

Of Death What Dreams

Prologue

"Left hand," the thin man said tonelessly. "Wrist up."

William Bailey peeled back his cuff; the thin man put something cold against it, nodded toward the nearest door.

"Through there, first slab on the right," he said, and turned away.

"Just a minute," Bailey started. "I wanted-"

"Let's get going, buddy," the thin man said. "That stuff is fast."

Bailey felt something stab up under his heart. "You mean-you've already . . . that's all there is to it?"

"That's what you came for, right? Slab one, friend. Let's go."

"But-I haven't been here two minutes-"

"Whatta you expect-organ music? Look, pal," the thin man shot a glance at the wall clock. "I'm on my break, know what I mean?"

"I thought I'd at least have time for . . . for . . ."

"Have a heart, chum. You make it under your own power, I don't have to haul you, see?" The thin man was pushing open the door, urging Bailey through into an odor of chemicals and unlive flesh. In a narrow, curtained alcove, he indicated a padded cot.

"On your back, arms and legs straight out."

Bailey assumed the position, tensed as the thin man began fitting straps over his ankles.

"Relax. It's just if we get a little behind and I don't get back to a client for maybe a couple hours and they stiffen up . . . well, them issue boxes is just the one size, you know what I mean?"

A wave of softness, warmth, swept over Bailey as he lay back.

"Hey, you didn't eat nothing the last twelve hours?" The thin man's face was a hazy pink blur.

"I awrrr mmmm," Bailey heard himself say.

"OK, sleep tight, paisan. . . ." The thin man's voice boomed and faded. Bailey's last thought as the endless blackness closed in was of the words cut in the granite over the portal to the Euthanasia Center:

". . . send me your tired, your poor, your hopeless, yearning to be free. To them I raise the lamp beside the brazen door. . . ."

Bailey's first thought when he opened his eyes was one of surprise that a girl had taken the thin man's place. She looked young, with a finely

chiseled, too-pale face.

"Are you all right?" she asked. Her voice was soft and breathy, but with an undernote of strength.

He started to nod; then the wrongness of it penetrated. This wasn't the Euthanasia Center. Behind the girl, he saw the dun walls and plastic fixtures of a Class Yellow Nine flat. He made an effort to sit up and became aware of a deathly sickness all through his body.

"My chest hurts," he managed to gasp. "What happened? Why am I alive?"

The girl leaned closer. "You were really-inside?"

Bailey thought about it. "I remember going into the cubicle. The attendant gave me a hypo and strapped me down. Then I passed out . . ." His eyes searched the girl's face. "Am I dreaming this?"

She shook her head without impatience. "I found you in the serviceway behind the center. I brought you here."

"But-" Bailey croaked, "I'm supposed to be dead!"

"How did you get outside?" the girl asked.

For an instant, a ghostly memory brushed Bailey's mind: cold, and darkness, and a bodiless voice that spoke from emptiness . . . "I don't know. I was there . . . and now I'm here."

"Are you sorry?"

Bailey started to answer quickly, then paused. "No," he said, wonderingly. "I'm not."

"Then sleep," the girl said.

1

"Why?" the girl asked. She sat across from Bailey at the fold-out table, watching as he ate carefully a bowl of lux-ration soup, with real lichen chunks.

"Why did I go?" He made a vague gesture with a thin, pale hand. "Everything I wanted to do, everything I tried; it all seemed so hopeless. I was trapped, a Ten-Level Yellow-Tag. There was no future for me, no chance to improve. It was a way out."

"You feel differently now?"

Bailey nodded slowly. "I used to grieve for the old days, when the world wasn't so crowded and so organized. I always told myself what I would have done if I'd lived then. Now I see that's just an easy out. It's always been up to a man to make his own way. I was afraid to try."

"And now you're not?"

"No," Bailey said, sounding surprised. "Why should I be? All that out

there"-he made a gesture which encompassed all of society-"is just something built by men. I'm a man, too. I can do what I have to do." He broke off, glancing at the girl. "What about you?" he asked. "Why did you help me?"

"I . . . know how it is. I almost jumped from the Hudson Intermix once."

"What changed your mind?"

She lifted her shoulders, frowned. "I don't know. I can't remember. Maybe I lost my nerve."

Bailey shook his head. "No," he said. "You didn't lose your nerve. Helping me took plenty of that. I don't know what the law says about leaving the center via the back door, but I left all my papers there. You're harboring a tagless man." He put down his spoon and pushed the chair back. "Thanks for everything," he said. "I'll be going now."

"Are you sure you feel well enough?"

"I'm all right. And there are things I have to do."

"Where will you go? What will you do?"

"First I'll need money."

"Without your cards, how can you apply for assignment?"

"You're thinking about legal methods," Bailey said. "I'm afraid that's a luxury I can't afford. I'll go where the cards don't count."

"You mean-Preke territory?"

"I don't have much choice." Bailey leaned across to touch her hand. "Don't worry about me," he said. "Forget me. At worst, I won't be any worse off than when I was strapped to a slab in the slaughterhouse."

"I still don't know how you got away."

"Neither do I." Bailey rose. "But never mind the past. It's what comes next that counts."

2

Bailey took the walkaway to the nearest downshaft, rode the crowded car to Threevee Mall. No one paid any visible attention to him as he walked briskly along past the glare-lit store fronts through the streaming crowd that bumped and jostled him in a perfectly normal fashion. He passed the barred entry to a service ramp, continued another thirty feet past the green-uniformed Peaceman lounging near it; then he flattened himself against the rippling facade of a popshop. A stout man with an angry expression bellied past, trampling his foot. Bailey stepped out behind him, delivered a sharp kick to the calf of the fat man's left leg, instantly faded back against the wall as the victim whirled with a yell. One windmilling arm caught another pedestrian across the chest. The latter dealt the fat man a return blow to the paunch. In an instant, a churning maelstrom of shouting,

kicking, punching humanity had developed. Bailey watched until the Greenback arrived, cutting a swatch through the crowd with his prod; then he moved quickly along to the gate, jumped to catch its top edge, pulled himself up. There were a few shouts, one ineffective grab at his leg by a zealous citizen who staggered back with a bruised chin for his efforts. Then Bailey was over, dropping on a wide landing. Without hesitation, he started down the dark stairs toward outlaw territory.

3

The odor of Four Quarters was the most difficult aspect of that twilight half-world for Bailey to accommodate to. The shops were shabby antiques, badly lit by primitive fluorescents and garish neon, relics of an age that had by-passed and buried the original city under the looming towers of progress. The Prekes—the lawless ones, without life permits, work papers, or census numbers—seemed not much different than their catalogued and routinized brethren on the levels above, except for the variety of their costumes and a certain look of animal alertness. Bailey moved along the wide street, breathing through his mouth. He strolled for an hour, unmolested, before a tiny, spider-like man with sharp brown eyes materialized from a shadowy doorway ahead.

"New on the turf, hey?" he murmured, falling in beside Bailey. "Papers to move? Top price for a clean ID, Frosh."

"Where can I take a lay on the Vistats?" Bailey asked his new acquaintance.

"Oh, a string man, hah? You're lucky, zek. I'll fence it for you. Just name your lines and give me your card—"

Bailey smiled at the little man. "Do you really get any takers on that one?"

The pinched brown face flickered through several trial expressions, settled on rueful camaraderie. "You never know. Worth a try. But I see you're edged. No hard feelings, zek. What size lay you have in mind? An M? Five M's?"

Bailey slipped the Three-issue watch from his finger, handed it over. "Take me to the place," he said. "If you con me, I'll find you sooner or later."

The little man hung back, eyeing the offering. "How do I know you're on the flat?"

"If I'm not, you'll find me later."

A hand like a monkey's darted out and scooped the ring from Bailey's palm. "That's the rax, zek. This way."

Bailey followed his guide along a devious route, skirting the massive piers that supported the city above, into streets even meaner and dirtier than the first, wan in the light that filtered down through the grimy plastic skylights spanning the avenues. In a narrow, canyon-like alley, supplementally lit by a lone polyarc at the corner, the guide pointed with his chin and disappeared.

Bailey stood in a unswept doorway and watched the traffic. A man in a shabby woven-fiber coat passed, giving him a single, furtive glance. A hollow-cheeked woman looked him up and down, snorted, moved on. Across the street, a man loitered by a dark window, glancing both ways, then pushed through the unmarked door beside it. A fat woman in shapeless garments emerged, shuffled away. Bailey waited another five minutes until the man had gone, then crossed the street.

The door was locked. He tapped. Silence. He tapped harder. A voice growled: "Beat it. I'm sleeping."

Bailey kept tapping. The door opened abruptly; a swarthy, pockmarked face poked out. The expression on the unshaven features was not friendly. The man looked past Bailey, under him, around him, cursed, started to close the door. Bailey jammed it with his foot.

"I want a job," he said quickly. "You need runners, don't you?"

The swarthy man's foot paused an inch from grinding into Bailey's ankle. His blunt features settled into wariness.

"You're on a bum pitch, Clyde. What I need a runner for?"

"This is a drop shop. You can use me. How about letting me in off the street before somebody gets eyes?"

Reluctantly, the door eased back; Bailey slipped through into an odor of nesting mice. By the light coming through from a back hall he saw a clutter of ancient furniture, a battered computer console. Then a meaty hand had caught his tunic-front, slammed him back against the wall. A six-inch knife blade glinted in the fist held under his nose.

"I could cut your heart out," a garlic-laden voice growled in his face.

"Sure you could," Bailey said impatiently. "But why take a wipe for nothing?"

"Who told you about me?"

"Look, I just arrived an hour ago. The first drifter I met led me here. Everybody must know this place."

"Bugs send you here?" The hand shook him, rattling his head against the wall.

"For what? The Greenies know all about you. You must have paid bite money, otherwise you wouldn't be operating."

The knife touched Bailey's throat. "You take some chances, Clyde."

"Put the knife away. You need me-and I need money."

"I need you why?"

"Your biggest problem is transmitting bets and pay-off information. You can't use Pubcom or two-way. I've got a good memory and I like to walk."

For a hundred a week in hard tokens I'll cover all of Mat'n for you."

The silence lengthened. The knife moved away; the grip on Bailey's blouse slackened slightly.

"Bugs got something on you?"

"Not that I know of."

"Why you need money?"

"To buy new papers-and other things."

"You got no cards?"

"Not even an ID."

"How do I know you're not dogging for the Bugs?"

"Get some sense. What would I get out of that?"

The man made a guttural noise and stepped back. "Tell it, Clyde. All of it."

Bailey told. When he finished, the swarthy man rubbed his chin with a sound like a wood rasp cutting pine.

"How'd you do it? Bust out, I mean?"

"I don't know. The girl found me in an alley mumbling about a pain in my chest. My wrists were a little raw, as if I'd forced the straps. After all, it isn't as if they expected anybody to try to leave."

The dark man grunted. "You're scrambled," he said. "But there could be something in it at that. OK, you're on, Jack. Fifty a week-and you sleep in the back."

"Seventy-five-and I eat here, too."

"Push your luck, don't you? All right. But don't expect no lux rations."

"Just so I eat," Bailey said. "I'll need my strength for what I've got to do."

