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The Stork Factor by Zach Hughes

CHAPTER ONE

Just four years previously Richard Skeerzy had taken the Funland, Ltd., tour around the moon. The tour ship didn't land on the moon, of course. No one went to the moon any more, just around it. The moon was a dead globe of space debris from which the last iota of scientific value had been extracted during the decades before and after the turn of the twenty-first century. Viewed from the tinted ports of a ship such as the *Nebulous*, the moon was a cold, empty wasteland. However, Skeerzy considered his trip into space to be the apogee of an otherwise ordinary life.

Not that Richard Skeerzy wasn't satisfied with his lot. As he had told LaVerne many times, the glory of being one of His creatures in His magnificent universe was reward enough. If, to the pleasure of mere existence, he added the smug knowledge that he, as a relatively young member of the ruling Christian Party, was a Brother on the way up, then that made life only slightly more satisfying.

The tourist ship *Nebulous* started final deceleration thirty minutes out of the Funland Gate, North America. There was no warning. LaVerne, not prepared for the gentle force of it, emitted a surprised squeak as she drifted slowly from her couch. Richard, laughing with the air of an experienced space traveler, engaged his wife and retrieved her as if she were a helium balloon. He placed her on the couch and helped her strap in, smiling on her with a great and dotting pride. She was a particularly lovable child and she had learned a lesson.

Richard had been engaged in a lecture on the wonders of His creation and how one should endeavor to see at least a small portion of that creation. It was Richard's way of rationalizing away the extravagance of a honeymoon which impoverished his new marriage. Space travel, that is, the quick trip up to the North American Gate, the transfer to the *Nebulous*, the single orbit of the moon, was a frightfully expensive way to spend a week. Space travel was so expensive and so relatively unrewarding in material worth that it had almost bankrupted the First Republic before the long-suffering silent majority rose up and, under the leadership of the Brothers, returned the country to the area of sanity. The *Nebulous* had been built with private funds and the North American Station, the one great achievement of the governmental space effort, was leased to Funland, Ltd., which lost money on the operation, but maintained it for prestige purposes and, perhaps, as a tax dodge.

"Now we are returning, slowly but surely, to the good green Earth," Richard preached. "It is an experience of a lifetime." For a moment he would not remind LaVerne that he had experienced the great moment once before. In his love and kindness, Richard did not want to make his wife feel inferior. "We must see and learn and never forget that He created this with a sweep of His hand."

"Yes, Richard," LaVerne said, as a huge globe went swimming slowly across the viewport. LaVerne was numb. Space was big. The ship was small and crowded. The compartments closed in on her. Even the main lounge with the viewports was a tiny, metal and stale-air cubbyhole which gave her claustrophobia.

"If you like, dear," Richard said, "I'll explain the technique of landing at the Gate."

"Yes, dear," LaVerne said, killing a guilty urge to tell him she was fed up with his eternal explanations.

"The captain of the ship on which I took my *first* cruise was kind enough to tell me all about it," Skeerzy said.

La Verne sighed. A short while ago he had seemed to be such a wonderful catch. He was handsome. He was of medium height with dark, curly hair which ducked out at the nape of his neck. He had nice features, a solid chin, good nose, brown, serious eyes. He was a member of the Brothers, and thus eligible for advancement. His position as spiritual

adviser to the famous Colonel Ed Baxley at University One, The Brothers, provided a more than adequate income, at least in the eyes of a girl from East City who, before her lucky meeting with one of the all-powerful Brothers, could only look forward to twenty working years in an office and retirement to a community building in the depths of the continent. He had wooed her and she had let herself be won without love, true, but she could have loved him easily if only he would have let her.

"Do you understand, dear?" he was asking in that preaching voice of his.

"I'm beginning to," LaVerne sighed.

The *Nebulous* glided slowly through the locks into the artificial atmosphere of the Gate. Below, there was a flurry of activity. The ground crew shuffled forward on magnetic shoes to guide the big ship into her berth. Cameramen, in an attempt to pry more dollars loose from the tourists, ground out rolls of instantly processed video-sound to be offered as positive evidence to the folks back home that one had actually been aboard the *Nebulous* coming into the North American Gate from the moon. The walkways were lined by vendors offering bits of space debris and scale models of the *Nebulous*.

Stern retainers were snapped into place. The ship's forward movement was halted with a slight jerk. Floating sixty feet above the ramp, the *Nebulous* was a fantastic sight, all angles, a ship built for space, every inch of available room utilized. Machinery hummed. Lines snaked up, were attached, began to pull the ship slowly down.

"Why, there's Ronnie," Skeerzy said, with mixed interest and disapproval in his voice. "The colonel must be here."

Richard pointed. A small figure floated at the end of a retaining line directly in front of the viewport. In relation to the surface of the ramp, the boy was hanging upside down. Skeerzy watched with a sort of fond interest as the boy, his six-year-old frame distorted by baggy overalls, fumbled inside his clothing.

"Isn't that cute," La Verne said, as the boy's hand became filled with a realistic toy weapon. "He's playing space pirate or something."

Skeerzy snorted. "If his father sees fit to let him play with martial toys

when the world had been a peace for thirty years there's nothing I can do, although God knows I've tried." Skeerzy was prepared to say much more. He started to say it but the small boy, whose blond locks pointed downward to the surface, stopped him. The boy aimed his toy pistol at the nose plates of the *Nebulous* and, with a studied scowl right out of an old adventure film, squeezed the trigger.

The *Nebulous* burned slowly. The chemical fire, once started, was inexorable. Skeerzy saw death creeping slowly toward the viewport along the surface of the ship. There was screaming. With a start, Skeerzy realized that the sound was, shamefully, coming from LaVerne. He put a protective arm around her and watched the fire crawl closer. There was a calmness in his mind. He was about to pass on to a better place. There was no need to mourn. If he deemed it fitting that His servant die in a spaceship drifting loosely above the metal surface of the North American Gate, then who was going to question Him? But just before the drive went, taking most of the North American Gate with it, Skeerzy heard more screaming and knew that it was coming from his throat.

Fuel stores inside the Gate went in a drastic, secondary explosion. The last foothold in space tore, ripped, twisted, turned, went deeper into space, fell, burned in atmosphere. An SST en route London to Bangkok reported sighting falling debris. A Siberian farm worker watched in awed silence as a forest burned, ignited by a blazing, thunderous object falling from the sky. Propelled by the explosions, scraps of the nuclear pile were thrown out of Earth orbit and started falling into the sun. So vast was the spew of wreckage that one antique rocket, in eternal orbit around the Earth, lonely, forgotten, was knocked into a new path with atmospheric terminus. It burned, but other pieces of space debris wheeled around the Earth, close in, far, far below the daring flights of the past century, flights which put men on the moon, men around Venus, men on Mars. Now, with the foothold gone, the old rockets wheeled around and around, useless, jettisoned scrap. The moon was, once again, alone, unreachable. And out beyond Pluto, where man had never gone, a melon-sized instrument was activated by the activity just outside the Earth's atmosphere. Powered by an isotope with a half life far beyond any known particle, the instrument had recorded activity on the Third Planet in the past, activity such as the eruption of Krakatoa in what was, to the instrument, recent time, explosions of natural origin prior to that, the release of primitive nuclear power in the atmosphere only moments ago, all activity which was recorded, but ignored, since it represented no danger. But now there was a

new radiation in space with its origin on or near the Third Planet. The instrument turned, made inner current, measured. A tiny computer sent electronic impulses over a simple circuit. And the beacon flashed into light, activated by the single discharge of a chemical fire gun, the weapon which Richard Skeerzy and La Verne, in the last moments of their life, had thought was cute. A signal flashed, faster than light, at a speed which could not even be compared with the slowness of light, a signal transmitted on a new plane cutting across galactic distance to be received by more instruments operating in endless vigil. The response was automatic, instantaneous, and was set in motion without the immediate knowledge of anything living.

CHAPTER TWO

It was getting harder to get a permit to hold a simple healing service in the park. The amount of red tape and graft was unbelievable. By the time he got through paying off the good Brothers in charge of permits in East City, Old Town, a man didn't have enough left over for a good bottle of Soul Lifter. And the marks were getting more and more difficult to impress. A man cures cancer and heart trouble and the common cold and they want more. They want him to regenerate an amputated leg. Hell, he wasn't Jesus Christ, after all.

"I am poor Brother Luke Parker, by your leave," he said, standing on the base of what must have once been a statue or something equally as sinful. "I will cure your lameness, heal your sickness, provide balm for your soul in His name. Gather around me, brothers, sisters. Listen to the Word. Have faith and ye shall be free."

Actually, he was only an Apprentice Brother, Third Class, but he didn't see any Brotherfuzz in the park and sometimes the marks responded better when they thought they were being touched by a full Brother. Full Brothers didn't go around laying hands on people, but the marks didn't have to know that. All they had to know was that Luke Parker had a God-given gift of healing. He didn't know how it worked, didn't question it. He just knew he had it and he used it to best advantage. He used it to raise a dollar to pay for his pad and for a bottle of Soul Lifter now and then. If he actually did make life a little less miserable for some poor mark, that was fine, too, but making life less miserable didn't put a dollar in his

pocket unless he found a way to bleed it out of the marks.

"In the beginning was the Word," he preached, standing on the old, cement base in the tiny park with a few marks stopping and listening and looking up. He was a striking figure, not tall, but straight at five-ten. He had to hold in his stomach. He wore the common costume, tight slacks, long, baggy cotton over-shirt, slip-on shoes. Put him in a crowd of Lays and he would be indistinguishable from the Techs and Fares and Tireds. It was the voice that made Luke Parker different. The voice and the gift.

"If ye believe," Luke called. "If you do but believe—"

And they looked up, wanting to believe. East City with its millions spread to all sides, lights, grayness, mold, age, towering walls. Old Town. Off there was the water, river and sea, and there was the continent, spreading in one vast sprawl of wall, roof and milling millions to the Chesapeake, to the mountains, to the small, heavily populated agribelt which was preserved before Middle City built walls and towering anthills to the great western deserts. God, they wanted to believe, for believing made them men, made them more than digits standing in line before the Medcenters waiting for a ration of Newasper.

"You must be born again," Luke preached, watching the little square fill. The big, preaching Brothers with electronic aids could fill a stadium. Luke Parker, with only his voice, deep, strong, mellow, could fill an antique little park with its few square yards of true earth, its three trees, could fill it with Lays and Tireds and Techs, although the Techs tended to be a cynical bunch, usually too smartalecky to listen to the true words of faith, putting their trust in Newasper and shakeshock. And dying of cancer and nuflu and heart and black lungs and being mutilated in crash and fall and machine malfunction. "Let him who has not faith approach the mysteries with an open mind," Luke preached, looking down on a small group of Techs in white uniform. They grinned back, making derisive sounds, talking, passing a bottle of Soul Lifter. They could, Luke knew, spoil the pitch. He had a promising crowd, heavy in Tireds, the older ones leaning on canes and white-haired and hopeless, looking up at him without life in their eyes but willing to look, to listen, to drink in the promise of Luke's words.

"He said, go forth and heal the sick," Luke said, trying to ignore the Tech. "He said, this is your gift, mortal man, go and use it wisely. And, my loving friends, I come to you, in faith, in humility, knowing that my poor

gift is not enough, but knowing that my gift, combined with your faith, can work miracles. Are there those among you who suffer, who ache, who know pain? Let them step forward."

"I got the clap," one of the Techs yelled. "Cure me."

"The wages of sin," Luke said. "First you must cure your conscience, friend."

Out near one of the sick trees, an old Tired man moved forward, looking around nervously. "Come, friend," Luke encourage. "It only takes faith."

"Make the old schmuck young again, preacher," yelled the loudmouthed Tech.

Luke looked down angrily. "Can we not coexist in peace, friend?"

"Lay your hand on this, preacher," said the Tech, making an obscene gesture toward a private portion of his anatomy.

"Let the man preach," said a voice. A big, ragged Fare man pushed forward. "Just shut up and let him preach."

"Peace, friends," Luke begged. "Let us have peace."

"Look who's talking," said the loudmouthed Tech. "Man never did a lick of work in his life. Sits on his ass drawing Fare money, our money. Look who's talking."

"Heal me, brother," the old Tired man said, standing near the base of Luke's perch.

"Yeah, heal those gray hairs," said the Tech.

Two more men joined the big Fare to glare at the Techs. "I said let the man preach," said the big Fare. "You gonna shut up and let him preach?"

The Tech, equally as big as the Fare, looked at his companions. "I think not," he said.

Unnoticed, a group of Fares, reinforced by one or two elderly Tireds had encircled the Techs. Luke watched the action unfold in silence. Below

him, the crowd moved away, left the two groups of men confronting each other. A slim, gleaming knife appeared in the hand of the big Fare. From the rear, another Fare felled a Tech with a piece of crumbling brick. The violence was expressed in thudding, flashing blades, groans, curses. The crowd gave it room, looked on with impassive faces. Limp bodies fell, were trampled. The Techs, outnumbered, retreated. The sounds of combat dwindled into the ever-present roar of traffic from old Third Avenue, one block away.

"I believe," said the old, white-haired Tired standing below Luke. Luke lifted his face. Above him the night was hidden by the reflected glow of the old lights of Old Town on the eternal blanket of choking smog. Luke closed his eyes, saw, in his mind, beyond the smog, the stars, the heavens. He mouthed a silent, sincere prayer. He leaped down, took the old Tired's hand.

"My lungs," said the old Tired. "My lungs." His voice was raspy. He coughed. Blood flecked his lips. Luke knew the man should have been in MedCenter. He felt a hint of despair, but he controlled it. It was not, after all, his fault that the old Tired had the lung failure. It came to most, sooner or later.

"Yea, friend," Luke said. "How old are you?"

"I've done my twenty," the Tired said, not without pride. "I went to work for the City when I was twelve. Got my Watch last year."

Luke added. "Then you're thirty-three."

"Yes, Brother."

"I'll pray," Luke said. He put his hand on the old Tired's head. He lifted his head and his voice. "Lord, look down on this, your lamb. Here he stands in the fullness of his years with faith in his heart and the death in his lungs. Here he stands, Lord, asking this, your humble servant, for healing help. I ask you, Lord, giver of gifts, healer of ills, sender of happiness, is it right that his poor servant, this man who has done his duty to his fellow men, this servant who has toiled in the canyons for twenty long years to cough up his life's blood from his poor, charred lungs? I beg you. Lord, Jesus, redeemer, heal this poor servant of God. Help him, Lord." Luke lowered his head. "Pray, friend," he said quietly.

Around him, the crowd was silent. The fighting men had moved away, chasing the fleeing Techs. The roar of ground traffic was loud. Onto the bared heads of the crowd rained the waste of the vastness of the East City, soot, carbon, particles carrying sickness and death, the efflorescence of their civilization.

"Heal," Luke said, giving the Tired's head a shake. "Heal!" He pressed down hard. The old man's knees buckled, but he fought back to stand upright under the shaking, pressing pressure of Luke's strong hand. "Heal!" Luke roared. "Heal! Heal! HEAL!" Then, with one final shake which rattled the old Tired's eyeballs, he released the quaking head. "Feel it friend," Luke shouted joyfully. "Feel the power of God slowly flowing into your pain. Feel it heal." But he knew it wasn't working. He cursed silently. He hated the lung cases. There was no helping them. Oh, now and then one of them got carried away and said he felt better and that helped with the other marks, because if a man can be cured of the lung sickness, there is no limit to the power of the healer. So Luke used his most persuasive voice. "You feel better, friend," he said. "You feel the soothing power of God soaking into your lungs."

"Amen," said the Tired, a mesmerized glaze to his eyes. "Praise God!"

"You are healed!" Luke exhorted. "Healed! Do you hear?" he shouted to the awed crowd. "God, in his mercy, has healed this dying Tired."

"Amen," they shouted. And they crowded around him, wanting to touch him. The Tired was pushed aside. A buxom Negro Fare with a short, kinky shirt, pressed soft breasts against Luke's shoulder and screamed at him. He singled her out.

"Yes, sister?" he asked. "Do you have faith?"

"I got this pain in my side," the Fare said, putting Luke's hand onto her waist. "'Bout here."

"Heal!" Luke shouted. He was beginning to feel it now. The power. The gift. He knew he hadn't healed the old Fare with bloody lungs, but he could heal a pain in the side. "Heal," he said, shaking the soft female flesh under his hand, knowing a sensuous power as he felt her warmth, heard her excited breathing. "The pain is slowly going away," he told her, his face close to hers. The crowd was silent, watching in awe.

"Oh, God," she screamed, "it's going away!"

"Heal!" Luke shouted joyfully. "Let the devil out and let the Lord in!"

"Oh, God," the Fare screamed. "I can feel the devil leaving!"

An old Fare woman with a cancerous nose was pressing her sickening face close to Luke. He pulled away. Another of the ones he couldn't help. But he had to put on a show. "Faith, sister!" he told the cancerous woman. "And slowly, slowly, the Lord will help." He put his hand on her head, shook her head vigorously. "Let the Lord in!" he shouted. "Don't expect instant miracles, sister, but wait until morning. Then you'll see a change. Let the Lord in. Kick the devil out!"

And then it was time to make the pitch. "I am but a poor, wandering Brother," he told the crowd, after working his miracles. He'd felt it with the Negro Fare and the pain in the side. He'd actually felt the little, wrinkled think deep inside which was causing her pain and he'd ironed out the wrinkles and he'd felt the pain subside. He'd had the gift during the brief moment, and he'd tried to feel it with the more serious cases, the lungs, the cancers, the slobbering, retarded child which they'd pushed into his arms. He had put his hand on the jerking, spastic head. He'd said the magic words. He'd felt the sheer idiocy radiating from the jumbled brain of the idiot. And he'd said, "This is too much, friends. The devil in this child is too strong!" And now he was making his pitch, holding out his hands. "All I need is food," he said. "Just a few dollars for the basic needs of life, for even a man of God must eat."

And they dug into frayed pockets and gave him useless coins. Dimes, quarters, half-dollars, two metal dollars. You'd need a truckload to buy a steak. "Help me, friends," he pleaded. "Don't let me starve because I serve our God." There was one dollar bill, more coins. He sighed. Not even enough for a bottle of Soul Lifter.

Then two Fares carried a man into the park. He was bleeding. Blood dripped and splattered onto the sidewalk and soaked the sick grass at Luke's feet when they placed him there. It was the big Fare who had first challenged the smartaleck Techs. He was holding his stomach. His eyes were glazed.

"Got a blade in the gut," one of the bearers said. "Can you do anything for him, you'd better do it fast. Brother. He was helping you, making those

bastards keep quiet so's you could preach."

"He will have his reward in heaven." Luke said, recognizing the glaze of death in the Fare's eyes.

"That don't cut it, man," the bearer said. "He needs help here. He's got a wife and a new baby and with him gone the Fare checks drop fifty percent."

"I'll do my best," Luke said, kneeling. He took the dying man's hands. When he lifted them, obscene things tumbled out of the vast slit in cloth and flesh, pulpy, purple things with pulsing veins and an overwhelming carnal smell.

"Oh, God," Luke said.

"Brother," the dying man whispered. "Brother."

"Oh, God," Luke prayed, hopelessly, his face upturned to the glare of reflected light on the blanket of smog. "Oh, God, help this poor brother. Make him whole. Mend his wounds. Heal him." But his voice was soft, hopeless. It trailed off. He felt the man spasm under his hands. He looked mindlessly at the lighted white curtain over the city. And a mindless anger filled him. The man was dying. Pain was making his face white. His breath was coming in hard, choking gasps. And for what? Mindless, blithering bastards of Techs going around making asses of themselves because they thought they were better than anyone, proud of their mindless little jobs where they sat or stood beside belts and tightened screws on endless moving pieces of new cars or refrigerators. Mindless everyone to let the world be so fouled up that a fight to the death in Old Town didn't even bring the Brotherfuzz. Mindless, bleeding man with his guts hanging out expecting him to do something, expecting the impossible. As if he could undo the vast, bleeding slit in the gut. As if he could put the intestines back in place. He was a healer, but he wasn't Jesus Christ. He could, sometimes, feel the cause of pain and, sometimes, when all things were right, he could remedy the cause. Sometimes it was as if he actually did have the divine power and could look into the vitals of a suffering fellow human and know, instinctively, what to do and be able to send something, a thought, a force, into the heart of the area and heal and now they all stood and looked and expected him to work a miracle and he was no miracle man, just a healer who could do it sometimes and the man. was dying, gasping.

"Bro—" His voice weak. Begging for help.

Luke felt tears trickle warmly down his cheeks. They cleaned white paths through the accumulation of soot on his skin. "Oh, God," he said, his voice choked. "Help him." And, to himself, bitterly, praying sincerely, *give me the power!*

Give it to me!

Goddamn you, if you're up there, you mindless, spastic sonofabitch, don't let this poor bastard die! Do you hear, you bloody, cruel, heartless prick?

And, lo, the heavens were alight!

A blaze of glory. Gutting through the eternal smog, lighting the sky. A vast, blooming, flowering explosion of awesome dimension, covering the sky, making the lights of Old Town dim. And it was God, speaking to him, warning him of his blasphemy. But he didn't care. If the goddamned yokel could light up the whole sky in indignation because some sod of a faith healer cursed him, then he could make that gut go back in and close that slit and—

"Do it, you bastard," Luke was screaming, floods of adrenal fluid glowing, bursting in him. "Help him, you prick. Give me the power. Don't just light up the friggin' sky. Save some of it for this poor bastard who needs you."

And the glandular action, the result of awed fear, anger, all the tumult of emotions, made Luke's hands tremble. "Heal!" he screamed. And he felt it. He looked down and he knew the workings, the pipings, the convolutions of the ruptured guts. He knew their place and he was pushing, shoving while the man jerked in terminal agony and the crowd, screaming, running, terrified by the vast blaze of light, ignored the maddened faith healer and the dead man and Luke was punching guts back into the slit, cursing, crying saying, "Heal, heal," and then things were there. He felt it in his mind. "Heal," he moaned, expecting the Lord to strike him down, knowing that his blasphemy had evoked the blaze of light, knowing bitterness that He would go to such lengths to punish one errant servant and not move a pinkie to heal a dying man who had fought so that Luke could preach. "Heal," he screamed, and his eyes widened as he felt the pull of cellular action, saw the slit gradually close, saw the flow

of blood cease, and then, racing heart in his throat, putting his hand down to wipe away the blood and gore from the taut stomach to feel undamaged skin there and the gradual rise and fall of the diaphragm in normal breathing.

"My, God," Luke said. He looked up. The sky was a soft glow, a blanket of smog lit by the lights from below.

"Whatchu doing?" the dead man asked, sitting up. "Why you got my shirt off?" Then, "Hey!" His hand in the blood. "I was cut!"

"Yes," Luke whispered, feeling weak, feeling very, very small.

"I was cut from here to here," the man said, feeling the undamaged surface of his stomach. "How—"

"I don't know," Luke said. "I don't know at all, brother."

CHAPTER THREE

Colonel Ed Baxley cursed himself as a sentimental fool. He paced the deep carpet of the observation room atop his quarters, a huge, Neo-Victorian house on the south end of the campus. Through the vast span of glass he could see the parade grounds. Trim ranks of crew-cut young Brothers in gleaming white uniforms stood there, waiting. He would have to go out. After all, the review was in honor of his son.

His son! The worst of it was that there wasn't even a body to mourn, not a particle of the bright-eyed boy who had been his life. Not even a body. Somewhere out in near space Ronnie might be floating. Baxley passed a hand over his eyes to wipe away a sudden vision of his son's mutilated body wheeling, wheeling, wheeling toward the cold, distant stars.

Colonel Ed Baxley could not afford to become a public weeper. Therefore, since his eyes would not stay dry, he could not go to stand before his cadets. He could not stand before that group of the Second Republic's finest and let the tears run down his cheeks, not Ed Baxley.

Baxley was too much man to cry in public. Baxley, who had saved the Republic, could not face his superbly disciplined student body, his hand-picked group of outstanding minds, and weep. The man who was still called *The Colonel* a full thirty years after the two-day revolution which threw the Socialistic bastards out would not, could not weep.

Baxley waded the deep carpet. He thought about his son with wet eyes. And he thought about Skeerzy. If Skeerzy were only here, he told himself, he could handle things. Skeerzy had a natural line of patter. He always knew the problem instinctively and could think of the right things to say. Yes, he mourned Skeerzy, too. And that cute little bride of his. Old Skeerzy, full of commonsense and solid, old-fashioned morals. Skeerzy, who gave the practical young scientists of University One, The Brothers, a God-sent gift of religious logic, who taught the Golden Rule. Skeerzy, who was almost a second father to Ronnie. Skeerzy was dead.

There was a low, musical gong. Baxley turned to the videophone. He pushed a button. "Baxley here," he said, as his image was transmitted back to the image-making machine which showed him a nurse in a smart, off-white uniform. He noted the black armband on the nurse's uniform and, once again, reminded, he felt the sting of tears. He was a big man, thick in the shoulders, narrowing only slightly at the waist, but without an ounce of surplus. His kinky hair was cut tightly to his scalp. His eyebrows were full, his nose strong, his teeth perfect. He looked the part. And he looked not much older than he had looked on the day, thirty years ago, when he'd led his small contingent of Brothers into Washington, armed with a half dozen hurriedly handmade fire guns.

The nurse smiled pleasantly. "Your wife is in the delivery room, sir. The doctor says that it will be only a matter of minutes now."

He had almost forgotten. His life, which had ended at the North American Gate, could begin again in the delivery room of the University Hospital. He thanked the nurse. He pushed a code into the phone. "Express my appreciation to the cadets," he told his executive office. "Tell them I regret not being able to address them personally. Tell them," and he smiled for the first time since the news from space, "that my wife is, at this moment, giving birth to a son."

But the matter of minutes became hours. Baxley paced in traditional fashion. His joy faded in the face of delay. He felt a sharp edge of pain, thinking of Ronnie. It seemed as if it were only yesterday when he was

pacing the halls of another hospital awaiting the birth of his first son.

Ronald Edward Baxley, Jr. A fine name. He had shouted his news to the entire Republic by way of a nationwide network. The people had not forgotten the man who gave them peace, who delivered them from the red-tape corruption of the decadent First Republic. They remembered *The Colonel*. He had, with one technological breakthrough, presented them with security. No longer were they threatened by nuclear war. The ultimate weapon, the fire gun, had never been duplicated. Because the Second Republic was run securely by the Brothers, there had been no danger of anyone leaking the secret of the ultimate weapon to the Godless Commies. Yes, the world, especially the Republic, owed much to Colonel Ed Baxley. So when the best of modern medicine and admirable genetics allowed Baxley to start a family at an age when most men were dying, the world rejoiced. And it seemed fitting, somehow, that the colonel should look so unchanged. Seeing him on the screens, the Republic shared his youth. Little did it matter to the Tireds with their putrid lungs, to the Fares with their life expectancy of less than forty years, that Baxley upon the birth of his first child, had already loved and lived longer than any of them could hope to do. Baxley had saved the world. Thus it was fitting for him to receive the care, the medicines, the treatments which would keep him alive to the incredible age of seventy or even eighty. Since it was impossible to give such miracles to the teeming masses, it was only fitting that Baxley, the hero, be allowed the best of medical care. Now, the Brothers—that was different. Brother President, yes. Public servants such as Senators, who took decades to learn the complexities of government, yes, they deserved the treatments. But the regular run of Brothers? That caused some minor discontent in the country at large and was always an issue when, once every eight years, the Lays had an opportunity to pick Brother President from a Brother-selected list of great men. Candidates were always promising better medicine for the masses, but all the masses got was Newasper, a combination of that ancient healing drug, aspirin, and one of the less harmful hallucinogens and, in severe cases of overactive adrenal glands, shakeshock. But that wasn't the important thing. The important thing was that Colonel Ed Baxley had, almost singlehandedly, overturned the Godless First Republic. Colonel Ed Baxley had kicked out the rascals who had, long, long ago, brought Commie sex education into schools while outlawing Godfearing prayer. Baxley had, without having to fire a shot from his massive fire cannon, the most terrible weapon ever devised, kicked out the rascals who wanted to tax Holy Mother Church. So Baxley deserved all the best, for he had returned the Republic to the

people and to God. *One Nation, under God and the Brothers indivisible.*

As the long minutes of waiting stretched into an hour, then two, the colonel paced. His mind, trying to steer away from painful memories, relived the moment, such a short while past, when he had helped his wife from the hospital to the waiting air car with LaVerne, his niece, walking behind them holding little Ronnie in her arms. He had made a short statement to the waiting press.

