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# The Changeling Worlds

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## Chapter One

Reclining comfortably three feet in the air, with his robodressers scurrying in silent deftness around him, Richard Makepeace Kirby struggled with the weighty problem of deciding whether to take the .1 needle gun or his new variable-aperture flarer to the forthcoming party. He pushed the problem away to be solved later and said to Molly: "We've been married for—what is it—four days now? Do you want a divorce for this party tonight or shall we stay married for a bit?"

"My vote says we stay married." Molly walked slowly from her dressing room. "And I was thinking we ought to have had a baby by now."

Kirby said casually: "Sure."

"After all, that Margot Bailey bought one the day she married that thin young architect; I forget his name."

"That wasn't her last, was it?"

"No. Three ago."

"His name was Jim. All right then, Molly, why don't you drop by the B.E. tomorrow and pick one out." He chuckled suddenly and a robodresser seized the chance of running the pin-stripe trousers onto his legs. "I don't have to remind you we'll have to stay married for a year. Can you stand that?"

Molly put the foot-long ivory cigarette holder into the corner of her mouth and said: "I don't like the way you say that, Dick. Of course I don't mind."

"Ah, but," said Kirby, "will I?"

"You'd damn well better not! I've a good mind to go right down to the B.E. this minute and buy a baby—"

"Hold it! Hold it!" Kirby sat up, his body moving against the magnegrav field without conscious effort. He looked across the bent backs of the temporarily baffled robots at Molly. "We take off for this party in thirty minutes."

Molly coughed on her cigarette holder. "Ow!" she wailed. "I've no idea what fancy dress to wear. I came in to see if you had any suggestions." Molly was wearing a petulantly perplexed expression and nothing else.

Kirby said: "I have, but thirty minutes isn't long enough. And I won't suggest you go as you are. Remember Alice Evans?"

They both laughed with tired, malicious amusement. The Set was still giggling over poor Alice and her dramatic entry to a party. At one of the incessantly regular parties she appeared as Eve-before-snake until the U.V.'s caught her nude back and everyone could read a certain suggestion some joker had scrawled there in fluorescent crayon. Abdul Rahman had shouted above the uproar: "Take the snake's advice, Alice—cover up!" The joke had gone the rounds and been fresh for a whole week.

"Anyway," continued Molly, dragging her half-practical, half-butterfly mind back onto her own problems, "what are those ghastly objects you're wearing? What are you supposed to be?"

Kirby recognized Molly's gambit. In only four days of marriage he had learned more about her than all their previous three-week acquaintanceship, which was as it should be, he had decided luxuriously more than once. He smiled and the robodressers took their chance and ran the black frock coat up his arms and settled it neatly about his wide shoulders. He rolled off the magnegrav couch and stood up. He spread his arms out and twirled on tiptoes.

"You look like some dam' great vulture," Molly said.

"Flattery comes naturally to you, my dear." Kirby had to move his head half-an-inch to allow the robodresser's aim to settle the silk hat on his head and he frowned and made a mental note to send the thing for adjustment. "I am a symbol of a vanished age, a romantic figure from the past, a —"

"A bag of wind. And time's running out."

"I'm a Twentieth Century capitalist," Kirby said shortly, obscurely annoyed that Molly had effectively punctured his little pantomime. He

might have done better to have married Yolande; at least she had no brains, and brains in a woman of The Set were a proven emotional hazard. Five minutes with Molly proved that.

"One of those," Molly said, tapping cigarette ash into the suction floor gratings, "from Earth, I suppose?"

"Oh, surely. Old ancestral home and stuff like that."

"Thank you, Dick. I shall go as a Twenty-First century TV personality. All you need is a contrast make-up and a sheath. I remember that from school."

"Well, hurry it up. I have to meet Alec, don't forget. Haven't seen him in two years."

"Alec! Oh, wonderful! My sister June was married to him for a week. Didn't work. But I blame June—"

"Go, go, go!" shouted Kirby. He pointed at the door and made shooing motions. Molly, pouting, went.

The unaccustomed clothes did not chafe Kirby as he walked slowly towards the picture window. The equation between near-perfect robot servants and perfect service was one being solved every thirty-hour day, without thought and without comment. Had the fancy dress not fitted Kirby like a second skin, he would have felt vague annoyance and called in a robot repair-robot.

From the window he had an uninterrupted view across the village and, not for the first time, he debated whether to continue to live here, a few degrees off the equator of Beresford's Planet, or take an idly casual stroll around this end of the Galaxy in order to turn up a different and more exciting home. As he had with the weapon problem, he pushed this one aside too. The first sun was on the point of setting, and rich violet shadows stretched away from him, throwing the outline of the building onto the grass and concrete below. As everyone had long ago agreed that to live in a penthouse was the only possible way to live, everyone lived in penthouses. Below Kirby, the tracery of supporting columns and elevators and service conduits laid an amusing shadow pattern across the village square and cut the central fish lake into segmented patterns of darkness and glitter.

In about twenty minutes, when they took off for the party over at Kraswic's, on the other limb of the planet, the second sun would be rising here in orange and red splendor. Not that anyone bothered much about where the suns were in the sky since everyone was almost continuously embarked upon a party that might last a mere week or extend until all the

guests had departed for fresh parties. There was talk of a party over in the Narciss system, three light years away, that had been running for ten years now. If it were a good party, then, why not? Why break it up if the drinks were still flowing and the conversation amusing and the women beautiful? What else to do if you broke that one up except go on to another that might be a bore?

To be a member of The Set, Kirby decided, stretching, was a very good thing. Life was good. Life was amusing. He felt very contented.

He would still be contented even if Molly did intend to drop by the B.E. and buy a baby. It would be amusing to have a baby. And very much in fashion, too. Yes, life, including wife and baby, was very good to Richard Makepeace Kirby.

A shadow flitted on the picture window sill and a wall valve opened. A cheerful, bubbling voice said: "What on planet are you wearing, Dick?"

Kirby turned with a smile and extended hand. "Hullo, Wynne! Glad to see you." The two men shook hands.

Wynne Statham was tall, slender, elegant, polished and looked a fool but wasn't. His height matched Kirby's but Kirby could never have donned the red-and-lemon jacket Statham wore.

"Where's Molly?"

"Dressing. You look fit, Wynne. How's the Galaxy these days?"

Statham gestured largely. "It's still there." He spoke as though a billion stars remained in their orbits only through his own magnanimity. Kirby chuckled. Statham was a bit of a crackpot, but a worthy member of The Set and one who added zing to any gathering.

"Any stories?"

"A million, my dear Dick." Statham glanced around, located the joy-dispenser and headed across. There was no need to ask Kirby if he might use Kirby's possessions; possessions were by their very nature communal property—apart, that is, from the very personal things of a man's life, and these a man would kill to protect. Statham selected his dope and unbuttoned the sleeve of the vivid jacket. He gave a little gasp and a satisfied wriggle as the needle slid in.

"That's better. Feel more like my old self now."

"What happened?" Kirby was fascinated by the personality-shift. He didn't dope himself—at least, not much—and he considered that he derived greater enjoyment from watching other people enjoy themselves

than he would from indulging in the harmless habit himself. He couldn't explain his attitude, but it amused him; and that was the important thing in this life.

"What happened? I'll tell you. But you haven't told me what those perfectly horrid things are you're wearing—if 'wearing' is the word for it."

"Twentieth Century capitalist." Kirby was beginning to wonder if his brilliant notion had been so luminous after all. He would be getting touchy about the clothes soon.

"Really?" Statham walked around him, studying the pinstripe trousers, the black frock coat and the silk hat. "Didn't they wear some sort of neckcloth like a butterfly?"

"I believe so. Bow tie, they called it. I looked it up. But I prefer to leave my neck open to the breeze in the natural way." Kirby felt vaguely that he had been caught out cheating. "After all," he protested, "this was a hell of a long time ago and, anyway, it's fancy dress."

"Five thousand years ago, that's all. Plus a little bit for accuracy. I'm disappointed in you, Dick." And Statham laughed.

Kirby laughed too. You could laugh, with one of The Set. Of course, with anyone else—say someone of another Set—it would have been a killing matter.

Laughing, Kirby remembered and immediately felt loutish. He said: "Oh, sorry, Wynne. Forgive me. How's Eva?"

"Nothing to forgive, laddie. We parted company. She was... well, you know... a little too much. Especially after that outrageous business off Starholm."

"Oh?"

"Name's always attracted me. Starholm. It's a black symbol world, you know. Funny thing. The old *Liza*—"

"I thought you'd sold that yacht and bought yourself—"

"No, sir! Found I couldn't part with the old *Liza*. She's a real beauty, still does fifty parsecs per—"

"Well, what about Starholm?" Kirby suddenly had a horrid thought. "You didn't set down on the planet? You said it was a black symbol world. You didn't—?"

"Steady, laddie." Statham wandered around the room, deliberately tantalizing Kirby and, at the same time, on the lookout for any new acquisitions that might have been added since his last visit. Kirby, despite

the irritated feeling that Statham was a jackass, still chuckled at thought of the set of Sirian carved gemstone chessmen that was very securely locked up. Most friends had taking ways. That was why they were friends. Statham began his protracted business of choosing a cigarette and flicking for the robo-dispenser to pop it between his lips. He had the decency to go on talking during the performance.

"Sure, I knew Starholm was a black symbol world. But I thought I'd drop down and rustle up some fun with the natives. And Eva wanted to have a swim."

"Wynne! You utter idiot!"

Statham had the grace to look microscopically uncomfortable. "Well," he said gesturing vaguely, "you know how it is when you feel a marriage is breaking up. And it makes it megatons worse when you're in space at the time. Sorta cramped, if you follow me."

"But, Wynne," Kirby persevered. "Starholm is a black symbol world. Lord! I know you and I were usually off woman-hunting or surf-riding or something or other when we should have been attending lectures at school. How we made University with honors still beats me, but we still learned the Law. And we still had time to understand very thoroughly that, of the color symbol worlds we may visit, black symbol and red symbol are strictly off limits!" He paused and looked balefully at Statham. "If you told this to some people they'd... well... they'd never talk to you again. Civilized people just don't meddle with black and red; they stick to the white and golden worlds."

"So I'm a nut case, Dick. So okay. So the old *Liza* doesn't boast any swimming facilities." He went on excitedly. "I've seriously thought about installing a non-grav swimming bubble after this. Well, what do you think? Long before we were within disc-sight of the sun, a great ship heaves up and warns me off! I tell you, *warns me off!*"

Statham dribbled smoke in his remembered indignation. Kirby did not laugh but remained quiet, waiting for the other to go on.

"I told them who I was and they were cloddishly impertinent about that, I can tell you. Warned me off! I left. Had to. They actually fired a shot at me. Well, not actually at the ship, but across her bows. Eva was green."

"They shot at you? In space?" Kirby felt profound astonishment. "I know you were breaking the Law, but to shoot at you..."

"They might have hit me!"

"Well," said Kirby, exasperated, "who were they?"

"Called themselves Interstellar Patrol."

"What! But that's tri-di nonsense!"

"I agree it's straight-from-the-gutter drama. But they shot at me and turned Eva green and warned me off." Statham had mangled his cigarette and he tossed it away. "Interstellar Patrol! Poppycock!"

Although he felt a certain difference, Kirby could not refrain from saying: "Well, after all, Wynne, you know you were breaking the Law. I'm not preaching; you know me better than that. But the Law stands for a reason and it... well, it's just not amusing to go around breaking it."

"Oh, I know all that. But weren't they breaking the Law, shooting at me in space? Barbarians!"

"I suppose, Wynne," Kirby said softly, "they were some of us? I mean... people? They might not have been by any chance... ? Well, you know, it's difficult..." His voice trailed off, skirting the uncomfortably hard reality that no one cared to face.

Statham, in his irate state had no such scruples.

"Oh, they weren't aliens, if that's what you're mumbling about. They spoke good English and they looked as Homo sapiens as you or I. I had them on the screen. They were wearing some fancy dress uniform, all black and silver. I *thought* it was fun and games at first, until they shot their damned great cannon off."

"And talking of fancy dress," Kirby said. "Here comes Molly. Now perhaps we can start for Kraswic's."

Statham gave a dignified whistle of applause and lecherous admiration as Molly glided in. Kirby was aware of a glow of pride, ownership and secret possession as he looked at Molly.

Her contrast make-up was not overdone, and it was evident that she had ordered her robocosmetician to use a light touch. Her blonde hair was sleeked down and shone softly, framing her face. The sheath dress was a pale, golden clinging webwork of hair-fine fibers around her upper body, waist and hips. Her face and figure showed through an enormous plastic imitation TV screen, one of the old two-dimensional TV peepshows. Her legs were veiled in diaphanous mahogany-colored silks which created a superficial resemblance to a TV cabinet. She walked with a gliding, swaying motion that did very un-TV-like things to the "cabinet."

"You look positively antediluvian," Statham said. He chuckled. "I'm wondering what Miller will have to say."

"I didn't know he was on-planet," Kirby said.

"Oh, yes. And as full of mystery as ever." Statham took Molly's arm. "Come along. Every minute we stand here is a minute's drinking time lost." He hustled Molly out through the wall valve and into his personal flittercar. Following, Kirby wondered which particular little item of news he had picked up in the last half-hour was bothering him and causing him to feel not so satisfied with life.

He slid the .1 needle gun under his arm, having made the decision without thinking about it, and took comfort and reassurance from the touch of the cold metal.

## Chapter Two

John Hassett picked up his small plastic-rolled grip, glanced around the tiny one-berth cabin which had served him well on the run from Frome and, whistling cheerfully, walked through to the control cabin. Not only space politeness demanded that he say thank you to the captain. Skipper Balakirev was an old friend and had done all he could to make the run—for a man he considered as good as dead—as pleasant as possible.

Hassett, at first, hadn't known if he shared that grim opinion of his mission. Oh, sure, Guyler had been picked up in a number of pieces after being spewed out of a combine harvester that had been rugged enough to go on working, but that was a simple occupational hazard as far as Hassett was concerned. He smiled, walking nimbly along the corridor to the gravchute. Like any other man he couldn't envisage himself as dead. He might be able to do it with some mental gymnastics; he couldn't do it with his emotions. Which was, he considered gravely, as he checked the whistle, just as well.

Balakirev was a florid, heavy, jovial man with an affectation of shortness of breath so that he puffed as he spoke. He greeted Hassett jocularly, jerking a thick thumb at the forward screens. Around them the control room hummed quietly to itself, arranging landing flight patterns.

"There's Brighthaven for you. A dinky little black symbol world. We've just been cleared in by the Patrol." Balakirev caught his lower lip in his fingers, released it and said: "You've not been down on a black before, John? Popsup Bureau sorted you out a right one this time." He laughed.

"I have, skipper. Since last we met I've cleared up a couple of messes."

Balakirev plumped out his cheeks. "Messes is right. Popsup is a fine

notion, but sometimes I wonder... well... why in blazes we got stuck with it. Is it worth it?"

"Poppycock!" Hassett laughed studying the world opening out below. "You and I and the Popsup brass know the value of it all. Once it started nothing could stop it. That I risk my neck seeing the wheels remain greased gives me something to live for." He shivered mockingly. "I've just left a party at Kraswic's. God! Think of spending your whole life running from party to party in The Set!"

"I prefer not to."

"It'd drive me up the wall."

"And me," Balakirev said sourly. "But they're the people you and I work for."

"I try to forget it most of the time." Hassett pointed. "Isn't that the spaceport?"

"That's right. Just north of the temple. All restricted area. No trouble in putting down. Not like some Popsup worlds. They're murder finding a secret spot." He moved across to the control console. "Ah well, as you said, it makes life worth living."

He began to speak into the microphone and soon spaceport control was on the air and reassuring them. They could drop straight down on atomics. The automatic landing was smooth and simple, and then Hassett, grip in hand, was walking with a spring in his step into Reception.

The girl in colonial gray looked up with a smile and twisted the register for him to sign. He signed with a plain, strong hand: John Arbuthnot Hassett. The girl handed him his room key and said: "As soon as you've changed, Archbishop Ramirez will receive you."

"Thanks."

Hassett went up in the elevator and changed in his fourth floor room. It had a view overlooking the wide concrete spaceport and the ship. He noticed the lack of activity over by the loading bays, the lines of silent transporters and the motionless robots frozen in their last movement and still waiting for the next orders. An air of decay had already settled over the whole layout like a fine coating of dust on an oiled machine part. Well, he told himself severely, that was what he was here to see about.

Archbishop Ramirez had entered the spaceport area an hour ago and now sat quietly reading a tape fresh from the ship, delivered personally into his hands by Balakirev. Ramirez was small and wispy and carried his

ethereal appearance well. His luminous eyes seemed to possess all the wisdom and all the mercy of the universe and his fragile hands the power of complete absolution. Back at home, on infrequent furloughs, he had the capacity to cram ten years experience into a mere six months party-going in The Set.

The room was small and comfortable, with just two armchairs, a table set up with drinks and mixes, a silent, cooling fan and the tape-reader, with which Ramirez was fiddling when Hassett walked in. Ramirez looked up.

"This darn thing's broken down on me, John. The standard of robot we get out here is terrible." He extended an almost transparent hand. "How are you, John?"

"Fine. And you?"

"That's a silly question, lad. We wouldn't have asked Popsup to send you out if things were fine."

The archbishop, who was wearing khaki shirt and slacks, looked critically at Hassett's clothes. "Well, they still remember on Frome what we wear out here. Although that tight jacket went out of fashion three years ago. You'll pass muster, though. All the better, really; you're going to have to pass as a very low-grade machine minder."

"Oh." Hassett made a face. "What's it all about? I'm constitutionally opposed to physical labor—"

"We all are. It's the curse of our times. The Galaxy, or at least, our little part of it, would be a very different place if we all did a bit of work for our living." Ramirez caught Hassett's expression and smiled. "Sorry, John. I'll amend that. Physical labor for our daily bread. Your special brand of blood and thunder still doesn't really come into that category."

"What happened to Guyler?"

Now it was Ramirez' turn to grimace. "He walked into something. Just what, we don't know; that's part of your job to find out. Everything here on Brighthaven was beautiful six months ago. Then the people began to slacken off production. They presented me with next year's plans and I was horrified to see they'd curtailed agricultural production by forty percent."

"Forty percent! That's no temporary rearrangement of supply and demand."

"Of course it isn't." Ramirez leaned back in the armchair. He pulled out cigarettes and offered the packet to Hassett who, temporarily flummoxed

by the unusual action, spluttered over his words.

"Come on, John! You're on an outworld, now. No robots for everything here, you know. Robot handlers on the apron, and that's all."

"Sorry. Fine sort of undercoverman I am."

"When we asked for you to be sent out we'd heard of your work with Miller on—where was it—New New-Jersey? You didn't fumble there."

"That was an industrialized world. I was a ferry-rocket pilot to their three big moons."

"Yes, Frome was buying machinery there, I remember. Well, here we buy agricultural produce, and next year there is to be a forty percent cut. That could mean that some of the Frome Federation worlds might starve." He lit their cigarettes and puffed smoke and reconsidered. "No. Not starve, of course. But some of the people outside The Set might not have their usual choice. That would annoy You Know Who."

"So you sent Guyler to find out why these people were going to deprive Frome of their food. And he wound up in a combine harvester."

"Yes."

The monosyllable was uttered with malevolent violence. Its effect was quite beyond its intention. Despite himself, Hassett felt a tremble inside him that profoundly disturbed him.

Ramirez said: "And now we're sending you."

The attempt to laugh it off was nobly done. Hassett leaned back negligently in the chair and blew smoke. The rings were imperfectly formed and he brushed them away irritably with a sweep of his hand. Ramirez' kind, wise old eyes watched it all, but the archbishop made no comment.

"Well, where do I start? Any leads for me?"

"Remember that the Frome Federation—that's all the new worlds out towards Sector Ten as well, don't forget—began on dear old Earth. Nobody goes there any more and for all I know they're back to wood and flint spears and polytheism again. But what we mustn't forget, ever, John, is that we're all men, Homo sapiens. The people living on this planet are Homo sapiens, too, although they don't know it. They have a perfectly good agricultural ecology and are as happy and contented as any planet has a right to be in our part of the Galaxy. We look after their kids, doctor them and ward off epidemics, supply them with all the pretty-pretty baubles they like in the way of films and motor cars and domestic gadgets

and gimmicks like that. All we ask in return is that they sell us their produce. And, since they produce about a hundred times what they can eat, the whole deal works out fine."

Ramirez sighed and put his hands together, speaking around the dwindling cigarette. "You may care to postulate that they have suddenly discovered a hatred for the people who do all this for them, that they have suddenly discovered that they don't know who we are or where we come from or where their produce goes; you can speculate all you like."

"But?"

"But all I can tell you is that they've suddenly discovered that sixty percent of agricultural work next year will suit them fine. And Guyler was murdered."

"So I take it from there?"

"You take it from here."

"What's my cover identity?"