4

The dog-eared, seam-cracked maps of the city which Bailey's employer supplied dated from a time when the streets had been open to the sky, when unfiltered sunlight had fallen on still-new pavements and facades. Two centuries had passed since those wholesome, innocent days, but the charts still reflected faithfully each twist and angle of the maze of streets and alleys. Each night, he quartered the city, north to south, river wall to river wall. In the motley costume which Aroon had given him, he passed unremarked in the crowds.

Off-duty, he undertook the cleaning of Aroon's rubbish-filled rooms. After feeding the accumulated debris of decades into a municipal disposer half a block from the house, he set about sweeping, scrubbing, polishing the plastron floor and walls until their original colors emerged from under the

crusts of age. After that, he procured pen and paper, spent hours absorbed in calculations. Aroon watched, grunted, and left him to his own devices.

"You're a funny guy, Bailey," he said after a month of near-silent observation. "I got to admit at first I didn't know about you. But you had plenty chances to angle, and passed 'em. You're smart, and a hard worker. You never spend a chit. You work, you eat, you sleep, and you scribble numbers. I got no complaint-but what you after, Bailey? You're a hounded guy if I ever see one."

Bailey studied the older man's face. "You and I are going to make some money, Gus," he said.

Aroon looked startled. His thick eyebrows crawled up his furrowed forehead.

"How much do you make a week, booking the 'stats?" Bailey put the question boldly.

Aroon frowned. "Hell, you know: Three, four hundred after expenses-if I'm lucky."

"How much do the big boys make? The books?"

"Plenty!" Gus barked. "But-wait a minute, kid. You ain't getting ideas-"

"They don't rely on luck," Bailey said. "They know. Figure it out for yourself. The play is based on the midnight census read-outs. But the figures for production, consumption, the growth indices and vital statistics-they all vary in accordance with known curves."

"Not to me, they ain't known. Listen, Bailey, don't start talking chisel to me-"

Bailey shook his head. "Nothing like that. But we do all the work. Why pass all the profits along to them?" He pointed with his head in the general direction of the booker's present temporary HQ in a defunct hotel half a mile south.

"You slipped your clutch? That's murder-"

"We won't cut corners on anybody. But tonight we're going to roll our own book."

Aroon's mouth hung open.

"I've worked out the major cycles, and enough minor ones to show a profit. It wasn't too hard. I minored in statan, back in my kid days."

"Wise up, kid," Aroon growled. "What do I use for capital?"

"We'll start out small. We won't need much: just a little cash money to cover margins. I've got three hundred to contribute. I'd estimate another seventeen hundred ought to do it."

Aroon's tongue touched his lips. "This is nuts. I'm a drop man, not a book-"

"So now you're a book. You've already got the work list, your steady

customers. We'll just direct a few lays into our private bank, on these lines." Bailey passed a sheet of paper across; it was filled with columns of figures.

"I can't take no chance like this," Gus breathed. "What if I can't cover? What if-"

"What have you got to lose, Gus? This?" Bailey glanced around the room. "You could have a Class Three flat, wear issue 'alls, eat at the commess-if you went up there." He glanced ceilingward. "You picked Preke country instead. Why? So you could lock into another system-a worse one?"

"I got enough," Gus said hoarsely. "I get along."

"Just once," Bailey said. "Take a chance. Take it, or face the fact that you spend the rest of your life in a one-way dead end."

Gus swallowed hard. "You really think . . . ?"

"I think it's a chance. A good chance."

For long seconds, Aroon stared into Bailey's face. Then he hit the table with his fist. He swore. He got to his feet, a big, burly man with sweat on his face.

"I'm in, Bailey," he croaked. "Them guys ain't no better than me and you. And if a man can't ride a hunch once in his life, what's he got anyway, right?"

"Right," Bailey said. "Now better get some cash ready. It's going to be a busy night."

5

For the first three hours, it was touch and go. They paid off heavily on the twenty-one hours read-out, showed a modest recoup on the twenty-two, cut deeply into their tiny reserve at twenty-three.

"We ain't hacking it, kid," Aroon muttered, wiping at his bald forehead with a yard-square handkerchief. "At this rate we go under on the next read."

"Here's a revised line," Bailey said. "One of the intermediate composites is cresting. That's what threw me off."

"If we pull out now, we can pay off and call it square."

"Play along one more hour, Gus."

"We'll be in too deep! We can't cover!"

"Ride it anyway. Maybe we can."

"I'm nuts," Gus said. "But OK, one more pass."

On the midnight reading, the pot showed a profit of three hundred and thirty-one Q's. Aroon proposed getting out then, but half-heartedly. At one hundred, the stake more than doubled. At two, in spite of a sharp wobble in

the GNP curve, they held their own. At three, a spurt sent them over the two thousand mark. By dawn, the firm of Aroon and Bailey had a net worth of forty-one hundred and sixty-one credit units, all in hard tokens.

"I got to hand it to you, Bailey," Aroon said in wonderment, spreading the bright-colored plastic chips on the table with a large, hairy hand. "A month's take-in one night!"

This is a drop in the bucket, Gus," Bailey said. "I just wanted to be sure my formulas worked. Now we really start operating."

Gus looked wary. "What's that mean, more trouble?"

"I've been keeping my eyes open since I've been here in Four Quarters. It's a pretty strange place, when you stop to think about it: a whole sub-culture, living outside the law, a refuge for criminals and misfits. Why do the Greenies tolerate it? Why don't they stage a raid, clean out the Prekes once and for all, put an end to the lawbreakers and the rackets? They could do it any day they wanted to."

Gus looked uncomfortable. "Too much trouble, I guess. We keep to our own. We live off the up graders' scraps-

"Uh-uh," Bailey said. "They live off ours-some of them, even at the top."

"Crusters and Dooses-live off Prekes?" Gus wagged his head. "Your drive is slipping, Bailey."

"Who do you think backs the big books? There's money involved-several million every night. Where do you think it goes?"

"Into the bookers' pockets, I guess. What about it? I don't like this kind of talk. It makes me nervous."

"The big books want you to be nervous," Bailey said. "They don't want anyone asking questions, rocking the boat. But let's ask some anyway. Where does the money go? It goes upstairs, Gus. That's why they let us alone, let us spend our lives cutting each other's throats-so they can bleed off the cream. It's good business."

"You're skywriting, Bailey."

"Sure, I admit it's guesswork. But I'm betting I'm right. And if I am, we can cut ourselves as big a slice as we've got the stomach for."

"Look, we're doing OK, we play small enough maybe they don't pay no attention-

"They'll pay attention. Don't think we're the first to ever get ideas. Staying small is the one thing we can't do. It will be a sure tip-off that we're just a pair of mice in the woodwork. We have to work big, Gus. It's the only bluff we've got."

"Big-on four M." Gus stared scornfully at the chips he had been fondling.

"That's just seed," Bailey said. "Tonight we move into the big time."

"How?"

"We borrow."

Gus stared. "You nuts, Bailey? Who-"

"That's what I want you to tell me, Gus. Here." He slid a sheet of paper across the table. "Write down the names of every man in the Quarters that might be good for a few hundred. I'll take it from there."

6

The dark-eyed man sat with his face in shadow, his long-fingered hands resting on the table before which Bailey stood, waiting.

"Why," he asked in a soft, sardonic drawl, "would I put chips in a sucker play like that?"

"Maybe I made a mistake," Bailey said loudly. "I thought you might want a crack at some important money. If you'd rather play it small and safe, I'll be on my way."

"You talk big, for a nothing from noplac."

"It's not where I'm from-it's where I'm going," Bailey said offhandedly.

"You think you're at the bottom now," the man snarled. "You can drop another six feet-into dirt."

"What would that prove?" Bailey inquired. "That you're too big a man to listen to an idea that could make you rich-if you've got the spine for a little risk?"

"I take chances when the odds are right-"

"Then take one now. Buy in an M's worth-or half an M. You get it back tomorrow-with interest. If you don't-I guess you'll know what to do about it."

The man leaned back; the light glinted from his deep-set eyes. He rubbed the side of his thin beaked nose. "Yeah. I guess I'd think of something at that. Let me get this straight: Aroon is selling slices of a book that will pay twenty-five percent for twenty-four hours' action . . ."

"That's tonight. Investors only. Tomorrow's too late."

"How do I know you don't hit the lifts with the bundle?"

"You think I could make it-with all the eyes that will be watching me?"

"Who else is in?"

"You're the first. I've got a lot of ground to cover before sunset, Mr. Farb. Are you in or out?"

The hawk-nosed man touched his fingertips together, scratched his chin with a thumb.

"I'll go four M," he said. "Better have five ready by sunset tomorrow."

Bailey accepted the stack of gold chips. "You've made a smart move, Mr. Farb. Tell your man to tail me from close enough to move in if some sharpie tries to play rough."

Six hours and forty-one calls later, Bailey returned to the Aroon pad with twenty-six M in chips. His reluctant partner goggled, hastened to sweep the loot into a steel box.

"It's safe," Bailey said, sinking wearily into a chair. "We bought plenty of protection along with the cash. Every investor on the list has a man or two out there keeping an eye on his stake."

"Bailey," Aroon's voice had a faint quaver. "What if we bomb out? They won't leave enough of us to tie a tag on."

"Then we'd better not bomb out. Just give me time for a cup of feen, and we'll start booking them."

Aroon sweated heavily during the first hour of the night's play. Of the ten thousand or so that was the normal wager on the twenty-three hundred hour readouts, Bailey diverted two to the private book, scattering the bets so as to disturb the normal pattern as little as possible.

"The longer we can keep the big boys off our necks at this stage, the better," he pointed out. "We'll feed them enough to keep 'em happy until we've built up some steam."

"They're bound to tip after a while," Gus protested.

"We'll be ready. Jack the ante to thirty percent next hour."

By midnight the traffic had risen to over twenty M in wagers on the numbers on the big board; customers, encouraged by the abnormally high rate of pay-off, were reinvesting their takes. Aroon wagged his heavy head as he paid out line after line.

"We ain't doing so good," he muttered, watching the digits flicker on the monitor screen. "I never paid off like this in six years of drop work."

"I'm keeping the balance as sweet as I can and still show a profit," Bailey reassured him. "We have to build our following fast."

"We're barely clearing enough to pay off our backers!"

"That's right. But I'm banking that they'll stay on for another whirl. We're going to need all the siders we can get when the squeeze comes."

In the following hours, the pot grew to fifty M, to seventy. Now Aroon was booking a full half of the offers on the new ledger.

"It can't go on long," he groaned. "We're cutting too big a slice! Bailey, we ought to take it slow, not make a wave-"

"Just the opposite. We're running a bluff, Gus. That means show all the

muscle you can beg, borrow, or fake up out of foam rubber."

By dawn, the new book had turned a grand total of almost half a million in bets, for a pay-off of sixty-seven percent and a net profit of forty thousand Q's.

"We're clear," Aroon announced in wondering tones after the count. "We can square our stakers and clean seven and a half-" He broke off as a sharp sound came from the locked street door-a sound of breaking metal. The door jumped inward and three men came through without triggering the defense circuits. Gus came to his feet, started to bluster, but the small man leading the trio showed him the gleam of a slug pistol.

"Easy, Gus," Bailey said in a relaxed tone. "Let 'em snoop." Bailey and Aroon stood silent as the three cruised the room, aiming detector instruments at the walls, the floor, the ceiling.