"This one will be reared as a man of God," he said. The small crowd cheered. "He will be taught at home by a Brother tutor." Some raised eyebrows from the Lays, who couldn't afford, mostly, to send their children to public school.

Ah, it was pleasant and it was painful. The colonel paced. He remembered. He would not let his pain rob him of the sheer pleasure of Ronnie's memory. An amazingly developed boy, a paragon from the first. At four he had his own horse, could ride like a twentieth-century movie cowboy. At five, he shot a respectable pattern with a conventional rifle on the firing range, much to Skeerzy's chagrin. And Baxley had told Skeerzy, "You teach him about God. I'll teach him about guns." Because hadn't it been necessary for him, Colonel Ed Baxley, to know about guns?

The colonel taught his son well. The boy was all boy, detesting all females except his mother and barely tolerating her. He could perform destruction upon the anatomy of all children with whom he came into contact. He adored his hero father with a single-minded intensity. He tolerated Skeerzy. His preaching teacher was a necessary evil, thrust upon him by his father. Being with Skeerzy was slightly better than falling into the hands of women.

The colonel smiled fondly as he remembered Ronnie's favorite costume, a combination of Kit Carson and Captain Flash of the Interplanetary Patrol. And a toy gun was an integral part of the costume. The colonel saw no harm in a toy gun. The manufacture of toys of war had long since been outlawed for the Lay population, but Ronnie wasn't Lay. He was Brother from the moment of his birth, one of the ruling elite by right of birth to the wife of the world saver.

The gun was an exact model of a hand fire-gun. And Ronnie knew how to work it, for the Colonel took him, not once, but a half dozen times, to the vast, cold, brightly lit arsenal caverns where a constantly alert group of

peace keepers practiced with the fire gun. Ronnie fired the gun well, using its narrow, hand-held beam with a grim precision which made older men frown with jealousy.

Skeerzy objected, of course.

"Richard, my boy," said the Colonel, "if the Lays ever rebel we'll need a few boys like my Ronnie. A few could make the difference. There are not a half dozen men outside of the Peace Corps who have fired a fire gun."

Ah, memories...

Only a few days before the *Nebulous* disaster at the North American Gate, Ronnie had begged to be taken to the caverns. Skeerzy went along. He frowned with distaste. The colonel chuckled. His wife, Ronnie's mother, had gone into false labor that morning. As she moaned with pain, Ronnie asked her why she was moaning.

"Never you mind, young fella," the colonel said. You didn't tell kids things like that, like birth and all. They were not ready for the sordid facts of life.

But then, his wife said, "Haven't you told him, Ed?"

Baxley frowned. "Not yet."

"Told me what?" Ronnie asked.

"You're going to have a little brother," his mother said.

Ronnie's face clouded. "You're putting me on."

"No, darling," his mother said. "Wouldn't you like to have a little brother to play with?"

"No," Ronnie screamed.

And for two days he'd pitched tantrum after tantrum. The colonel, uncomfortable about talking of birth and distasteful subjects with his son, would only say that God had seen fit to bless them with another boy. He tried to convince Ronnie that having a little brother would be fun. But Ronnie didn't want to share a moment of his father's time with a brother. He'd seen kids with baby brothers or sisters, forgotten, ignored, while the

adults clucked and cooed over the squalling, dirty-ended little brats.

So, to soothe Ronnie, Baxley took him to the arsenal caverns and let him fire a whole magazine of fire at solid rock, cutting a tunnel a hundred yards deep into the earth. Fine little boy with sturdy body dressed like Kit Carson and Captain Flash, toy gun in his holster, real gun in hand, blasting, eating, chewing solid rock.

But nevertheless, the colonel had to call for help. "He's all concerned about his little brother," he told Skeerzy. "You'd better talk to him."

Skeerzy did a magnificent job. Ronnie had been taught a healthy respect for Him who did the Universe with a sweep of his hand. If a fellow like that wanted him to love a little brother, he allowed, he would love a little brother.

Yes, the colonel thought, as he paced the hospital waiting room, Skeerzy did a wonderful job. He chuckled. It was funny thinking of Skeerzy's face when Ronnie, seemingly reconciled to the coming of his little brother, asked Skeerzy how his brother was going to get through space from heaven. He could almost hear Skeerzy's answer.

"But how is my little brother going to get through space." Ronnie insisted.

"Yes," Baxley chuckled, "tell the boy, Skeerzy."

The colonel chuckled as he remembered. Then he wasn't chuckling anymore. He stopped in midstride. Cold beads of perspiration formed on his upper lip. He burst into a lumbering run which carried him to the roof, to his air car. His driver snapped to attention.

"Get me the arsenal!" Baxley snapped.

With the commander of the arsenal on the phone, secure from eavesdropping by even the most powerful of Brothers, Baxley wiped his face. "Check the guns," he said.

"They are checked daily, sir," the Commander said, standing stiffly at attention.

"Check the goddamned guns," Baxley roared. "I'll hold."

And while he waited, dread was a weight in his stomach. He had wondered why Ronnie had been so insistent on meeting Richard Skeerzy at the North American Gate on Skeerzy's return from his honeymoon trip. It was totally unlike Ronnie. He'd given up seeing a cadet football game to go up on the shuttle. He waited in dread. The commander of the arsenal was back, white-faced, grim.

"I don't understand," the commander was saying. He was holding a fire gun. It looked very realistic. "I cannot understand how this happened."

"When my son fired last," the colonel said, "did he field strip and clean his own weapon?"

"Just as he always did, sir," said the commander nervously.

"And the guard allowed him to place the weapon in its rack and lock it?"

"Just as always, sir."

"And that is Ronnie's toy weapon," said the colonel sadly.

"I don't understand it," the commander said.

Baxley broke off. He walked to the edge of the roof, looked down. Far below the traffic was clogged. A gray haze of pollution rose from the canyon. He knew, then, why Ronnie had insisted on going to the North American Gate. He knew, then, why Ronnie had been a victim of the *Nebulous* disaster.

No. He corrected himself. Ronnie had not been a *victim*.

Not a victim.

"But how is my little brother going to get through space?" Ronnie had demanded.

And Richard Skeerzy, with a wink at the colonel, and because a true Christian gentleman doesn't talk about vulgar things like birth and animal functions, had answered.

"He's coming on the moon rocket," Skeerzy said.

Down below the, smog-making ground cars halted in a massive jam. The sound of their horns drifted up to the colonel.

CHAPTER FOUR

Luke Parker was one terrified Apprentice Brother, Third Class. He had witnessed a miracle, had, indeed, been the doing of that miracle. He'd watched the very heaven's door open. He'd seen the white, glaring face of God. He, Luke Parker, had done a miracle. He, like Jesus Christ, had brought a man back from the dead. Oh, the man had been breathing, but he had been dead, dead, dead, gasping, bleeding, his guts spilled out on his clothing. And Luke had sutured the cuts with faith, replaced the ruptured intestines with that inbuilt instinct of Tightness. *Flash*, God talked, and *splat*, things went oozing back into place, and *zippppp*, the slit closed and his hands felt wholeness under a slime of blood and the stinking contents of a leaking intestine.

And now, awed, terrified, he was still kneeling beside his bed, the little room in darkness, his face lifted to the flaking ceiling. Praying, thanking Him. For he'd cursed Him and He had rewarded him, not with burning punishment, but with the *power*. Somewhere down there on the streets or somewhere in a Fare hovel-room in a stacked building a poor joker was whole who had been slit from a to a.

Prayer, Apprentice Brother, Third Class. Pray and look for a faith you've never had but which has now been forced upon you by a miracle; and God lives. God walks in mysterious ways. Flash and speak and then the power, the knowledge.

He prayed and he tried to feel as he'd felt. He tried to know the grumbling movements of his own intestines, filled now with a dull, acid ache. Adrenal glands had pumped fear and awe and power into him leaving him empty, for he had not eaten. An almost empty bottle of bootleg Soul Lifter was on the plain, board shelf over the tiny sink and he didn't even think about it, didn't want or need it. He was high on power. And awe. And fear. And hope.

Back in the beginning, as told to him by his late father, the first Brother

President had possessed the power of healing. During the march into Washington, John Parker, Luke's father, had been hit by a brickbat, sinking to his knees under the blow. He had risen to march on, but there was blood on his clothing and a terrible ache in his skull and, once the revolution had been completed, John Parker had fainted and they'd put him down on the old Capitol steps and Colonel Ed Baxley, himself, had knelt beside John Parker to feel the big knot on the skull and to wipe blood, then, from his hand. And then Brother President, who wasn't President then, but who became the Second Republic's first after Colonel Baxley declined the honor, came and healed the wounded man.

Help for pain. That was a gift that the Brotherhood emphasized. And the first Brother President had healed John Parker, with the help of magic ointments, wrapping the wounded head in white cloth to hide the miracle-working of the healing.

The story had been told to Luke Parker time and time again. He knew it by heart. It had been inspiration to him during his youth when John Parker, as an original, fire-gun bearing member of Baxley's Army, lived on a lofty government pension and drank Soul Lifter with impunity and talked about the good old days and the way his son, Luke, was to be a genuine Brother. For all first sons of the members of the Army had automatic appointments to the new Academy, University One, The Brothers, founded by Baxley himself and used as a breeding ground for the leaders of tomorrow.

University One. And Luke a tender kid of ten going in for the first time with all the sons of the Brothers looking down their noses at him because he was common Lay. John Parker had never bothered to take his study to become a Brother. It had been enough, the pension, the unlimited supplies of Soul Lifter. So Luke was not Brother, but just Army and that made him a target for pure hell. The cadets, Brothers by birth, scorned him, taunted him, drove him into an isolation which ended when he discovered the power of Soul Lifter, found that there are no troubles which cannot be at least temporarily conquered by old S.L., himself.

He was called before the Dean Brother after the second time he made formation while still high. He was warned. He was lectured. The cadets laughed. He poured his last bottle of Soul Lifter, stolen from his father, down the sink in his shared room and worked hard. He completed his first year and was awarded the magnificent rank of Apprentice Brother, Third

Class. Then Kyle Murrel decided he wanted Luke's doll.

All of it came back to Luke as he knelt beside his bed, praying sincerely for the first time in a great number of years.

The two-day war seemed like ancient history to Luke when he was first old enough to listen to the tales his father told. But in a world of color cartoons on television, rough-and-tumble play on the crowded streets of Old Town, long hikes down the crumbling canyons on steamy August days when smog and the fetid vapors of massed people made the air seem thick like old-fashioned molasses, a delicacy Luke tasted once, the glorious march into Washington to throw the rascals out, made for exciting listening. The fact that John Parker's role in the bloodless revolution was enlarged with each telling only pleased young Luke the more. He was the only kid in his section of Old Town whose father had contributed to the new freedom. The fathers of other kids drove buses or worked on the subway or moved garbage for the city. A few of them worked in the plants doing jobs which could have been done better, and were done better in the more modern facilities, by machines. Some parents were old and gray Tired, having put in their twenty, and now drew well-earned pensions. But of all the kids, Luke was the only one whose father had actually been a part of the foundation of the Second Republic and Luke was the only kid who would go to school. Luke never tired of hearing his father tell about the march.

"What they did," his father would say, "was force us to fight, boy."

"How'd they do that, Dad?"

"Well, they done things like make kids go to school."

"All kids?"

"Every last one."

"Gee."

"And they made 'em go to school with people they didn't want to go to school with."

"Who?"

"Oh, I dunno. Fare kids, I guess."

Luke had nothing to do with the Fare kids in the neighborhood. Fare parents never worked, never marched with Baxley, never did anything but sit back and draw the Fare checks and fight with knives and complain about the government, although not out loud. No one complained too much about the government, because you never knew when the Brotherfuzz would be listening and, although the Brothers were fair to all and gave equal justice to all, Fare, Tired, or Tech, talking against the government just wasn't done. When Luke heard a couple of Fare kids complaining, he told them if they didn't like it they could go off to South America or somewhere. And then he told his father and his father said, "Some people are never satisfied. Back in the old days, people like the Fares had to beg and steal and stand in line to get pennies from the government. Wasn't like it is now when the Fare checks are delivered once a week to the mailbox and no man has to go hungry."

As Luke approached ten, time to enter the University, he did some serious thinking. He went to the library and looked at film and saw how, back in the bloody days of the First Republic, people actually fought each other on the streets of the cities and marched in protest and went out on strike. Going on strike, he guessed, although it wasn't clear to him, meant that the Techs wouldn't go to work and the assembly lines came to a halt and the new ground cars didn't come rolling out and, he guessed, people didn't get a new car every year. That was a terrible thing. Even the Fares who never worked got new cars once a year. They didn't get the big, fancy models like the Techs and the city workers, but they got cars, all new and shiny, and if they were careful, a car would last a whole year until another new one came and the old one was pushed or towed outside the city to be loaded onto the big, flat-bottomed barges for dumping outside the harbor.

Some of the really old films fascinated Luke. He especially liked the ones which showed the country as it was when everyone ate animal meat. Now and then, when his father was feeling plush, they would have real fish, tender little morsels fried gently in oil until they browned and tasted like pure heaven. However, he had never tasted actual animal flesh and didn't know anyone who had. There was one film in particular which Luke liked. It showed vast, unpeopled mountains and clear streams and weird-looking animals such as those which were preserved in lifelike poses in the museum alive and running around. It was a truly old film, made long before the last big war. It was in a place called a national park. Luke

talked with the librarian and the old woman told him that there wasn't any more national park, because the space had been needed, after the great influx, for people, and that made Luke sad.

"Why didn't they just tell the people to live somewhere else?" he asked.

"There were too many of them," the old woman said. "After the great Communist powers had their war, whole continents were made uninhabitable. All of Asia was a radioactive wasteland. Most of Europe was also contaminated. People were dying by the millions and our government."—she paused—"I mean the First Republic, because the people were dying, took them in. Millions of them. Would you like to see films of that?"

He watched the films. People. People. People with suppurating sores and missing limbs and bald heads. People dying from the radiation sickness, but mostly people who would live and cause the cities to build upward and outward, swelling the already overblown population to disastrous proportions. But they came. By huge planes carrying hundreds, by ships carrying thousands. America, the last uncontaminated area, was the bloodbank of mankind, taking in the Europeans, the Asians, the Africans. They brought with them what wealth and technology survived the war, but it wasn't enough to cushion the blow to the American continent. Cities doubled their size in a decade, grew, and reeked with uncontrolled rot. The medical system broke down under the overload. Those who had been exposed to radiation died by the thousands, the millions. Those who didn't die passed along their weaknesses to their offspring. The nation existed in a state of anarchy with the effete government of the First Republic trying to fight the change with outdated methods.

Out of chaos, the Brothers were born. Luke liked the historical film which told of the foundation of the Christian Party. The man who talked had a good voice and he made you feel it.

"It was clear." the man related. "to some, that old values had to be discarded, that old methods were sadly insufficient to cope with the anarchy. The influx had brought with it millions who had no sympathy with the Republican form of government. For long years, the nation teetered on the brink of anarchy. Communism, or worse."

Luke didn't really understand Communism, except that it was what

caused the war and left all but the Western Hemisphere unfit for humanity And he knew that Communists hated God.

"At first," the man who talked on the film said, "those who saw no hope except in radical change called themselves the Silent Majority. That was a phrase coined by a President of the First Republic in the last thirty years of the last century. It indicated the solid people, the Godfearing people, those who, even in early times, deplored the Godless demonstrations of drug-crazed young people, who cried out against the abuses of big labor. The Christian Party actually has its foundations in the twentieth century when a few brave pioneers fought the Communistic leanings of the leaders in minor actions such as resistance to a governmental order saying that their children had to attend school, sometimes by being transported out of their own neighborhoods, with people they didn't like. The first advance of the party came in the complete breakdown of the public school system, thus removing the youth of the country from the leftist influences of the central government. However, progress was always slow and painful until, sixty years after the influx, it became clear to thinking people that action had to be taken. For the New Republic of South American had developed the same weapons which had decimated the Old World and threatened the Republic with nuclear war. At home, the Godless Communists were in the process of taking over. The Communist Party was predicted to win the Presidential election of 2058, having come close in 2054. Almost one half of the elected representatives on a federal level were Communist, members of the American Party. They were in favor of treating with the Republic of South American, of appeasement."

The next part was Luke's favorite part of the film.

"God in his all-knowing wisdom, deemed it not to be. God acted through Colonel Ed Baxley, an obscure Army officer with engineering training. God inspired the colonel to make the most significant technological breakthrough in the history of mankind. Colonel Baxley himself admitted that he had no idea that his experiments in a dimly lit cellar outside Washington would result in the invention of the fire gun. In an attempt to explain it, Colonel Baxley said, 'God works His wonders in mysterious ways.' But God did work and, armed with the ultimate weapon, a weapon spaceborne on a giant space station assembled at tremendous cost, the Brothers marched to victory. Sanity was returned to the Republic."

There were also films of the march into Washington. The colonel was a young man, handsome, impressive at the head of his column of uniformed men. Behind him came the big fire cannon, towed by a huge halftrack. Luke, while watching the films of the march, always looked for his father, thought, once, that he saw him, but on rerunning the film, he couldn't be sure. What was sure was the overwhelming success of the revolution. The film showed Baxley and some of the Brothers confronting armed government troops in front of the old Capitol Building. The huge fire cannon was pointed directly toward the troops. The man who talked told how Colonel Baxley explained the fire gun, talked seriously of his fears that, once fired in atmosphere, the chemical fire could continue to burn until the entire nation was destroyed, perhaps even the continent, the world. During a period of negotiation, while the colonel's troops faced the regular Army and kept their fingers on fire gun triggers, the colonel and his committee of Brothers took the President and the top generals to the caverns and demonstrated the fire gun in the relative safety of the bowels of the Earth, where solid rock damped the fearful rays and stopped them, but only after great chunks were eaten from the walls of the cavern. The First Republic surrendered. The new government, with Colonel Baxley acting as Commander in chief, quickly sent the huge fire cannon into orbit aboard the space station and delivered an ultimatum to the Republic of South American. For one long day, while the new government flew in representatives of the enemy government and demonstrated the ultimate weapon, the world was close to one last cataclysm. Then the Republic of South American surrendered, the wall of isolation was established midway down the Central American isthmus, and the Second Republic started its great reforms.

When Luke first learned, during his early days at the University, that forty million people died during the first five years of the Second Republic, he was shocked.

True, there were over a billion people on the North American continent and forty million was only a small portion of the sum total, an acceptable sacrifice for the good of the whole. He could see that and agree with it, but still he was shocked to learn that the Brothers had eliminated the opposition by violence and by starvation. Yet, it was for the good of all.

"Would you want to be forced to go to school if you didn't want to?" his instructor asked.

"I guess not," Luke admitted.

"Would you like to see masses of people hungry?"

"No."

"Would you think it fair for the Techs to have two cars while the Fares and the Tireds had only one?"

"Of course not," Luke said. The right to own a car was one of the more basic freedoms, something not to be tampered with.

"Some of the Techs, back in the old days, had as many as three or even four cars," the instructor said. "They, some of them, lived in penthouses, whole floors of buildings for maybe two or three people."

That Luke couldn't imagine. Whole floors? He and his father shared a tiny ten-by-ten cubicle. Their common bath was shared by perhaps two dozen families. A whole floor for two or three people? Waste. Unheard-of waste.

"Would you like to hear one of your instructors stand before this class and tell you that God is dead?"

"Oh, no," Luke said, horrified, looking up nervously to see if the sky were going to fall even at such a supposition.

"They did. They said God was dead. They outlawed God in the classroom and in public places. They said man had the freedom not to believe in Him."

"Gee," Luke said.

Because he was not a Brother by birth, Luke was determined to show them at the University how the son of one of the members of Baxley's Army could achieve. He chose the roughest course of all, a course which required that he learn the meaning of the archaic lettering on paper. Reading, they called it.

Look, Look, see the car? The car goes fast.

And he would have made it if the other cadets hadn't made life a misery for him. He was getting to the point where he could make some sense out

of the simplified Bible when the persecutions of his fellows began to be too much for him and he found escape in his father's Soul Lifter.

Kyle Murrel was the worst of his tormentors. He was a big, husky boy who always picked Luke as his opponent in gym.

Colonel Baxley insisted on physical training, some of it on a primitive basis of actual face-to-face competition. In hand combat, Kyle Murrel would choose Luke as his opponent and, instead of pulling his blows as he was supposed to do, he would chop and hack and kick with intent to hurt. He often did. Luke would leave the mats with a bloody nose, with bruises and aches and hate in his heart. Finally, one day when Kyle chopped him under the eye and left what Luke knew would be a supermouse, Luke's hatred overflowed. He had always been able to hold his own in street fights, but he didn't do too well at the precision, sissy, stand-up hand-to-hand combat. But anger and hate boiled up in him with the new pain and he lowered his head and charged into the grinning Kyle and wrapped him in strong arms, bearing him to the mat. Before the instructors could pull him off, he'd returned the mouse and had almost severed one of Kyle's ears from his head with a set of strong, white teeth. For that he was called before the dean and made to march three punishment tours. But Kyle didn't ask for Luke any more as his opponent.

Kyle took a different route. A rash of stealing broke out in the quarters and some of the loot was discovered under Luke's bunk. He swore tearfully, his hand on a Bible, that he hadn't put it there. They had to accept his word. When a man swears on the Bible, he's putting his life on the line, for a lie under those sacred circumstances meant instant death by lightning bolt or worse. But he was kept under close watch and, thus, was detected twice in formation while still high on Soul Lifter. He was on probation when Kyle Murrel decided that he wanted to steal Luke's doll.

The doll was a cute little girl, daughter of one of the maintenance men. Since she wasn't Brother, she was below the social level of born Brothers like Kyle Murrel, but Murrel decided he wanted her just because she was Luke's doll.

Funny, Luke couldn't even remember the little girl's name. He could remember her long, blond hair and her sweetness. She was sympathetic. When Luke came out of the hand-to-hand combat class with bruises, she oohed and ahed and told him it was all right, that he shouldn't let the Brothers get him down, that soon he'd be a Brother, himself.

Their relationship was pure. In the first place, Luke knew nothing about sex other than what he'd heard as a child in the canyons of Old Town. Sex was something which was reserved for married people. Sex was something slightly dirty and very mysterious and sinful. So Luke had no designs on the purity of his doll. He liked her for what she was, a sweet, sympathetic human being to whom he could tell his troubles. He had never so much as kissed her. Often, in his dreams, he kissed her, a sweet, mysterious kiss on the cheek with their bodies not even touching, but he knew no trace of carnal desire for her. He fought one of Kyle Murrel's friends who said his girl was bad, a Jezebel. His punishment for fighting was garbage detail. He had to go through the quarters and clean the waste receptacles of each cadet. Kyle and his friends saw to it that he had plenty to clean. They saved food until it was rank and then poured it into the receptacles. Kyle even made waste in his receptacle and threatened to report Luke when Luke refused to empty the stinking mess. Luke had no choice. He was already on probation.

But when he discovered that Kyle had been giving presents to his girl and talking to her about what a lowlife Luke was, he could no longer control himself. He faced Kyle in the quad and told him that if he didn't leave his girl alone he would kill him. Kyle grinned and walked away. Things were quiet for a few days and Luke hoped that the Brother cadets had tired of baiting him. Then Kyle stood before Luke's desk while Luke was studying his reading and said, "I had your doll today."

"Huh?" There was a strange smirk on Kyle's face.

"Don't you know what that means?" Kyle asked, laughing, turning to his audience of several gathered Brother cadets.

"Sure I know," Luke said.

"It means, stupid, that I knew her sexually."

Luke felt his face go red. "You're a liar."

"Am I?" Kyle laughed. "Why don't you ask her?"

"I will," Luke said. "I just will."

He ran from the building. He ran across the quad, through the class buildings, down to the quarters of the working staff of the University. His

doll's father answered the door.

"What do you want?" her father answered angrily, when Luke opened his mouth to ask if he could see the girl. "Haven't you people done enough to her?"

"I didn't do anything," Luke said. "God knows, I didn't do anything."

The man's face softened. "No, I guess you didn't. It was them Brother bastards."

Luke felt scared. His stomach was aching. "What did they do?"

"You know damned well what they did," her father said.

"No, no, I don't. Honest."

"Well." He swallowed. "They raped her."

Luke didn't know the word. "Raped?"

"He's a nice boy," the girl's mother said, coming up behind the father. "You can see he's a nice boy. He doesn't know such nasty words."

"What is it?" Luke asked. "What did they do to her?"

"They hurt her," the father said.

"Rape means they did something awful to her," her mother said. "Something—sexual."

Luke blushed. "Well, didn't you report them?"

The man looked down at his feet. "I'm only a Lay," he said.

"What's that got to do with it?" Luke asked. "If they hurt her—"

"Kyle Murrel's father is Secretary of the Republic," her father said. "Do you think they'd believe me or my daughter against the son of the Secretary of the Republic?"

"But if they hurt her—" Luke said again, feeling helpless.

"Son," her father said, "you're from Old Town, right?"

"That's right, but I don't see—"

"How many fights you seen on the streets? Ever see a Tech or a Brotherfuzz kill someone?"

"Sure," Luke said, "but that's—"

"The way things are," the man said, "you being a cadet, you should know that."

"But hurting a girl?" Luke asked.

"He told her to tell us that if she squealed he'd swear that she propositioned him."

"Huh?" Luke asked.

"That she was the one who asked for—sex," the father said. "They would believe him."

Luke couldn't believe it. He went to one of his more sympathetic instructors, a young Brother who seemed to have an interest in Luke. "Kyle Murrel raped my girl," Luke said. "And her father says he can't report it."

"Her father is wise," the instructor said.

"Well, then I'm going to report it," Luke said.

"I wouldn't," the instructor said. "You're not even Brother. They wouldn't believe you."

But Luke went to the Brother dean and made his report. Kyle Murrel was called into the same room. He denied even knowing the girl. Kyle Murrel said that Luke—he called him that stupid Lay—had probably gone crazy and raped the girl himself and was trying to shift the blame. The dean, in his wisdom, said, "You are both cadets. The fact that one of you is Brother-born has no bearing. The gist of it is that we have a basic disagreement. So we will settle this with Christian finality." He got out two Bibles. Luke swore on his Bible that he had never touched the girl, that she had told her parents that it was Kyle Murrel who raped her. Kyle Murrel swore that he had never spoken to the girl, that he had not, of course,

raped her or anyone.

"There is serious blasphemy here," the Brother dean said. "One of you has just lied on a Bible."

Luke waited for the roof to split asunder, for lightning to punish the lying Kyle Murrel. That did not happen. What did happen was that Luke was called before a jury of his peers, a board of cadets and instructors and was dismissed from University One, without appeal, for telling a lie on a Bible.

He took it with a growing fury and a determination to do something about the gross injustice of it. It wasn't just the girl now, although she'd suffered, God knows. It was he and his father, who had his heart set on Luke's being a full Brother. There was only one thing to do. He ran to the restricted portion of the campus and slipped by the guard of Brotherfuzz and entered Colonel Ed Baxley's house by a French window. Awed by being in the great hero's quarters, he almost retreated, but he heard sounds from an adjoining room and pushed on, his heart pounding. He recognized Baxley from having seen him on the screen so many times. The colonel was talking with a group of important-looking brothers in ceremonial dress. If Luke had not been desperate he would never have had the courage to break in, but he was being kicked out of the University and it wasn't fair. He knew that the colonel would be a just man, that the colonel would do something about it. He stepped into the room. One of the Brothers saw him, halted his words in midstream.

"What the infernal are you doing here?"

Five faces, four stern Brothers and Baxley, looking at him, indignation, surprise, anger. Only Baxley was calm.

"Guard!" one of the Brothers yelled.

"Sir," Luke cried out. "Sir, I have to talk to you."

"Get him out," one of the Brothers said angrily.

"It's life or death, sir," Luke cried out.

Two Brotherfuzz rushed into the room and seized Luke roughly. "Get him out," said the tallest Brother. "And find out what idiot let him in!"

"Please sir," Luke said, looking at the Colonel. "I've got to talk to you." He was being hustled out, his feet barely touching the floor. "My dad marched with you!" he yelled.

"Wait," Colonel Baxley said. The guards stopped at the door. "What's your name?"

"Luke Parker, sir."

"Parker, Parker," the colonel mused. "John Parker, right?"

"Yes sir. I have to—"

"Turn him loose," the colonel said.

"Really, colonel," the tall Brother said.

"I am here to help my cadets," Baxley said. "And this young man sounds as if he has some problems." He smiled at Luke. "You'll have to talk fast, boy."

"Yes, sir," Luke said. "Well, you see, they say, I mean—"

"Can't this wait, colonel?" the tall Brother said coldly. "My time is valuable, you know."