"Lagash Tony. Tractor maintenance man. A reasonably high-grade position, despite my cracks when you came in. Here are your credentials."

Hassett took the envelope and flicked through the contents. Letters, driving license, tractor repair courses certificates, the usual paperwork an agricultural laborer would carry. "Lagash," he said. "Lagash."

Ramirez delved inside his khaki shirt and produced a transceiver the size of a cigarette packet. He clicked it on and raised an eyebrow at Hassett.

Speaking without moving his lips, Hassett said into his surgically buried mike: "Receiving me okay, Archbishop?"

The receiver, buried in his skull behind the ear, vibrated and Ramirez' unmistakable dry old voice said: "I hear you, Lagash Tony. Reading me okay?"

"Okay."

"That's that, then. Fine." Ramirez stood up as though the effort were against nine g. "I have a service to conduct in the cathedral in fifteen minutes. You could do worse than join the congregation. Get the feel of these people." He chuckled. "They speak English, although they sometimes call it Brighthavenesque. You've been indoctrinated to your satisfaction, of course?"

"To my satisfaction, yes," Hassett said, rising. "But will it satisfy the people who murdered Guyler?"

"Oh, I can tell you who that was," Ramirez said casually. "At least, I *think* I can. Can't be sure, of course."

Hassett just stared at the old man.

"There's a little club on Floral Street here in town. Young people go there and talk politics, music and sex. Place called the Yellow Rat. Guyler went there the night he was murdered. And, naturally, you must expect the police here to be your enemies. Our own system was thoroughly cleaned out after Guyler died, but no one knew a thing. That's why we want to start afresh with you."

"Considerate," Hassett said, and still managed a laugh. They both went to the door. Outside the sunshine was slanting in, and Hassett's watch, adjusted to planetary and zonal time, told him it was five-thirty. Night and day here were at this time of year, mid-fall, evenly divided between twenty hours. It would be dusk in about half an hour or so. The archbishop waved a casual good-bye and Hassett found his own way off the strongly guarded spaceport area through a long tunnel that led up into the house of a buying agent. The agent, a nervous man with a tense smile and a limp handshake, was called Sims. He opened the door for Hassett and he stepped out onto the street of the alien town.

Away over the huddled housetops, the cathedral spire rose against the dying light, tall and gray and very comforting. That spire was Frome's rallying point here on Brighthaven. To it, as a last resort, Hassett could appeal with some little hope of safety.

A shadow detached itself from the opposite side and paced him up the street. Dusk was now dropping down rapidly. Hassett felt the premonitory prickle of danger. At once he relaxed. It looked very much as though he had been spotted right at the beginning of this assignment. He cursed a little, wondering just who he was going to grill at some later and more luxurious date, and decided to head straight into the challenge.

He crossed the road.

The shadow resolved. A nearby street light revealed a tall, well-built woman with hair that, in the lighting, showed black as ink and twice as shiny. Her skirt, cut three inches above her knees in the current fashion, showed shapely legs. Hassett did not make the mistake of looking at them. He'd seen plenty of those in his time and confidently hoped to see plenty more.

She moved so that she stood directly in his way.

Her voice was throaty, too throaty. It was disguised, Hassett's analytical

mind said, without need for debate.

"Agent Sims have any message for me, big boy?"

"*Big boy*," Hassett said to himself. "*Ouch!*"

"Good evening," he said pleasantly to the girl. "I'm afraid I don't have the pleasure—"

The arm that locked around his throat smelt of beer and sweat and was very strong and very hard. It choked off his words. In his ears, a voice said softly: "But we do. We have very great pleasure—in killing you! Start saying your prayers ..."

## Chapter Three

Kraswic's party was in full blast when the Kirby group arrived. The Set usually sent off a party with a swing, and this one promised to be wild. The probability was that news of its festivities would attract other party-goers to replace those who fell out to catch up on their sleep. Kraswic had partially degravved a crystal bowl and had filled it with scents and sounds and vibro-stimulators. What lay outside the crystal world of gaiety and high life was of no interest to the roisterers.

They had trooped in by the hundreds, in all manner of costume, and their fluttercars filled the parking lot so that the robots' scurry was magnified to a frenzied flicker that reflected the frenetic activity within. Everywhere the new two-time music insinuated itself into every molecule, giggle-gas balloons plopped, narcotics circulated, drinks were dispensed shoulder high by roboservers, men and women laughed and drank and talked and shouted. The noise spurted into the overheated air like lava from a volcano.

Everyone was having a good time, faces were flushed, powder clung on men's clothes from the intimate contact of women's arms, feathers tickled nostrils, streamers flew, the two dozen recorded bands thumped unceasingly and the pipelined supply of drink was running at full pressure.

Perched in cunningly concealed nooks around the walls of the crystal bowl, drenched in flowers and vines, little arbors clinging to balconies served to give a mite of privacy for quiet talk, confidences, assignments. There were maskers intermingled with the throng and occasionally a fight broke out. But quickly it was effectively quenched by the robo-attendants and their flatulent spray. Noise, heat, music, drink and the heady perfume of rare wines and expensive scents combined into a soul-stirring slice of life.

Or so thought The Set.

Alec Kirby was sitting talking to a tall, intense man in black when Wynne Statham pointed him out to Kirby.

Kirby shook hands with his brother with evident pleasure, a pleasure that Alec reciprocated and which, for both of them, was not lessened by their complete dissimilarity.

Kirby said: "About time you looked us up again, Alec. Molly here wants to know about her sister—"

"Please, Dick!" Molly broke in, blushing at the social *gaffe*. "Let's talk about Alec."

"Well, what have you been doing, you long-faced preacher, you?"

Alec Kirby, two years older than his brother, was smaller and thinner. For the party he had deigned to wear fancy dress, but in keeping with his character and way of life he wore the plain dark trappings of a warrior monk of the Hecula system from the Fortieth Century. His costume was historically accurate for a great deal was known of the Hecula system of only three thousand years ago and no one would have been prepared to overlook any discrepancy. The professional fancy dress organizers were eagles on that kind of sloppiness in social conduct.

"Doing?" Alec said with his usual puffy indignation of speech. "I'll tell you what I've been doing." He waved an arm about him, at the screaming girls and guffawing men, at the luxury, the high-living, the wine and narcotics, the hurrying roboservers and the casual waste of a planet's resources. "Parasites! Parasites, the lot of you. I've been out where men are men, and—"

"Women are women!" Molly shouted, her eyes glittering. Statham joined the laugh. They must both have been hitting the dope, Kirby realized, and wondered again if he ought not to join in the social swim. He had always held back; he failed to understand why.

"I think you're nearly as nerve-shattering as your sister," Alec said.

Kirby glanced quickly at him and saw again the prim mouth and tight, unemotional eyes. The man was his brother, but sometimes there was no gainsaying that he was a bore—and a boor, too. "Another missionary stunt, Alec?" he asked easily.

"No stunt, Dick. This means something to me, something very personal. I suppose there's a self-gratification complex tied up in there somewhere, but I like to think I'm just a saint without recognition." He laughed easily and without affectation.

"Boor?" thought Kirby. "No, just different from the rest of us—more alive." He couldn't see the primness of mouth or the tightness of eye after that without acknowledging their origins. His brother had just come back from the Big Dark, working on perilous missions in the face of official hostility and social apathy. Any man would grow restive and taut under those conditions.

Since their parents had died in a flittercar smashup going from one party to the next, the Kirby brothers had gone different ways among the worlds. From piling up platinum cups for all manner of athletic activities at University, Richard Kirby had gone naturally into the social swim of The Set. He had been offered a career, but careers had not been fashionable that year. He wondered what he would be doing now had he accepted. So the shock when he had met his brother, all dressed in cowlish black, had been the more severe. Alec had said simply that he had received the call and intended to go as a missionary to the primitive worlds to bring them the luxuries of civilization that the people of Frome took for granted.

Kirby would always remember the intense, fascinated way Alec had said on his last night: "Do you know, Dick, the natives of Paulsford's Planet haven't even automobiles? They use steam railways. How do you expect the Galaxy to grow strong with backward peoples like that around our necks?"

To which Kirby had replied with a light laugh and an invitation to the next party and said to hell with the poor, downtrodden natives of Paulsford's Planet.

Looking at Alec now as he spoke in that nervously indignant way about a new planet he'd found and how he'd started the people off with tape readers in place of messy fragile paperbound books, Kirby felt a glow in him, a glow very similar in degree but different in kind from the glow that had pleased him when Molly had walked in in her scanty TV personality dress. Being perfectly honest with himself, the glow for Alec was the stronger of the two.

Dammit to hell! What was wrong about liking your own brother?

The thought spurred him vivaciously into the conversation, and he seized a passing robowaiter's tray and dispensed drinks lavishly with his own hand. He became aware that Molly was no longer with the party; neither was the intense man in black. He laughed and wondered what Molly would shock the poor guy with. Alec was speaking.

"... actually cutting people's insides open to get at the appendix.

Shocking affair. Yet would you believe it, I had a devil of a job to persuade them that an oral dissolver was quick, painless and foolproof? They just clung to their old barbarian ways, carving great holes in people's stomachs and cutting off—"

"All right, Alec," Statham said, with a little giggle. "Spare us the gory details."

"Slack!" Alec said. "Spineless! That's the trouble with the Galaxy today. You refuse to face up to facts!"

"We face up to them, Alec," Kirby said. "And we like what we see here; we don't like what we see outside."

Alec sniffed. "You ought to come with me on my next missionary trip. Open your eyes."

Kirby and Statham, as one, caroled: "Sorry. We've a party to go to!"

In the midst of all the brittle, frenzied haphazard living around them, the religious fervor in Alec stood out like a sooty finger track down white linen. It made men uncomfortable. Statham was fidgeting already. Out of politeness and friendship for Kirby, he had remained talking when quite evidently his immediate desires were to leap headlong into the milling, heated throng on the floor. Under the partial gravity, dancing became a thing of feline beauty and grace, effortless and interminable. Kirby gestured indolently.

"Look, Wynne. Isn't that that chick from Lyra?"

But Statham, with a wild whoop, had gone.

A girl with streaming draperies, flushed face, and flowing green hair, her white-painted mouth open and shouting, rushed upon Kirby and began to drag him off to her friends. Laughing and unresisting, he allowed himself to be drawn along.

Alec moved. His arm raked up. A thundering denunciation poured from his lips. The giggling crowd, half amused, half awed, fell back. Kirby, feeling a fool, was left standing midway between them. He swung on Alec.

"Look here, Alec! You may be a missionary, but why don't you save all that religious stuff for the outworlds? We came here for a bit of fun!"

Alec took Kirby's arm with a gesture that at once touched and mollified the younger brother. There was in Alec Kirby at that moment a crumbling, defeated look of great humility that, as well as amazing and discomfiting Kirby, demanded his help and reassurances.

"What is it, Alec?" he asked gently.

"I'm sorry about sending those people packing, Dick. But this is the first chance I've had to talk to you alone. Old Wynne Statham is all right but—"

"—But a little too fluttery for you, eh? Aren't we all?"

"Oh, yes, you're all gilded butterflies dancing your intoxicated saraband on the lip of the volcano," he chuckled dryly. "I can reel that stuff off by the yard. Funny thing is, I believe it, too." They began to walk slowly towards a vine-covered arbor set against the curving crystal wall. Because of the partial gravity, they staggered a little as though drunk. "I've got to tell someone, Dick, and you're the best person I know."

Kirby said nothing. He merely stared.

Alec said: "I'll be brief. You know missionaries are not liked by the Federation. The Set regards them as religious fanatics. We suffer abuse from those we try to help. But we go on." He closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes, we go on. But the hostility has sharpened lately, Dick. It comes to this: I fear someone is trying to kill me."

Kirby knew his brother. He reached for the heart of the matter.

"Who?"

"I don't know. If I did I wouldn't have this helpless feeling as though I'm in a sack just waiting for the executioner. My flittercar blew up when a robot pressed the starter; it ought by rights to have been me. There have been one or two other instances, each one a bit more bold."

"You've no idea at all? Not one of The Set; they wouldn't bother to kill like that... too clumsy and vulgar. The Federation? Fantastic, yet, in view of your religious calling, possible. Who else? Personal enemies? Women?"

"The whole thing has me worried. I'm not frightened of dying, no sane person is; but I've no wish to go before my time, and I'm a little choosy about the way I go."

"Aren't we all? And, anyway, it's just not right this way. Not amusing at all."

Alec pressed a hand to his chin, finger and thumb biting into the corners of his mouth. "To be honest, Dick, I've reluctantly come to the conclusion that it must be the Federation. In just the past few minutes, talking about it, gauging your reactions as a member of The Set... I don't know. The Federation!" He slammed his hand to his side. "It's crazy! I've no real personal enemies who wouldn't issue a challenge in the proper, formal way. The Set we rule out. So that leaves—"

"The Federation."

"They've balked me at every turn, as they do every missionary: permits late, incorrectly filled out, restricted to ridiculous worlds, no transport, censorship, the Law breathed down my neck every minute." He was no longer the puffily indignant missionary but a bewildered man trying to find out why someone wanted to kill him. "And if any part of the Federation wanted to dispose of me, I am absolutely convinced it would be the Popsup Bureau."

"The who?" said Kirby. He had never heard the term before. It sounded vaguely threatening. He envisaged black-garbed executioners and bloody axes and the quick flare of megaton weapons.

Alec began to say something in a tired voice. Over his words Kirby heard a shrill scream. The scream was followed on the instant by a cackling gabble of women's voices, and through them Kirby could hear Molly's loud, wrathful tones. He cocked an ear.

"You no-good two-timing bitch! You unfunny, unamusing, moralistic vixen!" Molly went on quite blithely. Kirby smiled and twisted to see. A knot of seminaked women were clustered into a shining area of hair and powder-free backs and waving arms. In the middle, briefly, he caught a glimpse of a magnificent coppery head of hair. Locked against it—too tightly locked against it—he could just make out the smooth blonde sheen of Molly's hair. Kirby frowned in irritation. This might be serious.

"Excuse me a minute, Alec," he said, giving his brother a friendly bang on the shoulder. "Maybe you've just been imagining things. Maybe not. And maybe a quiet word or two with Vansittart might straighten things out. Now don't worry." He was already turning away. "Keep smiling."

The women were ominously forming a ring. Kirby thrust Alec's problems into the back of his mind and strode rapidly towards the melee. He saw a roboservant trundle up. He groaned. Under the robot's plastic plate lay neatly the two *epées*, the shoes, and the single grail-like cup of coffee.

Behind him he heard Alec call something, but heard only the one word 'alone' distinctly. Then he was pushing into the ring of abandoned and excited women, thrusting to reach Molly.

The redhead was a fine strapping girl, quite young, with the smooth scraped face a redhead needs to carry off the glory of her hair. Her body was lightly clad in some plastic concoction, and it was clear that fancy dress had been of secondary consideration to maximum exposure and allurements in her choice. Kirby realized that here was another Alice Evans phenomenon and wondered when women would wake up a little earlier in

life to the fact that a little discreet covering goes far farther in arousing men than the naked-and-unashamed act. The girl looked tough and competent, though, and was a good three inches taller than Molly and a fair number of pounds heavier. And it wasn't baby fat, either.

"What happened?" he demanded roughly, but still controlling his voice, still elegant. It wasn't amusing to descend to beast level at the slightest provocation.

"Going to buy a baby!" shrilled the redhead. "Look at her—what a fine mother she'll make!"

"You'd be a sight different today if I'd been *your* mother!" Molly flared. Her big TV screen had been torn away. She had freed her legs from the clinging mahogany drapes. All across one cheek lay the red welt of fingerprints. Kirby checked the redhead. No sign of a slap there. Molly must have been slow.

The robot tinkled its little bell, and for a few yards around the people grew silent and opened to form a lane. The robot trundled up and down, laying down the rubber strip mat, precisely two meters wide by twenty-four meters long. Above their heads hung the watchful monitor robots twitching the shining nozzle of the flatulent spray. Kirby wanted none of that; he'd been doused once and had been nauseated for a week after.

His attention was again drawn to Molly. She was swaying gently backwards and forwards, her hands on her hips and her legs braced wide apart. She swayed like a dirigible at her mast being balanced for ballast. Her face was still lovely despite the contortions she was managing to put on it in order to express her contempt for the redhead. She swayed a little too far forward and staggered three little half steps before she caught herself. Kirby stared horrified.

Molly was drunk—as blind as a bat!

And she had to fight a duel with a young girl who would be out to kill her as remorselessly as a snake.

Kirby turned and Statham was at his elbow.

"For God's sake!" Kirby said. "Stall them off! I've got to sober Molly up." He glanced about wildly for a robot medic, but could see none. His own kit was with his cape in the cloakrooms.

The redhead was flexing her arms and knees, bending up and down with a flexible, jaunty spring. Molly hiccupped. Then she laughed and staggered sideways. From the growing crowd came a few laughs and jeers

and cheers. "Come on Sandra! Go to it, redhead!"

Kirby felt a strange, icy rage flood over him. He thought, most oddly, of Molly wanting a baby.

The robot had finished laying the rubber mat and now trundled across to the two women isolated in the center. The plastic cover flicked up. The two *epées* gleamed silkily under the lights.

Sandra reached in and selected a pair of shoes and slid them on with the quick, practiced fingers that told of familiarity and sobriety. Molly was still fumbling with the magne-catches when Sandra took an *épée*. The big redhead whistled the *épée* about her head, cut and thrust for fun, then made a few lightning-quick lunges that brought cries of applause from the crowd.

"Go on, Molly!" shouted Kirby in an agonized plea. He could not stop this now; no one could. It must go through to its grim conclusion until one of the girls was either seriously wounded or dead. He had no second thoughts about Molly's chances. For Sandra was a pro, a girl out to gain a towering reputation as a duelist, and it seemed that Molly had walked right into her trap blind drunk.

Molly took her *épée*. She swung it about raffishly. A few ironical cheers sounded. Kirby's fists were gripped so that the nails hurt his palms. Statham had disappeared.

The robot pronounced the words, tinged its bell, and rolled off. Complete silence fell over that part of the great crystal ballroom. Now everything was ordained. There was now no longer any chance that Molly could be sobered up.

Now she must fight it out alone.

The two girls fell into their fighting crouches. The *épées* rose and fell as the girls straightened up in the formal salute and then, as they resumed their crouches, the swords flicked straight across, forming a silver line of death.

Kirby stood there, the blood thundering in his head, wondering why he was so wrought up thinking of Molly and her baby.

Then the swords met in a clang of anger and the duel was on.

## Chapter Four

The arm around Hasset's throat was most unhygienic, and to a man

from Frome that was as bad as the physical pain of the fiercely gripping lock. He refused the imperative that flooded his mind to send a call to Ramirez over the buried transceiver; this was a mere routine part of the job and one that must be tackled alone.

The Brighthaven man said with savage satisfaction: "This is where you die, alien..."

Hassett did the obvious thing. He tensed himself up so that the assailant could feel it and began to lean forward to toss the man over his head. You could break a man's neck that way if you knew the tricks. The heavy breathing in Hassett's ear quickened as the man checked the forward movement by a cruel backward heave. Feeling like a man dealt five aces, Hassett went with the movement, hooked a leg backwards around the fellow's legs and they both went over backwards in a flailing welter of arms and a crashing thunder of falling bodies.

He had to watch the girl. She might step in with some lethal weapon now and take the pot.

The man was very silent. Hassett gripped the arm about his neck, twisted it off his body. The man did not move. Knocked out, Hassett surmised, and with the thought was on his feet searching for the girl.

Her long twinkling legs were visible as two gleams beyond the lamp, and then she was gone, vanished into the shadows.

Hassett laughed. He bent down and twitched the Brighthaven man's face into the light. He was unconscious. Blood trickled blackly onto the pavement from the back of his head. A quick search of the pockets revealed the usual paperwork a man would carry and, quite automatically, Hassett pocketed the lot. He moved the fellow's body into a more comfortable position and then loped off away from the area of light, into the shadows, after the girl.

The whole affair, from the first challenge, had taken perhaps forty-five seconds. No more.

As Hassett loped along, he entered an area where lights were more frequent, where people were moving in a steady stream towards the somber glory of the cathedral doors. He was forced to slow down to a normal walk.

The archbishop had suggested that attendance at the service might prove fruitful and provide a lead to the general feelings of these Brighthaven folk. Well, Hassett rubbed his neck ruefully, he'd found out quickly enough what they thought of outworlders. But how had they

picked him up so fast? And that attack was smoothly mounted; planning was evident there. Maybe the glamor gal hung around like Lili Marlene under the lamplight, waiting for anyone to leave agent Sims' house. Then, when the sucker was baited along, tough guy broke in with his smelly arm and broke the fall guy's neck. Maybe.

And maybe it had all been set up especially for him.