"Clean," the two underlings reported. "There ain't no tap here, Buncey."

"That's good for you small-timers," the man called Buncey said in a soft tone. "If you were bleeding the wire, you'd wake up a long way from here-only you wouldn't wake up. The way it is, we just lift the take and close you down. You're lucky, see? Vince, Greaseball here will tell you where he keeps the loot."

"No he won't," Bailey said in a level tone. Buncey turned to look him up and down. He dandled the gun on his palm.

"Use it or put it away," Bailey said. "We don't bluff."

"Kid, listen-" Gus started.

"You tired of breathing?" the small man inquired softly, curling his fingers around the weapon.

"Don't play dumb," Bailey said. "You've been covered like a bashful bride ever since you came in here."

"Yeah?" the small man said tightly. "Maybe. But I could still blow you down, junior."

"Does your boss want to spend three chips for a couple of front men?"

"Our boss doesn't like small-time competish," the gunman growled.

Bailey showed him a crooked grin. "Dream on, Buncey. We booked in half a million tonight. Does that look like small time?"

"You're cutting your own throat, cheapie-"

"There won't be any throats cut," Bailey said. "Wake up, there's been a change. Our outfit is in-and we're not settling for small change. Our backers are taking a full share."

Buncey snorted. "You're showing your cuff, dummy. The play's backed from the top-all the way up. And it's a closed operation, all tied up, a tight

operation. You got no backers. Your bluff is bust-

"There's more," Bailey said. "Sure, your Cruster bosses have always cut the pie their way. But as of tonight, there's one more slice. And this one stays below decks, where it belongs."

"What are you pulling?" Buncey looked uneasy. "There's not a bundle under the floor that could roll a full book."

"Not until now," Bailey said. "The syndicate changes that."

"Syndicate?"

"That's right. Every operator in Mat'n is with us."

"You're lying," Buncey snapped. "No two Preke grifters could work together for longer than it takes to mug a zek on a string lay!" He brought the gun up with a sure motion. "I'm calling your bet, little man-

He stiffened at a sound from the hall leading to the back room. A tall, lean man appeared, glancing casually about. He nodded at Aroon, ignoring the gunmen.

"I liked the night's play," Farb said easily. "I'm plowing my cut back in. So are the rest of us." He dropped a stack of fully charged cash cards on the table. Only then did he turn a look on the man called Buncey. "You can go now," he said. "Better put the iron away. We don't want any killing."

Buncey slowly pocketed his gun. "You Prekes are serious," he said. "You think you can buck topside . . ."

"We know we can-as long as we don't get too greedy," Bailey said. "Try to strong-arm us, and the whole racket blows sky-high. Concede us our ten percent of the action and nobody gets hurt."

"I'll pass the word. If you're bagging air, better look for a hole-a deep one. These things can be checked."

"Check all you want," Farb said. "We like the idea of a little home industry. We're behind it all the way."

After the three had left, Gus slumped into a rump-sprung chair with a guttural sigh.

"Bailey, you walked the thin edge just now. How'd you know they wouldn't call you?"

"They're gamblers," Bailey said. "The percentages were against it." He looked at Farb. "You mean what you said?"

Farb nodded, the glint of honest greed in his eyes. "I don't know where you came from, Bailey, or why: but you worked a play that I wouldn't have given a filed chit for twelve hours ago. Keep it up; you'll have all the weight you want behind you."

Three months later, Bailey told Aroon he was leaving.

"The operation's all yours, Gus. I've got what I need. It's time to move on."

"I can't figure you, kid," the older man said, shaking his heavy head. "You take chances that no other guy would touch with a chip-rake-and when they pay off, you bow out. Why not stay on? On your split you could live like a king-

"Sure I could, here. But there are things that need doing that take more than a fat credit balance. I need a tag, to start with. Can you fix it?"

Gus grunted. "It'll cost you a slice of that pile you've been sitting on."

"That's what it's for."

"Class Three Yellow about right?"

Bailey shook his head. "Class One Blue."

"Are you outa your mind, Bailey?" Aroon yelled. "You can't bluff your way Topside!"

"Why not? I bluffed my way into Preke territory."

"Your roll won't carry you a week up there."

"All I need is the price of admission."

"Face it, Bailey. There's more to it than the loot. You don't look like a Cruster, you don't act like one. How could you? Those babies have all the best from the day they're born, the best food, the best education, the best training! They have their own way of walking and talking, sniffing flowers, making up to a frill! They've got class where it shows, and they can back it up! You can't fake it!"

"Who said anything about faking it, Gus? You must know the name of a reliable tapelegger."

"A print man?" Aroon's voice had automatically dropped to a whisper. "Bailey, that ain't demi-chit stuff. Touch a wrong strip and it's a wiping rap!"

"If I'm caught."

"And anyway-a good tech line is worth a fortune! You couldn't touch even a Class Two tape job for under a quarter million."

"I don't want a tech education," Bailey said. "I want a background cultural fill-in-the kind they give a Cruster after a brain injury or wipe therapy."

"I guess there's no need my asking why you want to load your skull with fancy stuff you'll never use, that'll never buy you a night's flop?" Gus said hoarsely.

"Nope. Can you put me on to a right man?"

"If that's the way you want it."

"It's the way it's got to be for where I've got to go."

Aroon nodded heavily. "I owe you that much-and a lot more. You shook this whole lousy setup to bedrock, something that needed doing for a long time." He rose. "Come on. I'll take you there."

"I'll go alone, Gus. Just give me the name and address, and I'm on my way."

"You don't waste much time, do you, kid?"

"I don't have much time to waste."

"What is it you got to do that's eating at you?"

Bailey frowned. "I don't know. I just know the time is short for me to do it."

8

It was a narrow, high-ceilinged room, walled with faded rose and gold paper, furnished with glossy dark antiques perched around the edge of a carpet from which the floral pattern was almost worn away. An elaborate chandelier fitted with ancient flame-shaped incandescent bulbs hung from a black iron chain. Tarnished gilt lettering winked from the cracked leather spines of books in a glass-fronted case. The man who surveyed Bailey from the depths of a curve-legged wing chair was lean, withered, with a face like a fallen soufflé. Only his eyes moved, assessing his customer.

"Do you have any idea what it is you're asking?" he inquired in a voice like dry leaves stirred by the wind. "Do you imagine that by absorbing from an illegally transcribed cephalotape the background appropriate to a gentleman of birth and breeding, that you will be magically transformed from your present lowly state?"

"Can you supply what I want, or can't you?" Bailey said patiently.

"I can supply a full Class One socio-cultural matrix, yes," the old man snapped. "As to providing a magical entrance into high places—"

"If what you've got to offer won't fill the bill, I'll be on my way." Bailey got to his feet. The old man rose quickly, stood stoop-backed, eyeing him.

"Why aren't you content to absorb a useful skill, a practical knowledge of a saleable trade? Why these grandiose aspirations to a place you can never fill?"

"That's my business," Bailey said. "Yes or no?"

The old man's puckered face tightened. "You're a fool," he said. "Come with me."

9

In a back room, Bailey took a seat in a worn leather-covered reclining chair; the tapelegger clucked and muttered to himself as he attached the

electrodes to Bailey's skull, referring frequently to the dials on the wheeled cart beside him. As he pressed buttons, Bailey felt the stirrings and tinglings of the neuro-electric currents induced within his brain by the teaching machine.

"Make no mistake," the old man told him. "The material you'll receive here will be in no way inferior to that offered in the most exclusive universities. My prints were coded direct from the masters filed at HEW Central. Once assimilated, a bootleg education is objectively indistinguishable from any other."

"I'm counting on it," Bailey said. "That's why I'm paying you fifty M."

"A tiny fraction of the value of what is encoded here." The 'legger weighed the reel on his palm. "The essence of a lifetime of cultured ease. This particular Trace was made by Aldig Parn, Blue One, the critic and collector. You'll have a fabulous grounding in the arts. Parn was also a Distinguished Master at the game called Reprise. You'll get it all-and much, much more. It's not been edited, you see. It's all as it came from his brain, even to personal tastes and mannerisms, all those subtleties and nuances of culture which we cut from authorized tapes."

"If it's as good as that, why sell at all? Why not use it yourself?"

"Why?" the print man snapped. "So that I could become even more acutely aware of the horrors of life in a petrified society? I've too much education already. One day I'll present myself at Unicen for voluntary wipe and begin again as a pink tag crude-labor gangman. The solace of nepenthe."

"That's not much of a sales talk," Bailey said.

"I'm not urging you to buy. I'd recommend a limited tech indoc, sufficient to guarantee you a yellow tag."

"Never mind; I won't hold you responsible. Just be sure you watch those meters. I don't want a burned cortex for my trouble."

10

Bailey had had headaches before, but nothing like this.

"You'll live," the 'legger said briskly. "It was you who insisted on haste. You took it surprisingly well. Your metabolic index never dropped below .8. Rest for a few days, avoid any creative mental activity, problem solving. I don't want any blankages to mar the imprint."

Bailey muttered and lay back in the chair. Through the thudding pain, a kaleidoscopic whirl of images danced; phantom voices rang in his ears against the complex shapes of abstract patterns.

"I don't feel any smarter," he said. "Are you sure it took?"

The old man snorted. "Of course you're no more intelligent than when I began. But you'll find your mind is imprinted with a very great mass of new data. Of course, the current-status portion will be out of date by some years: the fads, catch phrases, in-group gossip of the moment. After all, I

don't have access to the daily addenda. But that will hardly be of importance, I imagine."

Bailey ignored the implied question. He paid off, made his way to the loft he had rented as temporary quarters. On the third day, the headache was gone. Gingerly then, he probed at his memory. Slowly at first, then more swiftly, a mass of data-concepts flowed into his awareness as the taped information swam into focus: The proper mode of address to a magistrate in a situation of formality degree five; the correct instruction to a groom when requiring disengagement from an awkward social context; the control layout of the Monojag Sport Twin, model 900; the precise gait appropriate to an unescorted entrance to a public dining salon, early evening, formality three; the names of the leading erotistes of the moment; the entry codes to clubs, the proper wardrobe combinations for this situation and that, the forty-one positions and three hundred and four strokes of the katcha-gat, the membership ritual for the Fornax Club . . .

"Good enough," he murmured. He dressed and left the loft, headed for the address he had purchased for an extra M from the tapelegger.

11

It was an unprepossessing front of ancient, natural stone, a hideous dull purple in color, with steep steps and a corroded iron railing. He rapped, waited. The door was opened by a small, bandy-legged, jug-eared man with a shiny scalp and the face of an intelligent Rhesus.

"Yes?" the man demanded, wiping at his face with a towel draped around his stringy neck.

Bailey showed a cred-card, almost fully charged.

"I want to see Goldblatt."

"Looking at him." The small man glanced up and down Bailey's slight frame.

"Rehab case?" he asked doubtfully.

"No. I want a Maxpo course."

The man jumped as if he had been jabbed in the kidneys. "You a kidder, Mister? What you think this is, Doose Center? I run a quiet house of physical fitness here, strictly on the flat-"

"I've got ten M's that say differently," Bailey cut in softly.

Goldblatt stared. "Out," he said firmly. He put a surprisingly sinewy hand against Bailey's chest. "You got the wrong Goldblatt."