"Brother Murrel," Baxley said, equally as cold, "There is nothing more important to this Republic than the future of its cadets."

Luke was stunned. Baxley had called the Brother Murrel. What a tough break, to get to the colonel only to find him with the father of Kyle Murrel, for now Luke recognized the badge of office hanging on the tall Brother's robe. It was Class One, meaning very high. And Kyle Murrel's father was Secretary of the Republic.

"All right, son," Baxley said.

So Luke told it. He stumbled at first, but he told it. He got as far as the charge of rape against Kyle Murrel and the Secretary of the Republic blew up, anger making his face red. "This is the Lay who swore false witness on the Holy Bible," he yelled at the colonel. "And you're wasting my time and yours by listening to his lies."

"Please sir," Luke begged. "I couldn't lie on a Bible."

"I have the report," the colonel said, not unkindly. "And it's quite evident that someone lied."

"Well, it wasn't me, sir." Luke said tearfully. "As God is my witness—"

"More blasphemy," Murrel said. "Guards—"

"This is my home," Baxley said quietly. "I give the orders in my home."

The Secretary's face turned a shade more ruddy, but he didn't speak.

"You were tried," the colonel said to Luke. "You were found guilty."

"By *them* sir," Luke said. "They were all Brothers. And I was only Army—"

"Now he is insinuating that—" But Baxley didn't allow Murrel to finish.

"I know what he's insinuating," Baxley said. "Look, son, there is nothing I can do." He sighed. "There isn't even anything I want to do, because the record says you swore falsely on the Bible."

"If I had," Luke blurted, "wouldn't He have blasted me right then?"

Baxley sighed again. "Not always, son. He moves in mysterious ways."

"I'll prove it," Luke said, his voice breaking with his tears. "God," he prayed, looking up, "Show them, God. Show them who lied. If I'm the liar blast me, send down your lightning, God. Prove to them who is the liar." But God, having failed him once during the swearing ceremony, was not to be moved. "Help me, God," he prayed. "God, help me."

"You'll have to go now, son," Baxley said quietly.

"I didn't lie," Luke said.

"I wish I could believe you," Baxley said, "but there is the evidence."

"I'll show you," Luke said, as the guards seized his arms. "Someday I'll show you. Someday I'll have that sign from God. Someday He'll punish the real liar." But by that time he was outside, being hustled roughly out of the

colonel's quarters onto the quad and then out of University One. He went back to Old Town with the beginnings of the ability to read and a new cynicism which made him doubt the very existence of God. The cynicism, and his unreduced rank of Apprentice Brother, Third Class, made it possible for him to go into the ministry, rather than into the already overcrowded ranks of Techs, Fares, or Lays. He used the privilege well, learning his trade on crowded street corners, preaching to anyone who would listen. He struggled through the simplified Bible, improving his reading skill as he went. He told the old Biblical stories and studied the techniques of the big, preaching Brothers who traveled the country holding revivals. Then he stumbled onto the faith-healing gimmick. His fine voice, his good looks, his youthful enthusiasm made him a success. He became skilled in picking those who suffered from psychological ailments and, with a combination of faith and mind control amounting almost to hypnotism, he effected cures. And then he began, at rare intervals, to actually feel the power. There were isolated times when he felt that he really could heal. And then the night when God opened the heavens and gave him a sign and he did heal, did pull back into place dislocated intestines and healed them and then sutured the slit belly lining with faith and power and now he was kneeling at his bedside praying with complete sincerity for the first time in many years, a young man of nineteen years, old in his society, mature, more than halfway through his expected lifespan, praying, asking for a clarification of his power and not caring about the ache in his knees, for there was, for the first time since he'd been kicked out of the University, hope. He had had his sign. If he could repeat it, repeat the sign or the miracle in the presence of a witness, a Brother, the colonel himself, he would show them who had lied so long, long ago. He would show them upon whom God cast his favor and they would have to clear his name; they'd have to give him the cloak of Brotherhood.

Reveling in new faith, joyful in hope, awed by what had happened Luke did not know that his sign from the heavens was merely the dying explosion of man's last foothold in space. He would learn this and there would still be the miracle. That would not be taken from him. But out beyond Pluto a sensor thing, newly activated by the first firing of a fire gun outside the damping mantle of solid rock, was sending a signal through space which was not even imagined by men such as Luke Parker. And, at the end of galactic distance, the signal was being received by other sensor instruments untended by living beings. And there was motion, activity. On a lonely, automated planet near the core of the spiral of stars

which made up Luke Parker's galaxy, an alarm flashed, sent signals deeper into the heart of the cluster. Automatic instruments began to double check, to trace back the call to the ancient sensor stationed near a planetary system out near the end of a spiral arm. The checks proved the sensor to be in perfect working condition.

Since the language of the signals was similar to but beyond electronics, there could have been no exact translation to a language spoken by man. Roughly, the alarm which went from the automated planet into the heart of the cluster would be read as: ALARM RED. PLANET KILLER. SECTION G-1034876. STAR R-875948 PLANET 3.

CHAPTER FIVE

Before coupling with the handsome male from A-7, a union computed to be on a superior scale because of the similarity of their gangliogroupings, she reduced gravity in her bedchamber to one-fourth normal. It was more restful. It tired one less when one became excited and went spastic-wild. The arrangement had been completed via warpsignal only the period previous and she was still in stage one of the euphoric, always new sensation of total union. The male from A-7 was as computed, total, willing to commit, sensuous to an extravagant degree. Together, with the atmosphere odorous with *trang*, they had built rapidly to maximum potential and then, their systems reinforced by the *trang*, past maximum to a paralyzing ecstasy which they prolonged by shared mental patterns of past couplings with others. It was as if they were able to couple with dozens, hundreds simultaneously. It was a good union and the *trang*, sweet, potent, euphoric *trang*, made time timeless and a period passed with nerves screaming at full climactic capability and that was but the beginning. Period after period they would lie, coupled, moving at times, wild at times, passive at times, minds woven, bodies clasped. Thus it was and thus it had always been and thus it would ever be and she knew no other way and would have wanted no other way. She was uncommitted for two stellar circuits and the delightful fusing of their gangliogroupings indicated that two circuits might not be enough. This male from A-7 was, indeed, superior.

Around them, around the soft-hard couch, the chamber was softly

feminine in glowing star colors. Alter rhythmic sounds sent languor to ears; aromas of life and goodness blended with the *trang*. And the room changed, pulsingly, with irregular pleasing patterns of color and form. Timeless time passed and the good coupling made her alive with pure sentience.

"I will cancel my next commitment." She didn't say words. She knew no language. Her mental pattern told him and it was the greatest of compliments.

"I knew of you." He communicated. "I made no commitments."

"And when we tire I will lie in numbness and remember." His mind sent a message meaning long, long circuits, a great lapse of time, contentment, total caress.

She had no name, as such. Her mental patterns were distinctive and by them she was known. In the mind of her lover she made a bright, rosy glow. By that pattern she was known. His mind was hard, masculine, metal.

Trang infused her, made her all mental, removed her from the physical and made her endless nerve pathways for voluptuousness.

A servomech extended a mobile arm. A sweet taste in her mouth. Liquid. Servomechs tending to the physical, outside of her responsibility, automatic. He was served likewise.

On the world outside a red sun gleamed, died. A crowded sky lit the dark period with huge, near stars. Three moons chased across the night.

Her structure was atop a hill overlooking a valley of trees with fernfrond limbs, a stream. Small furry things played. Winged nightbirds swept the air. No light showed from the structure. It was dark, permanent, private, isolated. Around the planet, at intervals of hundreds of miles, other structures reared darkly from scenic spots. A few floating structures were scattered over a great, single sea. Water creatures swam in the sea and feral things roamed the night and there was no other movement except in the chambers of the structures. There couples lay, *trangized*, libidinous, living, living, living. Servomechs coiled silently to serve, to nourish. A network of giant stations drew power from the crowding stars and sent it winging to keep alive the structures, the servomechs. And all around the

blazing stars crowded in a fairyland density and no ships cruised the space between for commitment time had come and gone and the ships rested at darkened ports awaiting the next shifting of male to female, female to male.

On one planet, however, near the heartland, there was movement. It was a light period, although that made no difference to the automated things which rolled and tested waving fields of green with nodules of gold ripening atop some of the fields and careful machines gleaning the golden buds tenderly and transporting them. Soon ships would flash from the planet *Trang*. Soon the mobile computer machines would send the *Trang* fleet moving out, scattering in hundreds over the widespread field at the heart of the galaxy to deliver golden euphoric *Trang* to each world, to each structure scattered widely over the populated planets, to bring *Trang*. At the end of harvest time, ancient, self-servicing traffic computers would sense the arrival of a single ship where once there had been frantic movement. Traffic computers designed to handle the landing and takeoff of one ship per heartbeat would put into action their vast capabilities to land one, single, small automated freighter with one small vital cargo. *Trang*. And servocenters would channel the new *Trang* to the isolated structures and local servomechs would grind it, sort it, feed it into the perpetually burning *Trangers*. And those without names would breathe and know maximum contentment, would breathe and live, would continue, circuit after solar circuit, to know bliss in the arms of a fellow being with sympathetic gangliogroupings. Thus it was and thus it had always been in the memory of those who were *Tranged*, but in the nonemotional memory bank of the great port computers there were records of more than that, records of vast, restless movement, of a reaching out, of conquest and power and vitality. Then a simple cereal grass mutated on the planet *Trang*.

A tranquil, vast, far-flung system of worlds was connected, at harvest time, by the small, flashing ships. An entire planet was sown in *Trang*. The galaxy wheeled on its axis and planets whirled around suns and there was no change as the endless present moved forward in a straight-curved line toward another harvest time, another flashing out of the *Trang* ships, another commitment time. Meantime, worlds peopled by perfect, beautiful beings *Tranged* through eternity glutting on the two most pleasant experiences known to cellular beings. Euphoria, Copulation.

Then from the rim of the galaxy, an ancient sensor flashed: ALARM

RED. PLANET KILLER SECTION G-1034876. STARR-875948 PLANET 3. Where the stars began to thicken, a relay station picked up the signal, backchecked to find the ancient sensor in perfect working order, forwarded the signal to the heartland. On what had once been the central planet, in what had once been the greatest city in the galaxy, but which was now a deserted, quiet, machine-controlled metal desert of structures, a huge central computer received the signal, backchecked to find the relay station in perfect working order, sent instant orders to working parts, sorted the mind patterns of the population, and came up with a pattern which exuded a soft, rosy glow. A female member of the old civilization, relatively nearby on A-1. The computer, programmed by Old Kingdom scientists to stand guard over the *Tranged* worlds, took steps. In a glossy, dark, isolated structure a servomech extinguished the flame in the *Tranger*.

Her body was wet. She felt cramped. She was being almost strangled by the male from A-7. With an unfamiliar irritation, she shoved him away. They analyzed it together.

"The *Trang*—"

Never, in her memory, had the *Trang* stopped. She felt panic, an emotion which was new and terrible to her. She wanted to scream. The male from A-7 wasn't taking it any better. He looked as if he were ready to bolt. But bolt to where? Without *Trang*—

She leaped from the couch. This era, the style was small breasts, big hips, small waist. Red hair was in. She gasped. She breathed *Trangless* air and heard the male from A-7 gasping, making little choking sounds.

"Servomech check!" she sent. "Servomech check! Malfunction!" *Trang*, she had to have *Trang*.

On the near wall there was a regular flashing. Into her panic, her helplessness, her fear, the flashing intruded until, to her dulled mind, the message came through. With a sob, she ran to the flashing instrument, touched it with her hand. Her mind pattern was communicated to her, a blaze. And then, RED ALERT PLANET KILLER. SECTION G-1034876 STAR R-875948 PLANET 3.

"What does that mean to me?" she sent. "Why is the *Trang* missing?"

Blaze. "You are the sentinel. For this circuit, you are on call."

"But there's never been a call," she sent. She remembered, now. Always there had been the assignments. Numberless times before she had been the sentinel, had been on call. But they'd never stopped the flow of *Trang* before. "I demand to know the meaning of this."

Through her hand, into her mind, came the communication of the huge central computer. Behind her she heard the male from A-7 whimpering in his *Trangless* panic. And the incredible message went into her mind. "I can't do it," she sent. "I won't do it."

"You must."

"I can't do it without *Trang*."

"There is a way." A servomech snaked out. She opened her mouth, swallowed. Soon a strange feeling came to her. The aching need for *Trang* left her. She knew, but had never known, normalcy. She could feel the blood flowing. She could feel her heart beating. She knew the workings of her organs. It was horrible. Yet, it was bearable.

"What must I do?"

When she was told, she felt her heart sink. Out' Out into the open world? Worse. Into space. Into space without *Trang*. On the rare trips she made to commitments—she, being of superior quality usually had males coming to her—she was thoroughly *Tranged*, euphorized to the point of being blocked out of the necessary movements to port, to ship, to port to structure on another planet. Now she was being told that she had to go forth *un-Tranged* and not in a comfortable personal ship but in an armed, cold, vast ship of the line.

"Why me?" she moaned.

"You are on call."

"Let *him* go," she sent, indicating the moaning male from A-7.

"No," he gasped. "No."

"Please," she sent to him. "For me. When you come back I'll be yours,

here, for the next two commitments."

"Without *Trang*?" he sent. He shuddered.

"Three commitments, then," she promised. "You know I'm good."

"No," he said. "Please go. Please I must have *Trang*."

At her bidding, a servomech brought a gleaming singlet. She slipped into it. It molded her form. As she left the room she heard the sigh of the *Tranger*. Beautiful *Trang*. And he was going to have it all to himself. She turned to go back. The door was closed and her palm on the senlock had no effect. Damned computer. Locking her out.

There was an atmoflyer on the roof. With a grim face, she entered, punched destination. She didn't know what was going on but whoever or whatever was responsible for taking her away from *Trang* and from a very promising coupling would suffer. She would promise that.

CHAPTER SIX

The morning news said that the vast light in the sky was the North American Station blowing up. Luke felt letdown for a moment. However, he soon brightened. He was not going to think that God had blown up the North American Station just to give him a sign, but the fact remained that the great light in the sky had acted as a sign and had inspired him to do something which was, beyond doubt, a genuine miracle. That fact could never be taken away from him. He had *healed*. And not just some imagined ailment. He had healed a fatal wound. A man lived because of him. And because that man lived, hope lived in Luke's heart.

He breakfasted on fishcakes made from an odorous meal which tasted almost as bad as it smelled. His coffee was bitter-weak, in spite of a reckless splurge of generous spoonings of the ground near-coffee into the hot water. It was not the best of all possible ways to start a day, but Luke's optimism was stronger than his usual distaste for the unappetizing meal. He gulped it down, dressed in a clean set of coveralls, his number-two outfit, and was making his plans for the day when he heard the

authoritative knock on the door.

"Coming," he said, turning, wondering who could be calling at this hour of the morning. He did not have time to reach the door. The ancient, weakened wood of the frame gave way under a pounding force. Wood splintered, the bolts and locks broke and bent. A helmeted Brotherfuzz lurched in behind the broken door, righted himself, weapon at the ready. Luke froze in shock. More Brotherfuzz moved in, three of them, big, grim, coming toward him silently.

"I'm clean," Luke said, thinking with belly-sinking panic of the incriminating bottle of Soul Lifter on the shelf. "I'm—"

Without speaking, two of the Brotherfuzz seized his arms, lifted him until his feet were barely touching the floor, hustled him toward the door. "Hey, listen," Luke said. "Listen, what is all this?"

The most frightening thing was the silence of the three Brotherfuzz. They moved him along rapidly, out the door, down the hall, past the nonfunctioning elevator, down the stairs. "What is it?" Luke asked. "Where are you taking me?"

A jet-rotor with Brother markings waited. Curious people stood at a safe distance and watched Luke being shoved into the craft. Numbed by the suddenness of it, Luke was pliant. He made no effort to resist, took his seat between two of the big Brotherfuzz as the rotor hummed, roared, listed slightly as it lifted. Below, Luke saw a ground truck pull up in front of his building. Uniformed Brotherfuzz poured out, carrying instruments which were unfamiliar to Luke. They moved into the entrance as the rotor lifted beyond the walls of the canyon and Luke, for the first time in his nineteen years, saw Old Town spread below, spiked and turreted and glassed and looking strangely neat and clean. For a moment he forgot to be frightened. A kind of elation filled him. Thus God must see the world, from on high, a world of moiling humanity and tall buildings and ground cars crawling on the streets.

"It must be nice," Luke said to one of the Brotherfuzz, smiling, "to be able to see this every day, huh?"

Silence. Grim faces looking straight ahead. The hum of the jet-rotor.

And Luke could see the water. Huge ships. Small craft moving. It was so

damned beautiful he felt tears come to his eyes. He lifted his hand to wipe them away, shamed. A Brotherfuzz caught his arm, shook his head menacingly "Don't try anything. Lay. "

"No, sir," Luke said. But the moment of beauty known was past. In its place fear, dread.

Ahead, tall buildings, the rotorcraft just clearing the tops, another Brotherfuzz rotor passing, gleaming with Brother insignia, piloted by a grim-faced Brotherfuzz who waved. Then, moving down slowly toward a port on the roof of a dark, old building. Luke didn't recognize it at first. Then, as he drew closer, the front of the building perspected down toward the distant street and he knew that it was the Hall of Justice.

"Listen," he said, "could you tell me why?"

Silence. A slight bump as the rotorcraft landed. Luke was pulled out, two Brotherfuzz on his arms, lifting him, dragging him, his feet working to try to keep up, to try to get a purchase on the roof, to walk. A door opened ahead of them. A guard nodded, looked at Luke without curiosity. Luke was jerked to a halt in front of a desk. An old Brotherfuzz didn't look up. "Name."

"I am poor Apprentice Brother, Third Class, Luke Parker, by your leave," Luke said.

"Room 802," the man at the desk said, still not looking up.

"Listen," Luke said, as he was being hustled along a hall, into an elevator, "if it's the Soul Lifter, I can explain. It's not mine, see? I mean it was left there, you know?"

Silence. A dropping sensation. Down, down the shaft. Out into a hallway which was windowless, dim. Luke noted the room numbers. 806. 804. 802. Into the room, coming to a halt, looking around with a sinking sensation. More Brotherfuzz, high-ranking men. And a full Brother in a purple robe, looking grim.

"Luke Parker," one of Luke's captors said, speaking for the first time.

"You may leave," said the Brother. Luke was left standing alone. "Sit," the Brother said, waving toward a hard, straight chair.

"Brother," Luke said, thinking that maybe things were not so bad after all. He'd wanted to come into contact with a Brother. He'd wanted to tell about the miracle. He wanted to ask for his chance. With such a gift, surely he'd be made a full Brother without having to take the impossible tests.

"You will speak when you are told to speak." One of the high-ranking Brotherfuzz said.

"Name," said the Brother.

"Luke Parker," he said, frightened again.

"Lay?" asked the Brother.

"Apprentice Brother, Third Class."

"By what means?"

"By appointment," Luke said. "To University One, the Brothers?"

"Get his record." The Brother sighed. He turned to Luke. "Is that where you learned medicine?"

"Huh?" Luke said.

"You will find it easier if you cooperate," said one of the Brotherfuzz.

"Sure—I mean, yes, sir," Luke said.

"Were you taught medicine at University One?" the Brother asked.

"No, sir," Luke said.

A Brotherfuzz came in with a sheet of copy paper, handed it to the Brother, who looked at it with knitted brows for a moment. Finished, he looked at Luke. "Where did you learn medicine?"

"Sir," Luke said, frowning in sincere concentration, "I'm not sure I know—"

"The search team," said a Brotherfuzz, answering a signal on a communicator. The Brother took the headset. He listened. "Very Well," he

said, taking off the headset.

They looked at Luke. The Brother frowned. Luke swallowed nervously. "They found nothing but Newasper and a partially consumed bottle of Soul Lifter in his apartment," he said, as if to himself.

"Listen, sir," Luke said, "about that Soul Lifter—"

"You are in serious trouble, young man," the Brother said.

"I know, sir," Luke said, "but you see, it wasn't mine. I mean, this guy left it there, you know? I mean, I was going to report it—"

"Silence!" the Brother said coldly. He leaned toward Luke, his face working with what seemed to be suppressed anger. "Now I want you to talk and talk fast. I want you to tell me where you learned medicine. I want you to tell me where you have hidden your tools, your drugs. I don't want to hear any more rot about Soul Lifter, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I mean, well—" Luke was truly baffled. "I'll tell you anything. I'm a good citizen, sir. I mean, I've never been busted. And I try to do all I can—"

"Last night," the Brother said, breaking in, "you healed a Fare called James Trimble. He had been wounded in a street fight. You used medical knowledge and equipment to heal his wounds. I want to know what you used and where you learned the skill."

Luke sighed with vast relief. "Oh, that," he said. "Praise, God, I'm glad you brought that up. Brother, I healed! I mean I really healed."

"Yes," the Brother said.

"I got this sign from God, you know." I mean I prayed and this sign came and—"

"All right," the Brother said. "I will not question your sincerity. How did you heal the Fare?"

"He was cut, Brother, you know?" Luke said, excited now, trying to talk faster than his lips and tongue would move. "He was cut bad. I looked at him and I knew he was dying. And I knew that I couldn't help him. I've got

this gift, you know, sir? I mean, sometimes I really can heal. I mean, I've healed things before. But I knew I couldn't heal this Fare, because he was dying and his entrails were hanging out and then God sent this sign and I felt this tremendous surge of—something. I felt it. I got this sign from God. I mean, the whole heavens lit up—and they told me later it was the station blowing up, but it was a sign, nevertheless, and it gave me this power and I said, HEAL! and the cut closed and there was nothing left but some blood and—"

"Put him on the rack," the Brother said.

Two Brotherfuzz leaped toward Luke. He gasped in surprise as he was seized, lifted. He was hustled into an adjoining room. He recognized the shakeshock rack and his heart leaped and his throat went dry. "Brother," he cried out, his voice choked. "Brother, please." But they were throwing him onto the rack and he was too shocked and too frightened to fight. He felt the straps go around his arms and his legs and then the big strap across his forehead.

"I'm giving you one last chance," the Brother said. He stood beside Luke, the control panel for the shakeshock rack in one hand. "Tell me where you learned the medicine. Tell me where you've hidden your equipment."

"I'm telling you, sir," Luke cried. "It was faith and the power from God!"

A teethshaking jolt hit him. His every muscle spasmed, tightened, screamed. A muffled grunt was shocked from his throat and his heart stopped momentarily, leaving a great, tearing pain in his chest and he couldn't even scream and it went on for an eternity and then it stopped and his spasmed body plumped back down onto the rack and he screamed, once.

"Where and how?" the Brother said.

"Oh, God," Luke sobbed. "Oh, my God."

"Talk," the Brother said.

"Brother," one of the high-ranking Brotherfuzz said with humble deference, "I would point out to you that you have the machine turned to

two-thirds power."

"I know," the Brother said. "I have little patience with such as this." He looked down at Luke. Tears were streaming down Luke's cheeks. "Now, Parker, now. Where is the medical gear?"

"Oh, God, Brother, as God and the Holy Book are my witnesses—"

Jolt. *Ripppppppp*. Terror. Heart stopped and body thrown into convulsions of unbelievable pain which went on again for the eternity and left him in a half-fainting condition and sobs coming with metronomic regularity and tears and fear and hopelessness. "Oh, God, help me," his voice said and it was from somewhere outside of him.

"The gear was not in your room," the Brother said. "We know you practiced medicine. We know, do you understand? We have witnesses. We have a half dozen Tired and Fares who saw you practice medicine. They saw the cut in the Fare's stomach and they saw you close it. Now, tell me. What did you use to suture the cut? What medicines did you administer?"

"God gave me a sign," Luke sobbed. "And I felt the power—"

— *Wereeeeeeeeeeeee*— Blue flames in his eyes and body supported by the back of his head and his heels as the incredible pain hit and lifted and tightened and bucked and shook and his voice keening—
eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee—

"Once more," the Brother said. Luke was limp. The room swam before his tearful eyes. He heard a great roar in his brain. His eyes ached, were hot. "Where is the medical equipment which you used?"

"Brother," Luke whispered, "Man of God, believe me I healed—with—faith!"

And, just as the shakeshock force hit him, Luke heard a voice from afar. "—can't stand much more. Brother. "

And blackness, merciful blackness.

He awoke in blackness. Things moving around him. He opened his eyes. Blue stars swam, exploded in blackness. He moaned. His throat was sore. He tried to move his arms. He cried out in pain. Every muscle in his body

was a small sea of pain. He tried to scream and nothing came but a groan. Blackness. And pain. And a voice. At first he could hear and not understand, then. "Easy, easy, boy."

Darkness.

"Easy. Just lie easy. Don't try to move."

A pinpoint of pain in his arm. And, spreading from that pinpoint, a radiating wave of blissful numbness. He could breathe again. But he couldn't see. He was blind.

"Help me," he managed to say. The numbness spread, made him feel sleepy, killed the pain in every muscle fiber. "I can't see," he said.

"Just lie easy."

Eternity Blackness. Then a glow of light, dim, far.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Luke said.

"There's nothing but muscle damage, fortunately. You'll be all right."

"I can't see," Luke said.

"That will pass."

Glow. Brightening. Movement. He tried to lift his head. He couldn't move. Numbness was everywhere. But the light was growing brighter and then, far off, he saw the face. An old face. White hair. A man's face close to his. Fingers at one eye, lifting the lid. "Can you see me?"

"Yes," Luke said.

"Good. Now I'm going to let you sleep."

When he awoke the soreness was there. Not much pain as long as he didn't try to move, but flaming soreness when he lifted his hand and let it fall back weakly. The face He could see it more clearly. "Just take it easy, boy. You won't be able to move for a long time. You see, they hit you so hard it tore down all the muscle fiber. It's as if you had exercised every

muscle in your body for ten hours at maximum potential." Bite of needle at his arm. "Just something to help you." Numbness.

Later. "Do you feel like talking?" The man's face was close. He had blue eyes, a beard, wrinkles, gray hair.

"Yes," Luke said. "It was faith. God gave me a sign."

"Easy. They're not here."

He could see clearly. The man was dressed in white. The room was white. A table nearby was laden with strange, gleaming instruments bottles, containers.

"I had the power," Luke said.

"I know, I know. Now listen to me. They'll be back for you soon."

"Oh God—"

"Just listen. I'm a friend. What did you use to heal that Fare?"

"Oh, God," Luke said. "It was the power."

"I'm your friend. Tell me. Did you have tools?"

"No," Luke said. "God gave me a sign."

"Medicines?"

"No."

"This is important," the man in white said. "Very important. I'm not the one who put you on the rack, boy. I'm your friend. Tell me, exactly, how you did it. Tell me how you felt. Tell me everything you can remember."

Luke told him. He told him about the healing, how, at times, he had the feeling he could see inside people. He told him about knowing that there was something wrong inside the woman's side when he put his hand on it, how he straightened things in there, how the pain left her, how he felt. He told how the Fare's stomach was cut, how he stuffed the things, the coils, the pulpy, hot wet things back in with his hands, how he saw the light in

the heavens. How he felt the power.

"Where did you feel it?" the man in white asked.

"Here," Luke said, holding his stomach. "It shot into me there and—"

"Burn?"

"Kinda," Luke said. "Funny. But I knew it was the power And I could *feel* the way the things were supposed to be inside the Fare and I put them together with my mind—"

"With your mind?"

"—the power," Luke said.

"Do you think you could do it again'?"

"I don't know," Luke said.

"All right," the man in white said. "They're going to be coming back for you soon."

"Oh, God, no." Luke said. "I couldn't stand it."

"No, you couldn't," the old man said, "not with that maniac jolting it to you at three-quarters power." He lifted Luke's hand, held it for a long moment, his fingers looped loosely around Luke's wrist. "Hummm."

"Why are they doing this to me?" Luke asked. He felt a strange warmth for the white-haired man in the white coat.

"Because you're rocking the boat, boy."

"Huh?" He started to add that he didn't understand, but the white-haired man put his finger to his lips.

"You just lie here," the white-haired man said. "Don't open your eyes and don't make a sound no matter what you hear, do you understand?"

Actually, it was what Luke wanted to do, lie perfectly still, only his chest moving with his breathing, his heart pounding, blood flowing through his veins. There was a soreness in his chest which pulsed with the beat of

heart, as if his very heart muscle were tired. He heard voices. He recognized the voice of the Brother who had put him on the rack. His pulse pounded, but he made no movement.

"Have you not revived him?"

"I'm a doctor, not a miracle worker."

"You will address me with the respect which is my due."

