms and legs.

"The crew?" she asked.

"Dead, far as I can see. There's a big gap in the hull, lots of snow. The ones who didn't get it in the crash must have frozen instantly. We were protected down here. I think some of the engines kept heating below us, too, until the cold cracked through."

"Where are we, Oren?"

"Lord knows. All I know so far is it's freezing cold and there is breathable air. The snow was what kept us from burning up when we crashed. We're burrowed deep into it, on a long tangent."

He found the space gear room jammed; a couple of boot-kicks snapped

the lock and then his blue fingers were pulling into a thermal suit. He found two more for Kora and the doctor and started back. Stranger pattering after.

A weak moan stopped him, almost lost in the wind that made ravenous noises above. Stranger started barking, led the way to the hatch of the engine plant. Below, clinging to the metal rungs, hands bleeding, was a young crewman. He had carrot hair and freckles and he cried, "Thank God!" when he saw Oren.

Oren bent down and wrapped the thermal suits around the boy's shoulders.

"I was down there when it happened," the kid chattered through clicking teeth. "When I tried to climb back up the c-cold steel tore my hands. Can't get 'em loose."

"Don't try. I'll wrap the suit-sleeves around the rungs until they thaw a little. Wait. I'll be back."

The kid grinned. "I'm not going anyplace."

Now they were four—four plus Stranger, in his own thermal coat. The doctor made them all eat self-heating tinned food, and vitamin capsules.

"Better take a final check before making for the surface," Oren said, then. They dug their way through masses of twisted writhing metal.*Oren found Rick; his jaw went tight.

"Poor guy." He looked down at the staring eyes, frozen into a look of pain forever. "He couldn't take Pallent's kind of a world. I thought he had decided to play along until he had a chance to really do some good, but the fear-hate was too deep. He had to do it *notv*. And Pallent wanted *him* to find the saboteur!"

Everywhere else was smashed death, frozen death.

"The engines stayed warm down where we were, hours after the impact," Dr. Corwin pontificated. "That's why we're alive."

Bart, the young redhead, looked around them and shivered. "Let's get out of this—tomb."

They filled packs with condensed rations and tools and whatever they would presumably need, then/ headed for the rear of the ship. Ahead stretched a long ice tunnel, a tunnel created by the spaceship's long last plunge into the snow. It was - like an ice-walled subway, glass-slick,' so that they went back for boot-cleats.

The upward trek was slow and their torches dazzled rainbow light off the walls.

Then...

"Look!" Bart shouted.

The translucent sheath of ice flared out abruptly to cloud-smear'd sky. Bart saw the creatures first. A shaggy line of giant figures limned against the cloud-wrack. The four stopped and stared.

"God! The size of them!" Bart dug for his blaster.

"Wait!" Dr. Corwin pushed down his arm. "We don't know that they are dangerous. Think. They survive in this place. They know how. We may need them."

"Must be more'n a dozen," Oren added. "Whatever they are, maybe that's it."

Kora shivered. "So ugly..."*

Oren gestured that they keep walking slowly forward. The smallest of the hairy giants must have been fifteen feet tall; they had chests like barrels, and flat noseless faces. Their legs spindled down to wide splayed feet made wider by heavy slabs of hide tied to them for snowshoes. They all carried spears with tied-on rock points.

The biggest and ugliest of them moved forward, brandishing his weapon; he shouted a guttural cry that was lost in the wind.

The Terrans stopped.

They stared waitfully at the great hulks; their breath made white ghosts dance on the wind. Stranger took his cocky stance between Oren's legs and stared, too. Over the mounds of pale gray-blue the storm-wind cavorted.

In a burst the savages broke their silent tableau; the yelled colloquy seemed to have differences of opinion; some lifted their spears as if to throw them. When one spear cut the air and jabbed the ice only a few yards in front of them, Bart broke.

"No!" Oren yelled.

Too late. Bart pulled offside, crouched, and made his gun spit flame. The creature who had tossed the spear grabbed his middle and fell in a roll down the snowy incline. More spears flew. One of them caught Bart in the neck, the other squarely in the chest. He crumpled, coughing blood.

Kora sob-gasped for the dead boy; Oren brushed his own blaster as he turned to the doctor. "Now what?"

"It may not be too late yet."

The wind made sad noises, sucking into the ice-tunnel; on the rim above the giants seemed frozen into statues. Then—a harsh admonishment from their leader and they fell flat on their faces.

Dr. Corwin pushed out a sign of relief. "The old story. We came out of the sky; we're gods. They weren't sure until Bart killed with his Thing That Breathes Fire."

"Now we proceed to act like gods?" Oren asked. .

Dr. Corwin bobbed his head. "Keep remembering, primitives have a way of turning on their gods if they don't get what they expect from them."

The sledge that carried them across the white wastes was built for giants; it was drawn by two animals routed out of their snow-nests and harnessed. The new gods were directed to seat themselves among soft furs and, with a wild piercing yell at the kangaroo-cum-elephant animals, they were off, leaving a spray of powder-snow in their wake. The hunters sloughed along behind.

Over the curve of grim horizon was a range of snow-mountains, like saw-teeth. The sledge-animals loped in that direction; then, reaching them, went straight into a huge cave of jagged icicles. The giant leader motioned the Ter-rans out of the sledge and the animals were corralled

behind a crude fence made of bones and snow. By the glare of pungent pitch-torches the new gods were led down a rocky incline, through one cavern after another, always down.

"This whole mountain must be honeycombed," Oren said.

"Yes. The walls are warm now. This is where our savages live; they owe their existence to the caves for heat and fire."

"I'm getting awfully tired," Kora complained.

Journey's end came as they moved into an enormous chamber of dark rock that had little side-caves radiating out from it. In its center was a great leaping fire and there, smaller giants, females, were squatting and cooking. The Terrans were pointed into an alcove fronted by stalactite teeth, where they could have relative privacy. Flat stone platters of food were brought by the women.

"Do gods eat?" Kora wondered, eyeing the great chunks of half-cooked meat and mushroom mounds.

Oren tossed her a food-pack. "While they last."

"Meat's not bad," the elf-doctor observed. "A little gam-ey. I imagine these big mushrooms grow back in the caves."

Eating over, Kora pointedly laid the platters outside the alcove. "They're so *big*. They give me the shivers."

Oren drew his guitar out of its waterproof case. "How about a song to soothe the savage breast. Or beast."

"We need all the comfort we can get," Dr. Corwin nodded vigorously. "Looks as though I will never prove my theories, now."

"And as if we're here from now on," Kora murmured.

Oren tuned up and sang and after a while the feeding growls and the chatter of the six-foot children eased off. Haiiy faces peeked around the stalactites; Oren grinned and gave the giant children a rollicking sea chantey. When one baby toddled hugely in to Kora, she touched his wide pink bristly face tentatively; then a great mother-shadow loomed and

whisked him back. The baby bellowed.

Hush, little baby, don't say a word,

Mama's gonna buy you a mocking bird ...

As Oren's voice gentled to lullabies the little family groups outside shuffled off into the side-caves, for sleep. Oren sang a space song.

Where—where is the star to guide us now?

Where is our vanished dream?

His dream was of rolling green hills and billowing seas, but it was shattered by a sudden awareness that something was gravely wrong... He pulled up, glanced for Kora and the doctor. They were sleeping peacefully. The great fire was red embers only, but he made out the delicate curve of Kora's cheek and throat. Dr. Corwin was a prenatal snoring ball.

All at once he knew.

Stranger was gone.

He moved to the other side. "Kora!" he whispered. "Doc?" Kora gave a wakening sigh, Dr. Corwin whipped up with a small animal snort.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Oren was flashing his torch into the darkest corners and across the great silent gulf with the red eye in its center. He whistled. That invariably brought the shaggy little mop in a hurry. This time—no.

"Give him a few more minutes," the doctor urged, rubbing his eyes.

"No-o, I've got to find him. He wouldn't have gone off like that, for no reason."

"I'll come," Kora told him firmly.

"If you must you must." Dr. Corwin yawned, while Oren strapped on his pack and Kora's. "We'd best all stay together. Oren, why is Stranger so important?"

Oren gave him a look. "He just is."

"All right. I only asked."

They made their way around the fire-circle toward the far wall. Oren kept whistling, now and then, but the only answers were high-up echoes and vague stirrings deep back in the sleep-caves.

"This big passage back here is different than the others. Not sure just why." He moved in, Kora and the doctor close behind.

"Yes, it's special." Dr. Corwin whistled, flashing a close beam at the wall. "See how smooth it is? The little notches? This cave isn't a natural formation, like the others. This tunnel was dug out and polished as well as they knew how. Look at the floor. Back there it's a mess of lit-ter and bad smells. They've taken pains to keep this tunnel immaculate. What does that suggest?"

"Mexicans have a complimentary saying," Kora put in. "They say 'Your house is as clean as a church.' "

"That's it! This tunnel leads to their place of worship."

Oren grunted. "Being gods, I guess we're headed in the right direction."

The tunnel lifted upward gently, their footsteps echoed in murmurs. Then, abruptly, they were walking up to a blank smooth wall.

"The end," Kora pointed out, unnecessarily.

"It's a door." Oren pushed his torchlight around it in all the angles. "Must be. But it's sure well-tooled. I wouldn't have thought those shaggy brutes had it in them."

"They haven't, perhaps. Primitive science invariably starts with the priesthood. We haven't met any of them yet. They may be a long stone's throw ahead of the hunters and general populace, anthropologically speaking."