Hassett maintained his regular walking speed, but angled off and took the first turning that led away from the cathedral. He'd found out a great deal already and he had a hunch that if he stayed around this neck of the woods too long then someone *else* would be put onto him by the girl or one of her confederates. The cathedral no longer offered a promise of succor. He would do best to leave this part of the world alone, including the Yellow Rat on Floral Street, and start where they weren't waiting to jump before he was even started.

Hassett was just an ordinary man of Frome, with all the normal likes and dislikes. He knew what fear was, and joy, and the fierce excitement of the chase—as either hunter or hunted. He remembered going through to see Balakirev on the spaceship and his fleeting thoughts about possible death. No, he had no wish to die; he had a job to do. He may have been just an ordinary man but he was engaged in an extraordinary profession.

Finding out who had killed Guyler was only a part of that job, a relatively unimportant part at that. Hassett had to find out why these people were turning against the men of Frome. A symptom of that was the murder of Guyler; another symptom was the cutback in agricultural production. Of the two, Hassett was willing to guess that the forty percent cut was nearer the heart of the matter and would yield him quicker results.

The map he had memorized showed him the quickest way to the train termini. As he walked easily through the streets, he could not but notice the brick buildings, the slate and tile roofs, the iron-shod tramways and the overhead electrical connections—all so ugly and unaesthetic. The streets were filthy by his standards: twice he passed a dropped newspaper, cigarette cartons blew about, and the half-chewed cigarette ends and burnt matches were legion.

Then he thought of Starholm, where they tipped night soil and every type of refuse out of the windows to fester in the center of the streets, and shuddered. He shouldn't grumble at this place.

The first train terminus he reached had no trains scheduled to leave for another hour, so he walked on to the next, the western terminus, and

bought a ticket for the next express, due to leave in ten minutes. As far as he could tell, he was not being followed. Practically speaking, that meant he was not. His senses in these matters were finely attuned.

Going through to the waiting room, he branched off to buy a cup of local coffee and thought about the dinner he would buy on the train. He stood casually leaning against the counter, under the metal and glass of the station roof, watching people in the Galaxy-wide scramble that inevitably takes place under a station concourse. Most of the men and women were dressed in much the same way as he was; the men certainly had more drape to their jackets than the one he wore, but their trousers were still thonged in under the knees and flared, slit, over flat sandals.

The women, in mid-autumn, wore brilliantly colored shawls draped in many different folds across their shoulders, and their dresses were mainly of blue or brown, plainly cut, with ample flouncing. The younger and more daring a girl was, the shorter the skirt she wore. Overcoats, cloaks or capes were almost unknown on Brighthaven. The world was, from a climatic viewpoint, lush at this latitude and even well up into the higher numbers. There were rudimentary snow caps only at the poles. Brighthaven was an agricultural world, and as such the men worked the land, the women cooked and bore children. The economy was as rudimentary as the pole caps.

Watching the activity, Hassett thought back to his last furlough among The Set. The surroundings there were familiar. They'd covered a number of worlds on that party, he recalled, flitting from solar system to solar system on what he foggily and pleasurably remembered as a monumental binge. However much he might deplore living permanently among The Set, at least there he was home. Here, in the middle of this alien, somber scene, he was not just off-home, he was off-culture.

He decided to call Ramirez, and then remembered the archbishop would be right in the middle of the service, dressed in elaborate cope and vestments, thundering righteous wrath at the devils of the netherworld and exhorting the peasants to grow more. Hassett reminded himself to call him on the train later.

The station announcer squealed and squawked and Hassett went with the crowd through the barrier and onto the train. The engine was a double-headed diesel-electric job that he felt sure had been built on one of the planets of the Jason Solar System something like two hundred light years away from Brighthaven. Not for the first time he began to work out the economics of it all, wondering if it might not be cheaper to make the engines on the planet where they were to be used, came up with the

conclusion that it would, collided headlong with the fact that they were not, and sat down in a corner seat and began to read the evening paper.

Outside the night was purplely black, and scattered lights occasionally passed like specks from a distorted venturi. The train was comfortable and warm, even allowing for the incredibly primitive mode of transportation it represented. Hassett was able to indulge in a good dinner and to return to his seat satisfied. So far no one had questioned his right, as a tractor repair man, to ride in first-class comfort. Until they did, he'd wait that one out. The train roared on into the night, the whistle screaming as they passed little communities that might have been beyond the Horse Head Nebula for all Hassett knew of them.

He stayed with the train for the next three days, cursing because Ramirez had, tactfully, suggested that a tractor hand wouldn't take a sleeper. The train jolted over plastic-filled expansion joints in metal rails—how primitive!—and rolled against torsion bars around curves and burrowed with eldritch wails through mountain barriers. "Give me a flitter-car every time," grumbled Hassett, and prowled the corridors, bouncing from the plastic foam upholstery as the train swayed gently. On the fourth day he decided he'd gone far enough—he couldn't have taken that seat for another night—and alighted at the first stop of the morning.

He accepted the form to be filled in to obtain a refund on his ticket which would have taken him clear across the continent and tore it up in the station forecourt.

The town he was in contained no more than a small hotel, half a dozen stores, three saloons, two service stations and a huddle of leaning plastic-and-glass ranch-type bungalows done in the once fashionable split-level design. Hassett walked through rich golden leaves fallen from overarching trees, to the hotel. The morning was bright with a blue tangy haze that told of trash burning, and the leaves made a pleasant rustling as he passed. He went up the three steps to the hotel's wooden porch in one bound and realized that he was enjoying merely being alive.

As he cut the photo-electric eye, and the plastic doors swung open, he heard a bell begin to ring in the distance, then other bells joined and a campanological vibration of the autumn air began and continued merrily as he walked across to the reception counter. He guessed this was just another manifestation of Archbishop Ramirez' religious web. Here a humble minister, a son of the soil, would exhort the local peasants, playing them taped transcripts of the sermons preached by Ramirez in the far-off city.

He tapped the little brass bell. An odd, choked sound reached him from a velvet curtain at the rear of the counter. The curtain stirred. A man thrust it aside and came through, glanced keenly at Hassett, grunted "Good morning," and went round the counter and clumped out of the door. All Hassett had time to see was the thin erectness of the man, his white hair and neat, shabby clothing.

Then the curtain stirred again and a girl advanced to Hassett. She was young, pretty in a doll-like way, and was pregnant. Her hands were shaking. She had been crying and was still crying. Her face was all puffed up and tears glistened on her cheeks.

"Sign here," she said before Hassett could open his mouth. She pushed the register across to him.

Hassett tactfully lowered his head, expecting that she would tidy up her face. He signed in a weak, sprawly hand: Lagash Tony.

When he looked up she was standing still, unmoving. Her face still shone with sticky tears.

"Uh—good morning," said Hassett. He tried to pass it off, to appear casual, matter-of-fact. "Nice changes they're ringing this morning. Nice set of bells."

"Bells!" the girl said. She raised both shaking hands to her head and thrust the fingers through her hair. "Bells! I hate them! I hate all the filthy rotten aliens!"

## Chapter Five

The two *épées* flickered like lovers' tongues. They slid around and about each other, tinkling with that peculiar sliding screech of metal on metal that is the most thrilling sound in the world to a fencer. Feet padded the rubber mat. Stamp and lunge, riposte, parry, draw out the sword arm and—thrust!

Kirby groaned. A red stain appeared on Molly's right shoulder. The tip of Sandra's *épée* gleamed in answering redness, the color a livid blur in the speed of movement. Molly was breathing heavily through her mouth, panting, eyes wide and fixed and drunken. Sandra was smiling. Her face as cold as the mask of death.

"For God's sake... !" shouted Kirby.

"Go to it, Sandra!" called many voices. The heat was intense. Reviver

pills were being eaten by the ton. Refresher sprays were pumping gallons of pick-me-up into the scented atmosphere.

Tiny two-man aerial platforms were gliding towards the duel from all over the crystal sphere. Leaning on the gilded railings, pairs of people—almost inevitably a man and a woman—gathered above, showering down flowers: roses, carnations, shastabells, daffodils, Sirian singing cups and, grimly, lilies.

The blood pumped painfully in Kirby's temples. With agonized eyes, he saw the sweat pouring down Molly's face, heard the animal panting, felt the next quick tickling lunge of Sandra's point sliding into Molly's stomach. Sandra was playing with her opponent. She wanted to inflict wounds.

Blood rilled in Molly's navel and spilled down as she moved awkwardly. Gradually her golden fiber sheath was being scissored from her.

Molly could fence! Molly was a first-class duelist. Many and many a time had Kirby fought it out with her until, breathless and laughing and passionate, they had collapsed together onto the wide waiting bed. He stared fiercely at her now, willing her to remember her skill, to let her muscles take control, to blank her mind, to allow all that wonderful rhythm and co-ordination to take over and sink the shining blade deep in the redhead's guts.

Molly gave ground. Two, three, four paces. The end of the rubber strip approached. Sandra eased her attack. No fencer would want to leave the strip and fight upon the polished wooden dance floor. No professional killer would wish to give an opponent the chance that a lucky slip might point the wrong blade home. Molly pressed now, but her excessive drinking slowed her reactions, deadened her arm.

If Sandra had wished for a quick killing, Molly would have been dead by now.

Kirby found himself thinking that that might have been the most merciful way out. Odd, he thought, for one of The Set to think about mercy.

Molly was gradually being smothered in blood... her own blood. The tip of Sandra's weapon was red-stained, the rest as clean and fresh as when she had lifted it from the robot's case. The uproar grew in volume. Kirby was sweating as profusely as Molly now, and his tongue hung out of his slack mouth. His eyes followed everything and every fresh cut upon Molly's body was felt as though inflicted upon his own.

He lost all hope. How long, he thought despairingly, could this go on?

Sandra's eyes brightened. She began to fight now with greater determination. Facing her was a gory hulk that still maintained a barrier of steel, that occasionally hiccupped and that kept up a loud continuous panting like a maltreated animal. Molly couldn't throw off the drunkenness under the impetus of danger; there was far too much alcohol and dope in her for that. She needed just the prick of a needle tipped with the drunken-antidote that now lay infuriatingly uselessly in Kirby's cape.

It would all be over in a moment or two. Having played with her mouse, Sandra now wished to finish it all off in a last spectacular blaze of swordsmanship. She could do it, too. She *would* do it! Nothing that Kirby could do could stop it.

He just stood there, frozen; then something began to happen to his mind.

For the first time since the duel had begun, there was silence around the ring. And for the first time, Kirby could see in Molly's wide eyes a tinge of fear, the dawning of an understanding that this was one situation she could not laugh off, could not quip her way out of, could not, even, fight her way out of.

Statham appeared at Kirby's side.

"Molly," Kirby said. "Poor kid. Poor kid. She's too drunk to fight properly, but she's not drunk enough to be beyond fear. She knows what is happening, but she cannot do anything to stop it." Kirby stood rooted where he was, quite unable to do anything, unable to rush into the area and strike up the swords. Etiquette would then demand that the host draw his own pistol first and shoot the suddenly strange interloper, the outcast. Afterward, ritually, everyone else would, in their own several ways, express their disgust and contempt of such conduct.

Quite suddenly, Kirby saw Molly clearly. He had married her off-handedly, out of whim, yielding to her soft persuasiveness, liking her a lot and thinking it fun. This evening she had wanted to buy a baby. Now she was going to die.

Kirby saw Molly and for the very first time in his life, he saw himself, or as much of the shadowy self as is ever vouchsafed a man to see. He knew, then, what he must do.

It would be amusing to rush out there and shock all these people. They wouldn't understand he was doing it for the thrill, for a new experience, and because he knew he had to do it, whether he loved Molly or not. It was

an obligation upon him, some atavistic throwback that had been generally crushed out by modern civilized living. He would shoot that sadistic bitch Sandra, throw his arms around Molly and then they could both die together, shot to pieces by their outraged friends.

Yes, it would be amusing.

He moved a half step forward and began to draw his gun.

A hand of surprising strength caught his arm. He swung round, astonished, and glared at Wynne Statham.

Statham said: "No, Dick!"

"Get out of my way!"

"Hold it, Dick! Here's Miller. He'll—"

A sudden long indrawn breath from all the close-packed spectators brought his head round. Molly was down on one knee. Sandra stood back. Obstinate, a shining red figure of utter stupidity, Molly struggled back to her feet, shook her head, extended her *epée*. And as she did so she staggered and hiccoughed and wiped her *epée* hand drunkenly across her eyes.

In that confusing double movement of the *epée*, Sandra began a lunge, changed her mind and, reversing, backed up to resume her crouch. Everyone knew that this was the end. This was the kill.

A shadow moved in the corner of Kirby's eye. He could not tear his gaze from Molly. Statham held his arm, and in that hold the sudden determination to act had to be built up again; he couldn't bring himself again so easily to perform the action that struck clear across the grain of his beliefs and upbringing and cultural patterns.

The shadow was smoking a pipe. Quite clearly Kirby heard the muffled, plopping expulsion of air.

Molly stiffened, suddenly, and then slumped.

The shadow in the corner of Kirby's eye said in a strong, firm voice: "Atta girl, Molly. Take her."

Molly laughed, a high-pitched, drunken giggle that chilled Kirby. His wife lurched and gravely recovered her balance. The *epée* waved dangerously.

Sandra began a confusing barrage and Molly clumsily backed away. Kirby saw that clumsiness and a great and sudden hope flared in him.

"Hold on, old chap," said Statham in his ear. "She'll be all right."

"She's going to trounce that bitch," said the shadow, who was surely Miller.

Molly's actions were now slowly growing in meaning and intelligence; Kirby recognized the quick wrist-flick he had taught her the day they'd... Now Sandra was in trouble. The crowd, ever fickle, began roaring for Molly.

Sweat started out on Sandra. A red weal sprang into livid life on her shoulder. One breast sprouted a crimson flower. Sandra gave ground. Her movements, though as deadly, as efficient as ever, still could not cope with the more deadly attacks of Molly.

Then, suddenly, it was all over. Molly, unlike her opponent, had no vicious desire to prolong the agony.

Sandra riposted. Molly played it along, and as Sandra recovered, Molly lunged forward, her left arm flinging forward and her whole body going down to rest on the flatly extended left hand, her head up and the right arm fully thrust out. The *épée* was a sliver of steel piercing through any defence any fencer could contrive.

Sandra went over, doubled-up around Molly's *épée*.

Smiling with her blood-filled mouth, Molly stood up, panting. She thrust back the frame of golden hair which had fallen forward like a dawn cloud. She stared around the blood-crazy ring. She spat.

She said: "The navel always was a good bull's-eye."

Then Kirby bounded forward and caught her as she collapsed.

When Molly opened her eyes and sat up in the arbor to which Kirby had tenderly carried her, Wynne Statham and Miller were there to ward off the flushed horde of congratulators. Molly accepted a cup of coffee, drank it down, then looked at the cup.

"Guess I passed out before I could drink the ritual cup of coffee," she said. She laughed, a deep, happy laugh from the throat.

"Molly," Kirby said.

"Sorry, Dick. Was in too far before I realized it was a put-up job. That Sandra was laying for me. Another scalp for her belt."

"She'll be all right, you know," offered Statham. "The medic robots have fixed her up already. Maybe she'll want her revenge."

Kirby laughed. "Maybe. But I doubt it. She's a young frenzy-kicker, out for a big reputation. She won't want to cross swords with someone of

Molly's caliber again."

"You were magnificent, Mrs. Kirby," said the shadow in Kirby's eye. Kirby looked at him.

Miller was inconspicuous. Shadow was a good tag for him. His thin mouth and deep-set eyes were at odd variance with his classically straight nose; yet the whole remained unmemorable; you could pass this man ten times in an hour and not really notice him once. His body was compact and lithe, and Kirby saw that his fancy dress—a strolling minstrel, complete with electronic zither of the Sixty-Second Century double-star worlds of Ziggatha—effectively concealed the strength of that body. Kirby was amused that he could see so clearly himself.

"Thanks, Miller," he said now. "You saved both our lives."

"There you are, Miller," burst in Statham. "I told you the idiot was planning to do something silly."

"I wouldn't put either remark as highly as that," Miller said cryptically. Kirby had the impression that this man, an acknowledged member of The Set—the same Set as the one acknowledging Kirby and his friends—somehow had to force himself into the mold of conformity. Like Alec, there was something about him at once vital and alive and more feral than the studied negligences and sudden fierce passions of the typical Set habitue. He was smoking his pipe now, sucking with slow enjoyment. The blue smoke was pleasantly scented, a tangy, heathery odor that stimulated obscure relation-patterns in Kirby's senses.

"What," Molly said, "exactly did you do, Miller? Oh, and call me Molly."

Miller laughed. "Thank you, Molly." He bowed. "Didn't you feel it?"

Molly rubbed where she sat. "I feel damned sore around about here." She pulled the silver lamé cloak about her, covering the medic-sprayed nakedness of her wounded skin. In a couple of hours the spray would have reconstituted the cells of her flesh and skin and replenished the lost blood. "Someone stuck a needle in me."

"I apologize for the clumsiness of the injection, Molly." Miller smiled reflectively. "All I used was my little blowpipe and a gelatine dart impregnated with the D.T.'s antidote. It took no time at all to dissolve and knock the alcohol out of you. After that, you were magnificent!"

It was gracefully said, but to Kirby, at least, it did not ring true. "May I have a look at that blowpipe, Miller?" he asked pleasantly.

"Surely." Miller took the pipe from his mouth and handed it across. Turning it over in his fingers, Kirby saw where the stem for the smoke was

drilled with two holes, and he saw the tiny opening under the tobacco bowl. "You just blow hard down here and the dart pops out there and, hey presto! a bull's-eye?"

"More or less." Miller took the pipe back casually. "It took me some time to learn how to aim the thing. But it serves a turn."

"Damned ingenious!" commented Statham enthusiastically.

"Oh, by the way," said Miller, as though discussing the weather. "I'd take it as a favor if you wouldn't mention this to anyone." He paused. Then: "To anyone."

"Of course," they all said.

"But," thought Kirby, "why?"

Miller stood up in the little arbor. The others, except Molly, rose too. There was the relaxed, easy air of comradeship between them; it was strong and pleasant. Still, the "mystery" that surrounded Miller had thickened if anything in the few minutes they had spent here. Despite this, a genuine feeling of togetherness had sprung up. It was a rare and precious emotion in the modern world, fleeting, difficult to catch and near-impossible to sustain. The emotion made a man feel bigger, decided Kirby.

Miller smiled and said: "Oh, Dick, I'd like to talk to you sometime. Why don't you drop over to my place?" He extended a card to Kirby. The plastic was warm. "You know the system, the old, forlorn, burnt-out triple-worlds of Stuyvesant. I get a sort of retroactive kick out of living there. And they're quite a sight, too, I can tell you. Worth a visit any time. You'll come?"

Kirby felt a responsive humor towards the man's description of his home. "Surely," he said. "We'll drop by some time."

Miller hesitated, obscurely nonplussed. Then he smiled again, waved a hand, said: "Looking forward to seeing you," and departed. He walked like a panther, thought Kirby, and the thought depressed him.

"Well now," burbled Statham. "How about a few drinks?"

"They'll be no use to me until Miller's dope wears off," pouted Molly. "But you can give me a cigarette."

Kirby suddenly slapped a hand along his thigh.

"Alec!" he said. "I forgot all about Alec."

At the others' quizzical looks at this odd display, Kirby smiled disarmingly. He flicked for a cigarette and the robo-dispenser popped a

lighted Virginian in Molly's mouth. She drew in luxuriously.

"I left Alec when all the kerfuffle began," Kirby explained. "I expect he'll be where I left him. And I must talk to him. Oh, Wynne, we'll go see Vansittart then. All of us. Okay?"

"Okay, sport," said Statham, mildly puzzled. He began to ogle Molly and she started to bedevil him and, on a light laugh, Kirby left. As he threaded his way through the rioting throng, the smile left his face. He hadn't realized just how near Molly was to being snatched from him. And he was waking up to the idea that he wouldn't like that at all. He looked about for Alec, making as directly as he could for the alcove where they had talked.

Alec was standing, leaning in a nook, a few yards from where he had told Kirby of his fears.

As he approached, Kirby found he disliked very much the slack, set look on his brother's face. Alec's eyes were wide and blank. He stood limply, leaning against the wall, as though indifferent to everything. That was not good.

There would, Kirby tried to decide at once, have to be a new approach with Alec. The man was too good a type, too loyal, to go to absolute waste. This missionary stunt was taking too much out of him, sapping energies for which his brother's slight frame had not been designed.

A giggle-gas balloon burst before Alec. His brother made no attempt to ward it off. Probably, like Kirby himself, he was wearing nose filters.

"Hullo, there, Alec," said Kirby, striding up. "Sorry I was detained. A slight kerfuffle, as Wynne would say, with Molly. Everything all right, though."

Alec did not reply.

"Come on, Alec, what's up?" Kirby slapped his brother affectionately on the shoulder.

Alec moved. His body leaned away from the wall. Stiffly, he twisted on his heels, then he fell full-length on the floor. Kirby bent over him.