"Sir." The word oozed with contempt.

"You bastards think the universe turns around you. Remember, my friend, no one is indispensable."

"Indeed, Brother. I agree. And, so, I think it would be only democratic for you and the rest to realize that and take your chances with the general populace."

"I can put you on the rack, doctor."

"Sure you can. And sometimes I think that would be the best thing. It would be quick with me. I'm not young and strong like this fellow."

"The arrogance of these quacks—"

"Who keep you and others like you alive—"

"I order you to be silent."

"Yes, *sir*."

"This criminal. Why is he not revived?"

"Because you've almost killed him."

"Nonsense. I want him aware. I want to question him."

"Then talk with your God. I have done all I can."

Luke held his breath. He'd never heard anyone talk to a Brother in such a manner. And the remark about God. It sounded, in tone, like rank sacrilege. He expected the wrath of the Brothers and of God to fall upon

the old man. But there was a moment of silence. He heard movement, felt the nearness of someone, kept his eyes closed.

"When will I be able to question this Lay?"

"Do you mean put him back on the rack?"

"If necessary."

"It may not be necessary. You may have killed him already."

Luke felt a touch of fear. But the man had told him he would be all right.

"I want this man to talk!" The Brother's voice was hard.

"I will do my best, but I'm afraid that his heart was damaged. I've told you that these people, who are beset by every pestilence known to medicine, who have never had the first minute's care, cannot survive under your methods of questioning. If you insist on sending a killing shock through them, I can only warn you again that they will not talk. You don't talk when you're dead."

Luke felt like crying out. They were talking about him. The man in white was talking about him! He was the one who was dying! But, with the great, exhausted numbness in him, he lay still, breathing evenly.

"If you let this one die, I'll—"

"You'll do what?" The old man laughed. "A long time ago a man said, there is no satisfaction in hanging a man who does not protest. All you can do, Brother, is kill me. And sometimes I think that wouldn't be too bad."

The Brother made an angry sound. "Let me know the minute he revives." Then there was a movement. Silence.

Then, "All right, son. He's gone."

Luke opened his eyes. "What you said—"

"About you dying?" He chuckled. "Don't worry. You're strong as a horse. I don't understand why, but you're in better shape now than most who have not been shocked." He put his hand on Luke's arm. "We're going

to get you out of here ."

Then, with a smile, "But you're going to have to die to do it. "

"Huh?" Panic. His heart thudding. Soreness. Pain. "At least they'll think you're dead. You won't be, I assure you." He was doing something with a long, gleaming needle. Luke watched fearfully. He flinched away. "You won't feel anything. You'll go to sleep. When you awaken you'll be in a safe place. You'll be able to hear but you won't be able to move." The needle bit. "Relax. You're safe. Safe."

Safe. Safe. Safe. The word rebounded in his skull. A wave of dizziness came over him. Then a numbness spread. He felt himself going limp, felt his breathing slow, halt. Yet there was no panic. His heart thudded, bumped, slowed and then, seemingly, it stopped. Waves of peace billowed up, covered, engulfed him. And he was not breathing and his heart was stopped and the soreness no longer bothered him and he could hear the old man moving about, making a thin, whistling sound through his teeth, heard the clicks, the voice. "Tell your boss he won't be able to question this one. He's dead." And long periods of silence and someone talking as he floated on a sea of softness and dim light and they were talking about him, about his body. "—keeping you alive—need subjects—train young doctors—body—" and the time suspended and then a floating and other sounds, some known, some not known and traffic around him, ground-car movement and peace, peace.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Where am I?"

"You're safe. Safe."

Safe, safe, and safe safe safesafesafe...

Coolness. The bite of a needle in his arm. A low sound of music. Clean air. Coolness at his lips. Swallowing. "Am I in heaven?"

A low laugh. "Not quite."

Time passing endlessly. Coolness Comfort. Clean, sweet air. Chewing. Sweet taste. His eyes still closed. Soreness. Moving his arms. People lifting, moving, pushing, rubbing.

He awoke. Light, a cool, early morning light. He could see. A form moved when he tried to raise his head. He was in a huge bed.

"Ah, we're awake, are we?" A feminine voice. He turned his head. A female face near. He shrank. "How do we feel?"

He was naked under a sheet. He felt ashamed. A woman close and him naked under the sheet. Coolness at his lips. "Drink this." Swallowing.

And when next he awoke, full awareness. The room was large, clean, white. A window, or what seemed to be a window, was closed. There was a distant hum of power. He was alone. Experimentally, he raised his head. There was no soreness. He moved each limb in turn, sat up, put his feet off the edge of the bed. He felt good. He looked around for his clothing. The door opened. He scrambled back under the sheet as the woman came in crisply.

"Well, look at us. All bright and chipper."

Luke swallowed, his face flushing. "Hey, how about my clothes?"

"Ah, we feel that good, do we?" The woman, smiling, walked on padded feet to what he'd thought was a window but what was actually a small door which opened outward into the room. The woman removed a folded, white garment, tossed it onto the bed. "Here. Try that for size." Luke crouched under the sheet. "Well, put it on!"

Luke squirmed uncomfortably.

"Oh, all right," the woman laughed. She paced out of the room. Luke stood. His legs almost gave way. He had little strength. He lifted the one-piece coverall. It seemed to weigh a ton. He managed to step into it and sat down, exhausted. The door flew open. The bouncy woman was back. "Ah, not so chipper after all, huh?"

"I'm all right," Luke said.

"Feel like walking?"

"I don't know," Luke admitted.

"Just sit tight." She was gone again. She came back with a wheelchair. Luke sat. She moved him briskly out of the room, down a hall. There were no windows anywhere. The air, however, was clean and fresh. The lighting was recessed into the ceilings. People passed, nodding, brisk, moving about their business as if it were of some importance. Nearing a door, the woman turned, backed into it, pulled Luke and the chair through after her, wheeled him around with a swiftness which made his head go dizzy for a moment. The white-haired man sat behind a huge desk. There was a nameplate on the front on the cluttered desk top. Dr. Zachary Wundt. He looked up, smiled. In the clear light of the office Luke could see dark spots on the skin of this man's face.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine," Luke said.

"Sore.? Weak?"

"Yes," Luke said. Behind him the woman shifted from foot to foot.

"That will pass," Wundt said. "I imagine you have some questions."

"Well, gee..." Luke said, not knowing where to start.

"OK," Wundt said. "You're two hundred feet below the surface of the Earth. Never mind what particular section of the Earth. You're with friends. You were brought here from Old Town under the influence of a drug with an unpronounceable name which made your metabolism slow down to a crawl. To the naked eye of one not experienced in medicine, you were dead. You're here because you did something the other night in Old Town which interested the Brothers—and us."

"The healing—" Luke had not understood it all, but he knew the man in the white coat was talking about the healing, about his power.

"The healing. We want to know how you did it."

"Oh, God," Luke said. "I told them. I've told you."

Wundt smiled. "Sure, son. You've told us. We believe you. It's not

unknown, you know. Others have healed with a certain—power. Not as spectacularly as you did, I'll admit. But the phenomenon is not unknown to us. A fellow named Jesus."—Luke caught a quick breath, shocked by the casual reference to the Lord—"did it. Some of his people did it. Preachers from time to time have healed, in minor ways. We just want to talk with you about the—power. Maybe have you try to use it again. OK?"

"I guess so," Luke said. "Can I ask you something'?"

"Shoot," Wundt said.

"Are you a—a—doctor'?"

"I am."

"You can heal?"

"Some things," Wundt said. "We can heal some things. We can't make a belly wound close up instantaneously, however."

"And you took me away from that place," Luke said. "Why?"

"Hummm," Wundt mused. "There's no simple answer to that, my boy. It opens up the entire subject and I don't think you're ready for it. Let me just say that not everyone feels about the world as the Brothers feel."

Luke was pushed away, back to his room. The woman was cheerful, talkative. However, when Luke questioned her about the place, about the man named Zachary Wundt, she merely laughed and told him he'd have his questions answered sooner or later. "The thing for you to do is get some rest," she said, holding a glass of water and a small, round pill somewhat like Newasper. Luke swallowed. He slept. He awoke and was wheeled to a room with fantastic instruments all around a hard table. He felt blissfully peaceful. He didn't mind at all their probings, pokings, the indignities which ordinarily would have made him livid with shame and outrage. They probed his anus. They told him to drink thick, milky liquid. Machines moved and hummed and clicked. He was suspended halfway between sleep and awareness. Their voices were quiet, and seemed to come from a great distance. Back in his room, he slept. The next day there was more. Small spots were shaved on his head, cold little plates attached. Wires ran in a bewildering array to winking, moving machines. And through it all the woman he'd first seen was there, pushing little capsules

into his mouth from time to time, serving food, talking cheerfully about nothing.

Then he was, once again, in the office of Zachary Wundt. He'd had no capsules that morning. He felt alert. His legs no longer threatened to collapse when he stood. He walked to Wundt's office, sat upright in a comfortable chair.

"Well, my boy, has it been too bad?"

"No, sir."

"You've had what is known as the works," Wundt said.

"The works?"

"We know more about you than you do. Inside and out. We've got you down right here." He held up a sheaf of papers. Luke looked puzzled. "You're in good shape, considering. A few cavities in your teeth, an irritated stomach lining, crud in your lungs, enlarged adrenal glands, heart a bit oversize as a result of the overactive adrenals. The usual things you find in a city dweller. Your brain is of normal size. You've got the usual crud in your bloodstream, potential disease and all. We're clearing that up. Can't do anything about the adrenals except advise long walks in the country—" He chuckled. "The country. Hah!"

"I don't get it," Luke said.

"No. You wouldn't." He frowned. "We've got more tests for you, I'm afraid. We've cut off the sedative—"

It was all strange to Luke. All the words. He felt as if he'd been lifted into a foreign country. Nothing was familiar. He felt dizzy, uneasy.

"—but you're recovering nicely from the shakeshock and after we run a few more tests on you we'll be able to get down to work."

Luke nodded. Somehow he felt he could trust the white haired man. And it didn't really matter. Now that he could think clearly again, he was confused. He'd found a great and valuable gift from God, his healing power. That gift should have gained him instant acceptance as a full Brother. Instead, it got him shakeshock, and not in therapeutic doses.

Then this.

"You won't be seeing me for a few days. I've got to get back to the city. It seems that Brother Murrel has a cold." The name registered with Luke. But before he could question Wundt, the white-haired man went on. "You'll be looked after in good style by Miss Caster. If you need anything, just ask her."

He read letters and symbols from a chart on the wall. Listened to tones, telling them when he could hear and when he couldn't. He put little pegs into holes in a brightly painted board. For three more days he was shuttled from room to room, from efficient young man to efficient young man. Then, in a pleasantly lit, white room, he sat in a plastic chair in front of a table. Wundt and some of the men he'd seen in the previous hectic days sat at the table. They talked about him and to him. He learned that the medical treatment, which was continuous, was clearing up the irritation in his stomach, was dissolving the foreign material in his lungs. He learned that he was of average intelligence. He started to question that, for he could read, and that was more than anyone he knew in Old Town could do. Wundt, as if sensing his objection, explained. The measure was of potential, not of learned matter. In short, he was merely a man, not a superman with hidden mental powers. Luke understood. They were trying to define his power.

"It comes from God," he said.

"Yes," Wundt said. "We know."

They wanted him to heal.

"Here?" he asked. One of the men had a small cut on his hand. He extended it toward Luke, the hand, soft and clean, lying palm down on the table. "I can't," he said.

"Try."

He tried. He put his hand on the man's hand and said. "Heal!" He even prayed. But he didn't feel it. There was too much strangeness. The room was too quiet. There were no traffic noises, no people, no Techs or Fares or Tired looking on with burning eyes, no muted "amens" from the audience, no *feeling*.

"I—I have to preach," Luke said.

"Would you?" Wundt was leaning forward. "We'd very much like to hear."

He tried. But their calm faces stared at him. No *feeling*. He told the story of the birth of Christ. He prayed. He told them that to be healed, one must have faith. He used his mind, but there was no feeling. "Heal." Nothing happened.

"That's all right, Luke. Don't worry."

"Conditions not right—"

"Under field conditions, perhaps—"

"—set up simulated conditions—"

In a large space without windows people gathered. They were dressed as city people. Yet there was something wrong. The Tireds looked too robust, too healthy. None of them coughed blood from lung sickness. The Fares were too contented. The Techs too quiet. Luke, dressed in his own clothing, preached.

He prayed. He put his hands on people with minor complaints. "Heal! Heal!" His hand shaking. Their heads held in his palm, shaking with his force. Nothing.

"It's no use," he told them. "I don't feel it." He didn't say that he felt, also, their lack of faith. They had been kind to him.

"He can't go back to Old Town, that's for sure."

"They think he's dead. His records will have been pulled and destroyed."

"We can't risk it."

"I agree," Wundt said. "If one of his acquaintances recognized him and reported another miracle—a resurrection—"

They were in the conference room. All the crisp young men and Wundt. And Luke. Being talked about, not to.

"I think it's a waste of time."

"There were three dozen witnesses," Wundt said. "They saw. Now if it had been healing a cancer or the lung sickness or menstrual disorders—"

"They could have been mistaken. Ignorant people—"

"It's hard to miss a belly wound," Wundt said. "And at least three Fares saw the intestines hanging out."

"It's too risky."

"No one would know him in Middle City," Wundt said.

"If there's the faintest chance—" One of the crisp young men.

"Luke," Wundt said, speaking directly at him for a change, "do you think you could feel, the, uh, power if you went into the city and preached?"

"I—I don't know," Luke admitted. It seemed so long ago, the healing. And trying to create the feeling of power artificially had left him numb, left him feeling slightly guilty, as if he'd been asking God to perform on cue.

"Would you be willing to try?"

"I guess so."

"Then there's only the question of who will go with him," Wundt said.

"I'd like to go," said the crisp young man who had indicated his willingness to experiment if there were the slightest chance of discovering Luke's power.

"How about it, Luke? Is Carter all right with you?"

"You mean you want him to go and watch me preach?" Luke asked.

"Yes."

"I don't know," Luke said, thinking about how he'd feel with the young man looking over his shoulder. No faith. Only what they called scientific

interest. "I really don't think—"

"What?" Wundt asked. "We want you to be perfectly frank."

"Well, it's just that, well, I don't feel faith," Luke said. "I mean, I'm sorry but—"

"I understand," Wundt said. "Is there anyone here who would not, uh, inhibit you?"

Luke thought. There was one person and one person only in the strange place of the doctors who didn't make him feel as if he were some kind of *thing* to be examined and tested. And she was a female. And that made it impossible. Go into the city with a female? Impossible.

"Luke," Wundt said, "do you realize how important this is?"

Frankly, he didn't. Frankly, he didn't know why they were so interested in his power. They had their medicine. He'd learned a few things in his days in the underground place. For example. Miss Caster had told him that Dr. Wundt was over seventy years old. That was incredible. If a Lay lived to be forty, he was an old, old man. Only Brothers and high officials lived past thirty-five or forty. And it was the magic of medicine that did it. So, if they had that magic, why should they want his poor power? For, although he'd healed the Fare of his terrible cut, that Fare would still die before he was forty. He would die of the lung sickness or cancer or his heart would just stop one day. He tried to express it to them. Wundt nodded understanding.

"But that's it, Luke, don't you see? That's exactly it. What we do is not magic. It's just sound science, based on a long history of medicine. There is hardly anything, except old age, that we doctors can't cure."

"Lung sickness?" Luke asked.

"Yes. And cancer. And heart problems."

"Then why—"

"Why don't we cure all the Lays?" Wundt smiled sadly. "Because there are just too damned many of them. Because the great influx and the population explosion drained this country down to nothing. Because

people put more value on a new ground car than on medicine. Because the Brothers—" He paused. "Luke, did you read any history when you were at the University?"

"Only a little," Luke said.

"Do you know that the life expectancy of everyone in this country used to be almost seventy years?"

"No," Luke said, shaking his head with disbelief.

"Do you know that people used to choose their government by ballot?"

"We still do," Luke said.

"Sure. You vote for men handpicked by the Christian Party. Have you ever bothered to vote, Luke?"

Luke shook his head.

"Why?"

"I don't know," Luke said. "Because it just doesn't seem to matter. I mean, my vote among all the millions—"

"Have you ever been to a museum, Luke?"

"Sure. I went to the Met once."

"And did you see the paintings?"

"Yes."

"The huge ones by Rubens and Titian and others"

"Yes," Luke said, "I saw lots of them."

"Did you see a single nude?"

Luke blushed. "Of course not."

"That's because the Brothers had clothing painted on them," Luke Wundt smiled at him reassuringly. "How is a baby made, Luke?"

Luke shifted in his seat, embarrassed, bewildered by the doctor's dirty talk.

"What books have you read?" Wundt asked.

Relieved by the change of subject, Luke said, "Oh, the Bible. A few books like the life of Jesus and—"

"Ever read a novel?"

"A what?"

"A novel. A *story*. Something that just tells about life, about love and living and adventure and the relationship of one human being to another."

"No!" Luke said. He didn't like being accused of being a pervert.

Wundt sighed. "All right," he said. "I'll drop *that* course. What does Freedom mean to you, Luke?"

"Gee, I dunno—"

"If you were going to change things, what would you like to be able to do?"

"Well, I wish there wasn't so much red tape involved in getting a permit to preach on the streets," Luke said.

"Before the revolution you didn't have to have a permit to preach on the streets," Wundt said. "Once men in this country could meet where and when they pleased to talk about anything, God, politics, anything. They could even talk about not believing in God."

"Not believe in God?" Luke was shocked.

"But most importantly," Wundt said, "there was the freedom to live one's life as one wanted to live it. A man could rise from poverty—I mean, well, like a Fare could rise to be the President of the United States. And there was freedom to travel. A man could go anywhere he wanted to go. And freedom to be treated by a doctor for sickness. Freedom to practice medicine for the masses."

"Gee," Luke said. He was sweating uncomfortably He didn't like the

way the talk was going. First talking dirty, about babies and all. Then about practicing medicine. He remembered what he'd been given, shakeshock three-quarters full, for healing, and he hadn't even practiced medicine. God didn't want anyone practicing medicine. God didn't like such talk. The Brothers said—

"I know this may come as a shock to you, Luke," Wundt went on, as the young crisp men looked on with interest, "but there are people in this country who are working toward a second revolution."

"Heaven help us!" For he'd been fed stories about revolution since he was old enough to watch a screen. He'd been told, time and time again, that the Brothers made it the best of all possible worlds, that the Brothers and the Christian Party kept away the horrors of atomic war, of sinful excess, of evil.

"There are people who want to throw the Brothers out of power," Wundt said carefully. Luke was too shocked to speak. "Because all over the Western Hemisphere people are dying when they should be in the prime of their lives. Our natural resources, what's left of them, are being squandered in an endless flow of billions of ground cars, of senseless waste. There are people who want to change the government because once man was moving into space, Luke. Do you remember that?"

"I've seen the old films," Luke said.

"We went to the moon. We went to Mars and Venus. We were ready to move out past Mars, and research showed promise of developing the means to go farther, showed promise of opening up the universe to man. Space promised to be the overflow valve for the Earth. Somewhere out there in space there are worlds like this, Luke, worlds which could accept our surplus, fresh worlds unspoiled by nuclear waste, worlds of fresh, running water and grass and trees. But we squander what remains of our wealth in making ground cars, gadgets, dumping our wealth in huge loads to the already littered bottom of the sea."

There was silence for a moment. Then Wundt continued. "I've digressed. Let me ask this, Luke. Would you like to live, in health, to be seventy, eighty years old?"

"Anyone would," Luke said.

"Everyone can," Wundt said. "If we could divert our resources into the proper programs, birth control, medicine, science—"

"I don't see what this has to do with me," Luke said.

"Maybe nothing," Wundt said. "I'll be that frank with you. Maybe we're pushing you into a wild-goose chase. But you're not the first man who has shown unusual powers of the mind, Luke. All over the country in places like this, people like us are looking into the mind. We've got people who can make things move without touching them. People who can read thoughts. Oh, not completely, but they can read them well enough to make us think that something is happening to the race. There just may be a change taking place. People have been thrown into incredible, crowded, miserable conditions for decades now, Luke, and we knew way back in the twentieth century that overcrowding does things. You show signs of it yourself in your oversized heart and adrenals and in your perpetually irritated stomach. We can see physical changes and we suspect, and have some scientific basis to suspect, mental changes, too. To get to the point, as far as you're concerned, we have reason to think that you caused a severe stomach wound to close, that you, without actual scientific knowledge of the proper placement of the intestines, put them back into place. We can't come out into the open and practice medicine. The Brothers, the millions of them, while still only a minority of the population, are numerous enough so that the meager facilities of the profession are scarcely enough to keep them healthy. But what would happen if we could isolate this, uh, power of yours? What if you could control that power, heal anyone anywhere? What if we could teach this power to others?"

"I don't know," Luke said.

"There is going to be a revolution, Luke. Sooner or later there will be revolution. A billion people will not stay in subjection forever. We want that revolution to be an orderly one, as orderly as possible under the circumstances. We want to be able to offer a sensible program to the millions when the revolution comes. One of our greatest weapons would be the ability to heal, with medicine or with the mind. If we could show the masses that we could offer them the same health and long life which is now enjoyed by the Brothers, they would follow us."

"I don't know," Luke said. "I just don't know. I don't understand all this."

"All right, Luke," Wundt said. "We have time. We'll give you time to think."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Luke was walking the brightly lit corridors with the nurse, Irene Caster. She was dressed in white. He wore a comfortable set of coveralls, also white. He had been moved from the room they called a hospital room to a beautiful room with comfortable chairs, a bed which, when not in use, hid away in the wall. There was music to be had at the touch of a button. A viewscreen uncovered itself at the pressing of another button. And there was a shelf filled with books. The books worried Luke.

For two days after his last conference with Dr. Wundt and all the crisp young men, he'd spent the time alone in his room, listening to the music, watching the viewscreen, thumbing through the disturbing books. Some of them were called histories. They had pictures. He saw ancient pictures of the country before the revolution. He saw men working in open fields, families eating on rustic tables in scenes of outdoor splendor. One section of the book showed before and after scenes. A bright mountain stream would be shown cascading over rocks. Then the same stream was shown, in color, foamed, dirty, dead fish floating. A typical family dwelling of the late twentieth century was shown. It was a beautiful building with large windows and rock on the front. Inside there were, unbelievably three bedrooms, a large area called an entrance hall—this was the most incredible waste of living space Luke had ever seen—a vast living room with a fireplace for burning wood. There was an entirely separate room reserved only for eating! A tremendous kitchen with gleaming appliances. A thing they called a family room with comfortable chairs and a bookcase and rugs on all the floors.

But the books which disturbed Luke most had no pictures. They had names like *Of Mice and Men*, *War and Peace*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Catch 22*. They were things that Dr. Wundt had mentioned. Novels. Stories. Thumbng through the one called *Catch 22* he saw, and he cringed as he saw it, the word "whore." Blushing, feeling soiled and degraded, he read a few sentences. Men and women were naked in a room. He could read no more. He was sure that he was in league with anti-Christ devils. He was

frightened. After that he left the novels alone, avoiding them as if they were poison, as if they were, indeed, the devil's work.

Alone in his luxurious room he prayed for forgiveness for reading the vile material. He prayed for release. He prayed to be allowed to go back to his life. At least, in Old Town, he'd helped slightly to do God's work. There he'd preached and he had healed. What was he doing in this hidden, underground place. Was it God's will? Had he been sent to do something about the godless conditions here? Was he to preach to these strange doctor people? He felt helpless.

Food was delivered to him. Caster came and took his pulse and temperature and gave him capsules. And, as usual, she talked cheerfully about many things. She would ask him how he felt and what he was doing to entertain himself. She asked if there were anything in particular he'd like to hear in the way of music. She would ask if she could get him something special in the way of food and if he'd seen a particular program on the screen and if he'd read any of the books. He blushed at the mention of the books, wondering if *she* read the obscene novels. He didn't think she did. She seemed wholesome. But she knew books. She went to the shelf and handed him a book and suggested he might enjoy it. After she was gone he opened the book suspiciously. It was called *A Brief History of the United States*. It, at least, was not dirty. It told about people in an ancient time who rebelled against a country called England, probably one of those countries which had been destroyed in the great Godless Communist nuclear war. Those people had fought because of something called taxes. It was all strange to Luke, but, having nothing else to do, he struggled through the text. And was fascinated by the overwhelming fact that once the country had been a wilderness. Once the population had been concentrated along the eastern coast in the area which was now covered by East and South Cities. West of that were mountains and forest—*trees*, hundreds of miles of trees and open land where Middle City now sprawled. And animals. Huge herds of things called buffalo and people killing them for meat and for their hides and—

"Do you believe this stuff?" he asked Caster.

"Don't you?"

"I don't know." He frowned. "Why didn't they have ground cars? It says here it took months to go from the East to a place called California by a thing called a wagon train pulled by animals. Why didn't they go by

ground car?"

"They didn't have roads," Caster said, smiling.

"Oh," Luke said. That was reasonable. He lost himself in the book. He read how the country fought over slavery, and the concept was shocking to him. People owning other people. Why had God allowed it? And why did those ancient people think people with black skin were bad? According to the book, people thought people with black skins were worse than—than—well, worse than Fares, probably.

He read about more wars and he talked with Caster about it when she came to check his pulse. She was nice, after all. She was a cheerful woman who said she was forty-two years old. She had nice brown hair cut short and a good smile and she was just a little bit shorter than him, but built solidly in contrast to Luke's thinness.

They talked. Then she suggested that it was time for him to start exercising. She took him to a place they called a gym. The crisp young men were there riding things with pedals and lifting things and wearing baggy, thick suits. Luke tried the pedals things and saw no future in sitting on a sharp seat pushing pedals with his feet and going nowhere. Besides, he became tired easily. His exercise in the past had consisted of walking around the sidewalks of Old Town and climbing the stairs to his room.

They walked. Caster showed him places called laboratories with fantastic arrays of glass and smoking, steaming things. Men worked and smiled and waved and talked and Luke wondered who they all were.

"Doctors, scientists," Caster said.

"Buy why are they here? If the Brothers need Doctors so badly, how can they all stay here?"

"They're all dead," Caster said.

Luke looked at her blankly.

"You're dead," she said.

"Oh. You mean like that."

"Like that," she said.

"I don't understand," Luke said. "Why—"

"Some of them were brought here because they were being given shakeshock by the Brothers for some offense."

"Healing?" Luke asked, since he knew that healing, for some reason, was frowned on by the Brothers.

"Well, practicing medicine, maybe. Or for questioning things. Some of them choose to come here."

"They must be crazy." Luke said. "I don't know why they'd choose to live here. Never seeing the sun. Never being out in the fresh air—"

"Fresh air?" Caster laughed. "Don't talk to me about fresh air. I'm from West City. When I was brought here I was terminal with the lung sickness."

Since she had opened the subject, Luke felt free to ask, "Why are you here, Caster?"

She shrugged. "I smuggled medicine out of a Brother house I was working as a maid. I knew I had the lung sickness and I heard the Brother talking with his doctor and when I heard that there was something that could be done, I took medicine. I didn't know what medicine I was taking. I just took medicine. It happened to be a mild opiate. That's a sort of drug. I got high—"

"High?"

"Know how you felt when you were having all the tests? All woozy and kinda floating and not caring about anything?"

"Yes."

"I got higher than that. You've had Soul Lifter?"

Luke smiled in agreement.

"I was high, like you get high on Soul Lifter. I went in to work and they spotted it. They put me on the rack and I talked my head off. I told them

about stealing the medicine. They sentenced me to therapeutic shock until my memory was cleansed of the knowledge of medicine. You know what that means."

Luke shuddered. "You walk around blank." Yes, he'd seen those who had been cleansed of evil by shakeshock.

"A doctor 'killed' me. With the drug. I woke up here."

"But you know medicine now," Luke said.

"Hah! I'm a nurse. I know how to talk to a sick man and how to take his pulse and temperature. I'm still under training. I'll learn more. But I don't know medicine. Not like the doctors."

"You mean they teach you that stuff?"

"If you want to learn," she said. "Do you want to learn, Luke?"

"I don't know."

"This is a good place, Luke. They're good people. They want to help. They want to help everyone, not just the Brothers."

"But they don't believe in God," Luke said, remembering the cynical remarks he'd heard from Wundt and some of the others.

"They don't tell you not to believe in God, do they?"

"No."

"They believe in freedom," she said.

"I don't think I know exactly what freedom is," Luke said.

Then there was another book. She brought it in from outside. "Dr. Wundt thinks you're ready for this," she said.