"Meanwhile, let's get this door open."

"Why?" the little doctor queried. "Stranger couldn't have opened it. He must be back there somewhere. Maybe one of the kids who saw him

decided he wanted a miniature pet."

"Maybe." Oren was squatted at a door corner and probing his fingers carefully along the wall. "Here it is!" Pressure on a loose rock triggered a mechanism. The barrier in front of them slid to one side. An icy blast of wind swept through.

"Back to the old icebox." Kora's shivery quip was lost in high dark reaches beyond.

Oren splashed his torch past the rock-lip they stood on. The vast cave they stared into was covered with a sheath of ice, over which the torches danced. High above, and where the rock-walls bellied in, were fringes of sparkling icicles.

"Like a cathedral." Oren whistled.

His whistle got an answer from across a narrow rock causeway over a sheer drop on each side. A muted yelp.

"Stranger!" Oren cried. "He's on the other side of that ramp. He tripped that door mechanism. He wants us to follow him."

"Incredible!" Dr. Corwin snorted.

"Not when you know Stranger."

"Maybe it's a trap," Kora said.

"Why? We're already in a trap." Oren took her hand to help her down the icy stairs to the causeway. "Careful, both of you. That drop's forever."

Wind made organ sounds through unseen crevices in the roof, the iced stalactites thrummed and trilled. The rime-covered causeway was wide, for the giants' splayed feet, but there were no railings.

"This whole place was ready-made for the priests, even to the music." Dr. Corwin stopped in the middle to savor the vastness and glistening theatrical splendor. "They like things to be difficult, too. Adds to their power and prestige."

"Hurry!" Oren urged. "The wind'll blow you off in a minute!"

The dumpy little gnome nodded and trotted after them. Across the ramp was another door opening on another tunnel. Oren found the trip-mechanism with his boot, this time.

"It wasn't really designed for dogs," he grinned. "I guess the priests make it look like magic with some 'Open Sesame' gimmick."

Dr. Corwin stopped to examine the system of root-ropes and balanced rocks. "Ingenious! Primitive, but it works."

"*Alma mia!*" Kora was staring ahead while they crouched to investigate the engineering. "Look!"

A few yards ahead was a smaller chamber of blue ice; its far wall was translucent, daylight shimmered into a concave outscop of clear ice. Without their torches, by some strange natural magnification, the chamber was a pool of ethereal rainbow lights that dazzled over pin-point icicles covering the ceiling like a nipples canopy.

But it wasn't just this radiance that stopped them cold. At the far side, in the center of the ice-shell, was a lifted section of floor like a dais. On this circular dais of clear ice was a square block, and in the block was—a man.

Stranger scampered around the foot of the upright figure, yelping his cleverness.

"Incredible!" Dr. Corwin moved up and patted his nose on the clear ice. "He looks *human*. But I can't be sure. The tunic he's wearing looks vaguely Oriental. That brown face and his bone structure, humanoid certainly."

"Looks very old."

They circled the ice-being in amazement until Kora gave a warning cry. "We've got company."

Out of the tunnel behind them filed a row of giants; but these were different from the others. Most of the hair had been scraped off their barrel-like bodies so that mottled purple-black hide showed. These had their wide faces painted dead-white and the leather togas draped across their shoulders had been dyed blood-red.

VII

"Remember, we're gods. Don't show fear." Dr. Corwin swaggered drolly in the direction of the white-faced giants. "These are the priests, of course. Now we know why we're gods. We're like the man in the ice."

He lifted a hand in benediction. The priests stared in silence.

"We have come out of the sky to bless you," Dr. Corwin told the priests. Then he went on in a garbled litany from vague religious sources. Oren gulped down his desire to laugh. The doctor was so small and they were so huge.

The priests murmured together for a few moments, then filed out.

"You were wonderful," Kora chortled hysterically. "You've got them eating out of your hand."

Dr. Corwin wagged his gray head. "Don't be too sure. These priests are well above the hunters in intelligence. *They* set up this ice-god, with the trappings to impress their tribe. They can destroy it—and us."

"Will they come back?"

"Of course." He turned to the man in the ice. "They must have found him frozen, like this, probably in a space ship. Which seems incredible in itself, since we're not in our proper time-space track!" He shook his head in disbelief. "Their frozen god was all very well, but live gods might not prove so tractable."

Oren nodded. "Get it. Alive, we might take something away from the priests. Hey, Stranger, what are you doing?"

The dog was haunched down in front of the ice-figure and pawing industriously at the ice; he had scooped out a handful of ice already. Oren bent over him. "You'll wear yourself out, boy. Look! Stranger's heat-suit is melting the ice. Does that suggest anything, Doc?"

The little doctor was pacing, preoccupied. "We must somehow manage to make friends with the priests. And the fact that someone else landed here gives us hope."

The tight silence that followed was broken only by lute-like winds

somewhere above and by Stranger pawing toward the ice-god. Oren watched him thoughtfully.

"Gods are supposed to work miracles," Kora put in.

Oren crouched down by Stranger. "Doc—have you ever done experiments in hyprothemia?"

"Observed them, yes. There was quite a cult some years back dedicated to the idea of freezing humans just before death, and then providing them with new organs to replace their diseased ones. It didn't prove too successful, though. Too many legal and monetary problems. Too many people already, for that matter. But the basic idea is sound."

"What about space-travel?"

"Also feasible. Suspending life for the long treks between systems." Dr. Corwin sucked in a sharp breath. "You think this man might still be alive?"

"Maybe that's how he got here," Oren said. "Look at Stranger. He thinks so..."

Dr. Corwin was doubtful.

"We'll use our portable heat drills. Cut through steel or plasto-alloys." He was already taking it out of his pack. Dr. Corwin shrugged assent.

"I'll take the other side," he said.

Under their attack steam hissed up and little creeks of water puddled down the sides of the dais.

"It's chancey," Dr. Corwin wagged. "Maybe we'll only prove to the priests he's a dead man—and we'll be too."

"Anything we do is a chance," Oren gritted. "This may be the miracle we need."

In an hour the frozen man was out of his transparent tomb; Oren covered him with a heat-blanket from his pack. "He's like a side of beef. Kora, help me massage him, try to get the blood circulating."

"He is definitely human," Dr. Corwin chortled. "As you said, Kora, he is old. Eighty or so, I would say. An Indian, perhaps. This fabric of his robe is synthetic silk, with a metallic heat-thread running through it."

"No use, Oren/" Kora said, half an hour later.

The taut muscle-strings stretched over the old man's boney frame were flaccid now, but the brown high-cheeked face retained the calm dignity of death. After a while the flesh warmed under the blanket's heat. Kora gasped when his left arm twitched up.

"Galvanic spasm," the doctor said.

Oren put his ear to the chest where every rib showed. "He's got to live!" He pushed Stranger off from licking at the gaunt chin and cheeks and began rhythmically stroking the high brows. He worked grimly; his silver eyes moved closer, glowing.

"Wake up, old man!" he whispered.

When at last Oren lifted, exhausted, the eyelids opened. Only a mere crack. Oren cried out and then bent and put his mouth to the old man's. He pushed out warm breath from his own body into those ancient lips. Again and again. This time when he straightened to watch, the lips moved. The eyelids jerked open, wider than before. The mouth gave a windy gasp; the lips twitched a quirking smile. The jaws clamped and undamped, robot-like.

"He wants to talk," Kora gasped.

"He's looking at you, Oren. As if—as if he *knew* you!"

A rattle pushed out from between the trying lips, a tindery croak. Then a vibrant musical sigh and Oren heard him say: "*You have come at last—my brother.*"

Kora fed the old man warm soup from a food pack, adding shaved ice to the solid cake. Dr. Corwin bubbled and chortled in a welter of questions Oren wouldn't let him ask yet. The old man held Oren's hand and smiled up into his eyes. What he saw in them seemed to pull him gradually back out of the stygian depths.

After he could sit, cradled in Oren's arm, he asked, "Who are the others? The girl is one of us—but the little man?"

Dr. Corwin answered for himself in a flurry of hodgepodge explanations and queries. "How did you get here? And what makes you talk to Oren as if you were old friends?"

The old man sighed.

"My name is Chauna. My story is a long one, but I don't believe there is time for long stories. I was born in the province of Pradish in northern India a very long time ago. My mother was a simple valley child who never knew a man's love. Not even once."

"Artificial—!"

"Of a sort. I was spawned from a strange seed which my mother ate, a seed that drifted down out of space. That is why I call Oren my brother. He, too—"

Oren's silver eyes stared into Chauna's, darker, but so like his own. "My grandfather. The stories about his mother told about a berry she found in the woods."

The mystic's eyes moved up to Kora; he touched her hand. "Your eyes do not show it, but you, also..."

"I don't know." Kora stared hard at Chauna, then at Oren. "I don't know anything about my father. My mother was a prostitute. She lived a dreadful life. But when I was in high school I tried to find out about myself. There was something about Yucatan. I have funny dreams at times about a beast—a jaguar with burning eyes—and a sacred well. I think I must have imagined everything, about the mango—"

"Mango?"

"In the tree. It shone like silver and I wanted to take it in my hand and eat it..."

Chauna reached up a bony hand and stroked her cheek. "No matter. We know, deep inside of us—we three. Myself, I searched everywhere for a true brother. I found none. So in desperation I sought

knowledge—knowledge that would take me out into the stars, where I could find the thing that burned inside of me. High up in the mountains I built my ship. I used ancient mystic arts and modern sciences as well, to start me on my star-search."