There was a small puncture in Alec's right cheek, a tiny hole, and in the hole, still melting, the remains of a gelatine dart.

Alec was dead.

## Chapter Six

Richard Makepeace Kirby had left Beresford's Planet six months ago, shaking the dust off his feet as he had entered his spaceyacht's airlock. To his surprise, Wynne Makepeace Statham had elected to go along too. His *Liza* paced Kirby's *Mermaid* through the topsy-turvy world of the parsecs between the stars. Molly, bouncing, confident, full of life, was happily talking about buying another baby.

This time, she told Kirby firmly, she wanted twins.

"Surely, dear," he said, lounging in the control cabin, where the ship's robots did all the work. "You know I want you to be happy."

She smiled a genuine smile and kissed him. They had now reached the stage of being really married; before it had been merely one of The Set's usual casual hitches.

In the nursery in the central sections of the yacht, robo-nursemaids kept a round-the-clock watch on young Alec Makepeace Kirby. *Alec!*

Wherever in space they went, the memory of Alec haunted Richard. Of course, the Frome Federation police had been unable to find a single thing to point at anyone who might have murdered Alec. Kirby, bitterly, had expected that. He had caused discreet enquiries to be made. Vansittart, the Makepeace head, had come up against a brick wall. He had been helpful, but in the end had provided as much help as he had in answer to Statham's queries about why he had been shot at off Starholm by a bunch of fancy-dress characters calling themselves the Interstellar Patrol. Nothing was working out.

A call had been left at their last planetfall, a general broadcast thing which cost a lot of money, containing a renewal of Miller's offer of hospitality.

On impulse, the Kirbys and Statham had decided to accept.

Statham, wryly, had said: "Since we last saw that character I've used up three wives. I need to find myself someone like Molly, Dick."

"So long as it's *like*, and not *is*, Wynne, okay."

They raced through the Galaxy, stars flaring up ahead to vanish rearwards if the Guide offered no promise of any interesting rewards for planetfall. They sought like children for that wonderful morrow beyond the next stellar cluster.

All that portion of the Galaxy extending conewards towards the Hub from the position of Earth was theirs to gambol in. Two thousand light years thick and five thousand broad, the great tongue of charted stars in the loosely knit Frome Federation thrust like a dagger in towards the

central ball of milk and dust, of mystery and adventure and the lure of the unknown. Being reasonably normal members of The Set, they did not care to venture beyond the confines of the known; the stars in the Frome Federation, their own back yard, were sufficient for their needs.

And added to that was the minor detail that they'd need a hundred lives to investigate very much further in towards the Galaxy. Stars and planets, interstellar dust, clouds of gas, comets—the whole mysterious Universe moved about them on its eternal circle and they could still find time to laugh and love and play games.

A call came in from Statham's yacht and the robo devices monitored it in and set up the full-color, tri-di picture on the screen.

"Hi, Dick," Statham began conversationally. "Look, I've been studying the route. To reach Miller's place we have to pass a system with a black symbol planet like Starholm— a place called Brighthaven. What say we—"

"No."

"You mean that?"

"Precisely."

"Now look here, Dick!" Statham ruffled his hair and glared from the screen at Kirby. He might have been in the same cabin so clearly was every part of him represented. "Now look here, we're out for a bit of fun, aren't we?"

"We are, Wynne. But monkeying about with the Law is no kind of fun. The Guide tells us that this Brighthaven of yours is a black symbol planet. And a black symbol planet, you've known from childhood, is taboo, but strictly. I can't see what you want to go there for at all."

"They shot at me, I told you."

"What's got into you, Wynne?"

"Nothing!" Statham glanced over Kirby's shoulder and appealed to Molly. "You convince him, Molly. Tell him this is just a trip to pick up evidence. Yes, that's it! We're beginning the detailed uncovering of some vast plot and we must accumulate all the minute details. You know how it goes. I want to sic Vansittart onto 'em!"

Kirby laughed. Molly left the Guide over which she had been poring and came and put an affectionate arm around his shoulders. She glanced at Statham.

"You, Wynne Statham, seem to forget there's a baby aboard this vessel. You go off blood and thundering all you want. I've more important things

to attend to." She glanced slyly at Kirby and then finished: "We're going to buy twins!"

"Oh great. Just great," said Statham. He made it a groan. "All right, you two. I'm off. See you in about three days or so at Miller's place on Stuyvesant." He winked. "And don't run into trouble at the B.E."

Molly bristled up and then relaxed and they both waved a casual good-bye to Statham. His image vanished from the screen, and soon his ship was a waning blip on the outermost-reaching radar screens. Then he had gone.

"He's a good egg," Kirby said, chuckling. "Perhaps just a little more wild and woolly than most of The Set."

"Poking around black symbol worlds is childish," Molly said with womanly finality. "Even red symbol worlds are bad enough."

That made Kirby think of Alec again and, to break the painful thoughts, he said: "What were you looking at so earnestly in the Guide?"

"There's a white symbol world quite near us, Dick. I thought we could drop down and buy the twins."

"I should have kept my big mouth shut," Kirby said, ruffling her hair. "But, okay. We'll go."

Molly cocked an inquisitive eye at him. Her hand around his shoulders squeezed his arm. "You see those gelatine darts all over, Dick," she said softly.

He put his hand up and laid it upon hers. Their marriage relationship had reached the stage where *non sequiturs* were almost impossible.

"I know. And, anyway, there was so little time."

"You're sure that is so? I mean—this is a reversal of thought—if the gelatine had been differently prepared from the normal way, the dart may have taken a lot longer to dissolve."

"I'm afraid that's out, Molly. Post-mortem analysis of the body fluids showed up nothing but what might be expected after a man had been poisoned by a gelatine dart. The, poison was one of those nasty, quick-rigid things, so he stood up until I... until I... pushed him."

"Dick..."

"Anyway," Kirby added, forcing the gloomy memories from him, "you know what you were suggesting? That it could have been Miller who murdered Alec."

"I realized that. I don't like the idea."

"Nor do I. I don't think it was. But at last I've plucked up enough courage to visit Miller on Stuyvesant. We'll find out what we find out when we get there."

The white symbol world was called Cwmllynfell and in truth there were, around the spaceport at which the *Mermaid* put down, the beautiful soft valley formations of Wales that must have brought a pang to the heart of those old Earthmen who had first landed here. Landscape meant a certain standard of aesthetic beauty to a man of Frome, a man of The Set, and here Kirby felt he could expand and breathe scrubbed stinging air and glow all over. Molly stood for none of that romantic nonsense.

"I've put a call through to my cousin back on Beresford's Planet and she's rounded up a group opinion and it's all right, Dick. This place has a good reputation. Babies sold here are fine people."

"Well, that's great," Kirby said. He allowed himself to be hustled by Molly into a flittercar provided by the spaceport people and they made quick time through the city to the B.E. Kirby had picked up an ingenious magnegrav problem while he had been waiting for Molly to make her call, and now he sat in the flittercar figuring out how to polarize and degrav a little red ball in the box to insinuate it through the clashing electronic and magnetic fields. He was quite absorbed by his toy and didn't even bother to look at the city.

White symbol worlds were all much the same. People of some kind or other lived here and did something or other, and he supposed their standards of luxury and comfort were on a par, more or less, with the worlds of The Set. He'd never bothered with these sort of things and saw no reason to crick his neck out of the window now. They reached the B.E. and the flittercar settled down on the reception platform. From here on, moving passageways would carry them into the building. If he thought about it, Kirby would have realized that he would not have had to walk more than two yards during the whole operation.

From the reception platform of the fifty story building, they could see a wide misty blue and lavender bowl of hills and valleys and rivers, soft in the early light. Kirby looked about with pleasure, slipping the magnegrav puzzle into his pocket. Molly touched his arm. A robot slid towards them, the entwined golden letters B.E. on its power box.

Involuntarily, Kirby glanced up. Outlined against the pearly, cloud-tufted morning sky he could see the sign that blazed at the summit of the building. Two simple words: BABY EMPORIUM

The robot said: "If you will follow me, madam and sir." It slid off noiselessly. Molly and Kirby followed.

This B.E. was considerably smaller than the one at which they had bought young Alec, and yet its sample rooms were as neatly and efficiently run as any to be found in Frome's share of the Galaxy. Kirby let Molly have her way, watching her fondly as she frowned in concentration and religiously kept her lips pressed together in what he knew she thought of as a stern professional and practical appearance. How these fluffy girls loved to play the brisk efficient expert!

The robot already had their particulars on file, duplicated from their previous purchase, and so there was no need this time to go through the aptitude and psychological researches to ensure that their mental attitudes would match those of the child they were about to buy. Twins, Molly wanted this time! Well.

First, full color solidographs. When these had been whittled down, and those mentally incompatible with the Kirbys had been discarded, tri-di projections of the babies in action, speeded up shots covering a day in their lives. Molly gurgled with delight as much as the children. She was having fun. Kirby, because Molly was enjoying herself, was enjoying himself, too.

At last they had discarded all but half a dozen, and now the robot suggested that they might wish to discuss their particular requirements with the Birth Supervisor.

The Birth Supervisor was a woman, middle-aged, handsomely built, with laughing purple-dyed eyes that matched her purple hair. Her mouth was its natural deep pinkish color, and Kirby found a fresh delight in that alone. She shook hands with them and said: "We're honored to have a customer from the Makepeace Set. Most of our business is local. My name is Juno."

Kirby murmured the polite things and then the woman ushered them through into the nursery. Here robots had selected and gathered the six children who now rolled about a plastic-foam room. Clad in diapers, the babies were gurgling and chuckling and dribbling. Kirby looked on with appalled eyes.

Molly put both hands under her chin and her eyes opened very wide.

Kirby said, very firmly: "Twins, Molly. That's all."

Juno laughed. "You'd be surprised how many mothers take away quadruplets when they come in for their first." She began to tell Molly

intimate details of the babies' history and possibilities. Kirby wandered off and leaned against a wall and smoked a cigarette. Women, he said to himself. Mothers! They're all the same.

Presently Molly made her decision. Then she changed it. Then she looked over at Kirby who desperately refrained from meeting her eye. Then she chose again. Then she hesitated, nonplussed, quite unable to make up her mind. Juno was very tactful and very helpful. Kirby smoked another cigarette.

At last he wandered over on the moving strip and offered to choose one if Molly chose the other. "What!" Molly flared at him. "And have favorites right from the beginning? Oh, dear me, no!"

"Oppycock!" laughed Kirby. "They're all as perfect as they can be. You want two. So take the first two to laugh at you.

Go on." He glanced enquiringly at Juno, who nodded confirmation. "Pick them up."

Gingerly, quite without the usual competent nonchalance she displayed in handling Alec, Molly picked up a baby. He grinned and dribbled and chuckled and made cooing noises not much different from those made by Molly.

"That's the boy," said Kirby firmly. "Now the girl."

Molly reached out, hesitated, her arms wandering uncertainly over the babies, then settled upon one mite who rolled over and kicked her legs in the air.

"Two," said Kirby. "Molly, you're a wonder. Come on, let's sign up and go."

Molly took some persuasion to leave the other four but at last they maneuvered her out of the nursery and after that she was more tractable. She wouldn't let go of the babies, though, and two frustrated robots trundled along dejectedly behind her. "They look as though they're used to this sort of treatment," said Kirby, jerking a thumb at the machines.

"Mostly," said Juno. "But we have to leave their circuits uncluttered and ready to take over in case a new mother doesn't quite know how... well, you follow."

"Um," said Kirby. "And this won't be the last time, either, I can tell you."

In the office a robot buzzed up and flashed his little instrument in Kirby's eyes. That took care of everything. Kirby's retinal patterns would

be checked to make sure that he was Richard Makepeace Kirby, the necessary money would be deducted from his account, the papers would be retinally signed, and the children officially entered in the Makepeace Set in the family of Kirby.

"Names?" asked Juno.

"Can we file those later?"

"Of course. Most do." Juno saw them off the premises, obviously much impressed by members of a Set choosing her B.E. to shop at. The last they saw of her, silhouetted against the gray hills, was a proud maternal outline waving them good-by.

Kirby lifted the *Mermaid* off-planet as soon as they were aboard. He chuckled at the thought of Molly going shopping again tomorrow. The little minx very likely would have, too. The twins were placed carefully in the nursery, with a lot of fond baby talk directed at young Alec by a contrite Molly, who repeatedly assured the young man that he had not been forgotten, that mother still loved him. The young man in question rolled about on his stomach and said: "Ggg... ggg... coo."

"Right," said Kirby in the control room. "Now for Stuyvesant. And Miller."

"Wonder what Wynne has been up to," Molly said. "And I'm beginning to think it's time we went to a party again. My cousin was telling me—"

"I'd like to go partying soon," Kirby said seriously. "I don't want to influence you, Molly. We work well as a team. And now we have the kids. But although you may think it's crazy, and I'm more than a trifle uncertain about it myself, I have a strong feeling that I must see Miller and get this last ghost of suspicion out into the open. I've felt uneasy ever since I talked to Alec. Something's got into me, some bug of devilment that Alec triggered off." He smiled in a puzzled way at Molly. "You do see, don't you, Molly?"

"Yes, dear," she said docilely. But Kirby felt that she didn't. He wasn't even sure that he did himself.

Statham's *Liza* was already on the field as Kirby guided the *Mermaid* in, homing on Miller's beacon. Looking down, Kirby could see melted fins and a wrecked and crumpled stern.

He guffawed nastily.

"Look, Molly," he said. "Old Wynne poked his nose in where he wasn't wanted and it seems he got his pants scorched." He chuckled again, settling the ship down lightly on Stuyvesant. "But I'd like to know who the

devil these 'Interstellar Patrol' idiots think they are."

"Perhaps we'll find out here," Molly said, looking down and shivering.

"Yes," Kirby answered, suddenly sobered. "Yes. And there are a few explanations that I need very badly," he finished, with somber premonition. "Very badly."

## Chapter Seven

The snug little township of Ford's Crossing on Brighthaven would, for any calm and sensible man, have been a perfect retreat from the cares of the Galaxy. John Hassett had settled in nicely. There were no outward signs as yet of the forty percent cut in agricultural produce, and finding a job had been easy. As a tractor repair man he commanded some standing in the hierarchy of a farming civilization. He appreciated Ramirez' discretion and forethought. A tractor maintenance man was far enough from the laborer to be respected by those Hassett must contact, and yet not so highly placed that he would be suspected.

He had needed to spend only two nights in the hotel, where Wanda, the pregnant girl, cried most of the time, hugging to herself a secret misery that affected her husband and had ramifications souring the community. On the third day, a job had turned up that necessitated a move to the Home Farm of a prosperous farmer along a white and rutted road about ten miles out of town. Here Hassett went about his job and kept his own counsel.

He let time drift by. Occasional calls to Ramirez confirmed that nothing new was happening, and Hassett explained easily that he had to gain the confidence of these people before he could begin operations. Gaining the confidence of the farmer, Solon, was not difficult; and his wife, too, offered no real resistance to Hassett's blandishments. The children were a tougher problem. There were three of them: two tall sturdy sons who silently resented any newcomer to the higher grades of work, and Stella, the eighteen-year-old daughter. She was a headache. Hassett was convinced that she was firmly of the opinion that every man had evil intentions upon her. Talking to her was virtually impossible; she shied away like a butterfly, disappearing round corners like dissipating smoke.

The man who had tried to kill him outside the agent's house, and the pregnant Wanda, had both mentioned the "aliens." This was crucial. People living on a black symbol planet should know nothing of any other civilization apart from the one on their own planet. He had quickly

discovered that the word "alien" was not used for foreigner. They had meant "outworlder" when they used the word "alien." How had they discovered whatever it was they had discovered?

He went about his job professionally, keeping up that quiet, indrawn air. Only gradually did he allow the friendship of Solon and his wife to thaw him out. He was punctilious with the sons and avoided the girl. One day, he knew, the breakthrough would come.

When it came, characteristically, it started off on the wrong foot.

Winter, or as much of winter as Brighthaven knew, had brought a powdering of snow and then a long procession of bright steely days that would lead up to the first crop of spring. The summer crop was the one likely to be affected by the cuts. Hassett was whistling away, working on a recalcitrant electric motor in the shop, when he heard a sharp squeal from outside the door. Vaguely interested, he put his head out the door.

Stella had tripped and fallen in an oil patch. Her ultra-short skirt was smeared with the thick engine oil.

Hassett laughed.

At once, he knew he had made a mistake. He dodged back into the shop. Rapid footsteps sounded outside. He didn't feel too apprehensive; laughing at the boss' daughter might be a heinous crime but he doubted it. He had known better, though, than to offer assistance.

The door opened and Stella bounced in, waving a long three-tined fork that looked sharp and dangerous. Hassett took off. Stella was unbalanced, and while that may have been only her age and her lonely situation, it still added up to a nasty accident to Hassett if those prongs pierced him.

He headed out the rear door and ran down the yard. Stella, shouting gibberish, followed. This, Hassett decided, was ridiculous. All his scientific and psycho training rebelled. Finally, he reached the door of the barn, the interior warm and stacked with fodder. He stopped running and turned, smiling, prepared to argue the thing out.

"I'm sorry, Stella," he said. "Are you hurt?"

He couldn't understand what she replied. The fork jabbed at him. He dodged aside, caught his foot on the barn door sill and tottered inside. Stella twisted and thrust the fork down on him.

This was beyond a joke. Hassett rolled away from the ugly tines, reached up and took the fork away. He was as gentle as he could. Stella stood sobbing with anger and humiliation. She was a big girl, Hassett saw.

I've said I was sorry, Miss Stella," he said in a cajoling tone. "Why don't you go in and wipe that grease off your skirt and bandage that scratch?"

Her reaction surprised and shocked him. With one fierce gesture she ripped the oily skirt away and flung it on the ground. Then she jumped on him.

Hassett went down fighting valiantly.

He recognized the symptoms and the actions and knew what had happened, of course. Complete reversal. It frightened him horribly.

He struggled with the panting, sobbing girl, trying to break her grip and avoid her teeth. She tore at his clothes. Hassett regretfully decided there was only one thing to do.

"Sorry, Stella," he said. "We'll never forgive ourselves, but..."

He struck her scientifically on the point of the jaw.

As he stood up, breathing hard and rearranging his clothes, a shadow from the doorway fell across him. He froze, and then looked up, his forehead creased. Solon stood in the doorway. In his hands he held an old but nasty flame rifle.

Hassett didn't say anything.

The silence held like bands of treacle slowly dripping away. Solon's expression was unreadable. Then he put the rifle down against the door jamb, took out his cigarette case and offered it to Hassett.

"Smoke, son?"

"Thanks." Watchfully, Hassett took the cigarette.

"Better come outside to light up. Too much fodder in there. Can't afford to lose that."

Hassett moved into the yard. Neither man mentioned or looked at Stella. When the two cigarettes were burning, Solon said: "Thanks, Lagash. She'll be all right when she comes round. Let's go and fetch mother."

"Shouldn't we carry her in?"

"Nope. Let her lie. Mother'll know best." They walked slowly into the house. When the woman, pale and with grimly compressed lips, had gone, Solon motioned Hassett to sit down. He looked tired and crushed.

"Stella's a good girl, but funny sometimes. Unpredictable. Scared of men all the time and then—bingo!—you can't hold her." He sighed. "Guess I should have warned you but she hasn't had an attack for some time."

Greatly daring, Hassett asked: "Does the minister know?"

"Sure." Solon eyed him speculatively. "Sure. We don't take too much account of what the church says here in Ford's Crossing. We just don't like aliens."

Hassett's heart began to thump. "Guess you're right, at that," he said. "They don't seem to bother none about us."

After that it was like eating ice cream on a midsummer day. By the time Stella was conscious and tucked between electric blankets, Solon and Hassett were deep in the discussion as to just *why* the aliens wanted so much food.

"They pay us well," Solon said. "We get plenty of industrial goods—those electric blankets, for instance, and the tractors. I'm a farmer, and so were my parents and their parents, and right on back. I want none of working in factories. Damned stinking holes! No, I'm glad we can just work our farms and sell our stuff and just ask for whatever industrial goods we want. It's good quality, too. You're not overworked." He fumbled around for cigarettes. "But what do the aliens, who can make such wonderful machines, want with our food? Surely they have enough of their own?"

"Maybe not," Hassett said. "Maybe their worlds are worn out."

"Worlds?" Solon looked up fiercely. "More than one, you think?"

"I don't know. Who knows much about them, anyway?"

Solon looked sly. "Some of us know more than others might think." He took the cigarette from his mouth and rolled it nervously between his fingers. "Why do you think they should try to keep themselves secret? Why pretend they're not what they are?"

"Maybe the people who know more than others know that, too."

"Maybe they do."