Bailey took his other hand from his pocket, showed the glossy blue of the One Category tag. "Don't worry, it's faked," he said, as the gym operator jerked his hand back. "I'm showing it to you to convince you I'm in no position to call in the Bugs. I can pay for what I want."

Goldblatt took a fold of Bailey's tunic in his fingers and pulled him inside, closed the door quickly, hustled him through a frowsty room where a pair of

sweating men pulled listlessly at spring-loaded apparatus. In a small office he said, "What's this all about, mister?"

Bailey eased half a dozen full-charge cash cards from his pocket, fanned them out. "These tell it all," he said. Goldblatt's frown lingered on the green- and blue-edged plastics.

"You said . . . Maxpo? What makes you think I can help you?" He shot a sharp look over Bailey's spare frame. "Or that you could handle the gaff if I could, which I'm not saying I can?"

"How I handle it is up to me." Bailey placed the blue tag on top of the cred-cards, offered the stack. "You hold them until the job's done."

Goldblatt put up a hand, made a pushing motion. "Nix. Don't show me a fixed tag, mister." His hand reversed, became an open palm. "But maybe I could take a retainer while we talk about it."

Bailey handed over the cards. "I want to start today," he said. "How long will it take?"

12

"How long it takes," Goldblatt said half an hour later, "depends on a couple of things. First, how good the equipment is." He slapped the curving metal case, like a streamlined coffin, that rested on a stand in the surprisingly clean and well-lit basement room. "And I've got the best. Private custom job, less than five years old, best circuitry a man could ask for-except no blanking circuit. You take it cold. That's how I got it cheap."

"How long?" Bailey repeated the question.

"Second, what we got to work with," Goldblatt continued, unruffled. He rubbed his hands together. "Frankly, my friend, you offer a man a challenge." He frowned happily at Bailey's bare ribs, reached out to squeeze his thin arm above the elbow. "You look like about what we call a three: minimum normal range, about point 4 musculature, probably no better'n a five vascular rating, same for osteo-"

"I understand it's a fast process," Bailey said. "Can you do it in a week?"

The trainer's mouth snapped open. He wagged his head in wonderment. "The ideas some people got," he said. "Forget it, mister. A week? In a week maybe you can see the first results. What you think a Maxpo is, some kind of magic trick? It's pain! Pain that will burn your heart out. Not every man can take it; not even most men. And frankly, you don't look to me like one of the tough ones. Maybe better we talk a standard toning course, two weeks and you feel like a new man-"

"Maxpo or nothing," Bailey said. "And in minimum time."

"You know how it works, mister?" Goldblatt turned to the tank, poked a button. The top slid back, exposing a padded interior of complex shape, fitted with numerous wide web straps with polished buckles.

"The principle," Bailey responded instantly, "is that of selective

electronically triggered isometric and isotonic contraction, coupled with appropriately neuro-synaptic stimulation and coordinated internal physiochemical environmental control. The basal somatic rhythms are encoded, brought into a phased relationship, and-

"You know plenty fancy words, bub, I'll give you that," Goldblatt said wonderingly. "But what it works out to is I put a micro-filament tap into your spinal cord, right where it leaves the skull. We use the trial-and-error method for coding the motor nerves. It hurts. When I finish, all I have to do is push a button and the muscle it's wired to contracts-max contraction, more than you could trigger with the voluntary nervous system. Once I've got you wired, I slap you in the frame and strap you up rigid. The frame is articulated, so you get isotonic work along with the 'metrics. Then I work you over like one of them guys in a torture chamber, know what I mean? You'll come out of it screaming for mercy, every muscle in your body yelling for help. You'll turn black and blue all over. This goes on for a week. Then it gets worse." He shook his head. "Like I said, not many fellows can take it."

"How long?"

"Give yourself a break, mister. A few times a year I sell a tank job, not a max but just whatever somebody needs, like a demo player is slowing down, he needs toning up fast; or some of these specialty show people, after a long layoff. And even at that-

"How many hours a day do I spend inside?"

"A day?" Goldblatt barked. "You work day and night-that's if you're talking minimum time. But that's for lab cases, theory stuff-

"We'll test the theory."

"You must be in some kind of hurry, mister."

"That's right. And we're wasting time."

Goldblatt nodded heavily. "It's your bones that'll get bent, my friend, not mine. All right, strip down and I'll run you across the 'tab monitor and see what we got to work with."

13

The insertion of the hair-fine electrodes took three hours-three uncomfortable hours of probing in sensitive flesh with sharp-pointed metal, alternated with tingling shocks that made obscure muscles jump and quiver. At the end of it, Bailey touched the coin-sized plastic disk nestled against the base of his skull and winced.

"That's the easy part," Goldblatt said cheerfully. "Now we start the hard work. You know, it's funny," he rambled on as he strapped his victim in position. "They invented this device to take the will power out of physical training. What they forgot was it still takes will power to climb in under the straps, knowing what's coming."

"If you scare me to death, you don't collect," Bailey said. "Those cards are no good without my prints."

Goldblatt grinned. "Ready?" he asked. "Here we go."

Bailey felt his right thigh twitch. He yelled as a full-fledged cramp locked to the rectus femoris-the name popped into his mind-like a red-hot clamp. The limb strained against the straps, quivering.

". . . four seconds, five seconds, six seconds," Goldblatt counted off. Abruptly the pressure was gone. The pain receded.

"Hey," Bailey started-and yelled as his left leg jerked against the restraint. Six more endless seconds passed. Bailey lay gasping as a lever moved, flexing his knee to a new position.

"Cry all you want to," Goldblatt said cheerfully. "This baby works over three hundred separate muscles, max contraction, three positions. How you like it, hah? Ready to get some sense now and settle for a toner like I said to begin with?"

Bailey gritted his teeth against the rubber bite protector and endured another spasm.

"Whatever you say, my friend," Goldblatt sighed. "Here we go again . . ."

14

"Only two and a half hours?" Bailey inquired weakly. "It seemed like two years."

"You build muscle by tearing down muscle," the trainer said. "You just tore down a couple billion cells-and that hurts. But the body's a fast worker. She rebuilds-and then we tear down again. So she works faster. But she hurts. She hurts all the time. For a week. For a month. Max job? Make that three months."

"That's cutting it fine," Bailey said. "Can't you rush it any?"

"Sure-if you want to sleep in the tank," Goldblatt said sardonically.

"If that's what it takes."

"Are you serious? But I don't need to ask, do I? You're a man that's driven, if I ever saw one. What is it that's eating at you, young fellow? You've got a lot of life ahead of you. Slow down-"

"I can't," Bailey said. "Let's get started on what comes next."

In the third week Bailey, out of the tank for his alter-hourly session in the treadcage, paused to look at himself in the mirror. His face was gaunt, knobbed below the jawline with unfamiliar lumps of muscle; his neck was awkwardly corded; his shoulders swelled in sinewy striations above a chest which seemed to belong to someone else.

"I look wrong," he said. "Misshapen. No symmetry. Out of balance."

"Sure, sure. What do you expect, to start with? Some sectors respond quicker, some were in better shape. Don't worry. First we go for tone, then

bulk, then definition, then balance. You're doing swell. We start coordination and dynamics next. Another sixty days and you'll look like you were born under that blue tag." He rubbed a hand over his head, eyeing Bailey. "If it wasn't so crazy, I'd think maybe that's the way you were thinking," he said.

"Don't think about it, Hy," Bailey said. "Just keep the pressure on."

15

On the eighty-fifth day, Hy Goldblatt looked at William Bailey and wagged his head in exaggerated wonder.

"If I didn't see it myself, I would never of believed it was the same man."

Bailey turned this way and that, studying himself in the wall mirror. He walked a few steps, noting the automatic grace of his movements, the poise of his stance, the unconscious arrogance of his posture, the way he held his head.

"It'll do, Hy," he said. "Thanks for everything."

"Where you going now? Why not stay on, help out in the gym? Look, I need an assistant-"

"Pressing business," Bailey said. "What do you know about the Apollo Club?"

Goldblatt frowned. "I was in the place once, mat man for a cross-class match. Lousy. Fancy place, fancy people. You wouldn't like working there."

"I might like being a member."

Goldblatt stared at him. "You really think you got a chance-Dutch tag and all?"

Bailey turned, gave the trainer an imperious glare. "Are you questioning me?" he asked in a steely tone. Goldblatt stiffened; then he grinned wryly at Bailey's mocking smile.

"Maybe you do at that," he said.

16

Bailey devoted the next few hours to ablutions: a vacuum-and-pressure steam bath, mani- and pedicure, depilation, tonsure, skin toning and UV, bacterial purge. Then he turned his attention to costume.

The clothes he picked were far from new; but they had been handcut from woven fabric, rich and elegant. Bailey bought them from a doddering ancient whose hand shook with paralysis agitans until the moment when the scissors touched the cloth.

"You don't see goods like this anymore," the old tailor stated in his frail whisper. "Heat-seal plastics, throwaways, trash. Nothing like this." He wagged his hairless skull, holding the tunic against Bailey's chest.

"Where'd you get them?"

"They were found on a corpse," the tailor said. "They brought them to me. Dead men's clothes. Bad business. Man should be decently buried. But they don't even get that nowadays, eh? Into the converter. Save the chemicals. As if a man was no more than a heap of fertilizer. No respect. That's what's gone wrong. No respect."

"How far out of the current style is this outfit?"

"Cutting like this doesn't go out of style," the dodderer said sharply. "People don't understand that. Trash, yes; flash today, junk tomorrow. But quality-real quality-it endures. In this clothing you could be at home anyplace. Nobody could fault you. Of the finest."

17

It was almost dark when Bailey left the shop swinging his swagger stick, his newly altered garments snugged to his new body with a feel he had never known before. People on the sidewalk eyed him aslant and slid aside. In a dark shop with a smell of conspiracy he made a purchase.

Once out of sight on the utility stair, he clipped his bogus blue tag in place, checked his credit code: a charge of eight and a half M remained on the plastic: enough to live for a couple of years below-decks, he reflected-or to buy an adequate evening up above.

Attached to the steel gate barring access to Threevee Mall was a yard-high sign reading DEATH PENALTY FOR TRESPASS. Bailey pounded on it. In less than a minute the panel slid back to reveal a pair of Greenbacks, slammers leveled at belt-buckle height. Their jaws sagged as Bailey strolled through the forbidden gate.

"It's all right, Leftenant," he said to the corporal, and pushed the still-aimed gun barrel aside with a well-groomed finger. "Clear a path for me, there's a good fellow."

The Peaceman made a gobbling sound. "B-how . . . why . . ." He recovered a portion of his wits with an effort. "M'lord, that gate is interdicted-"

"And a good thing, too." Bailey's eye flicked to the man's tag number. "I'll mention your prompt action to Father-" He smiled with just the proper degree of guilt. "In another connection, of course. Wouldn't do for his Lordship to guess where I've been amusing myself. Shall we go now? I reek of the Quarters." Without waiting for assent, he started toward the wall of gaping passers-by. At a yell from the Greenbacks, they faded aside. Smiling a negligent smile, Bailey preceded his escort toward the lighted entry to the high-speed lift marked BLUE ONE.