"You crashed, too?" Oren asked.

"I don't know. I was strapped at the controls, to awaken automatically when I reached the planet I aimed for, rather for any in the cluster. My suspended animation and low body temperature was to save oxygen and food. Seven years it would take to reach my goal. Somehow I never reached it. Like you, I failed."

Dr. Corwin shrugged his jowls in a vigorous demur. "You talk about something pulling you toward a planet outside our system. Oren, too. Even Stranger seems to be in on this hocus-pocus! I'm sorry but I can't follow the pattern of your thinking. I had no 'call'—just scientific curiosity and the human desire to know all I can before I die. Never mind, we've all lost our goals—"

"They're coming back," Oren interrupted, stiffening.

The priesthood gave out roars of excitement and awe when they saw the melted lump where their ice-god had been, and the frail brown figure Oren steadied to his feet. Two of the priests fell on their knees, shrieking. The others rasped disbelief and some more knelt, after a moment.

The high priest, the one with no hair at all, whose cloak trailed and dangled with silvery baubles, stood his ground fiercely. There was anger in his voice when he yelled at the others.

"He's not happy," Oren guessed. "He doesn't like having their god brought to life."

"It is like our ancients," Chauna told them softly. "The gods are most convenient when they are disembodied or carved out of stone. Then they can be invested with whatever powers or properties the priests deem most convenient."

"Not only ancients," Kora put in.

"Think!" Dr. Corwin adjured them. "We must convert them to the

feasibility of live gods."

Chauna suggested gravely, "What races of all kinds find most amenable about their gods, indeed demand on a daily basis, is the favors and gifts they impart. Gifts are always welcome. What can we give these priests, something that would raise their stature with the hunters?"

Oren hiked up his pack. "There would be lots of things in the ship, if they aren't ruined by now. Not much here. Fire? They've got that. Their hairy hides make them invulnerable to the bitter cold, so our heat-apparati wouldn't mean much. I guess the priests never leave the warm caves."

"I'll try them with a torch." Dr. Corwin flipped the flash off his belt and strutted toward the High Priest, as he had before. This time he went right up.

"A gift for you!" he intoned ceremoniously.

The High Priest stared down at him. Then he nipped up the torch between his knotty fingers. He fumbled with the button, as the doctor had done, until the torch emitted a beam of light across the ice-shrine. The others watched and made approving grunts.

The High Priest was happy with his new toy for ten minutes—demonstrating his new magic for the others.

Then he squinted down at the little doctor.

He looked down at the blaster on Dr. Corwin's belt.

He reached.

"No!"

Dr. Corwin stumbled back across the ice floor. The High Priest took a huge step and swept the gun off his belt in a grab that sent the doctor sprawling. While the High Priest fumbled with the release stud Dr. Corwin scrambled up on his feet toward him, yelling.

"Don't touch that! You'll hurt yourself!"

There was a dry crackle when the priest's finger pressed down. Death

spilled out of the weapon. The little doctor fell in a forlorn heap. A lifetime of patient scientific gleaning and building ended in a gentle regretful sigh.

Kora sobbed wild protest. Oren pulled out his blaster and moved forward, his eyes bright with anger. All the priests were on their feet now. The High Priest pointed the blaster at Oren significantly.

The blinding fury that swept Oren passed, he stepped back with the others. What was the use?

"There's another gun in my pack," he told Chauna.

The mystic sighed. "I'm afraid I couldn't," he apologized. "I have never willingly killed any living creature."

"I can—now." Kora took out the blaster, her eyes glazed with cold despair. The High Priest was kicking carelessly at the doctor's body, grunting at the others. This was no god! Look! I kill such a god with the flick of my finger!

The low growls became thunder-roars.

In a rush they came, bellowing derision and release from god-bondage.

Oren's blast cut down two. The High Priest pointed his death-toy and pressed the stud, but nothing happened. He didn't know how to flip for a recharge. But they didn't need guns, he raged. Backing into the shapeless lump, Oren and Kora blasted. Stranger snarled and yapped valiantly.

A wave of malodorous flesh engulfed them. Clawed hands raped the guns from their hands. When Oren felt giant fingers like talons close around his throat for the death squeeze he knew a torment beyond mere cease of existence. He would never find what he'd been seeking all of his life, never find the answer and the dream...

From somewhere above the tumult the High Priest growled a curt command. The pressure moved off. The three Terrans lay flung on the icy floor as the priests rasped the tunnel door shut behind them.

"Why didn't they kill us?" Kora asked Oren, as his arm closed around her.

"They must have gods," Chauna's mild voice told her. "The pattern was set when they found me. A few hours from now they will have four."

VIII

"It's all over." Kora shivered into Oren's arm. "Your dream. Your songs. It doesn't seem fair."

Chauna sat near them, eyes closed in meditation. "The universe is neither fair nor unfair," he said mildly. "That is one of the things mankind cannot seem to learn. The stars shine. The planets move. Civilizations rise and crumble."

He sighed. "But I am human, too. I have one regret, that I was not allowed to know who I am before I die. None of us can hope for true peace this side of death, no matter how far out into space we travel. Perhaps that is the answer."

Oren said, with conviction, "I believe there is peace— somewhere out there in the stars. Or as close to it as any living organism can expect. What we were looking for is all wrapped up in it, something beyond the ugliness and torment of Terra's struggles. We tried. Carve that on our ice-block."

Stranger crawled in close, looking up into Oren's face with his sharp black eyes, making little juttled sniffs.

The rainbow colors above them began to fade as the unseen sun waned. The wind trilled musically.

"Be dark soon,"-Kora said. "We'll die here on this frozen lost little world in the dark. Before that happens, sing just once more. Please, Oren?"

"I don't have my guitar, Left it in the big cave."

"Sing anyway. Please?"

Stranger settled down in the curve of their clasped hands.

Oren sang:

Somewhere a star waits,

A fine star with planets like children

Around a winter stove.

It waits and spins its dreams in the dark;

Someone will find it someday

When Time has lost its wounds,

The dreams will burst like sky-flowers

Spreading to the Earth, then

The fragrance of hope will be fulfilled

In every human heart.

He felt Kora's hands grow colder, colder. His feet were gradually becoming numb.

"We've got to get up!" he told them. "Keep the circulation of blood going!"

"No use." Kora's voice was drowsy, almost content, as she lay against his shoulder. "The heat in our suits is gone. We've used it all up. Let's not die scratching and fighting for the last tiny breath. Sing again!"

The arch over their head had lost its iridescence; it was deep green now, as if they were moving deep down into some strange ocean. Soon it would be green-black, then black. Their torches, too, were almost spent.

"Remember the song about the swan?" Oren asked.

"No. Yes. I don't know. Sing it, *caririo*."

"Okay." Oren kissed her gently, then hard.

*The silver swan, who, Living, had no note-When death approached
Unlocked her silent throat; Leaning her heart against the weedy shore,
Thus, sang her first and last, And sang no more. . .*

Darkness came, swift, implacable.

"It's true—that song." Oren muttered, staring at the opposite wall and watching it diffuse into impenetrable shadow. It was like a great wing passing over them. "This particular northern swan never utters a sound all of its life, until just at the moment when—*Kora!*"

"Yes, Oren?" Her voice was an impatient whisper.

"Just wanted to—hey, what happened to Stranger?"

He groped for the furry warm bundle of flesh. Stranger had sneaked away while he sang. He tried to move Kora gently off, but she resisted, clinging. He thought about Stranger moving off to die by himself, alone in the dark. The little mutt should have waited for them. In a kind of dying madness he saw the chamber as a boat, and them pushing off into the fog together.

"Stranger!" he called tautly.

No answer.

"Chauna. . .?"

No answer from the old man, but he heard him stir close by, on the other side. With effort, he pulled Kora and himself closer to the Indian. They would die together.

All but Stranger,

Seeing that warm-hearted little mop of existence stiff and cold and alone made sudden tears spring to his eyes. There had been something special about Stranger—so special that he'd never even talked about it much. Even thought about it. Stranger was like an extension of himself. He lifted his arms to pull Kora closer. They were like lead. He felt nothing in his fingers. Now his feet refused to move.

"Stranger's gone." Kora didn't answer his whisper, and he couldn't waken her now. It was easier to die only once. The tears on his cheeks, the first he had ever shed in his life, made little frozen globs.

"Stranger!" It was a final salute to an irreplaceable friend. "Goodbye!"

There was an answer, out of the dark, so now Oren knew he was dead,

too.

"Yes, Oren. I am here."

It was logical, somehow. "Stranger?"

"Yes, my dear friend."

"You can talk!"

"Yes, now."

"Am I going crazy at the last, or am I dead?" Oren wondered.

"Neither, Oren. You recognize my voice. You know that I am Stranger."

"Y-yes. My mind knows." i

"Good. Hang on. Listen well. I have probed the others; they will be all right for a short while. I want to talk to you, prepare you, before I show myself."

Oren sucked in a deep breath. "I knew! I *knew!* Who are you, Stranger?"

"I'll try to be brief. You met me before, Oren. Morris J. Phelps, the attorney. I told you then I was working on a case, a monumentally important case. When I found out that the seeds had struck fertile ground, as you might" say, I began to have hope. I had to get you three together, some way. But I had an enemy. A powerful enemy who believes with utter sincerity that Terra must be destroyed and that no one must prevent this from happening. In my world life is sacred, but this enemy would have killed me, to stop what I was trying to do..."

Oren felt the blood warm in his veins again. The sudden bright arrows of knowledge across his mind did this. Stranger's specialness was a fact...