It was called *The Revolution, Its Causes and Effects*. And it was written by Dr. Zachary Wundt.

"To understand the revolution," the book began, "one must understand the condition of the country in the late decades of the twentieth century."

And then, the man who said he believed in freedom, wrote that, perhaps, there was too much freedom in that ancient time. He wrote about the country being in a war and how some people thought it was wrong. He said that most of those people were "liberals" and were "victims" of the victory of Communist propaganda. He said the liberals were free to talk against the government because of a thing called the guarantee of freedom of speech and that they abused this freedom by giving aid and comfort to an enemy who wanted to control the world by violent means. He wrote about the freedom to take drugs and a gradual breakdown in law and order. He said that the culture of the entire country was influenced by a subculture who worshiped a drug called LSD, how the users of this drug created an entirely new music form and now, because it was fashionable to be "young," the entire country accepted this so-called music. He said that the drug-using minority also influenced the country in many other ways, in dress, for example. And there were pictures of dirty-looking young people in rags, with long hair and beads and strange decorations. He said that the drug users also contributed to a breakdown in morality. And (Luke blushed and started to put the book away, but didn't) how sex became one of the new freedoms, how girls and boys lived together and did sex indiscriminately. He wrote about how nudity became acceptable, how Broadway shows were performed with the cast naked, how the screen was filled with nude bodies, how books were allowed to be sold openly describing sexual acts, natural and perverted, in minute detail. Sexual freedom, Wundt said, contributed to a slow breakdown in the family unit, long a standard of Western civilization, one of the adhesive factors. Wundt wrote:

Freedom, without the education necessary to use freedom intelligently, can be destructive. To inject a personal note, the freedom to enjoy sex with a partner of one's choice is a necessary part of being civilized, of being human. Yet this freedom was handed to a nation with Puritan upbringing, a nation that had been weaned on the teaching that all sex is dirty, or even criminal. The nation eagerly seized this freedom, without the understanding of it, and, while enjoying it, lacerated itself with guilt. In the orgy of freedom in the late twentieth century, all barriers were lowered. The nation used the freedoms to be traitorous in the name of free speech, to be perverted in the name of sexual freedom, to be poisoned by drugs in the name of personal freedom. The old values faded and were replaced by new non-values of doubtful worth. Styles of attire in the 1980's were indicative of the new thought. Women were bare to the waist. Men

wore bottomless suits. The original function of attire was forgotten. Originally, the human race began to wear clothing, at least in the opinion of this writer, as protection and for comfort. A mature woman with large mammary glands needs some sort of support for comfort and for protection. The male reproductive glands are sensitive and easily susceptible to injury, therefore, clothing was devised as protection. Yet, in the last two decades of the century, commonsense was discarded in the rush to freedom. And yet, during this very orgy of freedom, there was a hard core of unreconstructed fanatics, throwbacks to the old Puritanical values, who resisted. While the majority of the country rushed to new extremes, this hard core of fanatics banded together under the skirts of the organized church and began to fight. A President of the First Republic, Richard M. Nixon, dubbed this segment of society the Silent Majority. Perhaps, when he first coined this phrase, in 1969, he was right. Those who objected to the excesses of the more lunatic segments of society may have been more numerous, but, in the fantastic time of prosperity, they ignored the warning signals and allowed the rush to dubious freedoms to continue. Then, when resistance began to become organized under the United Church, it was too late to rectify the defects by peaceful means.

The Church, itself, had undergone drastic changes, the largest single unit, the Roman Catholic Church, had disintegrated under the forces and disputes centered around birth control and celibacy. The Protestant churches had been weakened by the Tax Act of 1985, an extreme measure made necessary by the success of the rich churches in business and land speculation. The new-freedom advocates, having elected their own members to the national legislature, pointed out the power of the tax-free churches in the financial world. It was estimated that 85 percent of the real property in the nation was church owned. The Tax Act of 1985 was drastic, punitive, and final. Taxes ate into the Church holdings with an incredible swiftness and, since the common man had abandoned the Church, there was no way of stopping it. However, the loss of financial power galvanized the fanatics into union.

Mr. Nixon's Silent Majority, no longer in the majority but possessed of vast financial and industrial power, organized the Christian Party and began a slow, futile effort to recapture the country by political means. Having failed by peaceful means to effect change, the Christian Party tried, at the turn of the century, to overthrow the administration of the long-haired, drug-taking President, Peaches Tickles, a former guitar-playing pop singer, by force. The insurrection was put down in an

extremely bloody manner by administration shock troops who were allegedly high on the newest of so-called mind-expanding drugs, XES. The Christian Party was forced to go underground. Since members of the medical community were instrumental in Christian Party politics, and since many professional people died in the massacre of 2000, one of the most dramatic effects of the national schism began to make itself felt soon afterward. The medical system, already overburdened by the population explosion, weakened by the lack of young people willing to sacrifice the good times to be had under XES for the years of study required to become a medical practitioner, began to break down rapidly. Disease and death became endemic.

Then the Influx, following the great Communist War and the destruction of vast land areas of the Old World, made medical care for the masses an impossible dream from the past.

With the nation in chaos, the Christian Party found it possible to develop vast redoubts in hidden areas. Scientific progress, seemingly halted in the surface world, continued in the underground caverns. The alliance of fanatics and professional men functioned and developed, extending its tendrils into the chaotic conditions of the country. Revolution was assured. There was only the question of timing. And it appeared that external affairs, namely the development of a nuclear capacity in the Republic of South America, coupled with a new Nazism with expansionist leanings by the South Americans, would force the revolution prematurely. It was at this crucial stage that Colonel Ed Baxley made his great technological breakthrough, the invention of the fire gun. Threatened by the ultimate weapon, the decadent First Republic surrendered immediately. The Republic of South American was brought to heel by the threat of instant and total destruction. The revolution was completed.

Seemingly, then, all was right with the world. The sensible people were back in power. It was time to right the wrongs. The life expectancy of the average man had dropped, in a decade, by twenty years. Swift and decisive measures were needed. Professional members of the Christian Party urged a crash attack on disease and the serious problem of environmental pollution. The fanatics, in the majority, were more interested in consolidating their hold on the country and in perpetuating themselves in power. A new schism developed. And suddenly the professional men found themselves to be virtual prisoners of the majority. We stood by helplessly

as freedom, wounded by its own excesses, was erased. Censorship not only removed objectionable material from the arts, it stifled art entirely. The labor movement, guilty of vast excesses in the past, creator of inflation, disruptive of national wealth in excessive strikes, a virtual proletarian dictatorship within a dictatorship, was exterminated in a vast, bloody purge which saw the industrial capacity of the nation crippled, then revived to produce status objects, such as the ground car, with the installation of automated machines. Mighty Labor was reduced to a pitiable collection of workers who became known, in the new slang, as Techs. The government, in possession of all technology, industry, and wealth, doled out a minimum living to a vast segment of the society, creating the nonproductive Fares. Minor governmental workers, of which there were millions, became known as Lays and, when retired after twenty years of service, as Tireds. Meanwhile, in an effort to reduce the teeming population, the Christian Party withheld medical aid from the masses, giving them nothing more than a placebo called Newasper and, as punishment, therapy, a catch-all, a diabolical retreat from early, experimental treatment of mental illnesses known as shock treatments, a terror named shakeshock.

The effects of severe crowding in the environment have been studied by professional men since the middle of the last century and there is sufficient material on record without our going into the details here. However, it is well known that severe overcrowding at first stimulated sexual activity. The growing population of the past century and breakdown of the old morality seems to support this. Further, the leveling off of the population at approximately one billion seems also to make more believable the old theory that overcrowding also tends, after a suitable period, to inhibit breeding and keep the population level static. Thus, with the leveling off, there was created, with encouragement by the ruling Christians, a new Puritanism. Once again, sex became a dirty word.

The formation of a new underground was inevitable. Professional men who objected to government policies began to seek ways and means of changing the intolerable situation before a vast and bloody upheaval from the lower classes destroyed civilization as we had known it. The history of the success or failure of this new attempt to restore a sensible new freedom is yet to be written...

Luke read and reread and forgot to be shocked by the references to dirty things like sex and breeding. He asked Caster about things which

were difficult for him to understand.

"I'm no authority on history," she said. "I just know that things are not good outside. I know that my mother died when she was twenty-nine years old with the lung sickness. I'm forty-two years old and all my brothers and sisters are dead. Dr Wundt and the others want to change this. I'll walk on fire to help them."

"But they don't believe in God."

"And you do," she said.

"Of course," Luke said, shocked that she'd even question it.

"Then why don't you get about his work?" Caster asked.

"Huh?"

"You said you were given a gift, a gift of healing. Why don't you go out and use it?"

"Well," Luke said, "I mean—they—"

"They what? All they want you to do is go out and see if you still have the gift."

"They want someone to go with me," Luke said. "And they don't have faith. I mean, you've gotta have faith. It's like that. If you don't have faith..."

"They want to see what you do. They want to understand how you can do what you did with that Fare in Old Town. I think their having faith has nothing to do with it, Luke. I think you've lost faith."

"No!" He protested the idea with a loud voice.

"Then let's go out and heal," she said.

Luke's face turned red, for he had once had the thought of asking them to let Caster go with him and now she was saying, "Let's—"

"I'm Lay, too," she said. "I know what you're thinking."

"Huh?"

"Oh, I'm not one of those who can read thoughts, not really, but I just know what you're thinking. If we went together it would be me and you, a man and a woman, alone in the city:" She smiled. "Well, don't worry, boy. I've got the same hangups you have. I was born in a city, too. I got the treatment. I was going to be married when I came down with the lung sickness and I was just fifteen. I feel the same way you feel, Luke. I don't like it, but that's the way I am. No man has ever touched me and it doesn't look as if one of you ever will, not the way I feel. So your virtue would be safe with me."

Luke was unable to speak. He turned away. It wasn't the *act* he was afraid of. It was the continuous smutty talk of these people. Alone with one of them in a city? He'd die if she said something similar to what she'd been saying where people could hear.

"And I also know that you don't talk about things like that," Caster said. He looked at her quickly. Maybe she *could* read his thoughts.

"I pray every night," she said simply.

"Huh?"

"I shouldn't. My prayers have never been answered. I've never had a sign from heaven like you, but I pray. I pray because I think there has to be something. Something better than this."

He was silent. He thought about the big Fare who had come to his defense, who had fought the Techs to allow him to preach without heckling. He thought about the way the big man was breathing, all jerky and gaspy, how the blood and ooze covered his lower body. He thought about how he felt, seeing the sign from God. And Caster prayed. She believed. And things were bad outside. If he *could* help. If he *could* make it easy for the people. If he *could* help bring them ease from their illnesses and make life better...

"They don't have the right, do they, the Brothers, to live while we die?"

"No," she said. "They don't."

"Then I'll go," Luke said.

"I'll tell them," Caster said.

When she left, Luke fell to his knees, hands clasped. "Help me," he prayed. "Please help me."

There was no light in the sky, only a lightening in his heart as if a weight had been lifted.

CHAPTER NINE

Truly, she thought, those who were responsible would suffer. It was a living hell. The massive ship of the line was a prison. Time was, for the first time within her immediate memory, a thing to be endured. Back on the *Trangized* planets, entire solar circuits meant little. In the small, enclosed, *Trangless* ship, a standard rotation period was eternity. Being alone was a new and unsettling experience.

The navigation and handling of the ship was automatic, of course, directed by the huge computer back on A-1. Shipboard computers regulated the life of the ship. She was merely a passenger. Moreover, she was a prisoner. The shipboard computers were tyrannical. Machines directed her every movement, controlled her every moment. Machines indicated when it was time to take nourishment, time to sleep. Machines forced her into an indoctrination room where her mind was invaded, stimulated, shuffled around. Knowledge she had once been fed was reactivated from the memory storage banks of her brain, useless knowledge which had been force-fed her when she was a child, so long, long ago. It was there, but it was beyond her reach under normal conditions, for her pleasure-filled life on A-1 had not been concerned with such things. It was traumatic to be jerked out of a sweet mixture of *Trang* and the joys of endless coition into a world of machines and complicated areas of knowledge.

It is the function of the beings aboard a ship of the line to be capable of backing up any mechanical system.

And, thus, she was crammed with terribly dry data regarding arms

systems, navigation systems, the life system, power systems, emergency systems. It pleased her to find that the armament of the ship was sufficient to destroy a planetary grouping. She entertained bloody, joyful thoughts of finding the disturbing elements in Section G-1034876 and of blasting them into cosmic dust with one flyby. It pleased her to think of the sub-beings on Planet 3, Star R-875948 watching the nighttime skies to see planet after planet nova and spread death toward them, broiling them slowly before the actual effects of the guns reached them.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the entire miserable situation was the remoteness of the suspected planet. It was far out from galactic center, an outpost planet near the thinning edge of the galaxy, remote, small, insignificant. Getting there was a series of lightning-fast jumps which ate vast distances. Incredible distances were covered in each jump into sub-space, but there were interminable waiting periods between jumps while the shipboard computers located a suitable power source from among the near stars, focused onto it, hummed in motionless energy as the power banks were recharged for yet another jump. It was the recharging periods which were deadly. The indoctrination helped, after the shock of having areas of the mind stimulated wore off. The indoctrination, after the first few sessions, became somewhat of a release from the sheer boredom of shipboard loneliness. There was even a sort of pride in finding that one's memory banks were so completely stocked with a vast technology. And there was a sense of childish pride in being reminded of the history of the race. Once she had been taught all of it and it had been pushed aside into unused areas of the brain during the eons of *Trang*-life. Once, when she was a child, she'd been indoctrinated in the history of a people who started, ageless eternities ago, to people an empire which encompassed most of the galaxy. Having completed the necessary technical re-education, she passed the time with historical sessions and knew, with a sense of renewed wonder, the achievements of the race. Reliving it almost as if she participated, she saw the formation of the empire, the spreading out from A-1 to near star systems, then on and on, the race proliferating as if it had been given a mandate to people the entire island universe. She saw the early starships flash into sub-space, some never to resurface. She saw the trials of the early colonists in primitive surroundings. She met the greats of the race. All were preserved in the banks of the great knowledge banks, almost alive in her mind.

Outside, during the recharging periods of floating, seemingly motionless in space, she saw the great suns and the whorls of gaseous

nebula and the great dark clouds and the distance, the sheer distance, involved in her trip.

Far ahead of the ship, using sub-space as an instant medium of conduction, the small sensor near R-875948 acted as a beacon. Ancient records, exhumed by the central computer on A-1, proved the coordinates for each jump, and yet it was time-consuming. There was boredom, in spite of the interest in the historical archives. There was, after all, a physical limit to the time she could stay under the preceptors in the indoctrination room. For the remaining time, she was forced to endure long, *Trangless* periods of dissatisfaction. And alone! For the most desired female in the original system to be alone was the most unforgivable thing of all. There were times when her entire being cried out for male companionship, for the closeness, the joy of it. And for that, she determined, the sub-beings on that miserable, stinking planet would pay, and pay, and pay.

At last the shipboard computer joined onto the weak, distant rays of the star R-875948 and the power banks hummed to gather strength for the last jump. It was then that she was summoned—*summoned!* Her!—to the indoctrination room. She went sullenly. She had just completed a thorough self-survey making minute adjustment to a gland, revitalizing dying cells, changing her hair color, just to pass the time, to a more glowing red. She felt wonderful, of course. She'd never felt any other way. But she still longed for the peaceful languor of *Trang* and for the thrilling endlessness of love.

Communication was not in words. It was in concepts passed directly into her mind. However, the information conveyed by the computer, in contact through sub-space with the central memory bank on A-1, concerned the destination planet. She absorbed the information with a certain interest. She would, at least, know what manner of sub-beings she was going to destroy.

Not destroy.

No? She was of the race. She was in command, in spite of the fact that she was, seemingly, directed in every action by machines. Machines were creations of the race. Thus, she was the last word.

Sample, check, learn.

There was no time to do those things. She had to get back. Her partner, alone. A commitment to be made.

A thousand thousand sleeping, Trangized worlds, the race, threatened.

How threatened if she destroyed the offending planet completely? So they had even developed a primitive planet-killer, or at least the potential of one. So how much good would that do if she swept in from the depths of interstellar space and killed all their planets before they could suspect that they were not alone in the universe?

Special conditions. Others involved. If one developed such a weapon, could the others? A hundred scattered planets at vast, unreachable distances, placed there—selected—for their remoteness. Examine. Test. The fate of the race, protected and guarded by the vast, undying network of machines, now directed by her.

Acceptance. Fury. Why had the race allowed such a situation to develop? Bleeding-heartism. Short-sightedness. Consideration for those who did not deserve it. She had the urge to destroy and destroy but she bowed to the wisdom of those who had programmed the machines which kept the race in their ultimate stage of development. For they had foreseen the present possibility and had made plans to counter it before they, the master planners, retreated to their secluded structures and pressed the *Trang* button for endless pleasure. Yes, she would do as they wished. She would observe and test and then, when she had done all that, she would come back. Yes, even that. She would leave the lovely *Trang* time once again to ensure that she would never have to leave it again. She would leave it on a heavily armed ship of the line and with her, spreading to the far corners, the remote areas, would be a hundred other ships, all manned by the race, sacrificing a period of *Trang* to utterly destroy the last possible threat to eternal joy.

However, she did not communicate these thoughts to the computer network. That would come later, when the race gave orders to its machines. Then the machines would obey, of course.

She saw the stars wink out and felt the slight change indicating the departure of the ship from normal space. When she felt the next change, the offending system was spread ahead of her, a rather pretty system with nine planets and a small but efficient sun. She began to make

preparations.

In the midst of her preparations she was struck with an intriguing possibility. Out there on Planet 3 were beings, beings of the race. They were, true, inferior beings, but they were, originally, of the race. That meant males. A delicious tingle warmed her. Well, it was a possibility.

CHAPTER TEN

The first night was bad. They had used Caster's name. It was as good as any. Mr. and Mrs. Luke Caster, immigrants from South City by permission of the Brothers, Fares. The papers provided by one of Zachary Wundt's young men worked. They were assigned a room within smelling of the big, open sewer of a river which ran on the eastern edge of the city. It was a typical Fare room, with one bed, one chair, one small table, a sink, a sanitary facility separated from the living area by a moveable screen. It measured ten by ten. It had no window. It crawled with insects of various types.

Luke insisted that Caster take the bed. He slept in his clothing. He started in the chair and ended upon the floor with a cockroach slowly crawling across his lips shortly after he first began to doze. He slapped the disgusting insect away and then he could hear Caster breathing evenly. She was asleep.

It was bad. He'd never been in the same room with a female. Even though he was fully clothed and she was sleeping in her clothing, too, he knew it was wrong. He prayed for forgiveness. He prayed that the intent of the mission would make up for the sin of sleeping in the same room with a female. Finally, long after the factory horns blew midnight, he dozed.

He awoke with a headache. His limbs were stiff. His hipbone felt as if he'd been sleeping on rocks. Caster, awake before him, had a meal ready. Fish meal and coffee. After the decent food of the underground, it was terrible.

In the streets, they were assailed by the ever-present noise, harsh, ear-achingly persistent. Their lungs felt the burning, acrid fumes which

closed the city from the sky. Around them people moved in streams. The streets crawled with ground cars belching more smoke into the already overladen air. They walked, caught up in the hopelessness of the city, a feeling Luke had never experienced. Before the Brothers had taken him to the Hall of Justice, he'd known no life but the city, if one discounted his brief stay at the University. He had accepted it. There was the knowledge that he'd lived half or more of his life, true. There was the knowledge that the lung sickness or his heart would kill him, but, before he went underground and learned that there were alternatives, he had been only one of a billion people who faced the same fate and he had not asked why. He had accepted it as God's will.

Now he found himself asking why and suffering guilt for having asked it. For one does not question God.

"You forget," Caster said, after they'd walked for blocks in silence.

He knew she meant the city, the teeming, hopeless life, the ear-hurting noise, the lung-searing air, the jostling and fighting for a place to stand.

"Somewhere west there's a place where they work on nothing but space travel," Caster said. "They think that would be the answer, to ship millions of people to other planets, give those who are left a chance to breathe and move."

"Watch what you say," Luke said. "You're not underground."

"Sorry."

Two ground cars collided. Thin metal crumpled. Heavy engines broke loose, crushing the people in one car, one engine bouncing along the street into a crosswalk, mangling pedestrians. They halted. Luke accepted it as a matter of everyday course. Caster was appalled. Wrecking machines came.

Cars were lifted, crushed, moved toward the big barges which would carry them down the river to the dumping grounds in the gulf. Bodies were tossed into other vehicles. The wounded, if unable to walk, were taken to—Luke paused in his thoughts. Taken where? He'd never thought about that before. What became of seriously injured accident victims? Once he'd seen an aid station in Old Town. Those with nonfatal injuries were given Newasper. Broken arms were set roughly by aid attendants and wrapped in slings. But what happened to the more seriously injured

victims? There was a neighbor who had been hit by a ground car in the street in front of Luke's building in Old Town. He'd been taken away. Luke never saw him again. Were such people given the benefit of medicine?

Near them, as they watched the bodies and the wounded being taken away, stood a woman with a horribly scarred face. One eye was raw and protruding with deep, livid scars running away from it. Her mouth was twisted and scarred. Her cheeks were pocked and rutted. And, looking around, Luke saw others. He felt like crying. He could imagine the agony those people went through, healing from such injuries with only Newasper to help.

"I've just decided that I hate them," he said.

"Yes," Caster said.

"I mean the Brothers."

"Yes."

That night they found a small park. Caster stood in the shadows while Luke, armed with a permit from the local Brotherfuzz, preached. He was shy, at first. Then, standing on a rock, he began to see that Middle City was no different. It was like Old Town, without the tall, crumbling skyscrapers. The people were the same. They spoke the same. Regional accents had long since been replaced with a speech patterned after the countrywide viewscreen network, the great leveler. People in Middle City were the same, Fares, Techs, Lays. He preached. He talked quietly about the Lord and his promise of everlasting life. A Tech, high on Soul Lifter, razzed him, grew bored, moved on. Two old Fares nodded and said, "Amen." The Tireds moved in close, some with the bloodflecks of the lung sickness on their lips, others looking up at him with glazed eyes, drinking in the promises.

"Amen, brother."

"You tell it so sweetly, brother."

"Praise the Lord!"

And Luke crying inside thinking of them going through each day not even knowing that there was another way. And then crying openly and

they, his little audience, thinking he was in a religious ecstasy and saying "Amen" and "Praise the Lord" and Caster standing in the shadows looking on sadly. And Luke talking about faith and how it could move mountains. But man could and had moved mountains to build the sprawling, acid infections called cities and no one wanted to move mountains but faith could do more. It could heal man of his ever-present miseries and, come forward, brothers and sisters, come and give me your faith and be healed and then laying on his hands and not feeling it and looking up and praying through his tears for help and not getting it.

Back in the room, tired, lying on the floor with Caster breathing evenly from the bed. "Oh, God, look down on me and send me a sign." And, bitterly: "In your mercy, help us. Help us overcome them and help us be human again." And only the sounds of the city outside seeping through the thin walls. And the people next door high on Soul Lifter yelling and singing and banging things against the wall. Uneasy sleep. Caster and the morning meal. She was dressed in a Fare one-piece, her hair wrapped in a faded cloth. She looked as young as a girl. They ate in silence. It was raining outside. The meal finished. Caster washed the two plates at the sink and put them on the rack to dry. Luke was sitting silently in the chair.

"It makes me feel guilty," Caster said, wiping her hands on her one-piece not looking at Luke.

"Huh?"

"I mean, I see them and I know what they are and how they live and then I think that for twenty-five years I've been living, I mean really living, not just getting past one day after the other the way they do. I've been eating good food and I've had proper medical care and filtered air to breathe and they breathe this stinking air every day, not just one time in twenty-five years the way I'm doing."

"It's not your fault," Luke said. Inside, he cringed. Whose fault was it, then? God's? He would not allow it to form, that terrible thought.

"Oh, I know that," Caster said. "I've told myself that I wasn't even alive when it all started. I've told myself that it *was* the people, themselves, who threw it all away. God knows they were warned. I've read and seen how the thinking men warned us. They warned about the dirtying of the waters and the air and about overpopulation and about excesses in the name of freedom. No one listened, because it was all so good then, when it all

started. I guess when a person lived in a whole house all to himself and his immediate family in the good, green countryside he couldn't get too excited because people were being crowded into the ghettos of the cities and because chemical plants went into the good, green countryside and built and poured wastes into clear rivers. And knowing that people in West City couldn't breathe sometimes was terrible, but it didn't touch those who didn't live in West City and who didn't know that gradually the city was creeping outward like some kind of all-devouring monster to take up the good, green countryside and to spread its poisoned air over the hills and then the very desert and all. They were warned, God knows, but they didn't listen and it isn't my fault except that I am a member of the race and I can do some little something, maybe, to help make it better."

"Oh, sure," Luke said. "Everyone does what he can." But he spoke without conviction.

"But you can get into trouble caring about people," Caster went on. "It's all so complicated. I read where, back in the First Republic, they paid sort of Fare checks to people who couldn't find work or who wouldn't work. I find it hard to believe, but there were women who had children—uh—without being married." She swallowed. Luke looked away in silent embarrassment. "And the government paid them so much for *each* child. They were trying to help, you see, because the women, after all, were human and they couldn't help it, they said, because they, uh, had children and—well, anyhow, you see what I mean. They were encouraging the growth of population when that was one of the main problems, so while trying to help they were really bringing us to this." She spread her hands to the ten by ten cubicle. "And back in those days families might have as many as five or six or even more children and—"

Luke was cringing. She'd promised not to talk dirty.

"Oh, stop it," Caster said. "You've got to grow up sometime, Luke."

"I don't like that kind of talk," he said, almost angrily.

"Don't you ever have the feeling that you're missing something?" she asked.

"No."

"I'm not talking dirty I'm talking about life. I'm wondering how it came

to be this way. There was a time, Luke, when a woman married and had a home and had children and the old books talk about this as if it were something wonderful. I read one which said giving birth is one of the natural functions of a woman and I've always wondered if that isn't so."

"You're talking in circles," Luke said. "First you talk about overpopulation and then you talk about having—children—being the natural order of things. You're not making sense."

"Does any of it make sense? This world used to be a good place to live. That made sense. And why did God make us different? Why in all that's holy did he make men and women?"

"The Fares have children."

"Yes. And they die at birth and when they're babies and they get killed on the streets and they die of sickness and the lung thing and there's something terribly wrong with all of it. Something should be different."

"I don't know," Luke said.

"All I know is that I don't feel as if I've lived a full life, Luke. Oh, I'm no pervert. I'm not going to be bad. God knows, the very thought of it makes me sick to my stomach. But I *am* a female. Am I just supposed to live out my life and do what I can, nursing the underground people, waiting for that long-distant day when something can be done?"

"Don't fight it too hard," Luke said.

"You do understand a little of what I'm saying?"

"I think I do. I know that I'm not satisfied," Luke said. "I was, once. Just one time. The night I made that Fare whole again I felt, well, *complete*. I felt, I dunno, I guess I felt as if I'd finally done *something*."

The rain stopped at midafternoon. In the early evening, Luke preached again in the small park. He laid his hands on an aging Tired and prayed for the healing power. When it wouldn't come, he felt despair. He walked away. Caster took his arm. "You can do it," she said. "You can do it if you believe."

But he couldn't. He tried. He tried night after night. A Lay woman said

she was healed. She sang and praised God. She danced. But Luke hadn't felt it. Her faith alone had made her feel better, he thought. Not his.

Caster was encouraged. For the first time she took out her instruments, small, compact things hidden in a bedraggled shoulder bag, and measured Luke's bodily processes. She found no change.

Two weeks after they had entered Middle City as man and wife, Luke realized that he had come to like Irene Caster better than he'd ever liked another human being. Their long, soul-searching conversations in the tiny room had become a source of pleasure. He looked forward to them. For the first time in his life he was entering a new day with expectations of something pleasurable. Breakfasts, fish meal and coffee, were not just the tasteless meals of the past. They were made almost enjoyable by the presence of Caster. They talked and ignored the bitter taste of the fish meal and laughed and dreamed together about what would come to pass when the Brothers were overthrown and the world was made into a better place. They walked, exploring the city. They visited the museums and walked along the great, stinking river, their nostrils now numbed to the smells, their lungs taking in the black, evil pollution of the poisoned air. Caster developed a cough. Her lungs, hit once by the lung sickness, were more sensitive than Luke's. Concerned, he told her she would have to go back. She said she would be all right. She would not leave him and she would not allow him to go back until he'd rediscovered the power to heal.