18

The Peacemen cleared half a dozen passengers from the car to make room for Bailey. As the lift rocketed upward, he felt their eyes on him, hostile but cautious. At each intermediate level people crowded off against the flow of others crowding on, but the space around Bailey remained clear; no one

jostled him. A pair of Peacemen made a swift tag check at the final stop before the car entered Doose territory; they evicted a protesting burgher with an overdate visa, gave Bailey and one other man respectful finger touches to their helmet visors. Nearly empty now, the car continued upward. By the fourth stop only Bailey and the man the police had saluted remained. The latter was tall, erect, silver-haired, with ruddy skin, dressed in austere gray with silver piping. He glanced not quite at Bailey's eyes, murmured words which at first Bailey failed to understand: a formalized greeting, proper for strangers of approximately equal rank, indicating a degree of tolerant impatience with a shared inconvenience. Bailey made the appropriate response. The tall man's eyes flickered over him more boldly now. He touched the silvered panel on the wall. The car sighed to a stop. Bailey tensed.

"Special party. Tonight, twenty-four-thirty, Danzil's terrace. Kindred spirits. Do come." The words emerged in a breathless rush. Suddenly Bailey felt himself blushing as he understood the implications of the invitation. Muscles jumped in his arms as his fists tensed. He caught himself as his mouth opened.

"What a pity," he said easily. "I'm committed to some sort of rummage at Balali's. Tedious, but . . ." As he spoke, another idea formed. "Of course, earlier on . . ." he said suggestively.

"My club," the gray man said quickly.

"What club would that be?"

"Trident," the tall man said eagerly. "Willowinter. And of course, Apollo."

"I've never seen the Apollo," Bailey said roguishly.

"It's not the Fornax," his new acquaintance said, rolling his eyes. "But it has its charms."

"Suppose we say-at twenty-two hours . . . ?"

"Splendid!"

The tall man pressed the plate; the car slid upward. His eyes held on Bailey, glistening. At the next intermediate, he stepped off, turned to face him. He shivered.

"The excitement," he hissed. "Don't be late-and if you should be early, call for my man Wilf . . ." The door closed on his eager expression. Bailey grimaced.

"Just so you're not early," he said as the car shot upward, to halt half a minute later at Level Blue One.

19

Two impeccably groomed attendants-Special Detail Peacemen, Bailey knew-glanced pleasantly at him as he stepped from the car into the soft gleam of a twilight evening on a quiet, curving, tree-lined avenue. With an effort he restrained himself from staring like a yokel at the green, leafy

boughs through which the lamps shone on the smooth lawn edging the white pavement-and at the shining pinnacle of the Blue Tower looming five thousand feet sheer above the spotlessly clear dome, against the wide sky of purple and gold.

"Pleasant evening, sir," one of the two watchdogs said. He appeared to be doing nothing but smiling respectfully, but Bailey was aware that his fingers, diplomatically out of sight behind his back, were touching a key which would cause Bailey's counterfeit tag to be electronically scanned and its coded ident symbol transmitted to a local control station and checked for authenticity. He also knew that the false tag would easily pass this test but that on the ten-hours recap-in six more hours-against the master curve, the deception would be caught. A dummy tag, proof against visual examination, would have cost no more than a hundred Q's as against the ten M price tag of the model he wore, but the investment had bought him three hundred and sixty minutes of freedom on Level Blue One. It was worth it. With a casual nod, Bailey brushed past the guards, lifted a finger to summon the heli whose operator had been dozing at the curb. Sinking back in the contoured seat, he directed the man to take him to the Apollo.

"Surface," he added. "Briskly, but not breakneck, you understand."

In spite of himself, his heart was beginning to thump now with a gathering sense of anticipation. It was not too late, still, to turn back. But once he set foot inside the Apollo Club, the lightest penalty he could hope for if apprehended was a clean cortical wipe and retraining to gangman. The thought flickered and was forgotten. The business at hand outweighed all else. Already, Bailey's mind had leaped ahead to the next stage of the adventure. It was a long way from street level to the penthouse of the Blue Tower; but when the moment came, he would know what to do.

20

The doorman at the Apollo Club stepped smoothly forward as Bailey came up the wide steps between the white columns. With an easy gesture, Bailey flipped up his swagger stick in a seemingly casual swing which would have jabbed the attendant in the navel if he had continued his glide into Bailey's path. As the man checked, Bailey was past him.

"Send Wilf along, smartly now," Bailey ordered as the doorman, recovering his aplomb with an effort, fell in at his left and half a pace to the rear.

"Wilf? Why, I believe Wilf is off the premises at the moment, sir. Ah, sir, if I might inquire-"

"Then get him on the premises at once!" Bailey said sharply, and cut abruptly to his right, causing the fellow to scramble again to overtake him. He gave the man a critical glance. "Have you been popping on duty, my man?"

"Wha-no, no indeed, sir, indeed not, m'lord!"

"Good. Then be off with you." Bailey made shooin motions. The man gulped and hurried away. Bailey went down shallow steps into a long unoccupied room where soft lights sprang up at his entry. At the auto bar,

he punched a Mist Devil, sipped the deceptively smooth, purple liquor, simultaneously wondering at its subtle flavor and savoring it with familiar delight.

There were pictures on the wall, gaudy patterned space work for the most part, with here and there an acceptable early perforationist piece incongruous among the shallow daubs that flanked it. Bailey found himself clucking in disapproval. He turned as soft footfalls sounded behind him. A small, dapper man was hurrying toward him across the wide rug, a small, crooked smile on his narrow face. He bobbed his head almost perfunctorily.

"Wilf to serve you, sir," he piped in an elfin voice.

"I'm Jannock," Bailey said pleasantly. "I have some minutes to dispose of. I was told you'd show me about."

"A privilege, sir." Wilf glanced at the painting before which Bailey was standing. "I see you admire the work of Plinisse," he said. "The club has been fortunate enough to acquire a number--"

"Frightful stuff," Bailey said flatly. "You've a few decent Zanskis, badly hung and lighted."

Wilf gave him an alert glance. "Candidly, I agree, sir-if you'll forgive the presumption."

"Suppose we take a look at your famous gaming rooms," Bailey said patronizingly.

"Of course." The little man led the way through a wide court with an illuminated fountain of dyed water, along a gallery with a vertiginous view of dark forest land far below-whether genuine or a projection, Bailey didn't know.

"There are few members about so early, sir," Wilf said as they entered the garishly decorated hall for which the Apollo was famous. Chromatic light dazzled and glittered from scores of elaborate gambling machines, perched tall and intricate on the deep-rugged floor. A few men in modishly-cut garb lounged at the bar. Couples were seated at a handful of the tables on the raised dais at the far end of the room. Soft, plaintive music issued from an invisible source.

Genuinely fascinated, Bailey circled the nearest apparatus, studying the polished convolutions of the spiral track along which a glass ball rolled at a speed determined by the player. The object, he knew, was to cause the missile to leap the groove at the correct moment to place it in the pay-off slot of the disk rotating below it-the disk also being controlled by the player. The knowledge flashed into Bailey's mind that hundreds of M's changed hands every minute the device was in play.

"Looks simple enough," he said.

"Do you think so?" a bland voice spoke almost at his elbow. A man of middle age-perhaps over a hundred, being a Cruster, Bailey guessed-smiled gently at him.

"Sir Dovo," Wilf introduced the newcomer. "Sir Jannock, guest of Lord Encino."

Bailey inclined his head to precisely the correct angle. "Enchanted, indeed, Sir Dovo. And indeed I do think so."

"You've played Flan before, Sir Jannock?"

Bailey/Jannock smiled indulgently. "Never. My taste has been for games of a more challenging character."

"So? Perhaps Flan would prove more diverting than you suspect?"

"I could hardly refuse so intriguing an invitation," Bailey said with apparent casualness and waited tensely for the response.

"Excellent," Dovo said with hardly perceptible hesitation. "May I explain the play?" He turned to the machine, quickly outlined the method of controlling the strength of the electrostatic field, the scoring of the hits on the coded areas of the slowly spinning disk. He called for a croupier, keyed the machine into action, made a few demonstration runs, then watched with a slight smile as Bailey took his practice shots, with obvious lack of skill.

"Suppose we set the stakes at a token amount," Dovo suggested in a tone which might have been either patronizing or cynical. Bailey nodded.

"An M per point?"

"Oh, let's say ten M, shall we?" Dovo smiled indulgently. Bailey, remembering his credit balance, managed to keep his expression bland.

"Under the circumstances, this being my first visit, I should prefer that the stakes be purely symbolic," he said. Dovo inclined his head in a way that almost-but not quite-suggested a touch of contempt.

"Perhaps your confidence has lost its initial fervor," he said with an apparently frank smile.

"As a stranger to you, Sir Dovo, I should dislike to take any considerable sum from you," Bailey replied tartly.

"As you wish; shall we begin?"

Bailey played first, managed to lodge the ball in a chartreuse pocket marked zan. Dovo, with apparent ease, dislodged the marker, sending it to a white cup marked nolo, while his own came to rest in the gold-lined rey. Bailey missed the disk completely, occasioning some good-humored banter, and necessitating the opening of the locked case by a steward, and manual return of the ball to the play area. The double penalty thus incurred left him with four and a half M.

Playing first again, he managed to score a yellow nex, only to see Dovo casually drop his marker into the adjacent slot, thus scoring a triple bonus. Bailey made a disgusted sound.

"This is no exercise for a man of wit," he complained in a manner which fell

just short of boorishness.

"I fail in my duty as host," Dovo said in a smooth tone. "Perhaps some other game to while away the time until the arrival of your, ah"-he smiled thinly-"of Lord Encino."

"No need to bother," Bailey said shortly.

"The Zoop tower? A set or two of Whirl? Or perhaps you'd find Slam more suited to your mood . . ."

"Candidly, Sir Dovo, I find these toys tedious." Bailey dismissed the entire roomful of gambling machines with an airy wave of his hand, turning away as if to leave the room. At once, Dovo's voice reached after him.

"Surely, Sir Jannock, you'll allow me the opportunity to reinstate the club in your good graces by offering you play suitable to a gentleman of your undoubted talents?" There was an unmistakable trace of sarcasm in his tone.

Bailey turned. "My esteem for your delightful club remains as high as ever," he said acidly. "I'm grateful for your concern, but-

"If it's intellectual exercise you crave, possibly a quarter or two of shan-shan with Sir Drace, our club master, might serve." Dovo's tone was plainly badgering now. There were knowing smiles on the smooth, handsomely chiseled faces around him. Wilf hovered at Bailey's elbow, making small, distressed sounds.

"I dislike shan-shan intensely," Bailey said disdainfully, starting on. "Superficial."

"A round of Tri-chess, then. Our membership includes a former grand champion who might offer some slight challenge. Or perhaps a set of Parallel. Or a flutter of Ten-deck." Other voices chimed in with suggestions. "What about a heptet of Reprise?" someone called. Bailey halted, turned slowly, as if brought to bay. Maliciously smiling faces gazed comfortably at him, enjoying the moment's diversion, waiting to savor whatever parting shot he might muster.

"Reprise?" he said.

"Why, yes," Dovo bobbed his head. "Have I succeeded in intriguing you? Or is it, too, numbered among these disciplines not favored with your approval?"

Bailey let the silence lengthen. Reprise, the knowledge came into his mind, was a game for the select few who had devoted a lifetime to its mastery. Even to learn the basic moves of the seventy-seven pieces required a year of intensive study. The recording and encephalotape transmission of such a skill was a serious crime. But he, thanks to the deft fingers of a tapelegger, had it all . . .