"We're different too, somehow!" Oren cried. "Kora— Chauna—me!"

"Yes. The seeds fell at random in Lapland, Yucatan, India. Chauna is the only child of this one. There are other progeny who are distant cousins of our race, besides Kora and you, but genetically the strain is much weaker. The spark I was seeking was the faintest glimmer. Yours is the

strongest, because Chauna is so very old by your terms. Kora's is less. You—Oren Starr—are the hope of your world!"

Oren gasped at the enormity of it. He couldn't believe such a thing yet, not really. It would take time. He would try. Humbly, he would try.

"Stranger—?"

"To elude my enemy and the enemy of all Terra I *became* Stranger. I found the little mongrel dog lost in the Marin hills when I came searching for your secret hideout on the headland. He was half-dead, starved, homeless. I became him to such a depth that I lost my own personality and so threw my enemy off the track. I surrendered my own powers. I *was* the little dog you named Stranger!

"Of course this meant I couldn't do much to help. I hoped that your fierce drive toward the stars, and that Kora's necessity of being with you, would take all of us where we must go. Dogs have unsuspected qualities, Oren. An intuitive oneness with their master. If he becomes sick, they take on some of the same illness. If he is sad, they *must* be sad. My presence in Stranger's mind heightened his own natural capacities, but nothing more. Your tremendous yearning toward the stars was reflected in Stranger. You yourself accomplished the things he *didn't*. Your desires put him into action, when he found Rick and his teeners, when he saved The Big Man, when he concealed himself in the corridors of the Core until he found Rick. This came from you and your alien spark as much as from me!"

Oren's mind burst loose with surging knowledge. "Then you *wanted* Rick on the ship! You knew he would crash us here! We had to find Chauna!"

"Yes. It was necessary that I have all three of you together."

"Stranger's dead," Oren gulped.

"Almost, yes. Oren, I am sorry, but this had to be. You can take comfort from the fact that, had I not found him on the mountain that morning, he would have died there. He is dying happy, knowing intuitively what dogs wish for more than anything—to bring fulfillment and joy to their master. He brought you to your goal."

Oren found that he could move his fingers, his legs. Kora stirred in his

arms, with a soft sigh.

"I'm warm. You did something!"

*Yes, gradually, while I was speaking."

"Can—can I see you now?"

"There will be questions, much you must know. At this instant our little friend Stranger is breathing his last peaceful breath. Now I can show myself."

"How are you called?"

"My name is Thow. Among us there is another name, like a mathematical equation that involves my ancestry. For you—Thow."

Sudden brilliance seared Oren's eyes, reflecting from the glass walls like a million jewels. Then Thow stood before him. The soft glow from inside his close-fitting tunic put a sun's warmth over the chamber.

Thow was tall, slender, his head was slightly elongated and triangular from his oversize (by Terran standards) cranium. His eyes were like Oren's, silver; it was the eyes that pushed a wordless greeting out. The greeting of a friend. There was no hair on Thow's head, no eyebrows even, but when he took hold of Oren's hand, Oren felt a strength like steel in his muscles. He reached down and pulled Kora easily to her feet. While she woke and gaped, Thow flexed his arms and moved his long legs with a profound sigh.

"What a relief!" He looked down at Stranger. "Good-by, little friend. You deserve a monument. Perhaps one day Oren will write a song for you, and all of Terra's school children will sing it."

Kora stared at the aquiline nose, the smiling orange lips, in disbelief.

Thow took her hands in his, as he had Oren's. The steel-strength, more than physical, brought her instantly out of her despair-sleep; sudden well-being made her smile. To touch him, to look deep into those silver eyes, was to know absence of all fear—a oneness that was beyond telepathy; a kind of rapture earthlings grope for and find only in brief tenuous moments.

Chauna accepted him as he did breathing. "You have made us warm," he said.

Thow nodded. "Something in our minds, our cells, therefore. We are able to communicate warmth and light to our surroundings by thought."

"You speak mind to mind."

"Yes. To us by now this is taken for granted. After I took on a Terran body I realized the torment and secret fears that plague you—the enormous loneliness. But I believe the powers we have are latent in your race. Our physical makeup is very similar. I can read your minds instantly (forgive me, among us it is a politeness not to do so without permission) but, when I made the deep-change to a Terran creature I lost most of my powers. I planted latent thoughts in both Kora and Oren. I suggested to Kora that she keep Morko's spy occupied before he found Oren. I implanted the idea of entering the Trip-to-Mars contest."

"You were Mark!" Kora cried. "You said you were from Estonia. And Johnny, the newsboy!"

"After a while the lies came easily. I learned much about your Terran arts of deception."

"But for such an important reason!"

"Your planets are ruled by fear and distrust. Had anyone known about me, they would probably have killed me. Not only that, Morko's spy would have probed and pinned me down much sooner." He was probing Chauna, whose hands trembled when he touched them, as he had the other two. "You must resist the temptation within you to think me a god. I am not a god. Think of yourself, worshipped all these years by the shaggy primitives of this small world." He smiled. "Our technology is high, our mental control even higher. Still there are infinite areas of time and space left to ponder and explore."

Chauna glowed. "What is your planet called?"

"My home planet is Xo. But there are seven others like mine in Alpha Centauri and many smaller ones still in more primitive stages, or uninhabitable."

"Tell us about the seeds," Oren asked. "How did it happen?"

"Long ago an artist-dreamer—some called Isso a psychotic—ventured into your system and scattered these life-seeds on some of the planets at random. While his purpose of giving the primitive civilizations a boost was a good one, such a thing was forbidden by our High Tribunal. It might have been a careless whim, an artist's conceit, but my group prefers to think of Isso's hand strewing the silver life-seeds as an instrument of cosmic destiny. Who knows? Perhaps our races are related, from some far more ancient device than Isso's seeds...

"Our methods of procreation are almost identical; they would have to be in order to fulfill Isso's dream. The girls who took the seeds into their bodies had to be like us to give birth from them. So—you three realize your difference, stirrings of very strange powers you can't understand. It's as if a genius—an Einstein among you—were raised among a primitive Ganymede tribe. He would grope to realize his mind-potential, but without training and direction he never could fully. Chauna, the pure son of an Alphan, rose highest; he invented a space ship and by human technology combined with Indian mysticism he tried to reach his father's people."

"I failed!"

"No."

Kora injected: "Poor Dr. Corwin. He was a good man. So many people had to die—Captain Anderson, the crew."

Thovv told them: "Neither of your ships could have made it beyond this point. Decades ago, when our High Tribunal probed your extraterrestrial thrusts, they set up a barrier to deflect your ships onto this cold non-space planet. You would not die, but you could never return. It was hoped that presently you would stop trying."

"Our race is stubborn," Oren offered. "They will keep trying. I don't think even your barrier will stop them for long."

Thovv nodded. "Neither does Morko. Morko is a great genius, but like many geniuses, he has a streak of fanaticism. He thinks of Terra as the focal point of a contagion—a contagion that must be stopped before it infects the whole galaxy."

"How can a race such as yours even dream of such wholesale butchery!" Kora cried.

Thow touched her arm, rivering sympathy and hope.

"These things will be discussed later, with the others. My friends are waiting. The Tribunal will not postpone their decision about Terra much longer."

"How will we get there?" Oren asked. "Our ship is lost."

"Chauna's people would call it transmigration. Dr. Corwin—teleportation. There is a great machine on our planet Xo which enables us to move freely between our worlds. As for you three—your minds together possess the power we have individually. I found that out early in my prob-ings. None of you could make the journey alone. That was why I had to bring you together. Without me to direct you, even then, you couldn't circumvent the barrier."

"How long will it take?"

"Virtually none."

"What do we do?"

"Move close to me. There must be tactile contact—my mind will do the rest." He looked at Oren and smiled. "Yes?"

"My guitar," Oren said ruefully. "Back in the cave."

"I read you loud and clear some time ago," Thow said.

"It's down there at your feet."

"How-r "Later. I know how you treasure it; besides, your songs have depth and power in their very simplicity. Music and other arts are integral among our people."

The cave-dazzle of iridescent colors gleamed on the gaping row of primitive priests, filing in the doorway to their shrine. The giants shivered in awe.

So they were gods after all—risen from their ice-tomb and vanished, the

way gods do.

PART THREE

DEATH TO TERRA

I

Oren stared out of the window of Thow's lofty city apartment and his eyes misted at the webbed gray-green beauty of the spectacle. Alphans of this major planet had long since dispensed with technical necessities of stress and materials and weather factors (even gravity); their cities were masterpieces of form and color and design.

"It's like something I dreamed of a long time ago," Kora said from behind him. Her cool hand touched his shoulder, bringing him out of his breath-catching reverie.

Extending far as they could see toward the dawn-bright horizon were spiral-towers joined together by arched causeways; lazy silver and white aircraft moved through the clean dustless air, as the capital stirred into a new day's activity.

"Thought you were sleeping." Oren turned, struck now by another kind of beauty. Kora's. She wore a page-boyish costume, from the selection she'd been given; its close-fitting design molded to her young curves and was flecked with silver and opal.

"I tried, but how could I? Too excited by all this. When I'd had enough of tossing, the android servant brought me something to drink. Kind of tonic, I think. At least, it's as if I had had eight hours rest."

"I had some, too." Oren clouded. "How is Chauna?"

"They want him to sleep. They gave him something, too, but with him it's got to be special. Thow is worried."