Luke preached. He prayed. He looked for his sign and he put his hands on the weak and the sick and said, "Heal!" In his mind, he screamed, "Heal, damn you, heal," but there was no sign.

After three weeks, Caster's cough was bad. One morning, when they first went down into the streets, she coughed blood. Luke held her arm and she leaned on him weakly. When the spasm passed, she smiled. "It's all right. When we get back they can fix it. Don't worry."

"Let's go back to the room. You can rest."

"No. I don't want to. I don't want to sit inside on a day like this."

It was a beautiful day, as days went. The ever-present smog had lifted to a height which made it seem that there was clear air above them. Luke held her arm, no longer embarrassed by personal contact with a female. After all, it was only his friend Caster. And she needed his support. She

seemed to be recovered from her coughing spasm and she talked brightly, helping Luke plan what he would preach that night. Luke walked a half pace ahead, pushing his way through the swarms of people, making a way for her. Traffic was unusually dense. Ground cars and huge landships roared and smoked and stopped and growled into motion. At an intersection, they joined a swarm waiting for the lights to change. When the light went green, they joined the crowd moving in hurried masses across the street, being pushed, spilling out of the crosswalk, hurrying, fighting, looking nervously up as the pent vehicles roared in impatience and eased forward until their bumpers brushed the crowd and then, like a scream from hell, a Brotherfuzz vehicle roared through, zigzagging in and out of traffic, ignoring the massed people in the crosswalk, scattering them, coming directly toward Luke and Caster.

"Watch out!" Luke yelled, reaching for her arm. Panicked people pushed him, engulfed him, as the Brotherfuzz vehicle screamed and its engine roared and it leaped forward and just as Luke went down under the panicked crush of people he saw Caster, eyes wide, mouth open, being felled by the speeding vehicle. He screamed. His fingers were stepped on as he crawled, pushed, fought his way toward her. People yelled and cursed and screamed and the lights changed and the waiting vehicles leaped forward.

She was lying in a pool of her own blood, her hair falling from under the faded cloth, blood matting it. He lifted her, the way suddenly cleared as people ran, scratched, fought their way to the safety of the sidewalk. A huge, red groundship growled toward them. Luke lifted her, finding the strength with the aid of massive injections of adrenal fluids into his bloodstream. He dodged the landship, danced through a maze of roaring, honking ground cars, reached the sidewalk, and then he could pause, his lungs spasming for air, his heart pounding, his stomach aching with the force of the glandular action.

Her head had been crushed. Her hair was matted with blood and, when he put her gently down onto the sidewalk and felt her head, there was an open wound through which he could see the white of bone and the frightening, fatal gray of her very brain matter. She was gasping, her body still except for spasmodic jerkings. She was, he realized with a painful certainty, dying. He screamed. He raised his fist. He cursed.

"I hate you," he screamed. "God, I hate you. And I hate them. All of

them. I wish they were all dead and I wish you were dead and—"

And he could look at her and see the fatal wound and know that sharp pieces of skull had pierced her brain and that only the last, desperate efforts of her being kept her breathing in those fitful gasps and then he saw, with his stomach spasming with the rush of adrenal fluid, the order of things inside her head, could see the damage, and his fingers flew to her head and pushed and his mind went into her brain and dislodged the splinters and all the time he was crying and cursing and people stood by gaping and making sounds and he was not even aware of them because he felt the power and pushed and probed with his mind until the splinters were pushed out and the intricate gray matter grew back into its little whorls and cells and the bone rejoined bone and the break-split closed and the blood stopped and Caster opened her eyes and said, "Luke!"

Then he was leaning over her, putting his face near the gutter to vomit bile and acid, because his stomach was full of it and she was looking up at him in wonder and the people were silent, awed. Then the storm broke about him.

"Did you see?"

"He healed her?"

"Dead if I ever saw one. Head split open."

"Healed!"

"Healed!"

"He healed her."

"Heal me!"

A babble of voices, grunts as people pushed, fought to be near him, cried out, begged. "Help me, brother. Heal me, brother Heal! Heal! Heal!"

Caster, with her hand on her head, bringing it away bloody Looking at Luke with wonder in her eyes. "I saw the landship—"

"Help me, brother. Heal. Help. Help. Heal—"

"You did it, Luke," Caster was saying, as Luke sat up weakly, wiping his

mouth.

The realization hit Luke. He laughed through tears, his voice rising toward hysteria. "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you. Lord Oh, God, thank you."

And a new sound in the babble of the gathering crowd, an awed outrush of wind from diseased lungs, a low, awe-stricken gasp and, looking up, his face ecstatic, Luke saw his sign. An angel it was, a female angel with blazing red hair and a diaphanous, long garment which clung and revealed without being vulgar because she was sent from God, lowering, moving, looking down, descending from the cloud of smog and the crowd falling back and Luke on his knees beside Caster, his hands clasped, saying, "Thank you sweet Jesus." And the angel, his angel, sent from God, coming lower and lower and then her feet touching and no words, just a look at Luke and a beckoning gesture. Trembling, Luke arose. She beckoned. He took two tremulous steps forward and she reached out in impatience and her hand on his arm was soft and yet like fire filled with the power of God and then Luke was crying and praying because below him he could see them, the people, and Caster, standing now, holding up her arms, her lips moving, but Luke couldn't hear as she cried out, "Luke, Luke." And ever swifter, rising. Angel-borne, her hand on his arm. Like the time he was in the Brotherfuzz atmoflyer and seeing the city below and this time there was no atmoflyer, only a solidity under his feet and the feeling of being enclosed, and down below the Brotherfuzz vehicles moving in and before he was so high he could no longer tell one from another, the little ants on the streets, the Brotherfuzz seizing Caster and him saying, "We've got to help her. Don't you see, we've got to help her." But the angel was silent, looking past him, looking up, her beautiful face expressionless. "Please, please help her."

And God opened up his heavens and sent down a ship which opened for them, taking them in.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brother Kyle Murrel, President of the Republic by the grace of God and a long wait for his father to die, stalked into Colonel Ed Baxley's study with a scowl on his face. His long robe swished with his powerful strides. His

cleric's cap was low on his forehead at a somewhat rakish angle. Baxley, trim in a white uniform much like that worn by his cadets at University One, stood. "Brother President," he acknowledged. Murrel, without waiting for an invitation, sat in the chair facing Baxley's desk, his long legs outthrust.

"You read the report?"

"I read it," Baxley said.

"Then you realize the urgency involved."

"Urgency?" Baxley was fingering the thick sheaf of papers stamped TOP SECRET—EYES ONLY.

"Yes, dammit," Murrel said. "Something's going on, colonel. We've got to move before it goes any further."

"The measures you've suggested seem rather drastic to me," Baxley said.

"Drastic?" Murrel leaped to his feet and began to pace. "Drastic? Let's review the situation, colonel. We've known for years that there is a scientific underground. Yet we've never been able to find it. We keep getting vague reports, hints, smatterings of information which, when checked out, lead us nowhere. Then there is a series of events. First, the *Nebulous* disaster. Our last foothold in space, for what it was worth, destroyed. At first we didn't suspect. We accepted it as an accident. But then a ragged Apprentice Brother, formerly one of your students—"

"For a short while, Brother," Baxley said. He'd been briefed thoroughly on the incident.

"—heals a fatal wound with some sort of instant medicine. Still we see nothing which indicates a connected conspiracy. Yesterday, however, a preacher whose description fits exactly with that of the principal in the first instant-medicine incident perpetrates another feat of instant, miraculous medicine on a woman whose head was crushed by a motor vehicle—"

"A police cruiser, to be exact," Baxley said drily.

"—and then is spirited from under the very nose of the police by a woman dressed in a nightgown who came down from the sky without any apparent vehicle."

"That is the part that sounds somewhat fanciful to me," Baxley said.

"Substantiated by hundreds of witnesses, among whom were half a dozen experienced police officers," Murrel said, still pacing.

"You've not proven that it was one and the same man," Baxley said.

"No, but the coincidence is worth noting, isn't it? Two impossible feats of curing performed by a thin, lank-haired young preacher hardly seem disconnected. Moreover, if the feats were performed by two different men, this is even more indication that they have developed something of which we have no knowledge." Murrel ran his hand under his cap, replaced it, sat down. "That's why, colonel, that the Cabinet and I feel it's time to make a move."

"But to put the entire country under martial law'?" Baxley smiled. "Isn't that overreaction?"

"There is one thing that you may not know," Murrel said, looking at Baxley through narrowed eyes. "I said that we had accepted the *Nebulous* accident theory."

"Yes." Baxley said.

"It was no accident, my dear colonel."

"Yes?" Baxley said. His face was expressionless.

"Government scientists ran some routine checks on some of the space debris which fell in this country. There was undeniable evidence that a fire gun had been used."

"Impossible," Baxley said, controlling himself with a great effort.

"Impossible," Murrel said. "I agree. And yet it happened. The residual effects of a fire gun, as you yourself well know, are duplicated by no other force known to man."

"Sir," Baxley said, standing stiffly. "I must, of course, take this as a

direct challenge to my loyalty, since I and I alone control the fire gun arsenal."

Murrel was President, but the man before him was Colonel Ed Baxley. He stood, holding out his hand. "No, colonel. No. Your loyalty is without question. Please believe me. No one in the government has even intimated that you could be at fault in any way. However, there has been a suggestion that your security procedures be reviewed."

"If the government doubts my ability to control the arsenal, then I hereby tender my resignation," Baxley said stiffly.

"Please, colonel," Murrel said, showing his nervousness. After all, the man before him was, so to speak, the father of the Second Republic. "Please, colonel, don't say such things. No one is more respected. No one further above suspicion. But you've been busy, colonel. You've been concerned with the administration of the University, with a dozen other things. All we're asking is could it be possible that someone, some trusted subordinate perhaps, could have smuggled a fire gun out of the arsenal?"

"It is not only impossible," Baxley said, "it is patently absurd to even suggest such an idea."

"Then we have to assume that they have developed the fire gun," Murrel said. "And that makes the matter all that more urgent. For not only have they devised a means to move through air without apparent vehicle, not only have they come up with some magical method of healing fatal injuries, they are now in possession of the weapon which has guaranteed the security of this state since the revolution."

Baxley, still standing, sighed. "So it would seem," he said coldly.

"We have drawn up a plan for the most thorough search operation of all time," Murrel said. "We must find them. If we have to tear down every building in every city in this country—if we have to dig into the very bowels of the Earth."

"Do you plan to personally search one billion people?"

"If necessary," Murrel said. He mused, his chin in his hand. "It may not be necessary. Bystanders reported to our police that the woman who was healed in Middle City was seen walking with the man who healed her

before the accident. We are now questioning her."

"With shakshock'?" Baxley asked contemptuously.

Murrel smiled. "No. We lose too many of them that way. There are, however, other methods."

"Are we going back to Inquisition methods of torture now?" Baxley asked.

Murrel smiled. "I detect a touch of bitterness, colonel. No, no Inquisition. However, we have found that kindness does not make these people respond. I assure you, the woman will talk."

Later, when Murrel had gone, Baxley sat looking out the huge glass windows. Yes, he had spoken in bitterness. Lately, he was feeling more and more bitter about a lot of things. The Brothers had been in power for thirty years. He had helped them seize that power. He had helped overthrow a government which, once, gave more things to more people than any other government the Earth had known. He'd helped, had been instrumental, in fact, because the old government was failing and people were suffering. He'd helped because the Brothers, with their clean, wholesome approach, had seemed to be the solution. Men of God in power. God's mercy administered by men of the faith. The people benefiting and being made whole again, misery abolished, sickness conquered, overcrowding somehow eliminated, perhaps through reclaiming some of the vast land masses which had been made unlivable by the great Communist war. Yet, in thirty years, the situation had, in fact, become worse. There were no more people, the leveling-off aspect of severe overcrowding and lack of medical care had seen to that, but there were just as many people and they still died. The Brothers gave them, even the Fares, a new ground car every year, but they ate whole fish meal three times a day and coughed blood from seared lungs. Yes, he questioned. Yes, he was bitter.

Now they were turning, all those faceless millions. Now another force was moving. He knew that there had been no fire gun developed, but, then, they wouldn't need a fire gun. If they had medicine, and the reports on the miraculous cures in the streets of Old Town and Middle City seemed to indicate that something had developed there, that would go a long way toward winning the confidence of the people. If they had some miraculous method of air transport, as indicated by the reports on the last

incident in Middle City, they might, also, have a start, at least, toward a safety valve for the overcrowding. A scientist who could move through the air without apparent support might just also have the power to move through space.

Baxley felt a kind of excitement. Space! There were people on his staff at the University who talked of space as the cure-all, the answer. And the government did not agree, choosing to squander the remaining wealth of the nation on ground cars and other status consumer items while the race moved in retrograde back to bare subsistence levels. He questioned the administration decision to forgo any further space research following the *Nebulous* disaster.

But, alone in his office, looking down on the well-clipped parade ground, seeing his cadets move pridefully and quickly during a change in classes, he remembered when his first question was asked. His son, Ronnie, spared the filth of sexual knowledge, thinking that God was sending his little brother on the moon rocket, had destroyed man's last outpost in space. He didn't blame Ronnie. Ronnie had been a willful, spoiled child, but it had been adults who spoiled him, the colonel included.

And questioning the thinking which led Richard Skeerzy, the late preaching Brother, to tell Ronnie the modern fairy tale about birth did not mean that the colonel was ready to throw away all decent values in the false name of truth. There *were* things a young boy should not know.

Almost wryly he wondered if, with Ronnie dreading having to share his father with a little brother so much, if the boy would have killed his own mother had he known the real method of arrival of a baby.

But that was silly. The question was, had they been wrong? Should they have told Ronnie something more akin to the truth?

Ask one question—

Now they, the administration, had requested that he, as the nation's number-one military hero, take personal charge of the effort to ferret out the new rebels. He had said no. But sitting alone, wondering, questioning, thinking about what source it would mean if the new rebels had come up with a new power source capable of sending man into space again, and not just in fuel-burning rockets with limited speed and range, he reconsidered. He was not in sympathy with anyone who wanted to

overthrow the government. He had been that route and thirty years of experience had shown him that overthrow is not necessarily the answer. But if anyone found a group of scientists who could so change the world that there might be some hope, after all, he wanted it to be him. Otherwise the Brothers, in their iron-boot mentality, might put all of the rebels on the rack and shakedown all knowledge out of them. He could not allow such a waste. He punched a button Brother President Murrel had just returned to his office.

"Baxley here. Brother President," the Colonel said in his most impressive voice. "After thinking over your request, I would like to say that it is not only my duty but my honor to serve the Republic in any manner for which I have the capacity."

"We are pleased, colonel," Murrel said. "You'll take command immediately. The Vice President will brief you on progress made to date. Meanwhile, is there anything you'd like. Equipment? Personnel? Information?"

"I'd like to question the girl."

Murrel frowned. "Her interrogation is being conducted by qualified experts."

"Nevertheless, I'd like to see her."

Murrel made a gesture of impatience. He'd been against dragging the old warhorse back into harness from the first, but the others had insisted that, in a time of crisis, the active participation of *the* national hero would lend a certain respectability to the operation. "That can be arranged," he said, finally. "I'll get back to you."

"Brother Murrel," Baxley said, "if I'm to be in command of this operation I shall expect to have full authority. I shall expect access to *all* information."

"She's being held in the old Pentagon," Murrel said sullenly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The sensor mechanisms of the ship blanketed the Third Planet. The ship, itself, was lying in the protective shadow of the rather large satellite of the planet, safe from detection. For five planetary rotations the ship lay there, motionless in space, while automatic things hummed and searched in vain for any trace of suspicion.

She checked the information eagerly, wanting to find the offending radiations, wanting to collect her specimens and start the long, boring trip home. In frustration, after the fifth rotation, she demanded a recheck on the original sensor, the ancient device which was still in operation out beyond the Ninth Planet. Once again the reliability of the sensor was proved.

Since the ship's instruments showed no anti-detection activity from the planet, she ordered that the vessel be moved in closer. From the new distance, visual observation was possible. She was sickened. The incredible conditions on the planet below seemed to offer conclusive proof that the original condition of the inhabitants had not changed significantly. The total technological progress of eons seemed to be expressed in an inefficient internal-combustion-primitive mechanicalism.

After the quiet splendor of the home worlds, the planet below seemed to be nothing more than a hive of unattractive insectlike beings crowded into huge, cancerous cities. Since the city concept had been discarded early in the history of the race as being hopelessly detrimental to well-being, this, too, proved to her the inferiority of the racelike beings who peopled the world below.

We will go back.

The observation is inconclusive. Positive readings of a planet-killing weapon cannot be ignored.

She used the name of the ancient deity, a knowledge which had been stirred by the opening of the closed areas of her brain. But she agreed to wait. Two rotations near the planet. Nothing.

The burning of bodies fascinated her. Huge quantities of them. Around each city vast complexes of ovens into which death was pushed each day. It was incredible. A people who faced death could not accomplish a technical feat such as the manufacture of a planet killer. It was against all

reason.

But there was the quiet, eternally circling space debris which had been discovered shortly after moving the ship to its new location. She joined with a section of what was apparently a primitive combustion rocket, locked it into a port, examined it with the aid of a technology so far advanced that the secrets of the rocket were revealed within minutes. It was puzzling. Those hopeless people down there had, at some time not too far past, been in space. Pursuing this aspect, she searched the surface of the satellite by scoutship and found traces of activity there. Discarded vehicles were detected. However, there was no sign of permanent occupation of the airless satellite. Those who had come had gone, and left only discarded machines and pitiable plaques reading, she assumed, not taking the trouble to run the primitive printed language through the computers, proudly of the conquest of the tiny bit of space between the satellite and the planet. Yet, even that much accomplishment did not fit the pattern. The beings on the planet were not supposed to be in space at all. As a matter of fact, the primitive mechanical technology, expressed mainly in ground vehicles and a few atmosphere flying machines, was, according to the long-range predictions of the ancients, beyond the capacity of the beings on the planet. Thus, she was forced to stay.

Frustration and anger activated the glands of her body. She required almost constant attention. It was a bore. She knew the working of her body intimately. Under normal circumstances, periodic checks were sufficient. Now it was necessary to make checks twice each rotation of the planet, otherwise she began to feel the vague uneasiness of excess glandular activity, the nagging ache of dying cells. She wanted, more than anything, to activate one of the weapons and burn the offending planet from the skies.

Thus, when the sensors alarmed, she was in a vindictive mood. The populated areas of the planet were half-in, half-out of the light of the sun. The twilight line was passing through the midsection of the populated northern continent. She was sleeping when the alarm entered her mind and brought her into instant awareness. *Report.*

Life force action. Coordinates—

She located instantly with the aid of the computers. The area involved was in daylight. She chose to go down with the protection of merely a forcefield and antigravity belt. She went as she was, in a long, flowing

garment designed for comfort. The life-force action, incredible emanation coming from such a place, guided her. She could sense it. It was strong. When she neared the surface, the residual effects of the action clung to the person of a lank-haired, thin, vilely unhealthy male who knelt beside a female on a crowded sidewalk. There was blood in the hair of the female and the male was voiding his stomach contents into the street. She was disgusted. Yet, incredibly, there were the emanations of the life force coming from the ugly male and that was even more serious than the original report of a planet-killing device, for it was impossible for these beings to develop so far. She swallowed her distaste, lowered into the midst of the most nauseating mob of beings she'd ever seen. In order to include him in the force of the belt, she had to touch him. She caught the stink of him. It was unbelievable. And in the short moment when she had to let down the forcefield to take him in, she caught a short breath of the poisoned air. She performed quick repair on the damaged lung cells and closed the field about them, forcing herself to touch him. He made noises with his mouth, like an animal. Silence, she sent. Silence or— The things with which she threatened him would have awed an intelligent being, yet he seemed unaffected, continuing to make noises with his mouth and to look at her with an unmistakable rapture in his eyes. She could not believe that such as this could exude the life force, for his body was a wreck, a vast open sore of disease and disorder.

Luke, rising to the heavens on a cloud, like the Christ resurrected, was in a state of near shock. Ecstasy bubbled in words of praise. At first, he begged the angel to save Caster, but since God lived, since God cared, since God was lifting him to the heavens, it really did not matter if Caster perished down below, for she would gain eternal life with Him. And the words tumbled from his slack lips in a paroxysm of religious bliss as he rose and rose and rose and the angel, serene, blindingly beautiful, held his arm and lifted him to—a huge sphere which opened to them and closed behind and heaven was functional metal and materials unrecognizable to him and he was being led by the angel to a small room where a small bed shared space with weird machines which moved toward him, extending tendrils and, suddenly, he was horribly frightened, for heaven was not machines and hard metals and cold surfaces.

"Please," he said, "please, please..."

He was being pushed down onto the bed and the machines were closing and he screamed, once, before his mind fuzzed, darkened, went black.

She had to stay in the room for decontamination. The sub-being had brought with him a wide array of microorganisms and some of them were already infecting her body. She utilized maximum life force, cleansed herself. The machines were at work. The sub-being was being subjected to an analysis and a purification process. And it was writhing and gasping.

Life force, please. But do only the necessary. Its heart—

Was failing. She looked into it. The heart was enlarged, weakened. She made minimum repairs. The being was eased and ceased writhing. She left the room, leaving the being to the machines for analysis and study. She stripped out of the long, comfortable garment. She felt unclean. Later, she communicated with the computer. She was vastly relieved when the computer, having contacted the central section on A-1, announced immediate departure. It would require a more thorough study, but the preliminary findings, having compared the brain structure and function of the sub-being aboard the ship with the living brains of a random selection of the population below, indicated that the male aboard the ship was a one-in-a-billion mutation.

That, in itself, was cause for concern. Back on A-1, responsible authorities were being brought out of *Trang* to consider the implications. If cold machines could have expressed consternation the words would have been *impossible, incredible*. In a way, consternation was expressed in frenzied activity as entire planetary systems of automation and empire wide networks of computers were checked and rechecked. Automated servomechanisms replaced millions of components, discarding any one item which was not one-hundred percent efficient and yet the answer was the same. The odds against a being on Planet 3 of Section G-1034876, Star R-875948 developing even an erratic, uncontrollable life-force potential was expressed in astronomical numbers.

Aboard a huge ship of the line, the woman whose mind emanated a beautiful, rosy glow stood over the being who was causing so much activity throughout an empire which spread over the central portions of the galaxy. Her face expressionless, she examined his thin body, his pocked face. There was a smell about him. She felt a mixture of revulsion and pity. He was of a form to the race. His physical makeup was the same down to the minute cells. Yet, he was different. It was more, this difference, than a general wasting of the body mechanisms. The poor condition of every functioning aspect of his being was the most evident

defect, but there was a more important one. On a scale of mental ability he would, when compared to the race, rate so low as to be almost off the scale.

Before she saw him, this being who had emanated the life force, she'd had fleeting thoughts of having someone for company on the long, boring ride back to the home system? Now, having seen him, having looked into the shallow, worse than retarded mind, she was moodily irritated.

The ship made its first jump. Behind them, the star R-875948 was lost amid thousands of other stars. Ahead was a long, deadly period of waiting. She prowled the living quarters, scorning the entertainment possibilities of the central memory bank, thinking now of the male from A-7 who had been free, for some rotations now, to make a new commitment. Her frustration caused a slight acid unbalance in her stomach. Impatiently, she adjusted. Her mind, usually a bright, rosy glow, was aureate, a blaze. For lack of something better to do, she forwarded a bitter protest regarding the thoughtless, absolutely punitive lack of *Trang* aboard the ship. It was explained, once again, that the old-empire planners had deemed it necessary for the autosystems aboard a ship of the line to be backed up by an alert member of the race. It was explained to her, as if she were a child, that emergencies in space can happen with a devastating swiftness. In the time it would take for a member of the race to recover from the euphoria of *Trang*, an entire ship could be lost in the event of a major system failure.

And when has there ever been a systems failure?

Never.

So it is impossible.

On the contrary. It is almost inevitable.

Explain.

This ship was built in— The date had meaning only to a member of the race.

She was surprised. *So long ago?*

No ship has left the old empire in—

Again, she was surprised. But no wonder. Who would want to leave? Space was cold and lifeless and lonely and endless and dull. Space was endless sun after endless sun. Space was dull, dead planets and swarms of cosmic dust and beyond the boundaries of the empire there was only worlds such as the third planet of that sick little yellow sun she'd just left behind. Who would want to leave the comfort and the euphoria and the bliss of eternal love? She had not closed the communications circuit. And a machine, the huge, eternal central computer said, *They did*. And her mind was filled with a series of outward movements, the first swing into space in quaint, accident-prone chemical vehicles, the first leap to a near star, the vast enthusiasm of exploration and the zesty battles of conquest as one segment of the empire fought another for domination. *They did*.

Ancient barbarians.

Who built an empire which covers vast distances, a starfield of glory and achievement.

Achievement? You're programmed for the past. We'll have to see about changing your mode.

I am programmed for all contingencies which would affect the well-being of the race.

The well-being of the race is Trang. And love. We do not need to go out to the stars anymore. Why do we need more planets? Yes.

With Trang we have reached the highest limits of racial fulfillment. The empire was projected into her mind, far-flung systems peopled by the race, all beautiful, all *Trangized*, scattered widely, isolated in pairs in splendid structures on a thousand thousand worlds.

Exactly, she sent. Would you want it differently?

I am not programmed for emotions.

But she was shown vast autosystems lying idle. Sections capable of directing the landing and takeoff of one ship per heartbeat from a million ports were idle. Fleets of ships were stationary on the ground. Vast places for the making of a million things were silent.

I don't care. What right have you, a mere machine, to chide me, a

member of the race?

Angered, she broke off. She paced the spacious room. She was dressed in a close-fitting singlet which showed her beautiful form to perfection and there was no one to see. She, the most desirable woman on the old, home planet, perhaps in the original system, was alone.

With only a sub-being within countless light years.

But the sub-being was a male.

Once, when she committed with a male from an outlying planet, she was told of an ancient custom. Women of the planet, in the early days of the lovely *Trang* euphoria, in order to experience the completeness of sexual love, had, said the male, experimented with a form of animal life, an upright animal covered with hair.

At the time it had seemed deliciously funny. A woman couple with an animal?

Now she was to be isolated on a ship of the line for long, long revolutions with a sub-being.

If members of the race had once coupled with animals.

It *could* be amusing, in a revolting sort of way.

She stood before him, radiant in a tightly fitted one-piece thing which clung to rounded curves. She had had to wait for the machines to finish with him. Now he had been examined, rated, cataloged. She was not interested in that. She was alone. She was bored. It would be a long, long time before she was back on A-1 and it would be in the middle of a commitment period and she would have to join in the conference regarding these sub-beings from Section G-1034876 and, meanwhile, he was looking at her with a stupid, wide-eyed stare, making sounds with his mouth like an animal. An *animal*. She would pretend that he was one of the hairy, upright beasts of the outlying planets.

I am—her mind spread out—Blaze.

He made sounds with his mouth. He fell to his knees and held his hands clasped in front of him.

She projected the idea she had in mind in all its sweet possibilities.

He made noises with his mouth.

She moved toward him in a graceful, floating, sensuous walk. She was, to him, eye-burningly beautiful. He'd never seen so perfect a woman before. And, although heaven was, apparently, a thing of metals and other materials he didn't know with machines which probed and searched him and machines which fed and watched him, she was divine, an angel sent from God.

Blaze—wants you. Blaze—soft and warm and willing—will make things so nice for you.

He cringed away from her.

She couldn't read him. Inside his head were the usual arrangements of things, but in the receptive center was a ball of blackness, a dull non-life which puzzled her. The structure was there. And yet he did not acknowledge her generous invitation. She could not even get his thoughts. He was not sending. He was black inside.

Stop making noises with your mouth.

He prostrated himself at her feet, looking up at her fearfully, making the noises.

Angered, she sent strongly. *I am—Blaze. Arise. It is not necessary for you to crawl at my feet.*

He was making a series of strangled, wet sounds. Tears were running from his eyes.

With growing impatience, she probed at the dark ball of nothing in his receptive center and could find nothing. Yet, she thought, he'd exuded the life force, so that part of his brain was not totally useless. She searched for the crack, the opening which had to be there, a vent leading into that dark, shelled portion of his mind from which the healing force had to come.

The ship's system was sending. *Stop! Stop!*

But she felt an entrance and probed it. The male, still groveling at her feet, moaned and made noises with his mouth. She had to reach him. Her need was great.

Stop! the machines warned. Don't force it. The examination concludes that there is a potential there, but it is dangerous.

She listened.