His wife entered just then. There was no sign of Stella. The conversation was broken and Hassett was too cautious to return to it too quickly. What he had expected happened with commendable rapidity after that, and he smiled at the comprehensive behavior patterns worked out long ago by the Popsup Bureau visibly working as he watched. Solon could no more help his own actions than the crops could stop from growing with sun and water upon them.

Solon walked up to him as he was stripping down a tractor. "Want you to come into town with me tonight—meeting?"

"Right, boss," Hassett said. Solon walked away.

That evening fifty or so men crowded the back room of the largest saloon. Ostensibly a billiards tournament was in full swing; two men stood with cues in their hands by the greenly lit table. The others crowded around on benches, shadows in the angled lighting. Hassett made himself as inconspicuous as possible after Solon had vouched for him to the white-haired shabby man he had first seen in the hotel.

"Quiet, friends," this man, Carvic, now said, raising his thin hands. "Preacher Kassem is here." There was a stir and muted rustle all around the room. "Listen to his wise words in silence. After, we will talk."

Looking towards Carvic, Hassett saw his arms drop in a dramatic gesture and, following, saw a thin, tall, intense man rise to his feet.

At the man's first words Hassett experienced a convulsive shock.

"Friends!" Kassem said. His lean, lined face and narrow body that, clad all in black, seemed imbued with an electrical energy thrusting for release, meant nothing to Hassett. As far as he knew he had never seen the man before. But he could not mistake the way the man talked. He could not be fooled. This was something that he would stake his life on.

This man Kassem was a member of The Set!

This preacher Kassem was an outworlder, not a native of Brighthaven; he was one of Hassett's own kinsmen, knowing of the inhabited worlds of the Galaxy, a man of Frome.

Hassett listened, fascinated.

"You know I bring you word from your friends who live on the worlds around the stars in the sky." Kassem piled on the images, pitching the tone and content of his speech to just the right level for these people to grasp easily and yet to sense the wonder and mystery of it all.

"Now an important event looms, and we must prepare for it, ready ourselves in body and spirit to resist the evil men who steal our patrimony." Hassett wondered how farmer Solon would react to that. The aliens didn't exactly steal Brighthaven's crops when they paid so generously in industrial and manufactured goods. These men lapped it up, though, too far gone for fine semantics. They were ready clay for this demagogue to mold into whatever shape he desired. That shape would be a great sounding drum, and its heady booming would rouse this planet to bloody revolt. For that, quite simply, was what this tall intense man in black was preaching.

"The time draws near," Kassem boomed on. "We must make our stand together, shoulder to shoulder with our brothers all over this fair world.

For I bring you word from our kinsmen from the farthest corners, from all the millions groaning under the yoke of this cruel oppression."

Hassett sat tense, bitter, sorting out the blatant persuading words and the far-from-subtle double meanings and connotations. Kassem treated his audience with a contempt for their own thought processes that was incredible to a man like Hassett, trained for the hair-fine difference in meaning, and yet he had to admit that Kassem did all that was necessary. What he said went over with an impact that had the audience frothing. Kassem passed to a new topic.

"You all know," he shouted in a controlled shout that in pure decibel volume was barely above a whisper. "Those of you who are fathers are only too bitterly aware that the next ingathering is scheduled. It will come, and the heavy hand will reap a new harvest among you." He glared around in the damp silence. "Will you this time submit tamely? Will you this time allow the great garnering to go forward without expressing yourselves as men? For I tell you that you are as much men as these aliens! And these stealing, grasping, cunning aliens are no more supermen than are you! For, know you all that I speak the truth! You all, we all—all of us here in this room and all the other men scattered around the stars throughout the sky—claim one home and one home only; the same planet was the birthplace of us all! And that planet's name, friends, was Earth. We are all Earthmen. All of us. So why should you cower here on your own world and allow these other men who are the same flesh and blood as yourselves to stride in and take what they desire? Why any longer should you submit?"

A low, self-conscious growl of anger rumbled around the audience. The air was electric with passion and tensions barely repressed.

Kassem flung his arms wide. "I call on you all! The time has been ordained. At the next ingathering... at the next ingathering we will rise, mighty in our wrath, and strike the hated alien down, drive him altogether from our world!"

He ceased talking and utter silence fell. Into that silence dropped, like petals onto a pool of water, the sibilant murmurings, the hushed whispers and, finally, as a mighty stone falling through a torrent of water into that pool, a crescendoing shout of rage and determination and complete, ruthless fanaticism.

Hassett felt very uncomfortable.

Lights blazed up. The harsh brilliance of hanging gas-filled electric bulbs drowned the soft green radiance over the billiard table. In that unrelenting light, Kassem swung his head slowly around the crowding,

shouting men. His eyes raked each face in turn, noting, marking, urging, striking vitriolic sparks from heated and uncaring reckless manhood.

His eyes gazed directly at Hassett, dutifully shouting with the rest.

The lean, ascetic, starved fanatic's face hesitated, the brows drew down, the eyes slitted as the man strove for clearer focus. Hassett raised his hands in his feigned enthusiasm, trying to shield his face and yet appear genuinely enraged and excited as were the others.

In a terrible voice, Kassem spoke over the din.

His arm raised, and the index finger struck like a snake, singling out Hassett from the crowd.

"There, among you," boomed Kassem, "sits an alien. I recognize the breed." Men twisted to look, to follow that condemning finger. "An alien! Seize him! He must not leave this place alive!"

## Chapter Eight

As the robot pod engulfed them in its comfortably padded transparent egg, Kirby glanced more keenly across the small spacefield at Statham's *Liza*. He could see the stern tubes and crumpled fins past the smooth, blue-black robot's caterpillar tractors, spinning away just beneath the girder arm supporting the pod in which he and Molly rode. In the mellow yellow sunlight the spaceship looked sadly chewed-up rearwards.

"She looks a bit like a mangled slipper after a puppy's been at it," commented Kirby with a chuckle.

"I hope you're right," Molly said doubtfully.

The small screen and speaker set in the forward curved pod wall came to life and Statham's voice said: "I heard that, you two! I thank you, Molly, from the bottom of my wicked old heart for your few kind words. As for that man of yours—he wouldn't care if I succumbed to a white symbol world disease and vanished for ever."

"The self-pity in your voice is grossly overdone, jackass," remarked Kirby pleasantly. The screen now showed Statham with smiles all over his face. "I suppose you were struck by a runaway meteor and your screens failed to operate?"

Statham kept smiling. He said: "One of those fancy Interstellar Patrol things. I tell you, Dick, it's becoming downright unsafe to flit about space these days."

"Only if you meddle with black and red symbols," Kirby said acidly.

"No sense of fun at all, that's your trouble." Statham turned his head and then looked back. "You'll be coming through in a moment. Miller's having a foam bath. See you."

The screen died. Molly said: "Whatever happened hasn't upset Wynne at all. He's still as chuckleheaded."

"Thank God for that." Kirby glanced up. "Here we are, safely inside Miller's castle. Have to take a look round this place tomorrow. I'm interested in this triple-planet setup." He stretched, and as the transparent hood slid up, swung his feet out onto the moving pavement. He and Molly were quickly carried into the reception chamber of the building where attentive robots bathed them and clothed them in fresh, sweet-smelling clothes and then, with a chiming of silver cymbals, ushered them on the moving ways into the main lounge of the castle. Statham rose to his feet to greet them.

"Miller won't be long. Business call now." Statham took their hands briefly. "Hell of a trip down to that damn silly world. D'you see what they did to old *Liza*?"

"Serves you dam' well right," grunted Kirby, flicking for a cigarette. As the robot neatly popped the lighted Turkish-Lyrian between his lips, he met Statham's outraged expression and chuckled. Blowing smoke, he said: "It's a wonder you're still with us. If you must exhibit the mental capacity and traits of a two-year-old, you must expect to have your bottom smacked. Or *Liza's*," he finished unkindly.

Molly said: "Chair, Dick?"

"Sorry, dear, of course." Kirby clicked his fingers in the chair pattern, using the right pressure and amount of finger flick that was an ingrained habit by the time a man was a teen-ager, and the chair rose mushroomlike from the floor. Molly, with a graceful sweep of orange nylon skirt, sat down. "Thanks, Dick. Cigarette?"

Kirby flicked for a cigarette and Molly took a deep drag.

She blew smoke and said: "I think you're being childish, Wynne. And you haven't asked about the twins."

By the time a stuttering Statham had extricated himself from that particular feminine man-trap, Miller had been carried in on a moving strip. He stood, lightly poised on pink shining feet, a single strip of scarlet cloth wrapped about his middle, scrubbed and glowing from the robot's administrations. Greetings over, he said: "Had a business deal to shove

through, people. Trans-galactic tieup with Vaasittart; don't know where he was, in case you ask; the robots just found him and put me through."

"He's no use, anyway," Statham said gloomily.

"You need a drink, Wynne." Miller looked at Molly. "Are you...?"

"Thanks, Miller. Make mine straight alky, please."

Miller snapped his fingers four times and the four drinks were served by appearing and disappearing robot arms from the nearest wall. Drinking, Kirby said: "Tell us all about it, Wynne. I know you're bursting with it."

"Nothing to tell. Just went moseying along like a good little boy. Brighthaven, the place was called, black symbol. No compulsion on me not to go, which was strange, if you think about it—"

"Which you didn't."

"That's all oppycock, Dick! I thought about it and began to wonder just *why* we aren't allowed to see black and red worlds." Statham stuck out a finger. "Do *you* know?"

"No."

Statham turned with triumphant indignation on Molly.

"Do you, Molly?"

"Of course, I don't, Wynne. Anyway, it isn't very important."

"Maybe not, to your featherbrained man." Statham's triumph at digging into a fact neither of the others had previously thought about swept him on. He turned to Miller. "But to me it is. Do you know why, Miller?"

"Yes."

"There you are, you see," ran on Statham. "We obey these dam' silly rules and no one knows why... *What?* What did you say, Miller?"

"I said: 'Yes.'"

Statham slowly put his drink down. His mouth snapped shut. Kirby laughed. Molly drank placidly, obviously considering this man-talk complete nonsense.

"Oh, no, you don't, Miller," said Statham. "I don't mind nitwit Dick here taking me for a ride, but when you join in, too, well..."

"Well or not well, Wynne—I do. And that's one reason I asked you folk to meet me here on Stuyvesant."

"Now let me get this straight," said Kirby, swinging round and

beginning to take Miller's nonsense seriously. "You actually stand there and tell us that you know why the Law says we can't land on a black or red symbol planet?"

"I do."

"And," said Statham heatedly, "I suppose you know why those dam' fools in those fancy-dress outfits shot at me?"

"Yes. They happen to be friends of mine."

"Is that so." Statham stood up and advanced on Miller. "Well, suppose you just ask them who's going to replace the old *Liza's* stern plating and fins, huh? Just suppose!"

"Righto, Wynne. We'll do that. It's as good a place as any to start what I have to ask you, anyway."

"I suggest we all get comfortable," Kirby said pleasantly. "This is all very amusing. Quite made my day."

"Wynne here asked who is to pay for repairs to his ship." Miller flicked for fresh drinks. "Now who paid for the *Liza* in the first place, Wynne? Who built her?"

"How in blazes do I know?" Statham spread his arms. "I just wanted a new yacht and my robots sent in the order and she was delivered to my house. A robot took my retinal patterns and the cash was deducted from my account. But you know that; that's the way anyone does business."

"Right. But someone built her, Wynne."

"Robots, of course. Taped programming. Built on a white symbol world."

"Yes. But men have to organize what the robots turn out. In the final steps of planning, it has to be a man who decides and takes the responsibility."

"I know, I know. Some men *like* that."

Kirby said lazily: "They offered us a career when we left University, Miller. Wynne and I decided to join the way of life in The Set. I suppose we might have become directors of spaceship building yards, is that it?"

"Not quite. Careers for people like ourselves are mainly in the professions: lawyers, architects, planners, musicians, research scientists. Technology and manual labor are reserved for people who live on white symbol worlds. They have a different civilization setup there."

"Look here, Miller," broke in Molly. "How do you know all this?"

"That's my career."

"Oh?"

"Anyone is free to visit a white symbol world. Molly, you bought your new twins there, and yet neither you nor Dick cared to investigate that world."

"Why should we? Couldn't pronounce the darn name, anyway."

"Don't let any descendants of Taffy's hear you say that! But that's the whole thing. You live on the golden worlds of The Set and know nothing of the rest of the Galaxy."

"That's the way we like it. Do you blame us?"

"There's the heart of the problem. Way back, when Earth was colonizing the planets nearest to her, everyone worked hard, worked at the jobs they had been trained to do. There was a managerial set, a business tycoon set, men and women in the higher executive branches, and those who merely lived on the income of shares held in the business run for them by well-paid scientists and sociologists and business efficiency experts. It was inevitable that as business became divorced from real-life, as markets expanded with nuclear-explosion force, the owners lost touch with the workers. The two sets drifted apart. Only on really primitive frontier worlds—worlds like Stuyvesant used to be—were there any natural real-life balances at work."

The others sat silently now, listening to Miller's quiet words, almost catching through his confident, easy tones, a glimpse of the great expanding history of the Earthly portion of the Galaxy. For madly gay members of The Set to conceive of any serious issues outside the immediate petty vexations of their daily life was difficult.

Miller went on, quietly, not forcing the pace. "So, you see, the inevitable occurred. Men and women with inherited wealth that even death duties could only scratch, and enormous personal fortunes accruing every day, embarked upon lives of pleasure. They set aside golden worlds for their own use, forbidding anyone not of their set to land there. They developed robots to cater for their every need. Their factories were fully automated, needing only a very few humans to run them, and it was simple to site these on worlds where they would not offend the delicate nostrils of the golden people of the varying Sets on their golden worlds. Every time a robot takes your retinal image, Dick, or yours, Wynne, he deducts the necessary amounts from bank balances that literally extend into the billions of solar Credits."

"Solar whatsits?" asked Statham.

Miller laughed. "You don't even know that money is worked on a unit base. A solar Credit is something that a man would once have to work a lifetime to earn." He paused, and said sadly. "But you don't even know what the word 'earn' means in that context. You cannot conceive of a man working and being paid money for his labor."

"Sounds awfully barbaric to me," said Molly.

"But money's just *there*," said Statham. "I sometimes wonder why they bother with it at all."

"That money, that is just 'there,' as you put it, is the aggregate of thousands of years of profits rolling in. Your bank balances stem from work done by your ancestors thousands of years ago."

Statham said: "Jolly considerate of them, then."

Miller went on: "The men and women living on white symbol worlds have their own traditions. They are all very rich; 'rich' means having a lot of money." He stopped and waved his arms helplessly. "I remember that when I was told all this, I had to keep stopping Vansittart to get him to explain what he meant. 'Rich' means that the person has a lot of money when other people don't have a lot. Follow?"

Molly pouted. "But how can a person not have money? I mean..." she stopped, helpless to explain what she meant.

"Take it from me," Miller said. "There are people living in our part of the Galaxy who don't."

"On the black and red symbol worlds?" asked Kirby.

Miller smiled and nodded. "That's right, Dick."

"Well, something's beginning to make sense. Although the whole thing is completely screwball, when you think about it." Kirby snapped his fingers for another cigarette.

"It isn't, Dick. You see, even with robots someone has to do some work. We still handle delicate professions. We are sound enough in body and mind to render medicine a prerogative of the robots, and much else besides. You could have been something in a career, but you'd still have been a member of your Set, and still gone partying. You'd still have had money." He sighed. "To scrape the bottom where the dirty jobs lie, men had to be found who just didn't know about the golden worlds. Those on the white symbol worlds know that you are the owners, and their own traditions are strong enough for them to continue a technology that takes

care of fabrication of everything. It might interest you to know, Wynne, that your *Liza* probably took, with sound programming and no bottlenecks, a team of robots a whole day to build."

"Interesting." Statham left that, went on: "You mean these white world people *like* to work; it's part of their culture?"

"Yes. But they only do reasonable jobs. They still have a very good life. Very good."

Kirby stood up and stretched. "What about the red and black?"

"In a moment, Dick. I suggest that we have something to eat and then I'll show you a little of Stuyvesant. I'm very proud of my worn out little worlds."

"Okay. But this is very interesting. Very. I still don't believe it, but... well... if you say so."

"Come on, then, let's eat. What do you fancy?"

The discussion of that occupied some time. As they sat at the loaded tables, with roboservers scurrying, Miller dropped his little bombshell.

Smiling pleasantly, he said to Molly. "Oh, Molly, my dear, tell me, where do babies come from?"

## Chapter Nine

Hassett kicked two men in the stomach, thrust a third aside and, knocking over chairs and benches, scabbled away and was through the door before all the excited men in the room had had time to grasp just what preacher Kassem had said. His heart thudded sickly. This was a hell of a spot! That damned renegade Kassem, or whatever his real name in The Set was, had really sold him down the river.

He went haring across the little street, dived down the first dark back alley. This planet boasted three small moons that showed a fitful light at best; at the moment only one hung above the horizon, and the night was darker than a pitch-black night on Frome. Frome! They'd towed an asteroid there and set it spinning into orbit to impersonate friendly old Luna of Earth. Well, Frome was far away and Hassett was alone and friendless, with a whole planet thirsting for his blood.

They meant business all right. They'd kill him out of hand if they had the chance. Hassett, very naturally, intended to deny them that chance. He heard the boiling outrush of enraged farmers from the billiards hall

baying in the still night air, and ran on, heading out to the country. He stood a chance if he could strike a road before they got onto his tracks. He might be able to flag down an auto though they were rare on this place. Perhaps he should head for the depot and ride the rods. But they'd expect that. They wouldn't think about cars, and there were farm trucks around. It had to be the road.

He'd been lucky to get away—lucky, or quick-witted. Quicker, certainly, than these slow-moving, slow-thinking farmers. He'd have need of all his quick reflexes in the testing time ahead.

The night sky was velvet purple, dusted with stars. He refused to think about those friendly stars and fined down his perceptions to the hostile world about him. The dusty road ran past two sagging outbuildings, and all before him lay the hard, furrowed fields waiting for the spring to come. He angled off and headed over a field, jumping the iron-hard ruts, figuring in his mind just where he could contact the road. It curved here like a figure "S." The entrance to the village, on his right, perhaps two hundred yards from the billiards hall, debouched round in a wide semicircle so that now, angling crabwise, he expected to meet the road in about another three hundred yards or so.

Despite his superb physical condition he was panting. It was because of the ploughed fields. If there had been rain and no frost the going would have been all but impossible.

Very faintly and far off he heard a diesel electric locomotive wail. That would be the night express, which might or might not stop here. Was it a chance?

Too risky, too indefinite, decided Hassett, and plunged on. When at last the road lay before him, dark and ghostly in the enshrouding gloom, he had struck it, his clumsy Brighthaven boots clattering across it, before he could pull up.

At once a voice hailed. Then a chorus of shouts.

A light sprang vividly into life, stinging his eyes. He took off and in one running leap sailed into prickly bushes. He crouched, watching the light.

It swung nearer. The devil! They'd set off from the town and were combing the road. They'd see his footprints, sure as hell. Damn it! What now?

Hassett stared around, panting, unable to see anything but that ominously approaching light. Men shouted closer. He could hear their boots. They didn't care if he heard them or not. They were bursting with

confidence and with righteous anger.

Damn them!

Very well, then; the railroad it would be. There would be others there. But the railroad depot offered a wider target. And, if they did not find him when they first searched, they might then relax their vigilance. It was a tiny chance, an almost hopeless chance, but in Hasset's cautious and experienced eyes it meant a great deal. It made all the difference between despair and hope.

He paused, breathing deeply and quietly; then, oriented with the aid of those friendly stars above, he turned and set off for the railway line. This time he took it easy, walking carefully, taking the ploughed ruts as they came and letting his body ride them in a long raking stride that would not tire him for hours.

The overnight express was still howling as it approached. The freight standing in the yards was not due to leave for about an hour yet. That would be the one they'd expect him to hop. He chuckled nastily. For the first time he put his hand in his pocket and fingered his gun. These men had recently been his friends. He couldn't, so quickly and felicitously, bring himself into the frame of mind where shooting them was a mere reflex.

Suppose old Solon showed up, his ancient flame rifle held on Hasset's chest? Shoot the old farmer? He thought of Stella and her pathetic frame of mind and shook his head. He would just have to hope that he didn't bump into Solon —or any of his erstwhile friends, for that matter.

The rail yards must be near now, just ahead in the darkness. Hasset felt his way forward until his groping hands struck the split rail and wire fence. He went over like a lithe black panther. Men did all kinds of insane things in their lives, some for the thrill, some because of duty, and some because they didn't know why they did the things. To Hasset this was mere routine, a routine that was none the easier because he had lived with the expectation of its occurrence. And being scared sick to the stomach didn't help either.

He swallowed hard and went on, groping forward until his boots struck the rails. He stood tense, like a statue, listening. He heard the sough of wind and the rustle of trees bordering the track and the distant, slowing clatter of the night express. Those trees told him where he was, and the strong thrum of the steel rails told him that he was on the down side of the station buildings.