"I find Reprise a most delightful pastime," he said loftily. "I should very much enjoy a set."

Dovo looked blank. With an effort, he hitched a smile of sorts back in place. "Excellent," he said in a strained voice, turning to the man beside him. "Barlin, perhaps you'd be so good as to oblige Sir Jannock--"

"I had assumed, Sir Dovo, that you yourself would honor me," Bailey said. "Or perhaps you have a previous engagement at the Zoop tower." It was his turn to smile knowingly.

"Very well," Dovo said shortly. "I'll oblige you."

21

There was a surf murmur of chatter as Bailey took the seat offered him before a yard-cube wire construction scattered through with colored glass beads which glowed to sudden brilliance as Dovo activated the board. Each of the nexi, as the beads were called, could be moved according to a complex code of interrelating rules. The object of the game was to achieve a configuration which outranked the opposing one, again in consonance with an elaborate structure of interlocking taboos, prohibitions, and compulsions. With a part of his mind, Bailey stared dazedly at the incomprehensible flash and glitter as Dovo took up his initial grouping; but another part of his brain observed with mild amusement the na<vet, of the other's elementary classroom opening.

"For an M per point, as before?" he inquired innocently.

"Come now, Sir Jannock," Dovo snapped. "For an aficionado of your attainments, one hundred M should not be excessive."

"Very well," Bailey said casually. "Will you open?" He smiled, conceding the prized advantage to his opponent. Dovo nodded shortly and after a moment's hesitation, made a clumsy approche ... droit, technically legal enough, in that each of the forty-one nexi he put into play moved within their statutory limits; but pathetically inept in the aimlessness of the positioning. Bailey felt his hands move almost without volition, moving over the charged plate, shifting the beads en gestalt into a graceful spiral which twined among and around Dovo's hapless line-up. The latter stared for a long moment at the cage; his hands twitched toward the plate, twitched back. He looked up to meet Bailey's eyes.

"Why, I . . . I'm englobed," he choked. "In one!"

A surprised murmur rose, became a patter of applause. Cries of congratulation rang. Dovo smiled ruefully across at Bailey.

"Neatly done," he said. "Masterfully played." He smiled now with genuine warmth. He referred, Bailey/Jannock knew, not only to the smashing victory at the cage, but to the entire finesse, from the moment of Bailey's entry into the room. Boredom had, for the moment, been dispelled—the greatest service one could perform for the members of the Apollo Club.

Bailey relaxed, grinning in a way appropriate to a successful practical joker. "No more masterfully than you abolished me at Flan, Sir Dovo."

The latter handed over a gold-edged cred-card, glowing with the full charge

of one hundred thousand Q's. Bailey waved it away. "Add it to the sweepfund," he said carelessly, a gesture calculated to lay at rest any lingering suspicion of shady motivations on his part.

Smiling in a relaxed way, he listened to the chatter around him, gauging the correct moment for the proposal to which the elaborate farce had been the preliminary . . .

There was a stir at the outer fringe of the crowd. A square-chinned, clean-cut man appeared, followed by a sleek, round-faced member in baroque robes, his figure as near to corpulent as Crust social pressure would allow.

"Sir Dovo, Sir Jannock-a bit of luck! I found Sir Swithin just passing through the atrium; I mentioned our guest's clever ploy . . ."

"Swithin!" Dovo ducked his head. "A stroke of fortune indeed! Perhaps you're acquainted with our young friend, Sir Jannock . . .?"

The new arrival looked Bailey over coolly. Bailey wondered what version of the incident he had heard. "No, I've not met this young man. Which surprises me." Swithin had a buttery, self-indulgent voice. He glanced at the cage where the nexi still glowed in the end-game positions. "I was under the impression I knew the entire cadre of the gaming fraternity," he said somewhat doubtfully.

"I'm not a ranked Reprisist," Bailey said. "I play only for my own amusement."

Swithin nodded, giving the cage a final glance. "Interesting," he said. "Perhaps you'll honor me . . . ?" Without waiting for assent, he plopped himself in the chair Dovo had vacated. With a flick of his hand he returned the nexi to starting line-up and looked at Bailey expectantly.

Bailey hesitated, then sat down. "The honor is mine," he said. "But one condition . . . token stakes only."

Swithin shot him a startled look, his lower lip thrust out. "What's that? Token stakes? Am I to understand-"

"Having just taken a hundred M from me at one move, Sir Jannock is naturally desirous of not appearing greedy," Dovo spoke up quickly.

Swithin grunted, brushed the plate with his plump, jeweled fingers, sending the glowing beads darting to positions scattered apparently at random throughout the playing frame. But it was only to the uninitiated, Bailey/Jannock saw at a glance, that the move seemed capricious. Swithin had taken up a well-nigh impregnable stance, each one of the seventy-seven nexi perfectly placed in an optimum relationship to all the others-a complex move of which only a master player would be capable. But a move which carried within it a concomitant weakness. Once broached in the smallest particular, Swithin's complex structure would collapse into meaningless sub-groupings. It was a win-or-lose gambit; an attempt to smash him at one blow, as he himself had smashed Dovo's pathetic opening.

Bailey pretended to study the layout gravely, while a murmur passed through the spectators. Swithin sat back, his features as expressionless as a paw-licking cat. Hesitantly, Bailey-Jannock touched his plate. There was a seemingly trivial readjustment of nexi in east dexter chief. Swithin glanced up in surprise, as if about to question whether the minor shift were indeed Bailey's only reply. Then he checked, looked again at the cage. Slowly, the color drained from his face. He ducked his head stiffly.

"Well played, sir," he said in a strained tone.

"What is it?" "I don't understand?" "What are they waiting for?" The remarks died away as Swithin cleared the cage.

Only then did noise burst out as the watchers realized what they had seen. Dovo beamed proudly on his new discovery as Swithin glowered. Reports that the club champion had been beaten in one lightning move were being relayed quite audibly across the room.

"Once again, sir?" the plump man said harshly. "For an adequate stake this time."

"If you will," Bailey/Jannock said pleasantly. It was his opening now, a distinct advantage. Swithin drew a sharp breath as it dawned on him how neatly he had been ployed into throwing away his own opening on a flashy but unsound attack. "Would one thousand M seem about right?" Bailey inquired in the same easy tone.

The talk died as if guillotined. A thousand M was high stakes even here.

"Sir, you-" Swithin began, but Bailey cut in smoothly; "But actually, I'd prefer to keep our play on a purely friendly basis. After all, as an unranked dabbler, I'm being most presumptuous in taking a seat against you."

The challenge was unmistakable-and unrefusable. Swithin, still pale, but calm, nodded jerkily. "Done. Proceed, sir."

Bailey stroked the plate; the glowing beads leaped through half a dozen graceful configurations to end in starting position. Another apparently careless brush of his fingers, and they snapped into a branched formation of deceptive simplicity. Swithin frowned, drew out his nexi into a demi-rebut, a congruent array, paralleling Bailey's, a move of caution: Swithin would not be taken again on the same hook. Bailey extended pseudopodia in fess, dexter, and sinister, with a balancing tendril curling away in south nombril, thus forcing his opponent to abandon his echoic stance. Swithin, required to make his move in the same time required by the opener, fell back on an awkward deployment, totally defensive in nature. Bailey made a neutral rearrangement, a feint taking only a fraction of a second, forcing the pace. Swithin returned with a convulsive expansion, recoiling from the center of play. Swift as flickering lightning, Bailey cycled his array through a set of inversions, forcing his opponent to retire into a self-paralyzing fortress stance-

And barely in time, saw the trap the plump champion had set for him. In mid-play, he caught himself, diverted the abortive encirclement he had begun into a flanking pincers. Caught in his own trap, unable to change

direction as swiftly as had Bailey, Swithin bluffed with a piercing stab flawed by an almost unnoticeable discontinuity. The watchers sighed as the lightning interchange ceased abruptly. Taking his time now, Bailey shifted a rank of nexi to complete a perfect check position. On the next move, regardless of Swithin's return, the game was his. The plump man's face was the color of pipe clay now. With stiff hands, he prodded the plate, shifting his stance in a meaningless shuffle. He looked up, his expression sick. For a long moment Bailey held the other's gaze. Then, with a touch of his fingers, he made a subtle rearrangement which converted his checkmate into a neutral deadlock. For a moment, Swithin sagged; then his quick eye realized what Bailey had done. Color flooded back into his face.

"A draw," someone blurted. "By gad, Swithin's drawn him!" The watchers crowded around, laughing and bantering. As Bailey rose, Swithin came around the table to him.

"Why did you do it?" he whispered hoarsely.

"I need a favor," Bailey murmured.

Swithin studied him sharply, assessing him. "You're an adventurer," he accused.

Bailey smiled crookedly. "I want a crack at the Fornax," he said softly.

Swithin narrowed his eyes. "You aim high. I have no way of getting you into the Blue Tower."

"Think of a way."

Swithin clamped his jaw. "You ask too much."

"What about another game-to break the tie," Bailey suggested gently. "For the same stakes, of course."

Swithin's head jerked; his peril had not ended yet. At that moment, Dovo spoke up: "Well, sirs, we can't leave it at that, eh?" He shot a look of idle malice at Swithin. "Another set-unofficial, of course-will show us where the power lies, eh?"

Swithin gave Bailey a look of naked appeal. Bailey smiled genially.

"I'd prefer to rest on my laurels," he said easily. "I fear Sir Swithin will not be so gentle with me another time."

"Sir Jannock is too modest," Swithin said quickly. "He is a player of rare virtuosity. It was all I could do to hold him." He held up his hands as a chorus of protest started up. "But," he went on, "I have another proposal-one calculated to afford us better sport than the mere humbling of an old comrade." He shot a venomous look at Dovo. "I am thinking, gentlemen, of a certain gamester of swollen reputation and not inconsiderable arrogance, to wit: his Excellency, Lord Tace, champion of Club Fornax!"

A yell went up. When it had faded sufficiently for a single voice to be heard, Dovo called: "Are you sure, Swithin? Tace? Can he do it?"

All eyes were on Bailey/Jannock. His purchased memories told him that Tace was a formidable opponent; precisely how formidable he did not know.

"Tace, eh?" he said musingly. "But it's out of the question, of course. I fear I have no entrance into that exalted circle."

"Plandot," someone said. "He's a member at Fornax!"

"Get Plandot!" the shout went up.

The crowd surged away laughing and babbling like excited schoolboys.

"Well done, sir," Bailey bowed sardonically to the older man.

"Just what are you after, sir?" Swithin demanded.

"Oh, say ten thousand M's, eh?" Bailey said in a bantering tone. "You'll honor me by accepting ten percent," he added.

"Tace is no amateur," Swithin snapped.

"Neither am I," Bailey said. The two eyed each other, Swithin with a trapped look, Bailey-Jannock relaxed and at ease.

A shout went up from across the room.

"Plandot will meet us at the Blue Tower in half an hour! Tace is there, and in a nasty mood!"

"What if you lose?" Swithin persisted. "Can you cover?"

"Don't concern yourself," Bailey soothed. "That's my part of the game."