"It's as though he forced death back until he found out about himself, and this." His arm around Kora, he looked out with tight eyes. "It's not

hard to understand Morko's viewpoint. Look at that! No smog, no crushing traffic, no ugliness. They're beyond our educated squalor. When our money-hungry explorers latch onto something like this they make it into something dirty."

"But couldn't these people protect themselves? Slap our wrists!"

"It isn't really quite that simple. We're primitives. Then-philosophy goes beyond the use of any weapons, even mental castigation. Thow explained to me what Morko is really worried about. He thinks the Alphans are vulnerable and that their vulnerability lies in a restlessness, the kind that comes when things are going too perfectly. Something wants to mess it up a little. Lots of these people might covertly enjoy a shot of primitive stimulation. But it could cause havoc, split them into dissenting groups. By the time they realized they had a tiger by the tail it might be too late. Our profit motivation might have taken over."

Thow called them from a back doorway. "I'm glad you're both rested. We have so little time. The leaders of our group are already waiting. They're anxious to meet you. I'll have food brought in, while we talk."

There were five leaders. The three men were tall and slim, like Thow; the two women smaller, more delicate. They all possessed the tensile strength in their perfect-muscled bodies; Oren coupled it with the surge of magnetic warmth from their minds.

The android servant brought drinks and platters of food. They sat around a mirror-smooth table on cushions.

"This is a dark hour for your world," the Alphan called Chaikk opened. "But we must not lose hope." They seemed to be studying the Terrans for reassurance of their right-ness of cause.

"You have put yourselves in danger for a race you know slightly, and mostly negatively." Oren strained to make his meaning and sincerity strong, realizing that they saw into his thoughts. "Thank you. It is feeble, but that is all I can say." When they waited, he went on. "We Terrans live lives of fear and confusion, one against another, but each of us has his dreams. I believe that if permitted we can eventually achieve stature in the universe."

"So do we," Thow said. "We are working toward that end. That's why

we are here."

Oren asked, "Can't Morko probe us?"

"No. A shield protects this house from mental intrusion. He knows we are here, of course. And that you three from Terra are with us. But Morko is over-confident."

"You're known?"

"When he tracked me to Terra, his spy was ordered to kill me, but he would deny this to the Tribunal. Had he succeeded he would have covered his crime with some plausible accident."

"You said the Tribunal has kept a check on our world?"

Thow nodded. "For centuries. No deep probing, just routine scanning of your wars and socio-status. It is only since the hydrogen bombs and the space thrusts that the Tribunal has begun to take worried notice. Morko was given the deep-probe facility, for close psychological study of your potential as a friend or a menace. Morko overlooked the matter of the life-seeds."

"But the Tribunal knew?"

"Vaguely. What the artist Isso did, disseminating the seeds in the Sol system, was illegal. A whim, they thought. There was the possibility that some produced life, but nothing was done about verifying it. Our group discovered Isso's lost records by accident. It was this discovery that gave us new hope and spurred us into action. When we brought the complete record to the attention of the High Tribunal at the second Terran trial, we forced a delay."

"Morko made a heavy protest," the third man, Sibel, put in. "But the Tribunal could not refuse. Our most sacred law is non-violence to our own kind."

Oren considered. "How about psychotics?"

"There are a few; usually they are probed young and mentally regrouped. When someone has a trauma of some kind, if he's too far gone to regroup, he is sent to one of our pleasant primitive worlds to live out a

useful Me in an environment suited to his problem, with others."

"Morko." Oren's jaw tightened. "Wouldn't his fixation or whatever it is against Terra be considered psychotic? Among your people, I mean?"

"There's a reason," Thow sighed. "Morko is a genius; his life has been devoted to doing good for all of our worlds, especially primitives and psychotics. He had a son —just one—whom he adored. This son was sent out on a deep-probe to Terra, a routine disc flight. His disc was destroyed quite casually by one of your army spacecraft. There was no attempt to communicate; nothing but immediate and total destruction of our craft."

"Monstrous!" Kora exclaimed hotly.

"There have been others," Thow went on. "Our early abortive attempts at communication were all disastrous. After the death of his son, Morko took the view that Terra and all her peoples were beyond redemption."

"He has most of our people with him," Chaikk added.

"The fear and compassion syndromes are strong among them. Morko has little by little brought them to believe that, repugnant as the idea is, eradication is the only answer."

"He tried to kill you!" Oren exclaimed.

"Yes, his spy was pre-conditioned to do it. But from his standpoint the end would justify such a crime. Anyway, I could never prove it. Morko is no fool. The spy was preconditioned, then when he returned, immediately regrouped. He would deny Morko's plan with his dying breath."

Chaikk continued, "Morko is not only held in high esteem, but his position in charge of our psychotics' hospitals puts him in a peculiarly good position. As you say, perhaps he has a fixation—but he is irrevocably of the opinion that he is acting in the best interests of our people. He made tests, exhaustive tests, of Terran intelligence potential. He concluded that destruction was the only solution.

"Unhappily, when Morko talks, our people listen. Terran moral codes have not kept pace with their technological advances; he regards the careless disregard of human dignity by your leaders and profit-hungry finance groups as criminal. He equates Terran moves into space with a

cancer that devours healthy cells and explodes in all directions. He has made our people fear you—and fear is the deepest motivating factor of all. Your Big Man—Pal-lent—produced a spacecraft capable of reaching our planetary system in months."

"But Dr. Corwin is dead!" Kora pointed out.

"His notes and his theories are there for others to follow. Another ship is already in the Pallent works. Morko will point out the need for immediate action..."

Oren's hand shook when he sipped his drink. "I'm finding it harder and harder to understand why you are bothering about us. Are we worth saving?"

"We're convinced of it," Sibel told him. "Especially after seeing you three."

"I've seen something of your virility," Thow assured. "The soaring heights of your dreams. Wait! Suppose you sing for us, now. You're able to express so much of this in your songs."

"Please do," one of the women smiled.

Kora nodded and moved closer. Oren was filled with churning anxieties, a million fears for Terra and her people, but he could not refuse when Thow handed him his guitar. He sang about the good people of Earth, about their everyday lives—their loves, their laughter, their human fears. Then he made up a song about the dark shadow, like the black wings of doom, that hung over the children of Sol, of how their future existence hung by a cosmic thread...

When the women left with Kora for a fresh-up the men had one more solemn drink, then Thow's guests started to leave. Thow sent the android for the women.

He came back in black alarm.

"They are gone, sir."

"What do you mean?" Thow demanded.

"Vanished."

Oren felt a cold hand of terror grip his throat; Thow's complexion darkened in anger. "I was afraid this might happen, but there was no way to tell how or when. We trusted our girls, but somehow Morko must have got to them."

"How? Couldn't you probe it from their minds?"

Thow shook his head. "Their minds were wide open. That was what threw us off. This goes deeper; Morko has complete charge of the regrouping facilities. Somehow he got them taken to one of the hospitals and had their minds pre-patterned into this kidnap syndrome. But it was not to happen until *after* our meeting. Using *both* of our top women threw us off completely!"

Oren cracked down his glass on the table. He sprang about the room in a frenzy. "What are we going to do? We can't just stand here!"

Thow touched his shoulder with a mind-surge of compassion. Oren shrugged him aside and went to the window; his impulse was to smash a fist through it.

"You'll only injure yourself." Thow's voice was soft but forceful. "You must keep your mind clear. We need you. Kora needs you." He turned Oren gently. "Look at me, into my eyes. I know just how you feel. She is out there in that vast complex somewhere; you must go out there and find her. But you can't! Our people aren't to be trusted in their present frame of emotion. They might even kill you. And I couldn't help, Oren: I could not kill one of my own kind."

"But they'd kill a Terran!" Oren cried bitterly.

"Out of fear, yes. Our people aren't used to fear. They haven't had to live with it, as yours have.' They don't know how to handle it."

Oren's mouth and throat were dry, acetic. Futility washed over him. "What will Morko do to her?"

"She is safe, believe me. He wants information to use against Terra. He will drain her mind of all the evil things Kora knows about your people." Thow gripped his shoulder. "It's bad. He wanted an edge, so now he has

Kora. We have only you, Oren."

"What about Chauna?"

"Chauna's old, weary. His mind is as pure as mountain snow, but—" He shrugged.

Oren stared stormily out at the Alphan capital where shafts of mellow sunlight from this bright alien sun streamed over the pastel canyons and arch-ribbons. All that dazzling beauty was now a mask covering nightmare: Morko, in his personal despair and his conviction, had taught this wonderful race to hate and to fear—and to put this hate-fear into a vortex focused on Terra.

Who could overcome such mental and emotional force? He? A simple singer of ballads? How could he possibly overcome it? The High Tribunal—Morko—the billions of people out there? People convinced that Terrans were monsters who delighted in being evil...

Understanding, Thow gripped his hands; he read the turbulence, the anguish, the near-despair.

Oren ran his tongue over paper-dry lips.

"When-?"

"Tomorrow. The decision on Terra will be made tomorrow, once and for all time."

II

A winged plastoid ball lifted gently out of the apartment as the roof momentarily vanished, then sped across the capital of Xo to the great white dome in the center of the city. It was from this conference building that all surface streets radiated.

Uniformed officers formed a phalanx on three sides to hold back the crowds awaiting their landing on the terraced front of the High Tribunal Dome.

"They don't look friendly," Oren remarked to Chauna and Thow.

"No matter how high the level of intelligence is," Chauna shivered, "emotion produces the same unhappy mob reaction."

