

IN THE QUEUE

The old man fell just as Farn Hestler's power wheel was passing his Place in Line, on his way back from the Comfort Station. Hestler, braking, stared down at the twisted face, a mask of soft, pale leather in which the mouth writhed as if trying to tear itself free of the dying body. Then he jumped from the wheel, bent over the victim. Quick as he was, a lean woman with fingers like gnarled roots was before him, clutching at the old man's fleshless shoulders.

"Tell them me, Millicent Dredgewicke Klunt," she was shrilling into the vacant face. "Oh, if you only knew what I've been through, how I deserve the help-"

Hestler sent her reeling with a deft shove of his foot. He knelt beside the old man, lifted his head.

"Vultures," he said. "Greedy, snapping at a man. Now, I care. And you were getting so close to the Head of the Line. The tales you could tell, I'll bet. An Old-timer. Not like these Line, er, jumpers," he diverted the obscenity. "I say a man deserves a little dignity at a moment like this-"

"Wasting your time, Jack," a meaty voice said. Hestler glanced up into the hippopotamine features of the man he always thought of as Twentieth Back. "The old coot's dead."

Hestler shook the corpse. "Tell them Argall Y. Hestler!" he yelled into the dead ear. "Argall, that's A-R-G-A-L-L-"

"Break it up," the brassy voice of a Line Policeman sliced through the babble. "You, get back." A sharp prod lent urgency to the command. Hestler rose reluctantly, his eyes on the waxy face slackening into an expression of horrified astonishment.

"Ghoul," the lean woman he had kicked snarled. "Line-!" She mouthed the unmentionable word.

"I wasn't thinking of myself," Hestler countered hotly. "But my boy Argall, through no fault of his own-"

"All right, quiet!" the cop snarled. He jerked a thumb at the dead man. "This guy make any disposition?"

"Yes!" the lean woman cried. "He said, to Millicent Dredgewicke Klunt, that's M-I-L-"

"She's lying," Hestler cut in. "I happened to catch the name Argall Hestler-right, sir?" He looked brightly at a slack-jawed lad who was staring down at the corpse.

The boy swallowed and looked Hestler in the face.

"Hell, he never said a word," he said, and spat, just missing Hestler's shoe.

"Died intestate," the cop intoned, and wrote a note in his book. He gestured and a clean-up squad moved in, lifted the corpse onto a cart,

covered it, trundled it away.

"Close it up," the cop ordered.

"Intestate," somebody grumbled. "Crap!"

"A rotten shame. The slot goes back to the government. Nobody profits. Goddamn!" the fat man who had spoken looked around at the others. "In a case like this we ought to get together, have some equitable plan worked out and agreed to in advance--"

"Hey," the slack-jawed boy said. "That's conspiracy!"

"I meant to suggest nothing illegal." The fat man faded back to his Place in Line. As if by common consent, the small crowd dissipated, sliding into their Places with deft footwork. Hestler shrugged and remounted his wheel, put-putted forward, aware of the envious eyes that followed him. He passed the same backs he always passed, some standing, some sitting on canvas camp stools under sun-faded umbrellas, here and there a nylon queuebana, high and square, some shabby, some ornate, owned by the more fortunate. Like himself: he was a lucky man, he had never been a Standee, sweating the line exposed to the sun and prying eyes.

It was a bright afternoon. The sun shone down on the vast concrete ramp across which the Line snaked from a point lost in distance across the plain. Ahead-not far ahead now, and getting closer every day-was the blank white wall perforated only by the Window, the terminal point of the Line. Hestler slowed as he approached the Hestler queuebana; his mouth went dry as he saw how close it was to the Head of the Line now. One, two, three, four slots back! Ye Gods, that meant six people had been processed in the past twelve hours-an unprecedented number. And it meant-Hestler caught his breath-he might reach the Window himself, this shift. For a moment, he felt a panicky urge to flee, to trade places with First Back, and then with Second, work his way back to a safe distance, give himself a chance to think about it, get ready . . .

"Say, Farn." The head of his proxy, Cousin Galpert, poked from the curtains of the three foot square, five foot high nylon-walled queuebana. "Guess what? I moved up a spot while you were gone."

Hestler folded the wheel and leaned it against the weathered cloth. He waited until Galpert had emerged, then surreptitiously twitched the curtains wide open. The place always smelled fudgy and stale after his cousin had spent half an hour in it while he was away for his Comfort Break.

"We're getting close to the Head," Galpert said excitedly, handing over the lockbox that contained the Papers. "I have a feeling-" He broke off as sharp voices were suddenly raised a few Spaces behind. A small, pale-haired man with bulging blue eyes was attempting to force himself into Line between Third Back and Fifth Back.

"Say, isn't that Four Back?" Hestler asked.