22

From the distance of half a mile, the Blue Tower reared up almost to zenith, its slim length aglow with the soft azure radiance that served as a beacon across five hundred miles of empty air. At half that distance, it had become a shining wall, intricately fluted, a radiant backdrop spreading like a stage curtain across the avenue. Stepping from the car on the broad parking apron, Bailey felt its incredible mass hanging above him like a second moon. Even his jolly companions had lost some of their airy self-assurance. In near silence the party mounted the polished chrome-slab steps, passed through the impalpable resistance of the ion-screen into the vaulted entry foyer. The talk, as they rode the spiral escalator up past tiers of jewel-like murals, railed galleries, glassed-in terraces, was over-loud, forced, only gradually regaining its accustomed boisterousness as they stepped off in the pink and silver-frosted lounge to be met by a lean, sharp-featured man whom they greeted as Lord Plandot. The latter looked Bailey over as the introductions were made, his face twitching into a foxy smile.

"So you think you can spring a little surprise on Tace, eh? Be careful he doesn't surprise you instead, sir. I fancied myself as a gamesman until he took my measure."

While Bailey's escort went into a huddle over strategy and tactics, he scanned the room, noting a number of featureless doors opening from a wide alcove, mirror-bright panels of polished metal.

"Where do those lead?" he asked Swithin.

"Why, to the upper levels. The Club Fornax occupies only this floor-"

"What's up there?" Bailey cut in.

"Various offices, living quarters; certain governmental functions are housed on the highest levels. The Lord Magistrate occupies the penthouse."

"How do you know which door leads where?"

"If you had business there, I assume you'd know. Otherwise, it hardly matters."

"True enough," Bailey said blandly as Dovo caught his eye. While the others went off toward the sound of restless music issuing from a red-lit archway, Plandot led the two along a deep-pile passage into a somber room dim-lit by luminous-patterned walls which threw the angular shadows of ugly but costly pseudo-Aztec furnishings across the dark-waxed parquet floor. As Plandot went on ahead, Dovo nudged Bailey, pointing out an imposing, white-maned figure seated alone before a shielded arc-fire.

"We'll rely on Plandot to draw him out. Tace is an irascible old devil, but not one to let pass an opportunity to put an upstart in his place." He gave Bailey a sly glance.

Bailey passed five minutes in admiring the inlay-work of the table tops, the mosaic wall decorations, and the silky tapestries before Plandot beckoned. He and Dovo crossed the room. A pair of eagle-sharp eyes stabbed into him from under shaggy brows growing like tufts of winter grass on a rocky cliff of forehead.

"Plandot tells me you fancy yourself a Reprisist," Lord Tace growled.

"In a small way," Bailey said in confident tones. He smiled an irritating smile. Tace rose to the bait. "Small way," he rumbled. "As well speak of dying in a small way. Reprise is a lifetime undertaking, young man."

"Oh, I don't know that I've found it so very difficult, sir," Bailey smirked.

Tace snorted. "Plandot, are you people making sport of me?" He glared at the tall man.

"By no means, m'lord," Plandot said imperturbably. "My friends at the Apollo appear to have great faith in their prot,g,. Of course, I accepted the wager on your behalf. If you wish to decline, no matter, I shall settle the account, and quite rightly, in view of my presumption-"

"Apollo Club? What's all this?" Tace heaved himself around in his chair to survey Dovo. "Oh, you're in this too, are you, Dovo? Then I assume it's not merely Plandot's idea of baiting an old man."

Dovo executed a graceful head bob. "I see now that we were over-enthusiastic, m'lord," he said smoothly. "My apologies. Of course you're much too fully engaged to indulge our fancy-"

"Just how enthusiastically did you intend to back your man?" Tace cut in sharply.

"I believe the sum mentioned was five hundred M's," Dovo murmured.

"Fifteen hundred," Bailey corrected. "Sir Swithin seems to have some confidence in my small abilities," he explained at Dovo's startled look.

"That's a considerable degree of enthusiasm," Tace said. He studied Bailey's face, looked at his clothes. "Just who are you?" he demanded abruptly.

"Jannock," Bailey said. The name was an appropriate one, common enough to arouse no particular attention among a world-wide Cruster population of two hundred million, while suggesting adequate connections. Still Tace eyed him intently.

"I say, m'lord," Dovo murmured. "Sir Jannock is here by my request, under the aegis of the Apollo Club-"

"How long have you known him?" Tace demanded.

"Only briefly-but he enjoys the sponsorship of Lord Encino-"

"Is Encino here?"

"No-but . . ."

"Did Encino introduce him to you personally?"

Dovo looked startled. "No," he said. "His man, Wilf-"

Tace barked what may have been a laugh. "Sponsored by a body servant, eh?"

"Sirs," Bailey said firmly as all eyes swung to him. "I see I have occasioned embarrassment. My apologies." He hesitated, gauging the temper of his listeners. Their looks were stony. It was time to take a risk.

"Perhaps I should have mentioned the name of my Caste Adviser, Lord Monboddo. I'm sure that he can satisfy any curiosity you may have as to my bona fides."

The silence told him that he had blundered.

"Lord Monboddo," Sir Dovo said in a brittle tone, "died seven months ago."

23

Not a flicker of expression reflected Bailey's racing thoughts. Instead, he smiled a rueful smile, turned and inclined his head to Dovo. "Of course," he said smoothly. "How hard the habits of thought die. I meant, naturally, milord's successor as Lord Chancellor of the Heraldic Institute."

"And what might-" Dovo started. At that moment there was a stir across the room. The voice of a steward became audible, a strained stage whisper: ". . . My lord, a moment, by your leave-"

"There he is! Stand aside, you fool!" a ragged, high-pitched voice snarled the words. Another steward hurried past, headed for the entry. A tall, gray-haired man stood there, his path blocked by a pair of husky servitors. His eyes were fixed on Bailey-feverish, wild eyes.

"They've done it for pure spite," he choked. "He was my guest, mine! They had no right-" He switched his look to Dovo. "You, Dovo, it's your doing!" he called. "Give him back at once! He came for me, not-" the rest of the intruder's cry was muffled by a cloud of pink gas which puffed suddenly in his face. As the agitated nobleman tottered, the stewards closed about him, helped him away.

"Your friend Lord Encino seems somewhat agitated, Sir Jannock," Tace broke the silence. "His jealousy of your company suggests we are doubly fortunate to have you with us."

Bailey smiled coolly as Dovo and Plandot began babbling at once, the tension relieved. Lord Tace rose stiffly, using a cane. "So you're curious as to whether the old man is as thorny an antagonist as reputed, eh?" He showed a stiff smile, "Very well, sir-I accept your wager. But traditionally the challenged party has the choice of weapons, eh?"

Dovo's face fell. "Why, as to that-"

"To perdition with your childish game of Reprise," the old man snarled; through the mask of cosmeticized age, Bailey caught a glimpse of a savage competitiveness. "Instead, we'll try our wits at a sport that's a favorite among the rats that swarm our cellars, eh? A true gamble, on life and death and the rise and fall of fortunes!"

"Just-just what is it you're proposing, m'lord?" Dovo blurted.

"Have you ever heard of an illegal lottery called Booking the Vistat Run?" Lord Tace stared from one of his listeners to the other, ended fixing his eyes challengingly on Bailey.

"I've heard of it," Bailey said neutrally.

"Ha! Then you're sharper than these noddies!" Tace jerked his leonine head at Dovo and Plandot. "Doubtless they scorn to interest themselves in such low matters. But at my age I seek sensation wherever it's to be found! And I've found it in the pulse of the census!" He stared at Dovo. "Well, how say you? Will you back your man in a gutter game of raw nerve and naked chance? Eh?"

"Now, really, m'lord-" Dovo began.

"We'll be happy to try our hand," Bailey said carelessly. He glanced at the ornate clock occupying the center of a complex relief filling the end wall of the gloomy chamber. "We'd best declare our lines at once if we're to book the twenty hour stat run."

The private game room to which Lord Tace conducted Bailey and the Apollo members contrasted sharply with the blighted cold-water flat from which Gus Aroon had rolled his book three months before; but the mathematics of the game were unchanged. Bailey glanced over the record charts, began setting up his lines. After the dazzling action of the Reprise cage, the programming seemed a dry and academic affair; but the expressions of the aristocrats clustered about the stat screen showed that their view of the matter was far different.

"Well, sirs," Tace rumbled, watching them as the first figures began to flicker across the read-out panels, "the gamble stirs your blood, eh? The statistical fluctuations of the society that seethes like poisoned yeast below us provide a hardier sport than glowing baubles!"

"Those numbers," Dovo said. "Difficult to realize that each one represents the birth and death of a man—"

"Or of his fortunes," Tace barked. "Production and consumption, taxes and theft, executions, suicides, the rise and fall of human destinies. One thousand billion people, each the center of his Universe. And we sit here, like gods squatting on Olympus, and tally the score."

Half an hour later, Tace's exuberance declined as he assessed the initial hour's results. After the twenty-two run, he lapsed into a rumbling silence. An hour later, he snarled openly as another five hundred M changed hands, to the profit of the Apollo book. Bailey played steadily, silently, taking no unnecessary risks, outpointing the old man on run after run. At 0200, with Tace's original capitalization reduced to a few score M, Bailey suggested closing the book. Tace raged. An hour later he had lost another hundred and fifty M.

"I really cannot continue," Bailey said, leaning back in his chair before the programmer console. "I'm quite exhausted."

"But such a sportsman as Lord Tace would hardly agree to stop now," Dovo said eagerly, naked greed shining on his normally bland face. He looked with sly insolence at the embattled oldster. "M'lord deserves his chance to recoup . . ."

"I am not so young as I once was," Tace began in a voice which had acquired a distinct whining note. He broke off at a sharp buzz from the communicator plate, snarled, slapped a hand over the sensitive grid.

"I said no interruptions," he grated, then paused to listen. His expression changed, became one of thoughtful concern. With a show of reluctance, he blanked the grid.

"It seems we must continue another time, sirs," he said in a tone unctuous with regret. "The Sub-Commandant of Peace is waiting in the foyer. It appears that a criminal enemy of the Order is suspected of having somehow penetrated the Fornax."

"So? How does that affect us?" Dovo demanded.

"The Commandant wishes to make a physical inspection of all portions of the premises," Tace went on. "Including the private gaming areas."

"Unreasonable," Dovo snapped.

"Still, one must cooperate," Tace said, throwing the switch which unlocked the doors. "Shall we go along and observe the Bugs at work?" He smiled at his daring use of the vernacular.

"Best we close the bank first," Dovo murmured.

"Of course!" Tace poked angrily at the keys on the gaming board; a cascade of platinum-edged ten M cred-cards showered from the dispenser. Plandot counted them out, handed fifty to Dovo, the rest of the stack to Bailey/Jannock, who accepted them absently, turned to Sir Swithin. "Would you oblige me, sir? I feel the need of a moment to refresh myself." He dumped the double-handful of cash into the startled man's hands and turned toward the discretely marked door. A burst of chatter rose behind him, but no one raised objection.

25

Inside the chrome and black toilet, Bailey walked quickly past the attendant to the rear of the room, tried the narrow service door in the corner. Locked. He whirled on the soft-footed attendant who had followed him.

"Get this open!" he snapped.

"Sir?" the man prepared to lapse into dumb insolence. Bailey caught him by the tunic front, shook him once, threw him against the wall.