"They're afraid." Thow touched the Terrans' hands as the side of their small craft arched down to produce steps to the moving ramp that would take them into the council hall. "They have been made to fear you."

As they stepped down Oren's eyes moved across the wave of hostile movement, in leash. "All that's missing are the big 'Terra go home!' signs!"

Thow said, "Our mind communication makes that sort of thing redundant. You must point your eyes and your minds forward. Don't let them shake you; there is tremendous power in all those minds, even sheathed as they are here."

The sun shimmering across the esplanade and turning the surrounding towers into sheer gold was a warm, tender mother to this planet. The blue and yellow verdure that lined the several artistic levels glinted, happy in another beautiful morning. The Dome was a giant half-pearl.

Oren tried to keep his thoughts tuned to the glory of it, to forget the hatred battering at them from three sides, like three misplaced tides clashing. Chauna trembled and almost toppled as he tried to step after Oren onto the ramp.

"Forgive us," he whispered, sobbing. "Forgive us our trespasses."

"Steady." Oren took hold of his shoulders and pulled him up onto the moving causeway. In a passion of fury he whirled on the murmuring crowd and their hate. "Shame! This old man is a saint! He has never harmed a single creature in his long life! He wants only to thank you—and to die in peace!"

A small lull of surprise followed, then the hate blazed out again, a sentient crawling force. Had it not been muted by some counteracting power in this sacrosanct area it would surely have killed them both.

Thow got his share, too.

"Traitor!"

"Terra-lover!"

"Primitive!"

An officer leaped up by them. "I've speeded up the ramp for you. You better get in there fast. If they decide to break past the shield you're dead!"

The main council room was an immense tiered circle whose concave ceiling produced its own soft greenish light. Every seat was taken. These were the leaders from all eight planets and their satellites. Leaders from all the sciences and the arts. But there was none of the usual choppy sea of crowd conversation. These men and women were talking mind to mind.

Still, as they moved down toward their places near the High Tribunal's half-moon rows of high benches, an impulsive roar of noise rose up. These were the Terrans! Those fearful vicious primitives! Oren felt strong animosity. Not one of the elongated mobile faces was smiling.

Oren clenched his teeth. How ironic, that the first official appearance of Earthmen on a far, intelligent world should produce no word of greeting—only silent distrust, fear, hate...

When the sound got too loud it was suddenly turned off, as if mechanically.

"Poor, poor creatures," Thow told them, when they were seated, to the left of the raised Tribunal dais, "They forget that there is an animal deep inside of them, too. By their behavior here they are only *proving* it. Civilization is a random process. We were luckier than you in our formative times. Our mental life kept pace with our technological advances, and perhaps we had better leaders. They are taking their unconscious animal passions out on you. Perhaps they should have been given an outlet for this latent sadism. Perhaps we only *thought* for us that it was all over!"

A guard touched Thow's shoulder with a thin gray stick and his voiced words stopped. Oren watched his lips move, but nothing came out. He was right. Here in the chamber of the High Tribunal all sound and communication was controlled.

This was good—or was it? In the wrong hands...

Oren's eyes kept drifting to find Kora and at last he spotted her. She

was taking a seat in the boxed area just to their right, on the opposite side of the dais. The small group of Alphans in this box had the same thin benign faces as all the others. The tall one must be Morko, the one holding Kora's hands like a gentle father.

She was smiling up at him. She caught Oren's look and nodded in a formal greeting.

"Yes," Thow was allowed to whisper. "That is Morko."

"He's very—"

"Pleasant looking? Above unkind thoughts? Yes. Morko is a fine kindly man—who has done much for our people. They love him like a father."

Yet this was the man who had convinced his people that Terrans were monsters, beyond hope! Oren thought grimly, There was something to be said for the old Terran cliché of the villain wearing black and riding a black horse. This villain was only a villain in one direction, it seemed. If he was at all...

"Kora seems to have taken to him." Oren couldn't keep the bitterness from creeping in.

"He is most persuasive. I sense now what he intends to do. I'm afraid—" The silence wand again.

Chauna had closed his eyes and huddled back in his seat, a shattered forlorn old man, betrayed, it seemed, by his own lofty motives and ideals.

"There is no chance," he mumbled to himself. "They are right and we are wrong. I have always known it, in my soul."

"They are not right!" Oren burst.

Thow's hand touched him and the stream of oneness was very strong. Oren's head ached with it. Something was gnawing at his brain. He thought, it's what Thow had told him last night—about Oren being Terra's only hope.

It was plain now that Chauna would be unable to help. Chauna was imbued with the conviction that Morko was right. Terra *must* be

destroyed. The mob's anger outside was the last straw.

Oren's brain ached to the bursting point.

Then he thought about Terra. Of the green-carpeted hills and the painted deserts and surging blue oceans. The laughter of children, the majesty of a great symphonic orchestra under Toscanini, the flute-call of a shepherd in the Tyrols... He thought of Earth spinning on its appointed rounds, with its cottony froth of clouds to cover the good and the evil, trembling on the sword's edge of doom...

No, he wept inwardly. NO!

"How will they do it?" His voice was only a mere puff of air.

"Must I?"

"Tell me. Will there be painr

"No. A simple erasure. A cessation. Everything that lives will be disseminated into its basic components. Energy cannot be destroyed, so it will all go back to where it originated, scattered among the stars, perhaps to eventually become new life. As to the agency—they have a machine for the purpose, a machine that amplifies the mind-power of the entire populace. It's sort of the reverse of what is used in and near the Dome to avoid heckling of any kind. Only this is infinitely more powerful.

"This tremendously amplified mind-power will reach across space and erase your entire civilization and all its artifacts. There will be nothing left to tell the tale. It will be like that old story I read in one of your books about a Terran King who was so wicked that the gods decreed that he cease to ever have been. Terra will cease to ever have been. A faint shimmering across the vastness—then nothing." Oren felt his blood become ice. There was more.

"

"The beauty of the High Tribunal's plan is that *everybody* in our race contributes—we are all your executioners *by our own concerted wish*. A wish born out of deep sincere conviction. That way no one person, or even the High Tribunal, can ever feel guilt."

"But they will," Oren muttered.

"Yes. They *must* feel guilt. Philosophers in future generations will ponder on it, and debate. Those who contributed to this enormity will pass into dust. But the guilt will be there to haunt Alphans forever."

Oren watched the High Tribunal file in to their benches, wrapped in white robes, their old faces serious as stone. There was nobility in their grave faces and slow movement, These fifty were no wily cynical judges, who had seen too much of evil and were by now indifferent and immune to deep feeling. These were sincere dedicated creatures, intent on a just decision.

Prosecutor Morko spoke first. It was as if by the time he had completed his just vilification of Terra there would be nothing left to defend. Thow and his misguided group would be crushed before they got started.

From the speaker's circular podium Morko received the applause of this people with a humble bow. His smile and his sweeping glance embraced them with eternal vigilance for their welfare, and with abiding love for each and every one. He spoke orally, befitting the solemnity of the occasion, and by custom. His words were translated instantly in Oren's mind.

"Again we meet here," he began softly. "Again I have the privilege of speaking to you. And I speak only of love. I have no hatred for any race, however primitive. You know me and my work with primitives. I need not point out that I've dedicated my life to helping all who need guidance.

"It is this dedication to you all that insists Terra and her race must be destroyed. In the end they will destroy themselves; meanwhile, can we permit this endless debacle of greed to spread into our own patterned system and destroy us along with themselves? Our race, through its history of scientific achievement and exploration of all Alphan worlds, deserves better, surely. If Terrans were physically primitive, we might welcome them and help them. But they are advanced and still evil. Instead of using their advanced technology to help their own kind, they misuse it to enslave their own weaker races, and those on the other planets under their sun. Now they have reached the limits of their sun-system, sacking and plundering, and their greedy eyes have fallen on us. Make no mistake—*we are next!*"

The assemblage was permitted one surging thought-cry: "*Die, Terra!*" Then sound ceased.

Morko smiled. "But rhetoric is superficial. Let Terra condemn herself." He waved a slender hand; the self-contained light of the great bowl deepened to emerald, shot with flecks of silver—Alphan night.

Oren stiffened when above the assemblage a three-dimensional vision leaped into existence. It was reality itself, although he knew the source material was Terran histories, Terran video, Terran minds. All colored by Morko's fanaticism.

But the pain and poverty, the unrelenting squalor—it was all there to make a mockery of the pomp and pageantry of emperors and politicians.

First visions were of a primitive Earth, an Eden. Then man came. Savage hand-to-hand battles gave way to primitive weapons. In spurts civilizations rose and fell in panoramas of blood and evil. They were all there—torn out of Earth's vilest pages. Nero and Caracalla. Genghis Khan and Hitler. Enslavement of millions. Sadism and lechery. The Circus Maximus. The Egyptian pharaohs with their Jew-ish slave-hordes. The refined tortures of the Oriental masters of the arts. Christ on the cross.

All bisected by pompous strutting of the leaders; politicians and their meaningless phrases and slogans; self-justification of mass murder and slavery. Those who protested died. Religion itself was an excuse for war and more subtle persecutions. Poverty and misery ignored by perfumed dandys and their plump women.

Discrimination. Violence. Indifference. Greed. Lust. Hiroshima and the mushrooms. Then—space—and perversion of the primitives on Venus and Ganymede.

Oren saw himself in green and rust silks, drinking with Pallent, smiling at him. The takeoff of the *Alpha*. Last was The Big Man pointing at a huge astronomical map of Alpha Centauri, with his engineers and builders scurrying to complete another interstellar ship. Pallent's fat face grinning as he chomped his cigar.