Convenient.

If he could hitch a ride on that train he would be miles away before dawn. Had he attempted to make his way out of this area on foot—as he had considered and at once discarded—he would be picked up at the first break of day like a ripe fruit falling from an overloaded tree. The farmers knew this entire area backwards, their trucks would be out with the dawn, scouring the countryside.

It was the railroad or nothing.

The express was visible now, the prying light on its engine throwing eerie shadows into the night, the wail of its siren like a banshee riding ghostly winds. Hassett smiled. He began to walk slowly along the rails, away from the station and, he hoped, away from the section of track that would be swarming with men. He could hear them fitfully, growling and murmuring, the wind chopping up their voices and carrying them to him only in bits and pieces of sound. He guessed they were novices at man hunting.

He found a place where the tracks passed close to a clump of bushes and secured himself in the twigs and bare branches. He began to shiver as his exertion-born warmth drained away in the sharpness of the early weather. Light splashed like liquid fire all along the track, winking back from the rails and throwing the bushes into lime-lit relief. He remained perfectly still.

Then the diesel electric engine had slowly rumbled past him. With a muted clangor it rolled to a stop.

Men with lanterns shouted and began to walk along the length of the train, showing their faces momentarily as the light splashed back from steel wheels. They were searching the rods. Other men walked in burly arrogance along the roofs, poking and prying into every cranny. Had he attempted to jump this train he would have been caught like a moth in candlelight.

A group of heavily built men walked up to the driver and exchanged a few words. He wanted to know what the excitement was. The men fobbed him off with a story of a thief, and then they went back, throwing their lights under the wheels. Hassett waited.

Presently the driver hunched around in his cab and Hassett caught the flare of a lighter as the man lit his short pipe. The engine squatted on the track, purring silently as the diesel turned gently over, awaiting the prod of the throttle to bring it to life. Hassett looked back along the track.

He had to cross perhaps ten feet of open space to hit the engine. During that time his body would be silhouetted against the forward flung cone of

light. It was a chance he would have to take. He took a deep breath.

Then he was leaping forward, wraithlike, flinging himself hard against the steel of the engine as he clambered up the side of the cab. He clung just beneath the rim of the side window, panting and keeping the noise down to a throaty whisper while his whole body listened.

Nothing. Reassured, he climbed further and slid noiselessly into the empty cab of the second engine. The driver was now hidden from him; probably he would be sucking his pipe, blinded by the glow, and wondering impatiently when he would be allowed to leave.

Crouching there, Hassett listened. He could hear searching men crunching over ballast again, coming nearer. He tried to pick out the rough words they shouted.

"... engine. Driver half asleep... cab... better look."

Hell! They'd realized that a man could have leaped into the empty cab. Hassett glared around. There was only one thing he could do. He slipped out of the cab on the side away from the approaching party and ran nimbly up to the front engine. He went into the cab like a murderous owl swooping on some field rodent.

The driver said nothing. He started up and then he was silent, a limp and inert lump in Hassett's gripping fingers. With a shaky sigh Hassett released the thumb pressure on the man's neck. He began to strip off the man's jacket and peaked cap.

With the jacket over his own and the cap pulled down, he looked about breathlessly. There was no handy heap of coal under which to conceal the driver. The only place Hassett could see, in the few moments remaining to him, was alongside the big diesel itself. He reached down and lifted a metal plate. Directly beneath it, at the side of the main cylinder block, lay a maze of wiring and tubing and the bulky, clamshell-shape of pumps.

He pulled the driver along and, doubling him up, pushed him down. The man's head just wouldn't go under the metal rim. Hassett was sweating rivers now. Outside he could hear the oncoming tramp of feet.

With a last despairing push he got the man's head down and let the heavy metal plate fall into position. He caught it just before it would have broken the driver's neck and left it resting on the unfortunate man's head. Then he straightened up and turned as a light splashed into the cabin.

"Seen anything of him, mate?" The voice was rough and resigned. They must be despairing now, thinking he had fled into the fields. They'd like that.

Hassett kept bending over and let a curse or two float out.

"This damned engine," he said. "No. I haven't seen a thing sitting here. I suppose you'll have an explanation why I'm late? They'll want to know at the depot."

The voice was a good gruff imitation of the driver's voice as Hassett had heard it, crouching in the bushes.

"Well, we don't like thieves around here."

Another voice shouted something and then the searching man said: "All right, driver, you can go. We'll find him." He went off into a technical description of what would happen when they did.

Hassett said: "Good luck. Stand clear."

A diesel electric locomotive was like a child's toy to a man who could drive a spaceship between the stars. He started and slowly let the engines take up the strain and then pull gently out of the station. The train rolled on into the night.

"Phew!" Hassett said. "Close."

He locked the controls and released the driver. The man was blue in the face. Hassett draped his head over the side and then, when the man was conscious, tied him tightly with his own clothing. He sat comfortably at the controls and thought. The train rushed towards its destination, and Hassett decided he'd better contact Ramirez. That was an overdue task, anyway. There was a lot to tell.

But perhaps the most pressing need was to decide what he was going to do with a double-headed diesel locomotive hauling a night express.

## Chapter Ten

"What do you mean?" Molly demanded wrathfully, her face flushed around the edges. "Do I know where babies come from? Of course I do. I'll have you know I was brought up a lady."

"Well..." pressed Miller, smiling gently. "If you wouldn't mind sort of telling me...?"

"I'll tell you: you just go down to the B.E. and buy them, that's where!"

"Right," said Miller, still smiling that gentle smile. "And where does the B.E. get them, do you think?"

Kirby was lolling back, looking on, wondering what Miller was driving

at and, after the previous intense discussion, deriving quite a kick out of it all. He was having a quiet little chuckle at Molly's expense.

"I don't know!" Molly swung her arms around, expressing baffled fury and, at the same time, a ladylike uncaring attitude, and knocked a silver cup of wine flying. A robot speared the cup with a magnegrav beam, righted it, and returned it to the table without a drop spilled. Molly had sensed that Miller was pulling her leg and, while that infuriated her to a degree, the added feeling that Kirby was laughing at her brought her blood to the boil. Kirby, seeing this, corrected his mistake at once.

"What Molly and I would like to know, Miller, is just what you're driving at. I mean, anyone knows you buy a baby at the B.E. As to where they get them, well, I suppose some woman on a white symbol world goes through the necessary procedure."

"Families on white worlds buy their children at the B.E. as well as us, you forget," Miller said softly.

"Well, for good old Terra's sake," Statham broke in, waving his wine goblet. "Where *do* they come from?"

Miller cocked an eyebrow at Kirby. "You leaped to a conclusion just now, Dick. Why not do it again?"

"You mean babies are bought from black and red worlds?"

"More or less. As to the reason, well, Molly will tell you that. Any woman wants a child. They can't help that; it's built into them as part of their make-up. But the more civilized a woman becomes, the more elegant, the less she wishes to break up her life into child-bearing periods during which she is denied her usual free life."

"Well, that's obvious!" Molly said. "Imagine me carrying a child! Fantastic! I couldn't go partying."

"Most women of The Set don't even bother to think about it. They take their regular oral contraceptive and live life to the hilt." Miller wagged a fork in Molly's direction. "But the race has to go on, and if the women just don't have time to raise children—well, the babies must be found somewhere."

"So you buy them from black symbol worlds," Statham said. "And is that any reason for shooting at me in space?"

"The Law, Wynne, says that you can't set down on blacks and reds. I'm trying to tell you *why* you can't."

"This isn't generally released information," Kirby said slowly. "You've

said that your career gives you the entree to these secrets, but you haven't told us why you are telling us, if you follow."

Miller smiled. "I promise you I'll tell you that as soon as we finish lunch. I want you to look at my planets."

"He's spun us a lot of oppycock and now he's trying to wriggle out of it," Statham commented sardonically. But Kirby knew that Statham didn't really believe that, not any more.

Lunch finished, they allowed the robots to freshen them up and then went on a moving strip to the window which valved open at their approach. Halting, Miller turned to Kirby and said: "Tell me, Dick. Have you been to Frome?"

Surprised, Kirby said: "Yes, twice."

"The name world of our civilization, the headquarters of the small amount of civil service we possess, the world of power, where decisions affecting every Earthman in the Galaxy are taken—and you've been there but twice."

Obscurely annoyed and ashamed, Kirby said: "Well, what's the point of going there? The first time my father took us. The second time was just so that I could say I'd seen Frome with understanding eyes." He made a little *moue*. "I saw all I wanted to see in one day. I ask you! A complete planet covered with buildings, a whole planetary city. Ugh! Not for this laddie."

"What's the point, Miller?" put in Molly.

"Just this." They stepped through the valve now and the strip carried them along the side of the house. "If we visit our home world so infrequently, with all the means at our disposal of rapid transport, what about those early pioneers? Once they had left Earth, they set off into the vast dark, seeking fresh worlds. And, when they had found them, settled down and created a new home for themselves. They had neither the inclination nor the means to return to Earth."

"Well?"

"If I tell you that at least sixty percent of all those early colonies lost contact with Earth, you should not be surprised. We don't yet know the full figure. Of those about half retained a memory of Earth and welcomed the new incursion from Frome—as the Terran Commonwealth had by then become—when we carried out our galactic reforms. The other half had forgotten, had relapsed and gone back to savagery and the long uphill climb to the stars on their own."

"This was when?" asked Statham.

"Various times from the end of the Thirty-Fifth Century up to and including now. We still run across worlds where Earthmen live in mud brick houses, wear woollen garments woven on hand looms, count their treasure by herds of oxen and sheep and war against one another in battle chariots and with flights of arrows." Miller turned to look at Statham. "That world of Starholm you were incautious enough to try to visit—there you would have conditions approximating those on Earth of the Fifteenth Century. The situation was ugly, mean and filthy. In some respects, that is. It seems that no matter where man goes he carries a love of beauty and fine things... *and* a gift for denying them to over fifty percent of his population."

"Very well," said Kirby impatiently. He was beginning to resent the way Miller was pulling his items of information, as though he were a conjuror, out of a hat. "I can see that after the Terran Commonwealth broke down, bits and pieces were scattered about; and when Frome took control we had to start again. And our women folk no longer wished to have babies for themselves, so we simply went down to these Earthman colony worlds and bought their surplus baby population. Okay. Something bothers me about all this though I haven't as yet sorted out just what. But I will. Now I suggest you tell us why you're telling us. Please."

Miller swung his arm up and pointed. They followed the direction indicated, and Miller began to give them a short and crisp travelogue of this planet. Above them, in the clear blue sky, the second planet of the triple-worlds hung, close and near, larger than the moon seen from Frome. "See that huge series of excavations there?" asked Miller. "Where it seems as though the ground has been scooped away in ten-mile-wide swathes? Well, that is where the men of Earth mined. They degutted these planets. Now all that is left is air and water and vegetation. Oh, and *me*." He chuckled.

"Get on, Miller," Kirby said, a growing feeling of suffocation threatening to choke up into his throat. He kept remembering the way Molly cooed and gurgled over the babies, the way her eyes went radiant whenever she looked upon them. He remembered, too, her fierce, natural, maternal pride and the way she was attached to them. "Go on, then, tell us," he repeated.

Miller looked quickly at Kirby and then away. He said: "You were offered a career when you left the University. You joined The Set instead. I am offering you a second chance. If you feel that there is work to be done in the Galaxy, I can offer you an exciting job, an amusing job, Dick, where you will be doing something material to help the men of Frome."

Statham said at once: "Work? Not on your—Oh, no! Not this laddie."

"Don't you ever become tired of partying, Wynne?" asked Miller. They were moving now around the gardens, where fragrant blooms sent out scents that were as distinct and subtle as the worlds from which they had come. "Don't you ever, just a tiny fraction of time, grow sick of the everlasting search after pleasure? Don't you find it all the same—monotonous, boring, a downright waste of time?"

Statham said: "No."

Slowly, speaking despite himself, Kirby said: "You always were a scatterbrain, Wynne, but in this you merely echo everyone else of The Set." He turned to Miller. "That life which you paint in such damning colors is natural to us now; we're beyond the phase of wanting to go out and remake the entire Galaxy more closely to our hearts' desires. And yet, you know, I wouldn't mind joining up."

"Dick!" said Molly. "Think of the children. And, anyway, you don't know yet what Miller is talking about."

"I *am* thinking of the children," said Kirby. "Too much."

"Let me explain just what it is about these color symbol worlds that is bothering Wynne, here, and then we can talk more about my offer." Miller guided them to a flittercar and they made themselves comfortable inside. Miller flicked the hood closed and nodded around the interior, softly lit, glowing with pastel shades, luxuriously upholstered and with ready robots waiting to minister to the humans at a flick of the fingers.

"We take this luxury for granted," he said. "None of you three has ever known a day's unpleasantness."

"What about my last wife?" demanded Statham. "Not to mention getting the old *Liza* kicked in the pants by... by your friends, goshdarnit!"

"'Unpleasantness' I said, and I meant by that something that you three, by your very upbringing and way of life, can know nothing of." Miller set the flittercar in motion and they wafted into the air and began a leisurely tour of the planet.

"We aristocrats of The Set live on the golden worlds. No one who is not one of us dares set foot there, nor would they dream of doing so. On the white worlds, technologists and barons of industry manufacture, with robots, all the goods needed by us, and also for our trading ventures among the stars. They have their own luxurious ways of living which vie with ours; the difference is that they, at least, do do some work for their living."

No one said anything in answer to the evident bitter sarcasm in Miller's tones. He went on speaking.

"On the red symbol worlds, men and women who once knew about Earth thousands of years ago grow and mine and generally produce the raw materials needed by our people on the white worlds. Manufacture can be carried out by robots. Production of raw materials also may to a large extent be automated, but a great deal of primary production must be done under conditions that no one of Frome would tolerate. Also, agriculture demands just that little human understanding that robots signally fail to grasp; a man can raise crops that a robot could never do. They used to talk of 'green thumbs'—so far robots are wonderful mechanisms, but they don't have 'green thumbs.'"

Beneath them now the planet scudded by, and Kirby could see the enormous areas where men had come and ripped the materials they needed from the bosom of the world, leaving raw, sadistic scars. Vegetation was slowly ringing the areas with green, but many thousands of years would have to pass before the bare places accumulated humus and earth sufficient to raise more than a thin sickly scum of moss and lichen. And the great dust bowl patches that mottled the planet in leprous scales would need time that stretched into the far future before they once again resembled their vanished forests and jungles.

"The other two worlds are just the same," Miller said, regret lining his face. Then he smiled. "Oh, I suppose with all the planets in the Galaxy to use up, men may be excused a certain amount of violent spoliation. They needed these materials, and by the time they need to come here again the planets will once more be green and strong."

"But there won't be any ores again, will there?"

"True. But if we plan right, a carboniferous period will ensue which will lay down planet-wide deposits of fossil fuels. That, at least, we can plan for."

"And is," asked Kirby, "the job you offer us this planning, this rebuilding of the Galaxy?"

"Lord, no! In seven thousand years even greedy man hasn't been able to ruin more than a handful of planets. And, if we maintain the color symbols for planets, then there will be no need to ruin any more fair worlds."

"Well, then, Miller, what is this job?"

Miller lit up his pipe, refusing to flick for a robot to do the job for him. He sucked reflectively, and then, speaking unhurriedly, said: "On the black

symbol worlds we collect babies for our B.E.'s. We also take a certain amount of their primary produce, and pay for it handsomely, to cover that side of our operations. The job I'm offering you is to help supervise that work, to go down to the unpleasantness of a black or red symbol world and to act on behalf of Frome, to insure a regular supply of goods and babies, and to make very certain that these outworlders never discover just who and what we men of Frome are."

"You can count me out," Statham said in his usual bubbling way before Kirby could frame a reply. "I like parties. And so long as the system carries on without my help being vitally necessary, then good luck to it."

"And you, Dick?" asked Miller.

"Where do you come into this, Miller?"

"I'm just an official of the Frome Federation. I do my job and pursue my career. I've been down on primitive worlds organizing the collection of babies so that our B.E.'s are fully supplied. I've sweated in the fields seeing that agriculture is saved from all the perils that beset it, and thus insure that we receive our daily bread. I am a very minor official, but I'm due for a leg up the hierarchy. I was deputed to sound you out on this. We knew about your brother and his missionary activities, and we felt that you, too, would like to help."

"Are you telling me Alec was working for you?"

"Oh, no. The missionaries do not like us; they consider that we are monsters... those, that is, who are aware of the true situation. Your brother was a genuine man, Dick, a fine character. He devoutly believed that he had the call to go down to red symbol worlds and preach to the primitives a new and better way of life based on Frome's scientific marvels. I was very sorry when he... died."

Kirby studied Miller and could not take his eyes away from the man's pipe with its placid puffs of sweet smoke. He felt a keen sense of gratitude to the man for saving Molly's life, but he could not rid himself of a deep sense of suspicion that Miller had killed, or been instrumental in killing, his brother Alec. It was not a good feeling.

The flittercar swooped low over an ochre desert, where willie-willies sported madly and where the horizon was an unbroken bar of yellow and orange sand. Kirby could see Miller's point of view; he was helping to run the Galaxy along lines laid down by the men of Frome. Kirby knew that his every emotion should leap at the chance of actively helping the civilization he knew.

There was Molly and the way she idolized those kids.

There was the memory of Alec, calling after him a plea not to be left alone. His brother's voice floated to him from the past: "*Someone's trying to kill me, and I think of all of them it would be the Federation, the Popsup Bureau.*"

And he had walked off to suffer for Molly. And Alec had been killed. Kirby's thoughts were a maelstrom.

Kirby looked at Miller's pipe, the cunningly camouflaged pipe that could blow a gelatine dart impregnated with the D.T.'s antidote, or a rigid killer poison.

"Well, Dick? I can tell you a great deal more about the color symbol worlds. I can fill you with the idea that the Frome Federation needs men like you. I can appeal to you on many counts. But all I say is, will you, for a short space of time, leave The Set and do a man's work?"

"I... I don't know, Miller. To say I'm all confused would be ridiculous; yet I'm completely at space; I don't know, I just don't know."

Unexpectedly, Molly said: "Well, I think the idea of going down to a planet and buying babies is a lovely notion. It's a noble work. But I don't think I'd like you to go haring off, Dick, dear."

Miller smiled. "I must admit I hadn't taken into account that yours was a genuine marriage, Molly. We usually like unattached men. But Dick is so much the right type for us—"

"Meaning I'm not, eh?" interrupted Statham. And he laughed.

"More or less, Wynne." Miller swung the flittercar back on the return journey. Beneath them, a desolate, gouged landscape fled past, somber and barren. "Well, Dick, what about joining the Population Supply Bureau, as Molly has suggested, and become one of us who are insuring the future of the race."

"The what Bureau?" said Kirby.

"Oh, that's our official name—the Popsup Bureau. We supply the future population of Frome."

Kirby sat there, a leaden lump, and all he could see was the face of Alec, lax and limp, and the hole in his cheek where a gelatine dart had been fired by an agent of the Popsup Bureau.

## Chapter Eleven

For the first time in his life Kirby was faced by a problem of emotional importance. He had gone through the alarms and excitements of adolescence, and the gay hurdy-gurdy of life among The Set, and had met problems then that had seemed to him at the time of awesome proportions. To take another wife or not, the regret and sweet bitterness of parting, the death of friends and the spectacle of friends engaged in the petty, internecine quarrels that occasionally flared up among the aristocrats.

But this one was different.

This one touched him deeply, probing depths that he had not realized existed.

Miller was a good egg, a fine chap, and he had, without the shadow of a doubt, saved Molly's life. And Molly meant more to Kirby than anyone else ever had; more, now that they had the kids and had grown together spiritually and intellectually, even, than had Alec. Alec was an essence of memory from the past, a never fading but mellowing image of pleasures shared and strong friendship that had, right to the end, survived all setbacks and shocks.

In the days that followed Miller's disclosures, with an injunction upon him not to disclose them to anyone not previously aware, Kirby found an excuse to leave Miller's triple-worlds of Stuyvesant. He journeyed among the stars, seeking something that he knew, without thought, he could never find.

Molly, surprisingly, was growing restive. More than once she suggested that they settle down on some pleasant golden world or other and raise the children. Driven by this nagging urge, Kirby had discussed the problem with her and, without delving too deeply into motives that he could not fully comprehend in his own mind, he persuaded her to continue their old nomadic life. They went from party to party, and all the time the shallowness of the life grew on Kirby until he came to hate the very sound of the word "party."

He was beginning to understand what Miller had meant when he had asked if parties ever bored or palled.

Wynne Statham had gone haring off after some new girl and, having married and discarded three fresh wives, called unexpectedly on Kirby with Molly's sister Eva in tow.

Kirby had had the *Mermaid* remodeled in compliance with the fad that

any new thing could be improved upon, and the fashion that called on a man to buy a new spaceyacht a year, or to remodel the old. As he was preparing to set out for space to some as yet undecided-upon destination, Statham surprised him.