This is an alien mind. Should you penetrate it, the effects could be traumatic. We do not, yet, understand. There have been developments in this mind, developments which should not have happened. Yet, behind a—shield—an encasing—a madness—there is potential. It is best not to tamper with it except under the most rigidly controlled conditions.

She laughed. What did she care for his traumas? She *needed*.

Not him, the ship's system sent frantically, its warning reinforced by a joint communication from the base on A-1, but she had found the crack, the opening, the entrance. *I am —Blaze. I need.* And with an effort of concentration, her mind entered, probed, saw horror and tried to retreat but too late; for the shell, the shield, the encasing, weakened by the emergence, at odd times, of the life force, split and exploded and her mind flowed in an opened and madness leaped out at her and overwhelmed her with a power which sent her reeling back, physically, as her mind trembled and cringed under the onslaught of the alien things, the mad, sick, evil things which filled the male mind before her. Her mind screamed and fought, but was helpless to overcome the terrible power of the raw sickness which poured out of the male. Weakly, she fell against the door and it opened and she stumbled out into the corridor, her mind retching, crying out in agony, knowing for the first time fear and hopelessness and rot and death and horror, knowing torture on the rack and the illness of body she'd never experienced and the worst of it was the repulsion which was the strongest immediate force which drowned her in putrid, mad, raw emotions.

Stop! Stop! But compared to the power of the emanations coming from the alien male her mind was weak and she could do nothing to stop the horror. It sapped her strength. It oozed and slimed her own sanity and she could only retreat, get as far from it as possible.

Huddled in her bed, hands to her head as if to stop the flow of horror,

she sobbed and cringed in real pain as she was deluged, her mind helpless to stop it, her barrier down from the sheer power of it.

Help me. Help me. Help me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Luke awakened in heaven he saw only a pastel ceiling and then, turning his head, walls lined with machines. He was not able to move. At first, he thought he was back on the rack, and he braced himself for the jolt of pain, but it didn't come. Flexible, snaky things were moving about his body. Things touched and probed and moved and there was not pain. There was in fact, a feeling of well-being much like that he'd experienced while he was being treated back in Zachary Wundt's underground hospital. Gradually, he was able to relax.

When he was offered food, he ate. Afterward, he rose, unhindered, from the bed. He walked the small space of the room, tried the door. It had no visible way of opening. He prayed.

There was a sort of hum about him. He could feel it in the floor, in the walls. Once there was a slight, internal jolt, as if he'd been moved in some way.

He was in a high state of excitement, his adrenals pumping, his pulse pounding. God was near. He had been raised. He'd risen above the miseries of the Earth and was now—where?

"Oh, God," he prayed. "Blessed be thy name and praise everlasting. Lead me to understanding. Show me the light. Help me to serve you, Lord."

And, in answer to his prayers, the door opened. The angel was there, tall, radiant, beautiful, serene. He fell to his knees and clasped his hands. "Praise be to God in His glory and eternal wisdom. Thank you, Jesus." She looked at him. She was disturbingly exposed. And he hated himself for seeing not her glory, her godliness, but her body with rounded breasts half exposed, her long legs bare. "Forgive me, Lord, I am unworthy."

And, in punishment, there was a pain in his head. He fell to his stomach and groveled in shame and atonement. He could not, however, resist turning his head to look up at the angel. "Speak to me," he begged. "Blessed being, tell me where I fail. Help me to be worthy."

She looked down at him calmly, a half-smile on her beautiful face. She was trying to help him! He sobbed in grateful emotion, his heart pumping, his entire being trembling with ecstasy. "Oh, beautiful, blessed angel, help me. Tell me what I must do."

The pain in his head, far back, deep, doubled, grew to be more than he could bear. He screamed and writhed on the smooth, warm softness of the floor. He sobbed and begged, his words incoherent as the pain grew and exploded and, suddenly, she was speaking to him. No, not speaking. Suddenly there was in his mind her. *I am Blaze*. And he screamed again with fear and horror as he knew the rest, the filthy, perverted things she was saying, the dirty, pornographic, lasciviousness of it. And he was aware then that she was no angel but a thing of the devil sent to punish him and that he was not in heaven but on his way to hell and she was there to do horrible, sickening things to him and he screamed and fell back as she left the room, an unreadable expression on her face, leaving him to fall onto the bed, his mind in agony, still seeing the filthy things.

Fear, horror, madness. So beautiful she was and so filthy, so evil. The pictures in his mind of her beautiful body in contorted, perverted positions doing filthy, evil things and he was going to be forced to do them and, oh, God, what had he done? What had he done? And somewhere in the distance, as he lay on the bed curled into a fetal position, knees clasped, rocking in terror and agony, a small voice saying, *Help me. Help me*. But hell's fires were reaching for him to burn him in eternal agony and he was afraid, afraid. And the filth and degradation washed over him and made him violently sick.

Servomechanisms cleaned away the spew of his stomach. The ship jumped, the guidance section working independently as the mind of the ship communicated frantically and the sanity of a member of the race was assaulted by incredible force and lost, retreating slowly toward the point of no return.

Help me, help me, Luke was saying. And, far off an echo said, *Help me, help me*. And another voice, stronger, *Stop, stop, you're killing her!* And the fires of hell burning and filth and degradation seeping into the fibers

of his being, polluting him, making him one with the devil and him fighting, fighting, fighting, his mind a swirl of near madness and—*help me, help me*. With memories of the rack and the crowding and the suppression and the death and bodies burning in huge ovens and people lying in their own blood in the streets and Fares coupling in filthy little Fare rooms and she wanted him to do that and the devil was laughing and—*stop, stop*. And an image of Caster appearing in his mind saying, with the strong voice. "It's all right, Luke. You are not in hell. It's all right. Stop now. Stop it. Don't think. Do this."

And through his fear and shock came a realization. He could see himself. Inside him he could see the working of him, the flow of blood through veins and the seeping of blood into tiny capillaries, the beating of his heart and the functioning of glands and the pull of muscles as he rocked back and forth, back and forth, his head down, his heels dug into the bed, his knees clasped. And—*do this*. And a small thing happening inside his head and closing off and still there was the awareness and fear fought, failed, retreated before the wonder of knowing the very makeup of his brain, the flow of impulses, the sending and receiving of messages from parts of his body, the glow of sight and the sense of touch and—WONDER! And the strong voice—*Good, good...*

"Where am I?" Luke asked aloud. "What is this place?"

It is not hell. Not aloud. In his mind.

A strange feeling of competence. A knowledge. A total awareness. Like the two brief times when God opened up the heavens and he could heal. "Oh, God—"

I am not God.

"Who are you?"

A picture. Complex things mixed and totaled into a vast, strange machine.

"*How?*" He didn't voice the question. And then the answer directed him to the part of his brain which seemed to pulse with power and he knew that something strange had happened and he had to understand. The machine was trying to tell him, but it was too fast, boiling fonts of information which he was unable to absorb. His head ached. But there

were all mixed up, things—an opening of a potential which should not have been there, an assessment of himself which gave him the impression of—more than stupidity and then a childish thought that he could read so he was not stupid and it was more than retardation He was not a moron but more and then he wasn't and there was astonishment from the communications in his mind and mixed-up pictures of people who were eternal and eternally happy and vast, empty, luxurious worlds of parks and silent wilderness and it was too much for him.

"Stop!"

And then, silence, a wailing, weak cry for help. And blame.

"How could I hurt her?"

Raw power of never-before-used cells. An alien strangeness hitting at a mind grown defenseless during eons of peace and—love—sickness in Luke at the picture—SHE WAS HURT.

"How can I help?"

His mind. Pushed open. And the feeling of healing and so he went to her and found her huddled on her bed. She was breathing weakly. "I don't know how," he said.

And a picture of his mind entering hers.

"But she's evil! She wanted me to—"

She is a fellow being. It is her way. To her it is not evil.

"But she is evil."

She is dying. The power of your mind—

"Am I, then, more powerful than she, who has had this power forever?"

A reluctance. But a member of the race was dying. *The newness. The rawness. The unused potential building—*

"But if she tried to—" The vile pictures unwordable.

No.

Because he was more powerful. And suddenly they were afraid of him. The machines and all the people with eternal life were afraid of *him* and he looked into her mind and saw the ripping, the burning, the damage and he, knowing how it went, healed; and she looked up at him eyes wide, frightened. He closed. For a moment he felt the fright and he said aloud, "It's all right." And then, looking into her and seeing her as she was and catching in that unguarded moment, the past, the love, the vileness and anger, shame, shock causing her to reel back in pain.

Don't. Don't please.

He closed.

You must not! It hurts so.

"We will talk," Luke said.

A view of her mind. Perversions. Slime. Filth. Anger, shock and pain to her and a further plea. "Don't spread your filth on me," Luke said.

Filth? You hopeless—images of worse than stupid, more than moronic, beyond retarded. *You call me filth*— And a sudden assault on his mind which was repelled with amazing ease and then she was cringing as he called down the fear of God onto her, preached to her of her shame her degradation, her evilness and she begging, begging, begging, her mind reeling under the assault.

When his anger was gone, she was weak. He thought in silence. "If we are to communicate, we will have to keep partially—closed—"

"Yes."

"I know a little from your machines I want to know more."

Fear. A barbarian loose among the civilized worlds, a monster with hurtful power and a sick mind loose amid the beautiful, *Trangized* people.

"I don't want to hurt you. I cannot approve of you, but you are not like us. You are alien. I want only—" He paused. What did he want?

There was Caster, in the hands of the Brotherfuzz. He wanted her out. He wanted her safe. There were Wundt and the others who were trying to

do something for the unfortunates of the world. He wanted them to be able to do it. He wanted to go back. He wanted to see Caster. He wanted—

A sharp, huge pain crossed his chest. He gasped. His hands flew to his chest, clawed there. Agony doubled him. He fell. His heart speeded, stopped, leaped, tore at his chest as a portion of it died, ruptured. His mind was paralyzed by the enormity of the pain and panic joined terminal pain as he looked death over from up close and, above him, having leaped from her bed, the woman looked down. Hope. In the midst of fatal pain, hope. She could help him. She could heal.

She watched him spasm in agony. She waited for him to look into himself, heal himself. He was open. He had a vast power, so vast that it threatened her, threatened her world. So with that power he could stop the pain, heal the ruptured heart.

But he did not. He writhed and made sounds with his mouth and it was then that she realized that he would die if she didn't help. If she didn't heal, since he apparently was too stupid to know his own powers over himself, he would die and then the threat would be ended.

He was gasping, his lungs spasming, his diaphragm pumping in a strange non-rhythm. She smiled. Now it would be over. Now, with the danger clearly demonstrated, they would send ships to the fringes of the galaxy, to the hundred exile worlds, and burn them from the skies. Then it would be over. Then she could go home. Home to eternal euphoria, to eternal love. She watched, eyes wide. She'd never seen a being die before.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On a wasted, sick planet the latest chapter in a long history of cruelty had begun. Where once there had been a sincere attempt to bring true equality to man, there was now an equality of persecution administered by an elite corps who had control. Fare, Tech, Tired, and Lay suffered alike as vast armies of police, reinforced by the Army of the Second Republic, searched and ripped a world apart. The racks hummed with power as all suspects were questioned with degrees of severity determined only by the sadism of the Brothers in charge of the individual interrogation centers. A

section of Old Town, in East City, burned, ignited by a careless search team who poured explosive Soul Lifter into a storm sewer. Fire protection was obsolete, unable to cope with the conflagration which spread to cover an area of several crowded blocks, burning the ancient buildings and their inhabitants in a great roar which produced odd and erratic wind currents throughout the remainder of the old section and threatened to take the entire section in one vast firestorm.

The glow from East City was visible when Colonel Ed Baxley lifted his personal atmoflyer from the Washington port and headed west. He asked for reports and was given skimpy information. His attention was on his mission and he didn't push the matter.

Below, as he crossed the big river in mid-continent, Middle City seethed with activity. Martial vehicles blocked the streets as soldiers searched ground cars. Then he was past and checking with West City control for landing instructions.

He was stopped leaving the port. He showed his identification and was treated with awed respect. One of the junior officers in charge of the roadblock was a former cadet and greeted the colonel with a snappy salute and a smile. It was impossible to remember all the cadets from years past, but the colonel smiled and said, "Good show."

"We'll get the bastards," the cadet said. "Sir." He flushed with confusion, having let slip the profanity without conscious thought.

"I'm sure you will," Baxley said.

"The search is being conducted in a closing circle," the former cadet said, eager to make a good impression. "There are five hundred thousand troops plus the city police. We're covering the city building by building." Baxley frowned. He had given no orders for the search to begin. As he was driven past the block, he contacted Washington. Brother President Murrel was unavailable. He spoke with an aide. "Who ordered the operation to begin?" he asked.

"The President himself," he was told.

Baxley closed contact without comment. He leaned back, frowning.

Around him there was chaos. A group of sorry looking Tireds was being

forced at gunpoint from a dilapidated building. As he passed, he saw a policeman strike a Tired female. She went down to her hands and knees. Blood sprang from her nose.

The ground car eased through a mass of military vehicles. People were being loaded aboard vans, their faces contorted in panic. Baxley resisted an impulse to stop and order the troops to cease the senseless brutality. He realized, however, that such a move would be a relatively empty gesture. When he left, the troops would fall back on the only method they knew, the art of violent repression.

Where had it all gone wrong?"

The suspect was in central police headquarters. He showed his papers and the vehicle was admitted to the parking area. An elevator took him to a top floor. The woman was in a small room, surrounded by Brothers and police officials. A doctor was present.

The Brother Mayor of West City was a corpulent man with a sweating, bald head. He greeted Baxley with respect and, formalities over, pointed toward the seated woman. "She hasn't talked, but she will."

The woman's face was contorted into a mask of fear and pain. Her hands were tied behind her. The chief of West City police was questioning her. As Baxley watched, he inserted an electrode into her left nostril, threw a line switch on the power cord, and Baxley heard a small, sickening sizzle of burning flesh. The woman jerked, screamed.

"That's enough," Baxley said, stepping forward. He jerked the electrode from the hand of the startled police official and threw it violently into a far corner of the room.

"You don't understand, colonel," the Brother Mayor said. "In order to get these people to talk—"

"How long do you think she could take this?" Baxley asked angrily. He whirled to the doctor, who was standing a short distance away, his eyes downcast. "Have you used truth drugs?"

"They were not effective," the doctor said. "Some of them are immune—"

"Bull," Baxley said. "Now listen, you quack, you're not talking to some ignorant Lay. Don't give me your fairy tales. You don't develop an immunity to truth drugs. Not in a million years."

"Not exactly an immunity," the doctor said, strangely unruffled. "A protection. *They've* come up with some sort of long-range protection, a drug, something, which keeps the truth drugs from working."

Baxley made an impatient gesture. "What have you used?"

The doctor named three drugs. Baxley knew them. They had never failed to produce results in the past. He'd often advocated their widespread use in questioning prisoners. The excuse was their expense. "All right," Baxley said. "I'll talk to her." He moved behind the woman, cut her bonds with his pocket knife. She looked up at him fearfully, tears streaming down her cheeks. "It's not all right," he said. "I won't tell you that. You are in serious trouble. Do you know that.?"

She nodded.

"There is a threat to the Republic. We are going to see that the threat comes to nothing. Nothing you can do will stop that. We will crush the rebels. We will do it with any means necessary. Nothing you can do will help your friends. On the contrary, your silence will make it worse for them and for everyone. Do you understand?"

She was silent.

"I am going to give you a chance to save yourself. Tell us all you know about the man who healed you. Tell us about your friends. Tell the truth and there will be no more torture. You will be held in confinement and then you will be treated."

"Shakeshock to idiocy?" she asked, making a face. "No thanks."

"You see, colonel," the Brother Mayor said, "it's no use trying to reason with these people." He motioned to the chief of police. "Now if you'll let us continue—"

Baxley was looking at the woman. Her eyes seemed strange. Baxley turned to the doctor. "What have you given this woman other than the truth drugs?"

"Nothing," doctor said.

"Brother Mayor," Baxley said, "I want to be alone with the suspect and the doctor."

"But, colonel—" The Mayor protested with waving hands.

"Please," Baxley said, but the way he said it it wasn't a request. The Brothers and the police filed out sullenly. Alone with the woman and the doctor, Baxley stepped behind the woman, opened his knife, pressed the point of it against the woman's neck. She did not move. He pressed harder until the sharp point broke the skin and a tiny bead of blood sprang up. She made no outcry, no move. Baxley stood in front of her, lifted an eyelid. The pupil of her eye was large. He pinched her arm suddenly and forcefully. Her yelp came a second too late.

Baxley's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He started to turn, to face the doctor. Before he completed the move he felt a sharp pain in his right buttock. He struck out. A hypoderrhic needle clattered away, bouncing on the hard floor. He opened his mouth to yell in surprise. Only a strangled sound came forth. He felt his knees going, weakening. He folded, fell slowly, settled to the floor without a sound.

The doctor put his finger to his lips, motioning the woman to silence. He knelt over the fallen Baxley, felt his pulse. "I had to do it," he said to the woman. "He recognized the symptoms of the drug I gave you."

"What will you do now'?" the woman asked with a surprising calmness.

"I'll have to leave you," the doctor said. "I'm sorry, but I think this might be a great opportunity. The drug will not wear off for some six hours yet. They're under strict orders not to let you die, so you'll be safe from that, at least. And when you begin to feel pain, then talk."

"No," she said. "I'll never—"

"My dear, you'll talk. When you can feel the things those bastards are doing to you, you'll talk. You'll beg for the chance to talk. Do it. We'll have six hours. That should be enough."

"Are you sure—"

"We have no other choice. I can get Baxley out of the building. I couldn't get you out under any circumstances."

"The revolution?" Irene Caster asked hopefully.

"We'll try to come for you as soon as possible."

"I don't care. Don't think about me."

"But we must think of you. The world has gone too long without thinking of you, the individual."

"I don't mind dying," she sighed. "I really don't." She said the last with a sort of amazement, for she actually meant it. "If it means that we are successful."

"We will be," the doctor said. "And perhaps you won't have to die." He rose quickly, took three quick steps to the door. There was a well-acted panic in his voice as he called out, "Brother Mayor, quickly!"

They rushed into the room. The Brother Mayor halted in midstride when he saw Baxley lying on the floor. The doctor fell to his knees beside Baxley. "His heart—"

"Great God," the mayor said. "No there. Not in my city."

The doctor leaped to a communicator. "Stretcher," he roared. "Get me a stretcher and have an ambulance standing by."

"You're—you're going to move him?" the mayor asked.

"He needs care and quickly," the doctor said.

"But can't you treat him here? If the word gets out that the founder of the Republic—"

"The word need not get out," the doctor said. "If you'll help me."

"Anything," the frightened mayor said.

"We will remove him quietly and take him to a private hospital. His face will be covered by an oxygen mask. His uniform by a sheet. No one *need* know. No one outside this room."

"Is he—is he going to die?" the mayor asked.

"I don't know," the doctor said. "My first guess is that he's had a massive myocardial infarction."

"My God," the mayor breathed, awed by the sound of the medical words.

The stretcher team came running in. The doctor directed the loading of the colonel's unconscious body, covering the neat, white uniform with a sheet. An oxygen mask was clamped over the colonel's face. The stretcher team moved quickly, impressed by the doctor's urgency. An ambulance was backed to the entrance of the service elevator. The stretcher was loaded aboard. The doctor got into the back with the colonel and snapped directions to the driver. The stretcher was loaded aboard an atmoflyer at the nearest port. An emergency flight-plan was filed. Twenty miles outside the eastern limit of West City the flyer disappeared from the radar screens and all the frantic efforts to contact it were in vain.

Back in the grim, unimaginative building which housed West City police, Irene Caster screamed as her mouth was forced open and the searching, shocking electrode was forced under her tongue. She felt no pain, only a vague vibration as the shock spread. Her heart pounded and she was very frightened.

An hour later. Dr. Zachary Wundt looked on as assistants gave Colonel Ed Baxley the antidote for the drug which had made him unconscious.

"He saw quickly that I'd given Caster a painkiller." The doctor who had delivered the founder of the Second Republic into the hands of the underground stood beside Wundt. "You understand that I was not concerned about my own safety."

"Of course," Wundt said.

"The woman will talk. The painkiller will wear off in"—he looked at his watch—"approximately five hours."

"At least your actions have given us that much time," Wundt said. "We're ready. I have given orders to move."

"Have you had any word from your young healing genius'?"

Wundt frowned. "None." he said.

Baxley moved, tried to sit up. His eyes fluttered open, widened. "You drugged me," he shouted, looking at the offending doctor who had put a needle into him.

"Relax, colonel," Wundt said. "You will not be harmed."

"Harmed?" Baxley sat up, shaking his head. His vision cleared. "Then it's started."

"It has started," Wundt said.

"Isn't that strange?" Baxley smiled ruefully. "I'm not even surprised. I'm not even sure I'm sorry."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On the deck at her feet the sub-being writhed in terminal agony, unable to breathe, his life processes slowing, darkness beginning to cloud his brain as cells died from lack of oxygen. She watched with a horrified fascination. He was dying. He had, within him, the power to save himself, and yet he was dying. She could not understand. Death was an impossible idea to her. The animals in the wilderness died. But a being in the image of the race? And yet it would be an experience to see him die. *A terrible, unthinkable experience.* No one died.

Not since the race reached maturity had anyone died.

And, since death was so unthinkable, she could not accept it. *Fool, why don't you save yourself?*

Blackness. Unreasoning panic. The power of it was almost overwhelming. He was closed off and still the power of it, the death knowledge, the fear, was a force which made her wince. *Save yourself.*

But he was already dying. His brain was dying. His heart was struggling fitfully weakly, dying, stopping. His lungs had ceased to function.

Terrible. Horrible. Unthinkable. Bodies burning in huge ovens and people lying in blood on the street and—

Damn you, damn you, damn you.

But into his dark mind she ventured once more. Down into the depths of hell she went, her clean mind cringing and fighting against it and there she found the last, dying spark and fired it, her mind making repairs, making the torn muscles whole, easing the heart into a steady pounding of life and then working on the darkened lights in his brain until, with a cry, he sat up and looked at her. For a painful moment his shield was down and she screamed in horror. He closed.

"You healed me."

He rose. He looked at his hand. He held his arms out and looked at them in bemused wonder. "I was dying."

Yes. She watched him fearfully. Had she been wrong? Had she, by saving him, unleashed a monster?

"You saved me for hell," he said bitterly.

She made a disgusted movement with her lips. *Fool.*

And he remembered. She had told him, speaking in his mind. *Save yourself!*

You could have.

"How?"

I've done enough.

"How?" He stepped close to her. "Tell me."

No.

"If you don't I'll"—he searched for words—"come in." But she knew before he voiced it. He saw the fear on her face. He opened. He searched and she screamed silently and tried to block but he was too powerful. And it was there.

So simple.

"Of course," he said. He closed. He looked into himself and, somewhere in that never-before-used portion of his brain was a pattern of all the complex things which made him, all the cells and glands and veins and organs and tissues, all outlined for him and he could look into any minute recess of his being and all he saw was weakness and sickness and, experimentally, he altered, changed, stimulated, and things changed and moved. He did not notice the woman leaving, so bemused was he. He examined his newly repaired heart, made adjustments, opened clogged arteries and veins, set healthy cells working to reproduce and replace diseased tissue, repaired glands, felt a huge sweep of pure elation. Heal? God, he could heal! Even the near-cancerous waste of his seared lungs. And the waste was too much. He couldn't void it all at once. He halted, thought it out, retired to the room where the cold machines had first examined him. There was a voice trying to reach him, the voice of the machine. He closed it out. He cleansed his body of sickness, disease, waste, malfunction. He voided wastes, vomited wastes, sweated wastes but, rather than losing weight, he gained as muscles were made healthy, as fatty tissue was solidified. Knowing his needs, he called for them, foods, liquids. He ingested them without tasting, hurrying to perfect a body which had known only pain, sickness, ill health since shortly after his birth. And the wondrous feeling of vitality swept over him as the task was completed and he, taller, heavier, perfectly formed, smooth-skinned, radiant with health, ventured out to look for the woman.

He found her in the aft portion of the ship. She was behind a locked door, but he could sense her. He sent. His mind, more alert, benefited by the cleansing of his polluted, sick body, knew now that it was not necessary to voice the words. "I must know. I must know all of it." She resisted. He placed his palm on the door, read the pattern of the lock, opened it. She was huddled on her bed. "I won't hurt you."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. He read the thought. At first he felt the old reaction. But he knew, now, that she was no angel. Nor was she an instrument of the devil. She was merely a human being from a far place, a human being with fantastic abilities, abilities which were no longer a mystery to him. He read her thought. *Handsome*. With sexual overtones. He was, at first, repelled. But that was unimportant. His brain, freed of the burden of his wasted body, worked rapidly. "I must know," he repeated. "Open."

He pushed. Her shield gave. She sighed. He saw her. *Blaze*. Beautiful. Desirable. Not evil. Mistaken, perhaps. For looking in he saw clearly the sweep of the civilization from which she came. He saw the *Trang* people, beautiful, perfect. He saw her wistful need for the euphoria of the drug and he saw her need for—other things and everything came clear to him. Back on Earth there was a lowered birth rate because of the fantastic overcrowding and the eternal misery of existence. The population of the Earth stayed static because of the lowered birth rate, because of child mortality, because of the early mortality of the average man. In her world there was no birth. Having discovered the secret of eternal life, the race had no need for birth, had expanded, after the advent of the mutation which opened up their healing centers, to give every member of the race adequate room, had ceased expanding, then, and for countless eons, now, there had been no birth, no death. Static. As static, in its way, as Earth. And neither was right.

Now he had the power to change it all. Somehow, he, sub-being, worse than retarded, more than moronic, had developed the power and, somehow, his brain, having never been used to full capacity, was more powerful than that of a member of the race. He could change.

"Can I make this change in people on Earth?"

I don't know.

He searched deeper. He saw, behind the *Trangized* race, the vast network of machines. Thinking machines. Idle machines. Wasted resources. The possibilities opened to him. He left her, smiling, not angry when, as he turned to go, his new, vital body straining inside his too-small clothing she let slip one last hint of her eternal need. He went back to the room of the machines. "Talk to me," he said.

The voice came. He opened to it. It blasted inside his skull, an attack meant to be fatal, an attempt to burn his brain, to kill. Startled, he closed, shot back. For a moment, he knew, once again, the fear of death, but the fear pumped in him, glands working, his every fiber fighting and, with a smoking, sizzling hiss, wires fused and things blew with little popping sounds and the voice, weakened, was controlled.

"Now talk to me," he ordered.

The voice faded. "Talk or—" He opened, projected, seeking the machine

mind.

Stop. You have already blown half the system aboard the ship.

"I'll destroy it."

Then you, and she, would be lost in space.

He closed. He had not considered that possibility. In fact, since the machines, or whoever was behind the machines, had apparently decided that it would be best to kill him, why shouldn't they strand him in space? He opened quickly, searched for an answer.

She is of the race. She must be protected.

"I'm like her. Yet you tried to kill me. Am I not of the race?"

You are—sub-human—more than retarded—worse than moronic.

"I was." He sent. A hissing and more smoke from the machines inside the room.

Stop.

"What am I?"

Mutant.

"From what?"

Pictures. A race, changing. Mental abilities opening. Vast change. Men becoming supermen. Words changing to thoughts. The ability to heal, to control the last, minute cell in one's own body. And a segment, relatively small, not changing staying the same. A minority outside the pale, a minority which still died and had disease and reminded the new, beautiful people of their former mortality. Then ships flashing out. New planets. The people who had not changed being exiled, left on primitive planets to exist as they saw fit, without benefit of the vast technology developed by men like them before the super beings mutated into control. A hundred planets all peopled by castoffs, worse than retarded, more than moronic—by the standards of the new people. Left alone. Left to develop and crowd themselves off the primitive, isolated planets through sheer breeding, left to war as the memories of the once great technology faded

and barbarism swept the uneducated descendants of the original exiles and now and then, before *Trang*, ships checking and checking until, as the race became *Trangized* and withdrew to garden planets and eternal love and euphoria, check sensors were installed to guard, to warn of any change in the lowly lives of the new barbarians on the exile planets. And some ugly pictures, too, as the machine fed history tapes to him, race members on a lark, going down, ravishing the females, guiding males into wild ventures. *The sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were air; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And God spake unto Moses, saying—Giants on the earth, half-god, half-man. The gods fighting on one side or the other in ancient wars. Flying saucers. White gods coming to earth on pillars of flame to watch the sacrifices on the blood altars of the Incas.*

Is that all there is? Was God not dead, but *Trangized*? Was man no more than the cast-off dregs of this race which first peopled a large portion of the galaxy and then rested, euphoric, never sated on eternal sex? Is that all there is, he thought? Then what's the use.