"You don't understand," the little man was whimpering. "I had to go answer an unscheduled call of nature . . ." His weak eyes fixed on Fifth Back, a

large, coarse-featured man in a loud shirt and sunglasses. "You said you'd watch my Place . . . !"

"So whattaya think ya got a Comfort Break for, ya bum! Beat it!"

Lots of people were shouting at the little man now:

"Line-ine-ucker-bucker-Line bucker, Line bucker . . . "

The little man fell back, covering his ears. The obscene chant gained in volume as other voices took it up.

"But it's my Place," the evictee wailed. "Father left it to me when he died, you all remember him . . . " His voice was drowned in the uproar.

"Serves him right," Galpert said, embarrassed by the chant. "A man with no more regard for his inheritance than to walk off and leave it . . . "

They watched the former Fourth Back turn and flee, his hands still over his ears.

After Galpert left on the wheel, Hestler aired the queuebana for another ten minutes, standing stony-faced, arms folded, staring at the back of One Up. His father had told him some stories about One Up, back in the old days, when they'd both been young fellows, near the end of the Line. Seemed he'd been quite a cutup in those days, always joking around with the women close to him in Line, offering to trade Places for a certain consideration. You didn't see many signs of that now: just a dumpy old man in burst-out shoe-leather, sweating out the Line. But he himself was lucky, Hestler reflected. He'd taken over from Father when the latter had had his stroke, a twenty-one thousand two hundred and ninety-four slot jump. Not many young fellows did that well. Not that he was all that young, he'd put in his time in the Line, it wasn't as if he didn't deserve the break.

And now, in a few hours maybe, he'd hit the Head of the Line. He touched the lockbox that contained the old man's Papers-and of course his own, and Cluster's and the kids'-everything. In a few hours, if the Line kept moving, he could relax, retire, let the kids, with their own Places in Line, carry on. Let them do as well as their dad had done, making Head of the Line at under forty-five!

Inside his queuebana it was hot, airless. Hestler pulled off his coat and squatted in the crouch-hammock-not the most comfortable position in the world, maybe, but in full compliance with the Q-law requirement that at least one foot be on the ground at all times, and the head higher than the waist. Hestler remembered an incident years before, when some poor devil without a queuebana had gone to sleep standing up. He'd stood with his eyes closed and his knees bent, and slowly sunk down to a squat; then bobbed slowly up and blinked and went back to sleep. Up and down, they'd watched him for an hour before he finally let his head drop lower than his belt. They'd pitched him out of Line then, and closed ranks. Ah, there'd been some wild times in the queue in the old days, not like now. There was too much at stake now, this near the Head. No time for horseplay.

Just before dusk, the Line moved up. Three to go! Hestler's heart thumped.

It was dark when he heard the voice whisper: "Four Up!"

Hestler jerked wide awake. He blinked, wondering if he'd dreamed the urgent tone.

"Four Up!" the voice hissed again. Hestler twitched the curtain open, saw nothing, pulled his head back in. Then he saw the pale, pinched face, the bulging eyes of Four Back, peering through the vent slot at the rear of the tent.

"You have to help me," the little man said. "You saw what happened, you can make a deposition that I was cheated, that-"

"Look here, what are you doing out of Line?" Hestler cut in. "I know you're on-shift, why aren't you holding down a new slot?"

"I . . . I couldn't face it," Four Back said brokenly. "My wife, my children-they're all counting on me."

"You should have thought of that sooner."

"I swear I couldn't help it. It just hit me so suddenly. And-"

"You lost your Place. There's nothing I can do."

"If I have to start over now-I'll be over seventy when I get to the Window!"

"That's not my lookout-"

". . . but if you'll just tell the Line Police what happened, explain about my special case-"

"You're crazy, I can't do that!"

"But you . . . I always thought you looked like a decent sort-"

"You'd better go. Suppose someone sees me talking to you?"

"I had to speak to you here, I don't know your name, but after all we've been four Spaces apart in Line for nine years-"

"Go away! Before I call a Line cop!"

Hestler had a hard time getting comfortable again after Four Back left. There was a fly inside the queuebana. It was a hot night. The Line moved up again, and Hestler had to emerge and roll the queuebana forward. Two Spaces to go! The feeling of excitement was so intense that it made Hestler feel a little sick. Two more moves up, and he'd be at the Window. He'd open the lockbox, and present the Papers, taking his time, one at a time, getting it all correct, all in order. With a sudden pang of panic he wondered if anyone had goofed, anywhere back along the line, failed to sign anything, missed a Notary's seal, or a witness' signature. But they couldn't have. Nothing as dumb as that. For that you could get bounced out of Line, lose your Place, have to go all the way back-

Hestler shook off the morbid fancies. He was just nervous, that was all. Well, who wouldn't be? After tonight, his whole life would be different; his days of standing in Line would be over. He'd have time-all the time in the world to do all the things he hadn't been able to think about all these years . . .