"What ho, you old ratbag!" greeted Statham. "How's my wife's sister?"

"Wynne! This is grand. Flick for a drink; we'll have to celebrate." Kirby smiled at Eva. "So you've finally brought this nitwit to heel, eh?"

Eva laughed, throwing back her head. She was taller than Molly, more slender and, at the moment, affected an orange-dotted upswept hair style and a long, slinky emerald green dress. "He came crawling to me on his hands and knees—" she began, at which Statham shouted: "Unholy woman!" They scuffled together, falling onto a magnegrav couch. Kirby judiciously left them to it and went to find Molly.

He called her on their two-way transceivers and, after a decent interval, they called Statham and went back into the main lounge of the *Mermaid*. Statham was smiling from ear to ear.

"Eva wants to ask your advice, Molly, and then we have an announcement."

Kirby raised his eyebrows at Statham. The two girls went into a huddle. Kirby heard muted giggles. Then Eva walked across to Statham, swaying in her tight green dress, and whispered in his ear. Statham lifted his glass.

"Silence," he cried. "I have an announcement. Eva and I are going to buy a baby. If Eva has her way, more than one." He glanced at her and they both chuckled.

"Well, this is wonderful," said Kirby, and drank the toast. His voice sounded flat in his own ears.

"Oh, and, Dick, there's something else. Molly's given Eva the benefit of her maternal advice and we're off to the B.E. she recommends. After that, while Eva plays about with the kids, I'm going to join up. That is, well..."

"Join up?"

"You see, I ran into Miller again a couple of months ago and we got talking and—well, you know how it is—I thought it would be fun if I joined the Interstellar Patrol." At Kirby's look of utter astonishment, Statham hurriedly added: "Only for a short time, Dick. I couldn't miss out on *too* many parties."

"Well, I'll be—" said Kirby.

"You always are, Dick," Molly said, a little sharply. She and Eva had

evidently come to a decision. Molly went on: "And, Dick, I think it would be a good idea if I went with Eva. I'd like to buy another baby."

"Surely, dear," Kirby answered, thinking of Statham dressed up, as he'd put it, in fancy dress of black and silver.

"Well, sound a little more enthusiastic, dear, please."

Kirby stared at Molly, this time in baffled bewilderment. A sinking, tearing sensation began in his stomach. Was this how a marriage breakup began?

"I think it's a wonderful idea," he said, lamely. He strove to put gaiety into his voice. "And, Wynne, you must tell Molly and me all about this Interstellar Patrol kick of yours. Sounds amusing." He hadn't used that word in ages.

"Oh, it is, I assure you. All that stuff Miller handed us boiled down to very little. Can't elaborate too much, but what it amounts to is that, having had a couple of brushes with the Patrol, I'm selected to join their august ranks." He seemed to find it very funny. "I don a uniform, and then, hey ho! for the open reaches of space, fighting off the scallywags who want to land on black symbol worlds."

"Wynne, you are an idiot," said Eva fondly.

"About these black worlds," Kirby said, raising an eyebrow. "Does Eva—?"

"Oh, sure. She was with me when we ran into Miller. They thought it would be good for Eva and me if we parted occasionally. Something about two flinty temperaments, or something. I was on like a shot." He smiled engagingly and finished his drink. "It isn't work, you see," he finished in complete explanation.

"What's the matter, Dick?" Molly's tones were still sharp, but something of her old tenderness was still there, enough to reassure Kirby and to let him voice some of his own doubts. He swallowed and said: "I was just trying to picture what the people on the black worlds felt like."

"Well, they don't know about us, do they? So they just live their own normal life, I suppose."

"But, Molly," said Kirby, trying to frame in words just what was fermenting inside him. "You've the three children. You've bought and paid for them. They're yours. Well, suppose someone else came along and offered to buy them from you?"

"*I'd like to see that!*" Molly flamed.

"Yes, but just suppose. Miller said that the desire for women to have children was basic, something they had to do. Once you've bought a child, he's yours, for good and all. If you don't get on, then later, when he's growing up, you can always let the robots handle everything. We know that that kind of upbringing is a bad thing for the race; children without parental love do not measure up so well as those who have a normal and happy childhood."

"What are you driving at? That you and I and Wynne and Eva here were all brought from a black symbol world? I don't think that bit of knowledge can move us; as far as we are concerned, our parents are those people who have brought us up and given us their love. Alec and the twins will regard us as their parents, whether they know they were brought from a black planet or not. Everyone knows you buy babies at a B.E. so what difference is there where they come from?"

"You miss the point, Molly. I was thinking of the feelings of the babies' real parents. What did little Alec's *real* father and *real* mother feel when he was taken away?"

Molly stuttered and flushed and then, in a muffled voice, said: "That's no concern of ours."

"Molly's right, you know, Dick," offered Statham. "This has been going on for thousands of years. Why worry about a habit that's so well-established? It's perfectly natural."

"Natural? I wonder."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Statham turned on Molly. "Ask him to flick for a drink and a smoke and let's talk about something more amusing, for God's sake."

But Kirby could not dismiss the uneasy ideas simmering in him as easily as that.

When Statham went on to railing him and threatening that if he ventured too close to the black world he was guarding, he'd squirt him, Kirby was forced to smile weakly, excuse himself, and hurry from the lounge. The others watched him go, their expressions indicative of bewilderment.

Kirby heard Eva saying as he left: "I say, Molly, you want to watch out for your man. I don't like the looks of him..."

Kirby found a padded chair in the control room and stretched out to think.

The result of that unusual bout of the black depression saw Statham

and the two girls going off in Statham's new yacht *Liza II* to shop at the B.E. recommended by Molly. Kirby said something vague to the effect that he wanted to do a bit of skin diving, and the others, trying to understand and fall in with his odd mood, acquiesced. In a last despairing attempt to throw off this mood in the normally accepted ways, Kirby stopped off at a planet, where a party to which he had been invited six months previously was still going strong. They'd worked the dates around so that a carnival fell every week, and by the time Mardi Gras was finishing, Saturnalia was beginning. And so on.

A complete replica of an old Terrestrial city had been built on an artificially produced grouping of islands and had been named Venezia. Lights of all colors blazed all the time, and maskers, harlequins, columbines—bizarre creations from a dozen different worlds and culture patterns—flowed in a never ending procession along the clean, sweet-smelling canals in electrically propelled gondolas, with canned music plunking from every corner and rooftop. Kirby found a girl, a gondola, and ten roistering companions; but then, finding it all useless, sat sulking in the stern while the lights and music and scents passed him by.

The girl soon disappeared on the arm of a red-tailed demon from Tranthor IV, and Kirby was left to meditate alone.

He had for some time been aware that he was being followed, but assumed merely that this was one of his personal robots assigned the duty of waiting upon him.

When a man accosted him on the steps of a gambling hall and said: "May I have a word with you, sir?" Kirby did not connect the two occurrences.

Not at first. Only when the man had explained that he had been seeking a chance for conversation did Kirby flame out: "So you've been following me around!"

He almost flicked for his robot to toss the impertinent fellow into the canal, but the man's demeanor stayed his cracking fingers.

"Well?"

"If you will ride with me?" The man gestured to a small, two-person gondola. Kirby, without another word, entered. He sat in the stern and waited as the stranger settled on the opposite seat, facing him. When they were comfortable, the man said abruptly: "My name is Tausky. I was your brother Alec's friend."

To Kirby it was as though a piece of a jig saw puzzle had dropped into place, a piece for which he had been waiting, without realizing it, for some time. He leaned forward. "Yes?"

Tausky showed no surprise at the tone. "Your brother was a fine man. As a missionary he did noble work until—"

"Never mind that. What do you want?"

This time Tausky showed a flicker of surprise and—was it resentment? Perhaps. Kirby was not concerned over that now, nor about this man's feelings. He wanted the fellow to tell what he had to and then to get the hell out of it and allow Kirby to think.

Tausky said: "On the night your brother died, he was to have met me and passed on certain information."

Kirby felt a shock of surprised regret. Was this ferret-faced fellow merely seeking information, as was Kirby himself? That would make them both look fools.

"He told me nothing of importance," Kirby began. But the other quickly waved him to silence. Kirby accepted the arrogance implicit in the gesture. *His* time would come.

"I have facts to tell you. I, too, am a missionary, and I, too, have served mankind on many inhospitable worlds. You probably talked to your brother about his work. You will know that we believe that the red worlds should be given the luxuries that we of the white and golden worlds take for granted. All this"—he waved his arm at the floating splendor in a gesture that brought Alec so vividly to Kirby's mind that, for a moment, he felt an intolerable ache—"all this we do not condemn totally; we merely consider that it should be shared with the less fortunate brethren among the stars."

"And?"

"And," Tausky went on, refusing to be unsettled, "we need willing workers. We intend to bring the true way of life to all." His voice dropped lower in tone. "Even, I may say—and in saying indicate how fully we trust you—even to the black symbol worlds."

"They'll never let you," Kirby said flatly.

The stranger laughed. Kirby heard the arrogant confidence in that laugh and wondered. "We have our ways and means. But perhaps the most important fact of all is one with which you will not be acquainted. Your brother was working to stamp out an abominable trade. He and I and others have knowledge of the slavers; we know what goes on on the black

worlds, and we have determined to smash it, once and for all!"

Kirby said: "You know, you have a point there. But how do you intend to go about it?"

At this Tausky could not conceal his chagrin and bewilderment. He stared at Kirby. "You are a member of The Set," he said, his voice thick and impatient. "How can you possibly know what I am talking about? You are merely bluffing, or, as you would say, playing it along for laughs. Well, Kirby, I tell you seriously that this vile business is no laughing matter. It must be stamped out!"

"You needn't put on the histrionic act for my benefit," Kirby said, feeling amused for the first time in months. "What I want to know from you is who killed my brother?" The words lashed out, carrying with them the pent-up frustrations of months of worry and doubts built up in Kirby's tortured mind.

"If you know that, you must know more; you must know what we plan to do!"

"I know very little of my brother's work. All I ask you is to tell me what you know of his murderers. After that I shall know very well what to do."

"He was killed by agents of the Popsup Bureau. Does that mean anything to you?" The sneer in the words was not lost on Kirby.

"By God it does! Thank you, Tausky, for your information. Now, if you will excuse me, I have business to attend to."

Tausky started forward and laid a thin hand on Kirby's shoulder. "Not so fast, my friend. Not so fast. I am interested. If you are aware of the Popsup Bureau, you may know more that I should know. You know, for instance, what vile trade is carried on from the black worlds?"

"Yes. And I don't happen to like it."

"Nor do we. I am surprised you know and yet do nothing!"

"I'm no missionary."

"Precisely. Your brother was a missionary engaged on stamping out this trade. He was working to enlighten our brothers on the red and black worlds and to stop the baby stealing. You are an effeminate member of The Set." Tausky's eyes glittered under his down-drawn brows. He leaned closer and his words struck Kirby with the force of a jet-lash.

"I suggest that you get off your seat and work, for a change! I suggest that you should become a missionary now!"

## Chapter Twelve

"Become a missionary!" The idea struck Kirby like a thunder clap.

Then he saw the absurdity of it. He felt no call. As a member of the aristocratic class, an habitu  of The Set, living in luxury all his life and taking it all for granted, why should he bother his head about how some odd, aboriginal people on a primitive world fared?

Tausky's eyes had stopped glittering; he had drawn back and was now but a deeper shadow in the purple depths of the gondola awning. But still Kirby could feel the pressure of the man's presence, the personality drive that radiated from a man driven by one idea, one obsession, beyond which he did not care or desire to see. The man was a fanatic. Alec had been a fanatic. Kirby wasn't.

And yet...

Kirby said roughly: "Why do you say that agents of the Popsup Bureau killed my brother? Where is your proof?"

The voice was calm now, the passion burned gway in that last vehement call. Tausky said: "I have no proof beyond deductive logic. Alec was supposed to meet a contact from the missionary group at that party and pass on information. We all live under the shadow of the Popsup Bureau and their lackeys, the Interstellar Patrol. There were agents of the Bureau at that party, without the shadow of a doubt. Logic points to them as the murderers. Beyond that I can tell you nothing."

If Kirby had hoped to have his doubts resolved by this thin, dessicated fanatic, he had been rudely disappointed. Consequently, his next thought was of terminating this interview as rapidly and, in deference to this man's friendship with Alec, as pleasantly as possible. He looked about for a landing stage, intending to flick for his personal robot to carry him there.

Tausky's hand closed over Kirby's fingers. The touch of the man's skin was dry and feverish.

"Mr. Kirby," he said, on the verge of pleading. "I ask you seriously to consider. You have expressed your disgust with the baby-trading. Your brother was killed in attempting its suppression. Is it so much to ask of you to take up his work?"

"You know it is!" said Kirby, knowing that he had opened the question

to debate and that he would inevitably acquiesce. This was the end result of his months of self-doubt and anxiety and bitter moodiness.

He spoke again, uncertainly: "I have been learning much recently of what vileness goes on in the Galaxy, vileness that should not surprise me at all, since we all live by it and most take it for granted. As you have spoken about the baby-trading, I can talk about it to you. My friends regard it as a mere part of life. Habitual usage has endowed it with sanctity, and they cannot see your point of view. Even your ostensible aim of bringing the comforts of civilization to the outworlders, they regard as childish daydreaming."

"That is our general purpose," Tausky agreed. "We are forced to counter the baby-trading in undercover ways."

"I suppose," Kirby went on, unheeding the interruption, "that it was Alec being murdered that makes me see these things in a different light; that, and my wife. I can't rid myself of the thought of what the real parents must feel."

Tausky had the sense to remain silent.

"But all these things, bad as they are, are of no desperate immediate concern of mine. The purchase of babies and food and materials from the outworlds has gone on for thousands of years and I cannot see a handful of dedicated missionararies, however well-meaning, effecting the slightest difference in the established custom of the centuries."

Tausky began to say something, thought better of it, and remained waiting.

"The single fact that causes me to throw in my lot with you, Tausky, is my brother's death."

"Ah," said Tausky, with deep satisfaction. "So you *will* carry on the great work among the stars?"

"You'll have to cut out all that demagoguery," Kirby said crisply. "I'm in this for one reason and one reason alone: to find the murderers of my brother and to... and to..." He stopped, puzzled.

"Yes, Mr. Kirby?"

"We'll sort out what happens when they're caught," Kirby said firmly.

"An eye for an eye?"

"Perhaps. And perhaps the Frome criminal courts will have a bumper crop."

"As you wish."

"What had you in mind for me to do?"

"There are certain worlds, black symbol worlds, where we need men to preach the word. At the next ingathering a truly Galaxy-wide uprising is planned."

"Ingathering?"

"The name given to the time when babies are collected."

"All at once, all over the Galaxy?"

"No, of course not. Each planet selects the children to be sacrificed and they are gathered in time for the spaceships to carry them to their B.E.'s. We plan to stop the trade at that point to prevent the ingathering from getting started."

"Sounds feasible if you can persuade the outworlders to act together."

"They will. They do not desire to see their children snatched from the arms of their mothers."

"Okay, okay. And where do the Popsup people come into this?"

"They enforce the secrecy through the Interstellar Patrol and their agents on the outworlds. In dealing with them we are up against a strong and ruthless force."

"Can I get a list of Popsup men at that party?"

Tausky laughed. "You might if you could see the records on Frome."

"Seems as though I have to go to Frome, then."

This alarmed Tausky. "But the missionary work!"

"To hell with the missionary work! Oh, sure, I feel sorry for the kids' mothers. I sympathize with them. But all I'm interested in is finding who killed my brother. I thank you for your help, Tausky. If I can be of any assistance to you, apart from what we've already discussed, don't hesitate to call on me."

Tausky stood up in the rocking gondola. He flicked for his personal robot. "Very well, Mr. Kirby. Maybe you are helping us more than you think by destroying the Popsup men you seek. If you need our help, which may be very likely, a call to Laker's Planet will put you in touch with us." His robot flashed its light and extended its webbed and padded seat, lifting Tausky gently into the air.

He looked down on Kirby, sitting with upturned face. "Oh, and Mr. Kirby, your friend Miller is not above suspicion, you know. There is no proof... but..."

Kirby sat in stony silence until the robot had carried Tausky away into the lurid darkness. Reflections and dazzle from the inky water hurt his eyes. Rockets were bursting in splendid color high in the air and laughter and gaiety spurted everywhere. He sat alone in the gondola, planning his next moves and finding in himself a desperate hope that all his suspicions about Miller were wrong.

His first action was to send a call out for Miller. He had to wait an hour before his robots had located the last point of departure of Miller. The robots reported that after that planet there was no further trace of Miller; his personal call sign remained unanswered and no information on him came in from any other planet.

Kirby sat back in the gondola, dismissing his robot, realizing that Miller must have descended to a backward world and therefore cut himself off from the communications network of civilized men in the Galaxy. It just made the problem a little more complicated, that was all. And as Kirby flicked for his robot again, his mind made up, he was pleurably aware of a sense of excitement, of stirring, of hidden emotions in him. He was actually getting a charge out of this! He was actually enjoying the feeling of maneuver and plotting that his talk with Tausky had aroused.

His robot answered and, almost immediately, had Vansittart on the communicator. Vansittart's big ruthless head, with the deep-set eyes and powerful fleshy nose and jaw that was too square, too perfect, stared out of the screen. He was the epitome of impatience and, at the same time, of gentle and surprising affection.

"Yes, Dick?"

"Sir, I would like to have a chat, person-to-person, with you."

"Is it about Alec?"

"Yes and no, sir. Mainly, it concerns Miller."

Vansittart stretched his lips lengthways. Kirby assumed that the head of the Makepeace Set was smiling.

"Miller, eh? All right, this end is safe. Is yours?"

"I can't be a hundred percent sure."

"Well, say no more." Vansittart's big head ducked off the screen and Kirby heard his muffled rumble speaking to someone or somerobot else. Kirby understood Vansittart's reluctance to talk about Miller if this end of the interstellar communications line was not a hundred percent guaranteed safe from tapping; he was beginning to see that forces were at work in their civilization of which he had not dreamed a few months ago.

Vansittart came back. "I shall be on Frome all next week. Meet me there."

"Thank you, sir." The screen went blank, and Kirby's personal robot closed the iris lid in his stomach, shutting the screen off.

Kirby flicked for a drink, drank the whisky off at a gulp and tossed the plastic glass into the water. The robot speared the glass before it splashed. Kirby felt good. He looked more closely at the personal robot detailed to accompany him this night and smiled as he saw an old friend.

"Horace," he said. "Well, well. So you're still on duty." He stood up. "Horace, we are going back to the *Mermaid*. Now. At once."

The robot extended his webbed and padded couch and Kirby was whisked into the air and away to his spaceyacht.

He had forgotten completely about his proposed underwater holiday. Every expectant thought was concentrated ahead—to Frome and a certain list of Popsup agents.

## Chapter Thirteen

"What is the best thing to do with a double-headed diesel electric locomotive hauling a night express when you've finished with it?"

"Cut up a siding, I should think, John."

"Unfortunately, Archbishop Ramirez, there's no way of steering these things. They just go where the tracks tell them."

"What speed are you making?"

Hassett glanced across the darkened cab at the illuminated instruments. "Seventy miles an hour."

"Slow. Good. Hold on a minute."

Hassett stared ahead, trying to figure out in his own mind what the distances were to the next sizable town, what color signal system was in use here, and what Ramirez was figuring out in his wise old skull. The transceiver buried in his own head again came to life.

"You've exactly five minutes in which to put the driver back at the controls and bail out, John."

"Bail out?" said Hassett. And then he stopped. His head cocked a little to one side. He said, cautiously: "If I didn't know the no-good layabout was having himself a whale of a time somewhere at the other end of the

Galaxy, I'd say that was Miller talking."

"No-good layabout, hey?" the voice in his head said ferociously. "I believe we need to have a few words when we meet up, John Arbuthnot Hassett."

"Miller!" In the driving cab, a beatific smile spread across Hassett's face. "I might have guessed you couldn't keep away when the fun started."

"And I might have guessed you'd be up to your neck in it as soon as my back was turned."

Another voice cut in, Archbishop Ramirez': "That touching exchange of sweetness and light leaves you with exactly two-and-a-half minutes to spare, John."

"What happens then?"

"You start to roll into the rail network outside a sizable town. There are bound to be other trains on the tracks. I'd suggest you put your driver friend to work right away."

For some time the driver had been jerking at his bonds and generally exhibiting the symptoms of a man undergoing a severe emotional disturbance. Now Hassett realized why. The express was likely to crash head on into something equally as hard in a few minutes. He leant over and began to undo the knots. He freed the gag.

"Cut my clothes up!" the man gobbled, spitting. "Let me get at them controls."

Hassett obliged and the driver fairly flung himself onto the levers, throttling back, and trying, at the same time, to peer out at the signals along the track. There wasn't even a radar set on the loco. The train slowed.