"Wait'll I get up *there!* That's where the real fun begins!"

When the emerald brightened above and the scene faded, Oren found

his hands were shaking. He couldn't seem to think. His mind was drenched with this wholesale dose of horror, carefully taken from Terra's blackest pages. Yet all that blood and carnage was *true!* Before this moment he'd always comforted himself with the conviction that blame for these things was difficult to pinpoint in most cases, all shared in it, but that there were always those who protested against the evil and gave their lives protesting it. It was all part of the growing-up process of a race-that every civilization in every galaxy had its share. But wrenched out of context, these frightful montage scenes had a cumulative effect thousands of times more powerful than mere reality.

Still, right now nothing helped.

He turned to Chauna; the Indian mystic had slumped down far in his seat, his face like ashes. When his eye-lids fluttered and closed, Oren thought, "They've killed him. He was a saint, but he died seeing that..."

He found that he had stood up in agony, when Thow pulled him gently back into his seat. His head was bursting with pain like hot needles. Thow's wordless compassion was like balm, but it was many moments before he could draw an even breath.

Looking up at last, he turned to Kora. Kora sat like an image; her face was absolutely without expression. In a roar of anguish he thought: *She's lost her mind. It was too much.* For Kora, with her passion for the underdog, to see all this blood and misery in one package could send her mind into the cloisters of madness. His own soul cried out in despair.

When the rustling wind of indignation subsided Morko delivered his *coup de grace*. "As you have seen, this is not the end. Their Big Man is already preparing to invade our system. These primitives are insatiable, they have not even rudimentary feelings of cosmic morality. The first thrust made them aware of our force field. The second one will break through..."

Outrage and anger stormed up and boiled across the bowl. Outside, viewing the proceedings on giant videos, the mob augmented it. Morko stretched out his hands.

"Just one more thing. I have a witness, a witness who will tell you from her own heart what Terra really is. Thow will tell you she has Alphan blood in her veins, as his two witnesses do. This blood results from an illegal

seeding by a half-mad artist long ago, but no matter. We would not kill our own kind. These three must live. And the fact that this young girl born among these monsters has our blood in her body gives her the moral courage and the need to tell you the *truth!*" He beckoned Kora, who moved like a zombie up onto the raised circle. "Speak child!"

At first Oren thought she was drugged, she moved so woodenly; then his heart sank when she uptilted her face and he saw the determination flashing in her wood-flower eyes.

"I have been on your world only for one day." Her voice was a soft whisper, trembling with intensity. "But I want to thank you for this day. It has been my happiest day; it has shown me that nobility and greatness really do exist in the universe. I have never seen these things before. On our world it is different. Our people all wear masks. We are forced to cheat and to lie; it is our way of life. Every success is measured by money, manipulated by stealth and cunning. All kinds of chauvinism exist. We fear one another, we spy, we disobey the laws we ourselves have set up—and we are applauded when we get by with it. All this is simple routine. This moral corruption is innate in our people, as nobility is within you.

"My mother was a simple peasant woman, forced into prostitution when she was thirteen. Life to her was poverty, disease, and despair. I was decanted one night in a Los Angeles alley and left to die. Not because she did not love me but because she knew my life would be the torment hers had been. Better I should die before knowing such misery.

"You have seen that our rulers have exploited and murdered countless millions on their paths to power. Things are * no different now, only the *labels* are different. I speak as a simple peasant of Terra, of poverty, of minorities enslaved, of children dying because they have no bread to eat, of old people shunted into hovels and forgotten.

"Here you know cleanliness and beauty of the soul. But if our race comes here with its perverted philosophies, the evil within them will contaminate your magnificence. Terra is a canker on the clean face of the universe. Destroy it, before it destroys you!"

III

Kora's indictment left a sourness in Oren's throat that he could not

choke down. This was the sweet-faced girl he loved. Kora, with her kitten-warmth, her childish joy in nature and in music. Who'd laughed her happiness as they'd watched the evening sky over the Pacific become dabbled with Aztec gold, who read poetry, who begged for one more song.

He felt Thow's steel-like fingers take his hand.

"I know what this does to you." The Alphan's voice was caustic. "Don't you see what Morko has done? He reached down into Kora's unconscious mind and dragged out all of the agonies she has suffered since she was a mere baby—about her mother and the heartlessness of her own birth. Kora has never forgiven your society for what happened to her mother; she blames the whole world, deep inside. That was what made her involve herself in movements to help other unfortunates. She *had* to help people who were discriminated against.

"Morko did a despicable thing—he used all this to create total despair. He pulled these monsters out of her id and breathed life into them, so that Kora forgot all of the good things—even you. She sees nothing but evil in her past. It was a trick!"

Oren tried to take comfort as his eyes moved across the wide circle of indignation and mounting fury. The crisscross shafts of hate seemed to pierce even through the cut-off. Kora's simple words had tied everything up into a neat little bundle. There was no doubt in them, none at all, now. Terra had been denounced by one of her own. This turned the tide—once and for all...

His eyes touched Kora's. Her smile was bitter. In that smile and that look she told Oren that she had spoken nothing but truth, and that Oren, too, must speak the truth. Terra deserved the fate this wonderful race had decreed.

Oren, too, must denounce Terra.

All this flashed into his mind in that look.

Oren's head was splitting with it.

"There's no hope," he mumbled.

A nod from the Tribunal chairman signaled that Thow might now

begin his defense. Thow pressed Oren's hand before he moved lithely up to the circle.

He gave a confident toss of his chin in the direction of his colleagues; he shot Oren a smile.

"Our suns give each planet a bright side and a dark side. And every idea and concept which the intelligent mind can conceive is subject to opinion and debate. That is why we are here. Morko believes, and I. respect his opinion, that Terra does not and cannot ever attain the moral status to allow her to exist in harmony among the more advanced races of the universe. Our probes have scanned Terra's turbulent history. We have frequently been shocked at its violence and lack of wisdom. But we have watched hopefully for signs of progress. Progress came, true, but much violence remained. This is truth and I do not attempt to deny it.

"When the atomic explosions began, we were worried. And the moon probes and the first feeble stirrings in the direction of Terra's sister planets made us realize that she was coming of age—technologically if not morally and mentally. Our policy was still, as with all primitives, hands off. We observe, but we do not interfere. We colonize in our own system and in other directions, we explore, but never to subjugate or change in any drastic way. We believe that each race must work out its own destiny.

"Signs of enlightenment on Terra were promising for a while, but then their space-thrust created new problems. It was then our High Tribunal set up the Barrier. They must be kept within the boundaries of their own sun system until they learned to behave as adult beings, or destroyed themselves. Private communication with Terra was expressly forbidden. But—"

Morko was on his feet, blazing with righteous anger.

"The High Tribunal forbade us to communicate—and to visit this detestable planet! Thow went to Terra against your own edict! I submit that everything he has to say about his contacts there be thrown out by reason that it results from a traitorous and illegal act!"

The crowd roared approval.

The Chairman lifted his hand, to speak. Thow has petitioned for this new trial on the basis of new evidence. The extreme gravity of this case

impels the Tribunal to allow special latitude. We will hear what he has to say."

"No!" screamed the crowd.

"He is a traitor!"

Oren saw Thow pale under their whiplash, but he stood his ground, even forced a faint smile, waiting until the crowd's unheard tempest subsided. The faces mouthed hate-drenched words, fists pounded the air. But the power was turned down. To Oren it was like a silent movie of the French Revolution, with the knitters and the tumbrels, and heads rolling—in silence.

"We must have order!" The Chairman's voice was stern.

"You are behaving in a manner that puts you in the identical category of the race you wish to destroy!" When the soundless tumult drained away, he motioned to Thow. "Continue, please."

Thow bowed.

"Our esteemed prosecutor has shown you in ugly detail portions of Terra's history. Eras dominated by depraved tyrants and carefully selected individuals who were, plainly, monsters. But he has left out so much. It is only fair that the other side should be seen, as well."

Again, in the middle of the air, like Ezekiel's wheel, giants stalked hugely out of the Earth's years. The prophets. Jesus exhorting the multitudes for brotherly love and forgiveness. Buddha and Mohammed. Plato and Socrates. Michelangelo dying in an ecstasy to create the Sistine Chapel. Leonardo da Vinci's art and science. Confucius. Goethe. Bach. Beethoven's thunderous Ninth Symphony with its eternal message of goodwill. *All men are brothers, all men are brothers!* Tyrants were shown again, but in every case those who protested and martyred themselves in their passion for freedom and right. Pasteur. Dr. Tom Dooley. Albert Schweitzer. Heroism far beyond patriotic slogans. Death and transfigured glory. Individual sacrifices beyond counting. Anguish, but hope where there seemed none. A magnificent pageant of human goodwill and toil born out of heroic dreams.

Even The Big Man was shown with wonder moving sluggishly across his

fat, face hearing Oren sing. Oren's compassion for the mob in the arena, beyond his hate. Dr. Corwin and his dreams. The scientists and their hopes. Einstein. The gifts of life for humanity on all sides.

When it was finished the crowd was silently thoughtful. The hate was diminishing, changing.

Morko roared to his feet.

"These are jewel glints in the dungheap!" He was bellowing now. "But we must not allow ourselves to be de-luded! We must be strong. We must act—*now!*"

Thow turned to the Chairman. "If the Tribunal permits, I, too, have a witness."