Someone shouted, near at hand. Hestler stumbled out of the queuebana to see Two Up-at the Head of the line now-raise his fist and shake it under the nose of the small, black-moustached face in the green eye-shade framed in the Window, bathed in harsh white light.

"Idiot! Dumbbell! Jackass!" Two Up yelled. "What do you mean take it back home and have my wife spell out her middle name!"

Two burly Line police appeared, shone lights in Two Up's wild face, grabbed his arms, took him away. Hestler trembled as he pushed the queuebana forward a Space on its roller skate wheels. Only one man ahead of him now. He'd be next. But no reason to get all upset; the Line had been moving like greased lightning, but it would take a few hours to process the man ahead. He had time to relax, get his nerves soothed down, get ready to answer questions . . .

"I don't understand, sir," the reedy voice of One Up was saying to the small black moustache behind the Window. "My Papers are all in order, I swear it-"

"You said yourself your father is dead," the small, dry voice of Black Moustache said. "That means you'll have to reexecute Form 56839847565342-B in sextuplicate, with an endorsement from the medical doctor, the Residential Police, and waivers from Department A, B, C, and so on. You'll find it all, right in the Regulations."

"But-but he only died two hours ago: I just received word-"

"Two hours, two years; he's just as dead."

"But-I'll lose my Place! If I hadn't mentioned it to you-"

"Then I wouldn't have known about it. But you did mention it, quite right, too."

"Couldn't you just pretend I didn't say anything? That the messenger never reached me?"

"Are you suggesting I commit fraud?"

"No . . . no . . ." One Up turned and tottered away, his invalidated Papers clutched in his hand. Hestler swallowed hard.

"Next," Black Moustache said.

It was almost dawn six hours later when the clerk stamped the last Paper, licked the last stamp, thrust the stack of processed documents into a slot and looked past Hestler at the next man in Line.

Hestler hesitated, holding the empty lockbox in nerveless fingers. It felt

abnormally light, like a cast husk.

"That's all," the clerk said. "Next."

One Down jostled Hestler getting to the Window. He was a small, bandy-legged Standee with large, loose lips and long ears. Hestler had never really looked at him before. He felt an urge to tell him all about how it had been, give him a few friendly tips, as an old Window veteran to a newcomer. But the man didn't give him a chance.

Moving off, Hestler noticed the queuebana. It looked abandoned, functionless. He thought of all the hours, the days, the years he had spent in it, crouched in the sling . . .

"You can have it," he said on impulse to Two Down, who, he noted with surprise, was a woman, dumpy, slack-jowled. He gestured toward the queuebana. She made a snorting sound and ignored him. He wandered off down the Line, staring curiously at the people in it, at the varied faces and figures, tall, wide, narrow, old, young-not so many of those-dressed in used clothing, with hair combed or uncombed, some with facial hair, some with paint on their lips, all unattractive in their own individual ways.

He encountered Galpert whizzing toward him on the power wheel. Galpert slowed, gaping, came to a halt. Hestler noticed that his cousin had thin, bony ankles in maroon socks, one of which suffered from perished elastic so that the sock drooped, exposing clay-white skin.

"Farn-what . . . ?"

"All done." Hestler held up the empty lockbox.

"All done . . . ?" Galpert looked across toward the distant Window in a bewildered way.

"All done. Not much to it, really."

"Then . . . I . . . I guess I don't need to . . . " Galpert's voice died away.

"No, no need, never again, Galpert."

"Yes, but what . . . ?" Galpert looked at Hestler, looked at the Line, back at Hestler. "You coming, Farn?"

"I . . . I think I'll just take a walk for a while. Savor it, you know."

"Well," Galpert said. He started up the wheel and rode slowly off across the ramp.

Suddenly, Hestler was thinking about time-all that time stretching ahead, like an abyss. What would he do with it . . . ? He almost called after Galpert, but instead turned and continued his walk along the Line. Faces stared past him, over him, through him.

Noon came and went. Hestler obtained a dry hot dog and a paper cup of warm milk from a vendor on a three-wheeler with a big umbrella and a pet chicken perched on the back. He walked on, searching the faces. They were

all so ugly. He pitied them, so far from the Window. He looked back; it was barely visible, a tiny dark point toward which the Line dwindled. What did they think about, standing in Line? How they must envy him!

But no one seemed to notice him. Toward sunset he began to feel lonely. He wanted to talk to someone; but none of the faces he passed seemed sympathetic.

It was almost dark when he reached the End of the Line. Beyond, the empty plain stretched toward the dark horizon. It looked cold out there, lonely.

"It looks cold out there," he heard himself say to the oatmeal-faced lad who huddled at the tail of the Line, hands in pockets. "And lonely."

"You in Line, or what?" the boy asked.

Hestler looked again at the bleak horizon. He came over and stood behind the youth.

"Certainly," he said.