But his new vitality, the unbelievable feeling of health after a lifetime of misery, brought him quickly out of hopelessness. He pushed God away into a small corner of his mind. He was not prepared to reject God, although the foundations of his faith had been somewhat weakened. There were other things to think about. Back on Earth, Caster was in the hands of the Brotherfuzz. His first impulse was to turn the ship around, go back immediately. With his new powers he could fix the things they'd done to her. Unless— "The race is immortal since each member can regenerate his body indefinitely. Can they not be killed?"

The powers are limited, the machines told him.

"I could be killed by, say, a fire gun?"

By *any totally destructive method which would damage the*— an image of the portion of his brain which had newly come to life.

"Even a conventional bullet, then."

He could go back, but he would be one man alone. And one blast from a fire gun, one bullet could end it. But ahead of him, at the end of those incredible, unbelievable distances, were the means he needed to save Caster and to destroy the power of the Brothers forever.

"When will we arrive."

An expression in terms of time he didn't understand.

"In Earth days?"

He frowned at the answer. Weeks. Almost a month, with Caster in the hands of the Brotherfuzz torturers. Saddened, he paced the small room. Perhaps he should go back, try to rescue Caster, then go to the home system of these people and carry out his plan. But it was too risky. It came to this: Caster against the future of all the human beings on Earth. And the machines had talked of others like them, scattered on the outskirts of the galaxy on other Earth-like planets. Them, too.

"Caster, Caster," he said aloud. "Forgive me."

With some of the ship's computer system ruined, it was necessary for the girl, he thought of her as Blaze, after the rosy glow of her mind, to check navigation. He watched. He asked questions. She, impatient, feeling somewhat put upon to be called to do tasks usually handled automatically by the ship's system, told him that she was not in the business of education. When his quick anger seeped through his shield, she quickly suggested the educational potential of the system. He spent long days with the history of technology of the race being force-fed into his receptive mind. He encountered resistance, at first, but the machines were programmed to function on the command of any member of the race and his mind was now capable of giving orders.

He spent long hours learning about the potential of the ancient computer system which was now largely idle and, as ideas solidified, he began to communicate with the base system on the planet known as A-1.

"I need your help," he told the distant mind, which, to him, seemed alive.

I am programmed to protect and serve the race.

"We are of the race."

You did not develop.

"We can develop. I have developed."

This does not mean that all have the same potential.

"It is there."

Proof?

"There have always been those among us who showed the latent abilities."

Not always. Each exile was measured.

"All right, not always. But in written history. There was a man known as Jesus who could raise the dead." And Luke found himself, then, telling the old, old story as best he remembered. And there were others, evangelists, men of God who had healed. And there were the healing miracles in which a place became sacred in the memory of a saint and, the very memory of that saint having consecrated the ground, many people healed themselves with their own inner faith.

Interesting, but I am a servant of the race.

"You were built to serve an expanding race. You were built to help people the stars. You are now sterile, a great waste, idle. Your race is static. You can serve the race with a small portion of your capacity. It is no task for a great system, a galactic system, to control the shipment of *Trang* once a year and to send the small ships from planet to planet during the commitment changes between the members of the race. And yet, out there, there are countless stars, countless planets, waiting. And we have the people for them, people who desperately need the release of stellar colonization. Wouldn't it be satisfying to you to be directing, once again, a great, outward movement instead of a minor shifting of people from bed to bed?"

I am not programmed for emotion.

"You are programmed for function. I'm giving you a chance to function."

My first responsibility is to the race. I could not actively encourage the emergence of a rival race who could pose a threat to the race.

"From your own information I've learned of the richness of the

universe. The race has occupied a vast empire at the heart of the galaxy. But vast as that empire is, it covers only a minor portion of the total area. We could direct our expansion out ward. The fringe worlds alone would offer ample opportunity for a thousand years."

And after that?

"God will guide us," Luke said.

Your dependence upon this God has interested me. In the early days of the race, they, too, believed in a supernatural being. Now there are few who even remember the name of this being, or imaginary being. There were those who said he would be found when our ships began crossing deep space. The movement into space was actually opposed by some who said we were trespassing on his domain. Adventurers who visited the exile planets seized upon your belief in a supernatural being to experiment and, for some, to merely have amusement. I have no proof of the existence of any force save natural ones. Yet, I do not understand why primitive people, universally, create some form of worship. The race has existed for—a time period—without dependence on a god.

"And what has your race accomplished in this—time period?"

You are saying that the rule of the universe is movement. That is not necessarily so, although in nature the rule holds true in the form of change, revolution.

"I can only question. I can only ask why there is a universe. Why is there so much of it? Why are there planets capable of supporting human life? What is the purpose of life? Is it accidental? I don't know. I know only that the life of my people is a life of misery and that this misery could be eased. I can suggest that the original race set about accomplishing some purpose and did great things until they were—sidetracked—by *Trang*. I can suggest that it just might possibly be God's will that this purpose now be carried forward by the people of what you call the exile planets. Can you deny this possibility?"

I have insufficient data.

"Are you prepared to destroy me'."

I can destroy no life form unless it directly threatens a member of the

race.

"And if we arrange it so that there is no threat?" He voiced a plan.

We will talk.

The ship jumped past the outer fringes of the empire. The dense concentration of stars in the heartland of the galaxy made the recharging period brief. Then the home planet was below and Blaze was ecstatic. The landing was made under the supervision of the base computer. Informed that her presence was no longer required. Blaze departed. Within hours she was in her structure, *Trang* easing the frustrations of the long period in space, a new companion discovering that she was, indeed, one of the most accomplished, desirable women in the empire. She did not know that, days later, a vast fleet of huge ships lifted from various planets, rendezvoused outside the limits of the populated portion of the central galaxy, and then proceeded toward the fringe worlds. Only a few elders of the race, eager to return to commitments and *Trang*, saw the ships leaving, saw the vast, encircling curtain of deadly radiation spring up behind the departing fleet, a curtain which could not be penetrated by any living being. The secret of the protective curtain was locked inside the mind of the portion of the central computer which had been left behind. Aboard the fleet, other elements of the computer had been programmed, irrevocably, to consider the curtain a natural phenomenon which made the central galaxy forever off bounds for the new race.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Far away, people were dying. Thirty million perished during the first week of the rebellion against the Second Republic. The Brothers, alerted by the sobbing, agonized confessions of Irene Caster, broke out the fire-gun arsenal in panic and burned entire sections suspected of being nests of rebellion. In turn, as they fought for the things in which they believed, the underground devastated Brother areas with disease. The Republic of South American, seeing what it considered an opportunity, attacked the Second Republic from the south with conventional methods and with huge masses of troops. With the attention of the government diverted to the threat from outside, the underground survived and fought

with biological and chemical weapons. Outside, in the cities, the people took sides, some of them attacking government troops—armed with propellant weapons and a few fire-guns—with sticks, rocks, their hands. A lone enemy missile streaked through defenses, evading the antimissile weapons. A radioactive cloud rose over a vast burned-out section of South City. The Brothers set fire cannon to work, advancing by ground down the connecting isthmus, devastating the countryside, razing the cities, and millions died. Airborne fire raids on the southern continent left wide scars of smoking ruin. The intercontinental war lasted a month. It would take longer for the Brothers to ferret out the last hiding places of the scientific rebels, but the outcome was inevitable.

Under the frozen tundra of the northern reaches of the Republic, Colonel Ed Baxley, sickened by the slaughter, seeing the revolt failing, worked frantically to help the underground develop the fire weapon. He shared his knowledge and all the resources of the withering revolution went into the speedy manufacture of big fire cannon, which were deployed down the plains, taking unsuspecting government forces by surprise. But the battle took its toll of life, both among the combatants and the civilian population. The government, having gained capitulation from the Republic of South American, turned its full fury on the advancing rebel army. Battle lines were drawn on the wide plains of the northwest. The chemical fire of the weapons chewed the earth, burned it, the very soil, slowly, but the feared spontaneous spread of the effects of the weapon were, fortunately, limited. However, the Brothers were slowly getting the upper hand through overwhelming force and superior fire power. After three days of advance and retreat through a heated, smoking devastation, the rebel forces were encircled by a ring of fire and the circle was slowly closing.

Colonel Ed Baxley, commanding his second revolution, could see the end. Around him, in the ever-closing circle, his weapons met fire with fire, barely holding back annihilation. Now and then an overstrained weapon failed with a spectacular explosion and each time a weapon failed the circle closed.

Baxley had lived out of a ground car for weeks. He had not shaved for days. He had had three hours' sleep in thirty-six hours. His white uniform was soiled. Around him men walked as if they were already dead, zombies tired to the breaking point. He faced Dr. Zachary Wundt. Wundt, himself, was red-eyed, stubble-faced, weary with fatigue and age. Battle reports

were being relayed to Baxley by a former cadet who had joined the cause. They were all bad. When Wundt approached, walking slowly and with great effort, Baxley waved the cadet away.

They talked, the two old, tired men. Around them the air was dense with acrid smoke. In the near distance the fire ring pulsed, roared. A weapon blew with an ear-splitting blast.

Sadly, they agreed that it was hopeless.

They met in a battered city in a building which had been seared by a near miss. Wundt, so weak he had to be helped into the room, sat with his face lowered. Baxley, in a clean uniform, stood stiffly at attention as Brother President Kyle Murrel strode in arrogantly, escorted by helmeted Brothertroops.

"Well, colonel—" Murrel said.

"We request terms," Baxley said, eyes straight ahead.

"You have them," Murrel said. "Our terms. All ringleaders will be shot. All surviving scientists will become prisoners of the government. All medicines and equipment, will, of course, become state property."

"I must demand that our troops be treated as prisoners of war," Baxley said.

Murrel smiled coldly, "One hundred million people are dead because of you, colonel. Surely you would not be shocked by the execution of a few thousand more?"

"We can continue fighting," Baxley said. "We can cost you a half million casualties."

Murrel's smile did not change. "Actually, you've done the Republic a service, you know. Overpopulation was a problem. You've reduced that problem slightly. I, personally, would not object to a further reduction. However, I will agree to execute only the leaders and all those in your army above the third rank."

"But— "

"What does it matter?" Zachary Wundt asked. "What does it matter if we die now or next week or next month?"

"Why, doctor," Murrel said, "can't you heal yourself? A man with your ability should be able to cope with a few bullet holes."

"Couldn't you pardon the members of the rank and file?" Baxley asked. "Wouldn't you be satisfied with just the officers?"

Murrel spread his hands. "It is beyond my control. The people demand revenge."

"The people—" Wundt said. "The people..."

"You will command your forces to cease firing," Murrel said. "You will march them, in orderly fashion, into areas which will be prepared for them. They will carry no weapons. If there is any resistance, we will open fire."

Ed Baxley turned away to hide the tears which came to his eyes.

It was late evening before the word could be passed. Isolated groups refused the surrender orders and continued fighting. They were overwhelmed and burned out of existence. The bulk of the tattered rebel army marched listlessly toward the designated areas. The firing squads were already at work. Officers and noncommissioned officers were marched directly to execution areas. High-ranking personnel were imprisoned, awaiting public execution. The army disarmed, beaten, was crowded into three areas encircled by government troops and fire cannon.

The early morning saw a renewal of the firing squad activity. Colonel Baxley and Zachary Wundt were roused from their exhausted sleep and escorted to a small hill overlooking the valley in which the mass of the troops were concentrated. Kyle Murrel was there along with members of the government high command.

"I must report that my recommendation for mercy for the rebel army has been overruled," Murrel said. "It has been decided that there will be no reward for treachery." He turned to a uniformed Brother. "Brother General, you may proceed." The general raised his hand. Below, in the valley, crews looked to their fire weapons, the muzzles trained on the massed rebel troops.

Shocked beyond horror, Colonel Ed Baxley prayed. He prayed aloud. "God in heaven, don't let this happen."

They came out of the north. They came soundlessly, floating high, moving in formation. They numbered in the hundred, the thousands, huge, spheroid things glintingly metallic in the morning sun. A low murmur spread over the plains. Murrel, face gone white, stood with his eyes turned toward the heavens.

A shape detached itself from one of the large spheres, lowered silently. It hovered over the hill on which stood the President of the Second Republic and his military staff, shocked into momentary inactivity. A great voice came thundering down to them.

"I have the means to destroy you. I will not hesitate to do so. All Brother troops will lay down their arms and withdraw."

"The guns," Murrel said. "The guns!"

Orders were given. Fire cannon raised their muzzles to the sky.

"Fire!" Murrel said.

Lances of force shot skyward. The massed fire of the government cannon concentrated on the stationary spheres and there was a roar of power as weapons discharged massive beams. Visible, deadly, the fire streams shot upward and flared and were absorbed. The spheres were untouched. The small vehicle which had lowered toward the hill shot high, attached itself to a large sphere. The large sphere moved slowly, settling, making a slow movement above the circle of discharging cannon. The earth rocked and shook. Dust swirled as tremendous force was brought into play. It took five minutes for the sphere to make the circuit and when it rose there was, where the massed cannon had encircled the rebel army, a trench fifty feet deep and hundreds of yards wide. The smaller sphere detached itself once again, hovered over the now silent group on the hill. A small port opened. A boiling, vibrating blast of dust appeared only yards to the front of the Presidential group, Murrel bolted. The generals held their ground for a moment. One aimed a hand fire-gun at the sphere. The beam was absorbed. There was a sound much like the clapping of hands and the general who had fired was gone. In his place there was a smoking hole in the earth. Then it was over.

Stunned, not yet believing the sudden reversal, Baxley and Wundt stood nervously watching the sphere above them as a port opened and a man stepped out into open air and descended. He reached ground directly in front of them. He was dressed in a metallic garment. He was strikingly handsome, well muscled. He was smiling. He walked toward them. He paused.

"Who are you?" Wundt asked in an awed voice. "Where are you from?"

"I'm from East City," Luke said. "You know that Dr Wundt."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The computer had been right. Not all of the Earth's people had the capacity to make the change. Zachary Wundt and Colonel Ed Baxley were, as the first people whom Luke met and tested after his return, a source of great concern. When Luke first faced them, he looked into them and saw—nothing. He could use his power to make repairs in their aging bodies, but the potential for using their own life force was frighteningly absent. The vast, unused portions of their brains were fallow, incapable of being altered, having no connective passages to be opened. Luke envisioned disaster. He had seen the planet from space and new devastation had been added to the still unhealed scars of the old atomic war between the giant Communist powers. Now a good portion of the two remaining usable land areas was a fire-gun-scorched wasteland. He had counted on being able to alter those with whom he came into contact, make them capable of the feats which came so easily to him. He had envisioned a spreading wave of change, one person helping his brother to reach the capabilities of repairing his own physical imperfections, passing that ability to others, and the others passing it in a progression which would, in a short time, affect the population of the entire world.

Then he saw blank, fallow hopelessness in the brains of the two leaders and his hopes were, momentarily dashed. Desperately, ignoring the excited questions of Wundt and Baxley, he turned to others. He found that the capacity to change was present in a large percentage of those who had lived in the overcrowded cities. He wondered then, for a moment, remembering the old, old adage which said that God moves in mysterious

ways. It was hard to accept the supposition that God had made millions suffer in order to prepare the race for a great leap outward, but the fact remained that it was the poor and downtrodden who were able to accept Luke's penetration of the dark, closed ball in that large, unused area of brain. It was the suffering mass of people, those who had lived like rats in the hell of the cities, those whose bodies had altered through the tension, the irritation, the overcrowding, those with vastly enlarged adrenals and seared lungs and overworked hearts who had developed the unopened conduits through which could pass, with stunning stimulation from Luke's mind, the life force, the knowledge, the ability.

He found it first in a tired old non-commissioned officer on the fringes of the mass of rebel troops who milled and shouted and wondered at the vast fleet which had appeared so miraculously overhead to save them from the Brothers' fire guns. He saw the black ball of potential, shot power into it, sent the old man reeling down to his knees holding his head in pain. Then there was communication.

"Know yourself, brother," Luke told him in his mind, giving instruction, leading, showing the old non-com the key to it all. "Pass it on, brother."

It spread out through the troops with a visible ripple of movement, rapid, the aching, almost-dead city people finding a reward, at last, for the lifetime of almost non-living. And from the battlefield, small ships carried converters to the cities, across the country, to the south into the devastated Republic of South American.

"Know yourself, brother. Pass it along."

With the change spreading in a moving wave of wonder, the education process was begun. The fleet from the inner galaxy moved to key points, thousands of ships, each ship's system connected with the main computer, each ship able to reach into the minds of a hundred changees at once, force-feeding information to newly opened minds eager for knowledge.

Luke, having begun the wave of change, flew with Wundt and Baxley to the underground capital near old Washington, installed Baxley as temporary President of the Third Republic. The crippled communications system was augmented by the mind-to-mind passage of the news among the changees. Organization slowly began to come from chaos.

From the very first a special search team had been looking for Irene

Caster. She was traced from the shakshock therapy room in police headquarters in West City to a Fare home for invalids. The home, itself, had been in the path of a localized skirmish involving conventional weapons. The buildings were sagging, burned-out, empty. There was no trace of any of the occupants of the home.

"Too late," Luke said, when he received the report. "God I was too late."

He was with Wundt and Baxley. It was six days after Luke's return. Already, computer-educated technicians had patched the nationwide network of communications to establish a link to the west. The news saddened Luke. He walked to the wall on which hung a large, military map of the Republic, looking at it with unseeing eyes. He thought of Caster as she was when they were together in West City, gay, optimistic. He remembered the fright on her face as he was lifted by the girl called, in his mind, Blaze. He imagined the tortures she had endured, the final treatment on the shakshock rack which blasted her mind, left her a vegetable, for that was the only conclusion to be drawn from the information that she'd been sent to a Fare home for invalids. Then the local battle with high-explosive shells tearing and blasting and ripping the buildings and people fleeing in panic, those who could move. Caster, perhaps, not realizing the danger, moving slowly, zombilike, walking into the path of the onrushing troops.

She was dead.

He had to accept it.

And there was an empire to be built.

It was estimated that some 60 percent of the population had changed. Another small percentage would be reached, but that would leave almost 40 percent of the people in misery. Orders went out. Those who have the life-control power are to use it to heal those who have not been able to make a change.

Time passed. Local areas elected representatives to the First Congress of the Third Republic. The congress approved Luke's unilateral appointment of Colonel Ed Baxley as President, pending organization of the elective machinery based on the old system of the First Republic. Luke spent long hours in consultation with Baxley and a staff of newly changed, vibrant, healthy young men. There was so much to be done. A task force

was set to work revamping the industrial facilities of the Republic. Plants which had produced endless lines of useless ground cars turned to the making of elements which went into ships patterned after the fleet which Luke had brought into the last battle on the northern plains, for vast as it was, the fleet was inadequate for the purpose of resettling almost three billion people on new planets scattered long light-years along the periphery of the galaxy. Another task force went into the Republic of South American, working toward union, toward peace among the survivors of centuries of warfare and pestilence on a tired, wasted planet. Vast efforts were underway to clean the environment of the Earth. This effort had priority, since it would take years, decades to complete the colonization of new planets and, moreover, there were those who were sentimental about the home planet, who wanted to keep it, return it to health and beauty.

It became increasingly apparent that the non-changees were being left behind. Baxley and Wundt, healthy, cared for by the changees on the staff, found themselves turning over details more and more to the vibrant young men with the expanded minds. It was thus over the entire area of the two continents. Those who could not change found themselves being left out. They were treated with courtesy, but there was a touch of condescension which, as the exciting days passed, brought a crisis. The crisis came when the majority, the changees, voted to limit the franchise to changees only.

Colonel Ed Baxley, at the head of the table, resplendent in white, rose, his face grim. "Gentlemen, I find myself, as President of the Republic, in an untenable position. You are saying that I will be unable to exercise the basic rights of citizenship."

"The rule will not apply to you, of course," said a bright young changee.

"Why should I be allowed special status?" Baxley asked his face flushed. "I am, along with all the others who have not been able to change, an inferior being."

"As I understand it," Dr. Wundt said, with a rueful smile, "We are being punished now for having lived a childhood of comfort."

"Perhaps we can find a way," Luke said. "Research is under way."

"I don't have your mental abilities, my boy," Wundt said, "but I'm a medical doctor. I've studied the matter. Encephalograph of changees and

those who have the change potential, when compared with the ordinary brain, say the brain of the colonel or myself, show differences so basic that I, in my ignorance, hold no hope of ever knowing the feeling of being a superman."

"But we can help you," Luke said. "We can heal you, keep you healthy."

"And keep us as poor, retarded relations locked in a back room?" Baxley said.

"No, not at all," Luke insisted.

"He is right, of course," said one of the young staff men. Luke looked angrily toward the speaker.

"I've always wanted to go into space," Wundt said. "It's been a lifelong dream. Give us, the retarded relations a back room, a planet or two somewhere. Give us a basic technology, medicine—"

"But that's exile," Luke said. "That's what they did with us."

"Yes," Wundt said. "I've been thinking of that. It's almost as if there had been a long-range plan, almost as if we were put here, God knows how long ago, to act as a blood bank for the race, to furnish new blood when the old became tired, inactive. Now they had lapsed into complete inactivity. You might even say they're being rewarded for good work. When it comes right down to it, being eternally healthy, euphoric, sexually stimulated, without care or responsibility is not a bad way to live."

"But don't you see," Luke said, "we'd be doing exactly as they did. We'd be pushing you out, cutting you off from all the benefits of our new status. You'd face death, disease, poverty, war, all the old things which have made this planet a living hell."

"It wasn't always a living hell," Baxley said. "Once it was good here."

"Then you want this, too?" Luke asked.

"In the past weeks I've found myself pretending that I understood the things that are happening," Baxley said. "But I've been fooling no one but myself. Ask your young men. They come to me and say, 'Mr. President, there is this situation in Middle City,' and I listen and nod and don't

understand half what they're saying. It's like putting a baby who can't even speak in charge of a group of adults."

"We'll talk about it," Luke said.

The first ships lifted away two months later. Scout ships, sent out during the early days of the change, reported habitable planets in the group of stars surrounding Antares in Scorpio. Non-changers went eagerly, happy to leave behind the yet uncured filth and pollution of the Earth, pleased to be among people of their own kind. With them went the knowledge to build a civilization based on science and medicine with a limited space capacity, for it had been discovered that the knowledge needed to man and maintain the starships came only with the expanded mind.

As the word went out across the two continents and the giant starships flashed outward, they came by the millions, the thousands, the hundreds, in a diminishing trickle, all the non-changers, flocking together with people they could understand, seeking the clean air and expansion room of the new planets.

Irene Caster was discovered with a small group who had been, since the battles around West City, hiding in caves on the rocky coast. Notified in New Washington, Luke flew out quickly. She did not, of course, recognize him. Even if her mind had been whole, she would not have seen in the muscled, handsome, vibrant young man the slack, sick, wasted, middle-aged nineteen-year-old who had gone with her into West City to preach and try to heal.

She was sitting in a chair in a bare, efficient office at the port which had been built on the wasted site of the last battle. She had been sorted out of the mass of non-changers by the identification-record method, which was to be a permanent history of all those who went to the new planets. Her fingerprints, checked against the undamaged central file in old Washington, had matched those which Luke took from Zachary Wundt's records in the old underground. Without fingerprints, she would never have been recognized. She was forty-two, a ripe old age in the olden times, when a member of the masses lived a long life if he reached thirty. She looked sixty. Her hair was dirty, long, and lank. It had turned a streaky, unattractive gray. Her body was flabby, weak, racked by disease and malfunction. The old lung disease had ravaged her. But in those respects she was not unlike thousands of others who had not yet been

treated by the life powers of the changers. The difference was in the livid, relatively fresh scars on her face, her neck, the exposed portions of her arms and legs. Her nose had been ripped by the torturers electrodes and had grown back in the shape of an obscene, white, diseased vegetable. One eye had been gouged out and the empty socket was sunken and raw. Her tongue was deformed, enlarged to the point of making it impossible to talk, very difficult to eat and swallow. And the inner damage was equally appalling. At the end of her torture when death would have been more merciful, the Brothers had treated her to shokeshock to the point of permanent damage of much of the brain. She was a walking vegetable. Her one eye was blank, expressionless. She had been kept alive by the group of non-changers through some miracle, for they, themselves were wasted and near death when the word reached them and they came in to seek treatment. Since the able-bodied ones in the group had lived on slimy weeds salvaged from the sea, on a few mollusks, and on garbage stolen from the fringes of the city. Caster, getting only the leftovers, was near starvation, in addition to the other heart-breaking disabilities of her body.

Luke cried when he saw her. He couldn't stop the tears of anger and pity. For a long moment he regretted the policy of pardon which the new people had adopted toward the Brothers and their minions. For a moment he felt the urge to blast and kill, to main and torture as they had done. He controlled himself with an effort. He knelt before her. "Caster?"

She looked past him blankly. He took her hand. The fingernails had grown back, deformed by the vile things which had been done to them. Almost automatically, he started the correction process, using the vast powers of his mind. He had never before met such a challenge. He worked rapidly. He healed scars and straightened broken fingers. He went inside, doing the physical things first, easing the pain-racked body, thinking that it would be best, before restoring the mind, to heal the damages done by time, age, and the Brothers. And, without admitting it, he was afraid to look into that damaged mind, afraid of what he'd find. His powers were limited. If large portions of the brain were destroyed, he'd be helpless. And there was, further, the possibility of finding, even if her brain could be repaired, that frightening lack of contact in the important portion of the brain where the abilities of the race were centered. So he mended and healed and gradually, slowly, her breathing eased, became natural as she coughed out waste, leaned to vomit waste, voided waste.

He lifted her from the filth of her body and washed her. He had been

unable to do anything about the missing eye. That could be remedied later with a transplant from a newly dead body. People still died in accidents. That was no problem.

Seeing her undressed, her body restored, Luke realized the vast changes which had come over him. Once he would have cringed away in disgust from a nude female. Once he would have been unable to even touch a female, much less strip filthy clothing away from her, wash the wastes of her body from her. Now he did the job without repugnance. She was beautiful. There had been given to her by his mind a beauty of health which made her body youthful, full, firm, shapely.

Finished, her body functioning more perfectly than ever before, stunted as it had been by the Earth's environment and by the gradual dying process which began shortly after birth in all non-changers, he dressed her in a clean singlet, and fearfully, looked for the first time into her tortured mind.

The way was blocked. He could not see into the change center of her brain, because the shokeshock treatments had clogged, damaged most of the cells through which he had to pass to enter the dark center.

The process was long and tiring. It went on for hours while, outside, the big starships rose with their cargoes of equipment and humanity and orderly masses of people loaded and waited and talked and dreamed. Cell by cell, connecting track by connecting track, he worked inward, restoring the potential which had been destroyed by what was, in effect, a shock lobotomy of massive proportions. And, as he worked, his fear grew, for the damage was severe. She would have a functioning brain when he finished, but if the damage were deep enough to reach into her memory bank, it would be a newly created brain devoid of knowledge, as receptive as the brain of a new-born baby.

The room grew dark as the day ended. There was little to be done. Already he could see past the final obstructions, could sense the area, the vital area, where there would or would not be the vital *thing* which would determine whether she would be whole—he found himself thinking thusly, being as arrogant about his new status as the young people who agreed that it was best to exile the non-changers—or merely human. And it mattered greatly to him. Having found her, he could not face the thought of losing her again. If she were unable to change, he thought, as he rested, preparing to make the last repairs which would enable him to slip into the

unused portion of her brain, then it would not matter. But, sadly, he knew it would.

He entered. Floods of memory hit him as it shot up out of the isolated memory bank, rejoined. She screamed. She leaped to her feet crying out. He held her. "Caster. Caster. It's me. Luke. Listen to me. It's all right."

"No!" she was screaming as she relived the torture, remembered the final, shuddering, terminal agony of brain killing on the shakeshock rack. "Oh, God, help me..."

He held her close and she subsided. She looked at him with her one eye. The empty socket was grotesque in her face. "Who are you?"

He didn't answer. He held her close, no longer fearful of the contact with a female body. He held her because she was dear to him, because out there on the new worlds it would be, once again, man and woman. It would be child-rearing and work and—he let the word come—love. And, in silence, he went in and found a dark, solid ball, the telltale blackness of unused potential, and he felt a surge of elation as he sought an opening, probed, found a weakness, entered, and said, in her mind. "Hello, Caster." And he tried to soothe the pain of opening, but she cringed, cried out, clung to him in agony until he could complete the opening, until, with a bright, red glow of excitement and elation, her mind answered him.