The Chairman consulted with the Tribunal, then he nodded. He signaled for silence. When Thow motioned to him, Oren dragged up onto his feet. A great wind was roaring inside of his head; he managed two steps toward the speaking circle before he collapsed.

Thow ran to his side, bent down anxiously.

"It's my head!"

"Morko," Thow muttered. "He's trying to take you over the way he did Kora. Fight him!"

Oren clawed up to his feet again; the great room swirled around his head. He fell. When he drifted out of it Kora was at his side with Thow. There was hurt in her eyes, a kind of resignation to sorrow. But this defeat forced him on his feet. Grimly, he made it to the speaking circle.

Thow came up. "Here. Take your guitar. It will help. Concentrate on your music. Keep your mind tight and invulnerable."

Oren grabbed the guitar and his fingers twanged across its string in a savage discordance. The feel of it against him did help; unknown music swept into his mind. He planted his boots wide apart and stood there, swaying. In a moment he was able to flash Thow and Chauna a slanted grin. Kora had rejoined Morko's group.

He stood, a lanky figure with sunburned face and wheat hair curling around his ears; he had none of the feline grace that was typically Alphan, his freckles grated with the smooth tan-gold of all those faces around him. His rangy look was odd in these alien surroundings. Except for his silvery eyes Oren was raw and out of place. Physically, he was of Earth.

Those silver eyes ranged the wide arc of faces up to the furthest row. Now the throbbing in his mind vanished; words poured out of him.

"I'm not a speaker. What I have to give comes out better in music. Whether any of it is important is for you to decide. I love my people. I won't plead for them, much as I want to. But I will try to make you understand, as I do, *why* they do bad things.

"Mostly it is one thing. *Fear. Fear.* What is eating into all of you right at this moment. Only, on my world it eats at us all the time. We are almost never free from it.

"You are lucky; your minds developed very differently. You can't remember the clutching fear that we know—every day of our lives. Not knowing what is on the other man's mind. That's what it amounts to. We try. We try so damn hard. But we never *really* know. Talking it out helps, but not enough. Maybe the other guy is going to do bad things to us. Maybe he thinks bad thoughts. But we never know for sure. *The way you know.*

"A long time ago there lived on my world a great man who said we must have faith in our fellows. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' We agreed he was right, but that terrible fear was there. Some of us had faith and this faith, out of fear, was taken advantage of. Still, we try. Listen . . ."

He was in his own sphere when he began to sing, touching the silver strings of his guitar; there was energy and -vital freedom in his spilled-out songs—bursts of joy in living, in the want to live, to feel strongly, to endure what comes. Oren sang as he had never sung. It was as if this singing, now, was the very culmination of all the agony and the beauty condensed into his heart and his soul since the moment of his birth.

His songs told them of Terra. Of deep valleys, of green forests, of rushing rivers, of snowy peaks, of waterfalls and crashing tides. He told them of children playing in the bright sun. Of terror when unforeseen

death wrenched away a loved one. Of sacrifice. Of happiness. Of hope.

He unveiled all that exists inside a human heart, and his songs asked them: *Must all of this be> lost? Must this urgency for living, this depth, be blotted forever from the endless reaches of space?*

"We have not been great,

Nor kind;

We have sullied our seas and our land

With our brothers' blood:

But we try and try and try

Before we give up and die.

We yearn out to the stars for meaning,

We look to new suns for comfort and hope;

Perhaps there we will find the answer,

Written up there on strange stars.

One day

In a burst of glory

We will know that all that has mind

And exists

Is created to be kin;

All that walks and flies and shambles on strange stars.

Then we shall spill joyfully out into the black and fire

And weave our dreams and our destinies

Together."

Silence.

Then, roaring applause. Without tricks, Oren had hit home. The hate-monster in their minds was beginning to crawl back where it came from. They gave Oren freely their wave of love.

Then the Chairman rose.

"You are very convincing, youth. We respect your sincerity, we know it comes from your heart. We accept you and we love you—and your friends, as well. But you are part Alphan, and there can be golden grains in a desert of poisoned sand. These grains can be buried so easily under mountains of evilness. And you speak of *fear*. Fear, you say, is your evil nemesis. Well? Will this fear not persist? Indefinitely?"

Morko stood up. "We have no quarrel with this young man, or the others with him. Let them live here among us, far more content and happy than they could ever be on Terra."

There was doubt in the vast crowd, uncertainty. He had given all he had to give. Was it enough? As the Chairman said, the fear was still there. Putting a name to it did not erase it...

Defeat made his knees weak.

A pinpoint of light came.

He told them: "The man we call The Big Man has enormous power. This man wants to make me President of United World. I am to be his pawn, a figurehead for his schemes. He feels I have the power to lead people."

"Perhaps you have. Can he actually do this?"

"His organizations can," Oren said urgently. "I have made you believe in me. Perhaps I could make the people of Terra trust me, too. In our history there have been leaders who were put into high office by unscrupulous machines, yet when they had the power they used it wisely, for the people's good. Perhaps I could do this. Slowly, changes could be made. This is a crossroad in Terran history. If we were permitted to colonize livable planets, under careful control, our overpopulation problem would be solved. And other reforms could be made, little by little."

"What about Pallent?"

"He is old, he cannot survive many more years of self-indulgence. With a free hand, much more could be accomplished. Eventually, we could achieve dignity and stature."

The Tribunal discussed this among themselves; the populace was quiet, thoughtful.

"This would be no easy task," the Chairman said, then.

Oren pushed out a sigh. "Nor do I really want it. You have offered me the chance to live among you with Kora; this is what I've dreamed of all my life—a clean beautiful world where every day of living is a joy. But my world is Terra. I must work for my own world with all of my strength, until I die."

"Give him this chance!" Thow cried out. "Oren Starr has

ALPHA YES, TERRA NO! a destiny—to save and serve his world. We must not deny him his right."

Some of the crowd cried: "Live, Terra!"

Morko rose, his face orange with psychotic fury, as he saw his defeat mounting and growing. The Chairman of the Tribunal signaled for cut-off until the dissension and tumult subsided. Oren stood palely in the circle, hope rising in his throat. The High Tribunal was voting.

Finally the Chairman rose again. "We are divided," he said tonelessly. "We believe in you, Oren Starr, But you have the soul of a dreamer and we must consider cold facts only. You would give your life to save Terra. Very well. We believe you. But we cannot allow a dreamer's yearnings to tip the scales. Take Kora—live out your lives among us, singing your songs!"

Oren's head dropped on his chest. "I can't live if my world dies."

There was a murmurous sigh.

"We were afraid you would say this."

A wall of sympathy moved down on Oren from all sides. With it came an argent burst of light in his brain—like a nova exploding.

"Oren!"

In a blinding chaos of color he saw Chauna. On his feet. His bony face was almost white, it glowed with a kind of transcendental ecstasy. He smiled and spoke Oren's name again; Oren heard it like a joyful shout, although his lips didn't move.

Oren turned his eyes toward the multitude.

"My friends! My sudden wonderful friends! Something strange and unbelievable has happened—in my mind. Chauna has told me that it happened to him, too, like quick lightning.

"I told you that on my world the thing that divides us into chauvinistic cliques is—fear. Now I do not have that fear. My mind is clear as crystal. Thow helped—you all helped—my urgency helped. Most of all—Chauna. *He gave me his new mind power.* He is dead, but he is happy. He *willed* me the extra power to help save our world!"

His silver eyes shone as he embraced them all with his mind. "Don't you see? Now I have understanding—full and complete. I see into your minds. I am not speaking to you with words any longer. I am one with you all, in your minds!"

The crowd roared to its feet. What had happened gradually to their race many centuries before had come suddenly to this Terran. His despairing urgency—plus Chauna's extra thrust of power—projected into his brain the telepathic oneness they shared with each other from birth. The tacit understanding which cast out fear...

It was as though a ponderous weight had been lifted from their hearts. They did not *want* to kill. It was not in their nature to kill. Now Oren had entered their minds, shown them they need not kill.

Morko lurched on his feet. Something had snapped in the Alphan, something that had been growing in him like a festering microbe-cluster, burst into his blood and his brain. He could not bear defeat, it taunted. Terra must die! If this young upstart singer with the new power died, his whole world would die, too!

His hand moved under the long official cloak he wore; a tube weapon glinted.

"Die, Terra!"

Lightning flamed from the cylinder. Oren was sheathed in sudden flame; his guitar dropped from his hands, a crisp black ash even before it hit the floor. Then—Oren.

Where the singer had been standing, in new joy and hope, was a stirring of ashes in an eddy of disturbed air.

The silence was like death itself. Then Kora screamed and flung herself up to the dais and pushed her slim body down on the marbled floor in wild heart-tearing grief. "I must be with him. Help me," she sobbed.

Hands lifted her to her feet, strong hands. She lay against him, unknowing, limp, shivering in agony.

"Open your eyes," Oren told her.

Death was kind, after all, she thought. Death and beyond. She opened her eyes. It was Oren—and his arms were tight around her. Guards held a crumpled Morko.

"Thow did it," he told her, thickly. "In that last second he knew what Morko was going to do. Morko *had* to kill me, so that Terra would be lost. Something in him snapped. But Thow took my place, he gave his body for mine. My new mind-power made it possible to exchange his cells for mine."

"He gave his life for our world," Kora whispered.

Oren nodded. He said: "Maybe what happened with Morko will remind Alphans that evil is still possible in their shining world—and Thow and Chauna will remind them that total sacrifice is a small deep flame burning inside of us all."