"Do as you're told!" he snarled. "Haven't you heard there's an enemy of the Order at large in the club?"

"S-s-sir," the man mumbled, pressing an electrokey against the slot. The door slid back. Bailey stepped through and was in a dark passage. Dim lights went up at his first step. He tried doors; the third opened on a white-walled room where half a dozen stewards lounged around a long table.

"As you were," Bailey barked as the startled servants scrambled to their feet. "Remain in this room until told to leave. You-" He stabbed with his finger at a thick-shouldered, frowning fellow with red pips on his collar who appeared to be about to speak. "Lead the way to the prefect's office!"

"Me?" the man gaped, taken aback.

"You!" Bailey strode across to the door, flicked it open. The big man lumbered past him. Bailey stepped out behind him, looked both ways; the corridor was empty. He struck once with the edge of his hand, caught the man as he collapsed. Swiftly, he checked the man's pockets, turned up a flat card to which half a dozen keys were attached. He covered the distance to the next intersection at a run, slowed to a walk rounding the corner. Two men came toward him, one an indignant-looking chap with the waxed-and-polished look Bailey had come to expect of Crusters past their

first youth. The other was a small, quick-eyed man, in plain dark clothes, as out of place here in Blue Level territory as a cockroach on a silver tray. As he started past, the latter turned and put out a restraining hand. Bailey spoke first:

"What the hell are you doing standing here gossiping?" he snapped. "We're here on business, remember? What are you doing about the dead man in the cross-corridor?" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction from which he had come, turned his attention to the other man, who gaped; his mouth open.

"Sir, I'll have to insist that you go along now to the lift foyer," Bailey said briskly. "If you please, sir." He made an impatient motion. The man made a gobbling noise and set off at a rapid walk. Bailey followed without looking back.

They passed half a dozen grim-faced plainclothes Peacemen; none gave them more than a glance. As they came into the circular silver-and-rose chamber where Bailey had first arrived, he halted his companion with a word. Clusters of uniformed Peacemen were grouped here and there throughout the room. Bailey pointed to a shoulder-tapped officer.

"Tell the adjutant the snarfitar is bonfrect," he ordered. As the Cruster stiffened and opened his mouth to protest, Bailey forestalled him: "We're counting on you, sir. You and I between us will make this pinch. And whatever you do, don't look at me."

"The . . . snarfitar is bonfrect?" the man queried.

"Exactly; and the doolfroon have taken over the ignort."

"Doolfroon's taken over the ignort." The man hurried away, mumbling. Bailey watched the officer turn as the messenger came up; he waited until the sound of raised voices told him the message had been delivered. Then he strolled behind a group of Peacemen as they stared toward the disturbance, tried keys until one opened the lift doors, stepped into a silver-filigree decorated, white leather upholstered car, and punched the top key.

26

Bailey changed cars three times at intermediate levels, each time under the eyes of guards alert for a man descending, before he reached the tower suite. He stepped out into a mirror-walled ante-room rugged in soft gray. A wide white and silver door stood at one side. It opened at a touch. Across the room a square-faced man with carelessly combed black hair looked up with a faintly puzzled expression.

"Are you Micael Drans?" Bailey heard himself ask.

"Yes . . ."

Bailey made a smooth motion and the gun he had bought in another lifetime, six hours earlier, was in his hand. He raised it to point squarely at the forehead of the man behind the desk. His finger moved to the firing

stud-

A side door burst open. A girl stood there, wide-eyed, white-gowned, elegant. In a single step she was between them, shielding the victim with her slim body. A gun in her jeweled hand was aimed at Bailey's chest.

"No, William Bailey!" she cried. "Drans mustn't die!"

27

"I remember you," Bailey said. His voice sounded blurred in his ears; the room, the girl, the man sitting rigid behind the desk had taken on a dream-like quality. "You're the girl who helped me. I never learned your name."

"Throw the gun away, William," she said urgently.

Bailey trembled, sick with the hunger of his need to shoot, restrained by the impossibility of killing the girl. "I can't," he groaned. "I have to kill him!"

"Why?" the girl demanded.

"The voice," he said, remembering. "In the Euthanasia Center, it told me how to control my circulation to keep the drug from paralyzing my heart, how to make my legs work enough to carry me out through the service door. It told me to come here, shoot Micael Drans! I have to kill him! Stand aside! I'll kill you if I have to!"

"William," the girl's voice was low, urgent. "Micael Drans is more important than you can dream-than even he dreams." She spoke over her shoulder to the waiting and watching man. "Micael-something very important has happened within the last few hours." It was a statement, not a question. Drans nodded slowly. "Yes." He seemed calm, merely puzzled.

"A message," the girl said. "A message from very far away."

A look of incredulity came over Drans' face. "How could you know of that, Aliea?"

"The message is genuine," the girl said in an intense voice. "Believe it, Micael!" Bailey listened, feeling the sweat trickling down the side of his face. His heart thudded dully.

"I think I understand part of it, William," the girl went on. "You received a part-but I received the rest! You knew what-and I knew why. I made my way here-just as you did. I didn't understand, then-but now I do! And you must, too!"

"I have to kill him-"

"I can shoot first, William," she said steadily. "You're confused, under terrible stress. I'm not. You must try to understand. Perhaps . . ." She broke off. "William, close your eyes. Concentrate. Let me try to reach you . . .!"

Like an automaton, he followed instructions. Blackness. Swirling light. Out of the darkness, a shape that hovered, a complex structure of light that was not light, a structure incomplete, needing him to complete it. He moved toward it, sensing how the ragged surfaces of his own being reached out to meet and merge with its opposite-

Light blossomed like a sudden dawn. All barriers fell. Her mind lay open to him.

Now come, William, her voice spoke in his brain. I'll lead you . . . He followed along a dark path that plunged down, down, through terrible emptiness . . .

And emerged into-somewhere. He was aware of the compound ego-matrix that was himself, Bailey/Aliea; saw all the foreshortened perspective of his narrow life, her pinched, love-starved existence. And saw the presence that had reached out, touched him/her. And abruptly, he/she was that other presence.

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He lay in darkness, suffering. Not the mere physical pain of the wasted, ancient body; that was nothing. But the ceaseless, relentless pain of the knowledge of failure, the bitterness of vain regret for the irretrievable blunder of long ago.

Then, out of despair, a concept born of anguish; the long struggle, probing back down along the closed corridor along which he had come, searching, searching; and at last the first hint of success, the renewed striving, the moment of contact with the feeble, flickering life-mote that glowed so faint and far away:

WILLIAM BAILEY! LISTEN TO ME! YOU MUST NOT DIE! THERE IS THAT WHICH MUST BE DONE, AND ONLY YOU CAN DO IT! LISTEN: THIS IS WHAT YOU MUST DO . . ."

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The girl still stood, aiming the weapon at his heart. Tears ran down her face, but the gun did not waver.

"It was the voice," Bailey said. "You and I were . . . linked. We . . . touched him, were him. He's the one who made me live, sent me here. Who was he? What was he?"

"He's a man, William. A dying man, a hundred years in the future. In some way that perhaps not even he understands, he projected his mind back along his own life line-to us."

"A mind-reaching back through time?" Bailey asked.

"I think he meant only to reach one man, to explain the terrible thing that had happened, to enlist your help to do what he believed had to be done to right the wrong. But his brain was too powerful, too complex. An ordinary mind couldn't encompass it. I was near-on the Intermix, ready to jump. A part of his message spilled over-into my mind. I saw what had happened,

what would happen-saw who and where you were, knew that I had to help you-but I didn't know-didn't understand what it was you were to do."

"A message," Bailey said, remembering the flood of impressions. "A transmission from a point in space beyond Pluto. A ship-heading for Earth. Aliens-from a distant star. They asked for peace and friendship. And we gave them-death."

Drans spoke up, his voice strained. "When did we attack?"

"Sarday, Sember twenty," Bailey said. "Black Sarday."

"Tomorrow's date," Drans said in a voice like cracked metal.

"And Micael Drans was the man who gave the order!" Bailey blurted. "Don't you see, Aliea? That's why he sent me here, why Drans has to die!"

"For three days and three nights I've wrestled with it," Drans said dully. "Pro and con, trust or mistrust, kill-or welcome. There are so many factors to consider, so terrible a risk . . ."

"And you decided: it had to be death, because how could man, who had betrayed his own species, trust another race?" Bailey accused.

"Is it possible?" Drans stared from Aliea to Bailey. "Can you know the future? In some miraculous way, were you sent here to save me from this terrible decision? Can we trust them? Are they what they say?"

"They come as friends," Aliea said softly.

Drans stood. "I believe you," he said. "Because the alternative is too bitter to contemplate." He stepped forward, gently thrust the girl aside. "Do your duty," he said flatly to Bailey.

"William-no!" Aliea said swiftly. "You know now, don't you? You see?"

Bailey looked at the defenseless man before him. He lowered the gun, nodded.

"The voice-the dying man, a hundred years from now. It was-is-will be you: Micael Drans. You sent me back to kill yourself before you gave the death order."

"Only a very good man would have done that, William," Aliea said. "Micael Drans is one of the few good men alive in these vicious times. He has to live-to meet the ship, welcome the aliens to our world!"

"Will you do it?" Bailey asked.

"Why-yes. Yes, of course!" Life came back into Drans' face. He turned to his desk, spoke rapidly into an intercom.

Bailey opened his fingers, let the gun fall to the floor. He felt suddenly empty, exhausted. It was all meaningless now, a vista of blown dust, crumbling ashes.

"William-what is it?" Aliea's face wavered before him. "It's all right now.

It's over. You did it. We did it."

"A puppet," Bailey said. "That's all I was. I served my purpose. There's nothing left. I'm back where I was."

"Oh no!" Aliea cried. "William, you're wrong, so wrong!"

"For the first time in my life, I had pride, self-respect. I thought it was me who invaded Preke territory and stayed alive, absorbed an education, sweated out the Maxpo treatment. I believed it was me, William Bailey, who faced down the Crusters on their own turf, bluffed them all, took what I wanted, made my way here. But it wasn't. It was him, guiding me every step of the way. And now it's over, and there's nothing left."

Aliea smiled, shaking her head. "No, William. Think, remember! He gave you a mission, true. And one other thing he did: he took away fear. The rest you did yourself."

Bailey frowned at her. "I was like a man in a dream, all those weeks. That complex plan, the twisting and turning, the bluffs and the chances I took--"

"Don't you see? He couldn't have planned it all. He had no way of knowing what would happen, how you should meet what came. It was you, William. Once fear is gone, all things are possible."

"Aliea's right," Micael Drans said. He came around the desk to stand beside them. "There's no way for me to thank you. But in eighteen hours, the Evala ship will take up its orbit beyond Luna-peacefully. There will be much to be done. I'll need help. Will you stay, accept positions on my personal staff?"

"Of course," Aliea said.

"If you really think-if I can be of any use . . ." Bailey said.

He felt Aliea's hand touch his-felt the touch of her mind, delicate as a blown feather. Together, we'll do it, William.

"Yes," he said. "I'll stay."

We must tell him, Aliea's thought spoke in his mind. Bailey closed his eyes; together they reached out across the void, found him, waiting there in darkness.

Together, they waited for the sound of a new thunder in the skies of Earth.