"I'm bailing out now," Hassett said soundlessly. "Hold on."

He supposed the train must be doing about forty miles an hour as it slowed down with a great squealing and clanking on overstrained couplings. He decided to give himself some chance and wait a fraction of time longer. The driver was fully occupied. The train's rush slackened. The darkness was intense on either hand, with only the forward flung illumination from the headlight throwing everything into stark frosty relief. Kirby looked ahead, saw where the track ran across a low grassy embankment studded with bushes, and decided that that offered a better chance than the oncoming rail sidings and ballast and railway features.

He lowered himself over the side, clinging with one hand, straightening

his body out to face front, and dropping his legs to absorb the impact. The train's speed was down to twenty miles an hour now, and at that speed an infant, in Hassett's tough book, could have rolled out of its cot with complete safety.

The driver just then realized what was happening and what he ought to do. He picked up an iron bar and started to swing it at Hassett's head.

Hassett didn't wait. He pushed off, and then his legs were running away as fast as they could over grassy hillocks. He went down and rolled over and over, feeling his body crash through a small bush. Then he lay flat, winded. He spoke into his transceiver. "All Sir Garnet. Now what, superman Miller?" The laconic words belied the bumps and bruises rising on his body, and the black eye.

Miller's tones were controlled, and yet Hassett did not miss the tremble and he warmed to his comrade. "This damned world is such a flea-bitten pesthouse. There are no civilized means of communication. We can't get to you quickly, and we can't send a robot. What's more, we have no reliable contacts in that town you're approaching."

"What about the church?"

"Uh huh. At this stage you'd be well-advised to keep away from churches. Since your report we've been doing a bit of checking. Seems that almost every church is riddled with the missionaries. The whole planet is a time bomb ready to blow at any minute."

"How nice." Hassett stood up and dusted himself off. Away ahead he could see lights and a neon glow yellowing the sky. A brisk wind was sporting about his legs, and the dawn would soon be creeping up on another bright, cold day on Brighthaven. "Seems I'll have to make my way back as best I can," he said.

"Just a minute, John." Ramirez spoke and Hassett caught the uncertainty in the voice. "Miller's trying to organize transport."

"I think I'll move off the railroad, anyway. That driver is bound to raise the alarm. It should be light enough to see reasonably in half an hour or so. I'll strike off south. I never did like the cold."

"Spring is nearly here, John."

"I don't intend to hang around that long. There's work to be done in the Galaxy."

"And on this world. We're gradually uncovering the conspiracy. Everyone, apparently, is in it. No wonder they called you in. They had no reason to suspect anyone at all."

"I'm sorry I let you down, Archbishop Ramirez. I should not have allowed myself to be spotted. But suddenly being confronted with a member of The Set—well, it was rather unsettling. Kassem. Yes, I'll remember him all right."

Hassett could hear a faint murmur as Ramirez spoke to someone, his voice faint and blurred over the transceiver. Red stains were creeping up the sky and objects about him were taking on a lighter hue, standing out against the grass. Dawn was near at hand.

"John! Miller's talked Balakirev into sending an airboat, a lifeshell from his ship. Hold on, won't be long now."

"But the natives—" began Hassett.

"The balloon's gone up as far as they are concerned. The plans for this planet, which were already far advanced but not finalized, must now be pushed ahead a couple of years... Terran years, that is."

"I see. All I've got to do is keep my skin in one piece. Right?"

"Right, John."

Hassett began to walk away from the railroad tracks, sliding down the embankment and cutting directly across the fields. Here the land had been left fallow, and he walked across fields covered with clover and grass and starred with little unfamiliar flowers. Dew soaked his trousers.

By the time full light had broken, he was a good three miles away and walking strongly along a narrow lane between high hedges. He felt uncomfortable about those hedges; anyone walking in the opposite direction could see and challenge him long before he could scramble away out of sight. He pressed on. This lane must have an ending, he thought.

When he debouched onto a wide expanse of marshland, he realized that he had blundered. Somewhere near, a river must wind widely, and he had, unknowingly, wandered into a great loop where, one day, an oxbow lake would form.

He stopped and considered. Behind him, the lane ended in a high hummocking of bushes which extended laterally in a wall of vegetation that suggested some part of the farmers' attempts at landscaping this area to contain the marsh. Ahead and on either side, the land was entirely flat and reed-covered, with an occasional stunted bush rising from some muddied half-submerged island of firmer soil. The sky lay in long silver streaks, against which marsh birds rose in meticulous formations, trailing web feet behind them. The sun was beginning to throw heat on his neck and the air before him shivered with faint, silver-quivering mists.

It was a desolate scene.

Still, the lane must lead somewhere, and there was no going back. He spoke briefly into his transceiver.

"Archbishop, I've struck a sticky patch. I'm going straight ahead, try to find the trail." He gave Ramirez his position as well as he could, looked behind him along the empty lane, and set off directly into the marsh.

"Miller won't be long, John. Keep out of mischief."

"Me and my bump of location," said Hassett.

"You were bound to strike that marsh. It covers a wide arc to the south, and all to the west and north lies a network of interlinking farms. You'll do better in the wastelands."

The going became difficult. There was some sort of trail, but almost at once Hassett was sinking up to the ankles. His nostrils wrinkled. He persevered and, as the sun rose higher, he cast ever more frequent glances over his shoulder.

His disappointment when the first men showed at the high crest of bushes in rear was sharp. He had been hoping, with an intensity that only showed itself when proved false, that Miller's airboat would arrive first.

The men saw him at once. They had dogs. Hassett took out his gun and checked the charge and slipped it back into his pocket. He plunged on with determination. Every stride he could make meant just that much longer before he was caught.

The land was now nearly all swamp, and the reed clumps showed on either side of the track as dark, silhouetted bastions against the shine of water.

The first bullet splashed ten feet to one side. The second whined past his head and fell—where he didn't know... or care. He ducked his head and ploughed on. The next few paces brought water and mud up to his knees. He wished savagely for an antigrav set, thrust the betraying thought from his mind, and stepped strongly forward to fall full-length on his face in malodorous mud.

Bullets thudded with soft plops into the mud in front of his face. He rolled over, clawing mud from his eyes and wriggled, half in water, behind a clump of reeds. Their tops were hard and brittle. He cleaned off his face and stared back along the submerged track, panting.

Well, this was as far as he went. If he tried to make a run for it now, a dozen slugs would meet in his back.

He could hear the dogs' snuffle and the harsh tones of the men controlling them. Casual bullets clicked over, decapitating the reeds. The hunters just wanted to pin him down until they could settle with him at their leisure.

The morning was bright with the promise of a fair day. The silence with which he now lay had brought back confidence to the insects, and they buzzed and chirruped around him in the marsh. A magnificent green-winged dragonfly alighted on a bulrush a foot in front of his face and began to manicure its wings. Hassett waited.

Now he could hear the suck and splash of the men's boots. The dogs were whining low in eagerness. Any minute now they would break out into ululations of savage desire to be loosed at him. Hassett took out his gun and rested the barrel on his left arm, lying square on the mud across his face. He kept his head down. When they saw the blur of his face, white among the dark reeds, they might not be able to contain their anger; they might shoot without thought for the consequences.

And Hassett felt very sure that preacher Kassem wanted him alive for questioning. He felt a stab of confused pity for Kassem. The man must feel so confident. To him, the capture of Hassett would be a great triumph.

To the muffled but mighty workings of the Galaxy, this world was on the verge of the great transition. Kassem would have all he had striven for swept aside in the blaze of a greater revelation; in that convulsion Hassett was a minor and very unimportant piece.

To Hassett himself, the outcome was very important; as important as anything possibly could be in the life of a man. But he could still experience that vicarious stab of pity for the missionary. Dying, Hassett would win. Living, Kassem would lose.

It was choicely ironic.

His transceiver came alive. "John, Miller reports he's sighted the marsh. Can you give an indication... ? Oh, hold it! Yes, he's spotted the men and the dogs. Where are you?"

The men and the dogs had seen the airboat, too.

The men were stopped and staring up, shading their eyes against the pearl-gray luster of the sky. The dogs were whining in a different key. One man lifted his rifle and fired a defiant shot.

Hassett laughed and at once he felt the flow of confidence return. Lord! He'd been getting very low back there. He looked up carefully and at once saw the little airboat swinging in tight circles above the group of hunters.

The craft was small, perhaps six hundred feet long, a slender, streamlined shape with six sharp fins angling from the stern. Ahead, under the bows, the control blister showed like the opened mouth of a shark.

She looked beautiful.

Hassett tore his eyes away from her and, reaching out, clumped together and bundled up a sheaf of rushes. He split a couple open and set fire to them with his matches. The dry interiors of the brittle heads blazed up and he thrust the fire into the heart of the bundle. White smoke rose and then trailed.

The ship stopped orbiting and nosed over.

The men were shouting now. Some had run off, coat tails flying, dots vanishing into the mouth of the lane. Others stood, shaking their fists and firing rifles into the air. Some, more bold, pushed on, shooting haphazardly into the rushes around the white smoke.

The airboat hovered above Hassett. She lowered methodically until her lower fins were a hundred feet in the air. From her hull a deep, resonant gonging filled the ears and reverberated in the clear morning air.

Around Hassett, in a ten-foot diameter circle, the rushes suddenly sighed and bent, all pointing away like spokes in a wheel with Hassett as the hub. Hassett smiled.

He stood up jauntily. The men saw him. They took careful aim and shot repeatedly. The bullets struck the magnegrav beam and hung for a livid moment, suspended, glowed cherry red with suddenly expended kinetic energy, and then dropped into the mud.

Hassett acknowledged the bravery of the men. They must have realized that this sudden apparition was an example of the tremendous power of the sort described to them by preacher Kassem.

Hassett stood nonchalantly before them, secure in the protection of the magnegrav beam. He carefully adjusted his coat, brushed off some of the mud on his trousers, and ran a finger and thumb down the creases. He remembered then, and smiled at forgetting that Brighthaven trousers *had* no creases. So, in a pantomime that infuriated the watching and silent men, he adjusted the thonged slits at the trouser ends. Then he raised both arms.

The magnegrav beam began to raise him up. He sailed into the air, riding on nothing, ascending into the waiting and friendly valve of the ship's control cabin.

A face looked out. A hand waved. Looking up, Hassett waved back.

As his head rose above the level of the valve, he stared at Miller, standing with hand extended.

"Mr. Hassett, I presume?" said Miller.

Not to be outdone, Hassett said with dignity: "You kept me waiting, my good man. Home, James, and don't spare the atomics."

## Chapter Fourteen

"One of the Arbuthnot Set?" Faint distaste shadowed Kirby's voice. "I suppose he's a gentleman?"

Vansittart said: "Out among the stars, Dick, all men are brothers."

The room in which the two men reclined on magnegrav couches was luxurious and comfortable in the normal and accepted ways of luxury and comfort; there was nothing to remark about on that score. But outside the room, pressing down as a stultifying weight, was a planetary city. Frome, Kirby could never forget, was all building. The sheer bestiality of that condition crushed his spirit, making him feel uncomfortable, making him sweat. He was really, when he thought about it, just a hick from the sticks.

Vansittart flicked for wine and went on speaking. "You asked me for the names of the Popsup men on duty or on leave at Kraswic's party when Alec died. You ought to understand that Popsup agents have jurisdiction only on red and black symbol worlds and the ships of the Interstellar Patrol. They have no authority here, or on white or golden worlds. And, I can assure you, when a Popsup man takes a furlough, he forgets about work and enjoys himself."

Vansittart was eating grapes now, each separate globe peeled and deseeded by a tiny attendant robot perched on his shoulder. The robot's prehensile tentacle popped a fresh shining grape into the man's mouth each time it opened.

While Vansittart chewed, Kirby said: "Thank you for your help on this, sir. I hope that either Miller or this John Arbuthnot Hassett will be able to tell me something to assist me in my search."

Vansittart grunted the stop call to his Beulah-robot and said: "Hassett is away on an assignment now. I tried to contact him when we first made inquiries but was unsuccessful." He chuckled. "And what I was going to say before Beulah here began feeding me grapes was that a Popsup man crams a year's partying into three weeks and enjoys every second of it. You

degenerates of The Set can know nothing of that sort of gaiety."

Kirby began to make some protest but the old man waved him down. And, anyway, apart from nut cases like Wynne Statham, there did exist, Kirby was forced to admit, a sort of gray patina of forced amusement over The Set's partying which was not apparent until you thought about it. And thinking, as Statham had pointed out, was fatal.

"I'm an old man, Dick. Older than you think. I've had a damn good life and I don't regret a minute of it; and there are precious few who can say that, believe me." His fierce brows dipped and the fire of his eyes was concentrated on Kirby. "And shall I tell you why? They don't know where they're going. I did. You, Dick, made a bad mistake when you left the University and wallowed at once in The Set. You should have taken up a career. A man like you needs some other interest outside normal life to make that normal life worth living."

"That's what Miller said, sir."

"Miller. Yes. Well, as I said, I'm an old man. When I'm gone Miller will take over as head of the Makepeace Set. Surprised?"

"To be honest, no, sir."

"Miller's best friend is an Arbuthnot. Don't forget it." Vansittart flicked twice and the Beulah-robot peeled and dealt twice. Vansittart chewed. "So," he said, and swallowed. "You want to join the Popsup Bureau, hey? Well, that can be arranged."

"I want to talk to this Hasset," said Kirby doggedly.

"I know. But the high brass will have to consider you as joining up. Otherwise, you won't get within parsecs of him. I carry enough weight to put it through, but no one can go up against the Law."

"I understand, sir."

With a wicked change of conversation that drove home the whole point of this meeting, Vansittart asked in a smooth and syrupy voice: "How's Molly?"

"Molly?" Kirby stammered. "Why... why she's fine, sir. Off buying some more children."

"That's fine. That's just fine."

They both knew it wasn't. The signs of a rift were all too plain. Kirby felt a warmness in his guts and wondered just why Molly, of all women, should affect him as though he'd just left college. She was a witch, all right.

Vansittart clicked for his personal robot and issued detailed orders.

Kirby lay back, not listening, envisaging Molly and wondering what she was up to this minute. Around him he could almost feel, pushing on his skin, the incredible weight of a world-wide city. His soul cringed. He had a struggle to prevent himself from leaping up and dashing off at once, away from this labyrinth, out to where Molly was to tell her that his black moods were over. But that couldn't happen until he had sorted out this business and had set his mind at rest.

Vansittart took a yellow flimsy from his robot and began to read it, flicking almost vertically down the lines of fine print.

"Ah, things have been happening on Brighthaven, it seems. This is the latest situation report from Ramirez. He's the man in charge down there, an archbishop in the church we set up as a cover for our activities and also, incidentally, as a fine prod to increase production of food and families." Vansittart's tones were matter of fact. "He tells me that agents of the missionaries have been honeycombing the place, stirring up discontent—actually telling the natives that we of the golden worlds exist and that they and we are all descended from Terrestrials. These damn missionaries go too far, by a long shot. We'll have to clip their wings, that's obvious."

Then he must have recalled Alec, for he added with a gentleness that was not assumed: "Alec was a fine chap, Dick. I don't think he was implicated in any way with this subversive activity."

Kirby kept his own counsel, remembering Tausky.

"You can slip down to Brighthaven as a member of the Popsup Bureau. You'll come under orders there. They will brook none of this fine, free independence we value so much in The Set."

"If you mean I'll have to take orders from an Arbuthnot, I'll do that, and willingly, if it'll put me on the trail of Alec's murderers."

"Very well. You'll have to be quick about it. All hell is scheduled to break loose. We hope that we can reveal our true policy to the natives in time to prevent a wholesale uprising. Our installations there are valuable, but they mean nothing beside the lives of our men and the good will of the inhabitants. This could put back their growth by a thousand years." He finished angrily: "It's happened before."

Kirby stood up and flicked for his personal robot. The old man smiled up at him and instructed his secretarial robot to pass across the necessary papers and commission. "This Hasset is an extremely good egg," Vansittart said. "He's just done a purely routine assignment of counterespionage, if you like to call it that, on Brighthaven, and has

turned up this conspiracy. That he very nearly got himself killed doing it doesn't mean a thing. It was a job of work, and the Popsup Bureau had to do it. It was done."

"I won't forget," Kirby said, perfectly understanding what Vansittart was implying. "When I've sorted out this business of Alec, you might ask me to join up properly." Vansittart did not reply. He leaned back and flicked for Beulah to go on feeding grapes. There was a most peculiar look on his face—half smile, half pain.

Aboard the *Mermaid*, and heading as hard as the engines could drive him across the light years to Brighthaven, Kirby thought back on the interview. He felt confident that Vansittart had no inkling of his real purpose. So Hassett was rough and tough and a good egg, was he? Well, by the time Kirby had had a little conversation with him, and had found out that the Popsup man had killed Alec, then all the roughness and all the toughness in the Galaxy wouldn't stop a very pleasant quarter of an hour. After that, Frome could deal with him. Kirby had by this time persuaded himself that Hassett was the murderer. Miller didn't fit, and the time element excluded him. Hassett it had to be.

The mysterious hints that Vansittart had been dropping about the destiny of Brighthaven and of all the other out-worlds—hints which Kirby had willfully ignored—now came back to him. He had achieved a sort of quasi-peace over the murder, and so his mind could grapple with other problems. He supposed that Vansittart was going to tell him that the color symbol planets gradually worked their way up the scale, striving to leave black, reach red and then finally achieve white and an understanding of their rightful place in the scheme of things. The only trouble was that Kirby did not recollect ever having discovered a new golden world not previously listed in the Guide.

It might be that, it might not. Kirby began to think of Molly.

In the frantic search after pleasure consuming all members of The Set, the restriction of remaining married for at least a year after buying a baby was an intolerable burden to most. He had thought that he and Molly had found something precious, something better than a mere marriage of convenience, and that buying the babies had been fun and oddly touching. The percentage of baby buying was dropping every year; people of The Set just didn't want to bother with the brats, robot nursemaids or no. They wanted fun and parties and the complete freedom to divorce and marry when and where they pleased.

As far as Kirby was concerned that was normal. He now had to

acknowledge a tremulous unease in his attitude to The Set, but he still could not find fault in their way of living or their desire to have fun and not buy children. If it hadn't been for the scattered couples prepared to buy babies in much the way Kirby and Molly, and Statham and Eva, had done, then, Kirby supposed, without really weighing the matter, the human race would have died out long ago. The thought was so preposterous that he forgot it at once.

The headquarters of the Frome Federation had been set up on the solar system of Frome, which was situated well into the star-filled inner reaches of the great cone of Terrestrial influence. This central location, even in an age where spaceships could cross the gulfs in parsecs-long gulps, had been one of the reasons for leaving the old Earth, swinging in lonely peace nearer the rim of the Galaxy. Kirby, sending his ship at maximum acceleration from Frome to Brighthaven, would still spend a number of days on the journey, and in that time he pondered his problems forward, backward and sideways. The conclusions he reached were substantially the same as those with which he had begun: Hassett must be the murderer. Therefore Kirby must meet Hassett, talk to him, extract a confession—that might be a pleasant task—and then he would again shove that problem to the back of his mind, as was his usual custom.

When at last he reached Brighthaven, and a stranger ship called on him to heave to, he was quite beyond caring about the problems of the Galaxy or of any fancy-colored worlds in it. Every thought was bent upon consummating his errand.

And his errand had boiled down to one simple task: see Hassett and avenge Alec.

The spaceport lounge had been converted into an operations room. Outside the tall windows, the entire cathedral area, which effectively concealed that it was in reality a spacefield, was shrouded in the murky gray of force fields turned up full. Natives of Brighthaven would now see for the first time, instead of the projected huddle of buildings and seminaries and sacred enclosures, a dull, featureless gray dome rising to overshadow the spire of the cathedral.

Inside the lounge, reports were coming in regularly from spy-eyes positioned on the perimeter. The reports were always the same. More and more masses of men crowding into the city and standing sullenly behind their crude barriers, all staring malevolently at the cathedral and the ominous gray dome. The reports could merely add weight to the feeling of anger and retribution sweeping over the planet. The day of reckoning, according to the men of Brighthaven, was at hand.

"I'd like to get some of the Patrol here now," said Skipper Balakirev sourly. "I'd twist their dandified necks between my fingers, like, like—" He stopped speaking and his hands finished the sentence for him. Miller, Hassett and Ramirez, watching him, all felt the outward flow of cold, ruthless passion. They were of The Set. Skipper Balakirev was not.

"I should estimate however efficient the Patrol may be," Ramirez said calmly, his fragile hands folded composedly, "some missionaries would sneak through. Only two large-capacity ships would be necessary to bring in enough weapons to arm the people more than adequately. And it's obvious that more than two ships have got through."

"They've been planning this a long time." Miller was as elegant, as poised and as inconspicuous as usual. His pipe emitted even, unhurried puffs of smoke. "As the position stands at the moment, they have a far superior power than we. When the reinforcements arrive, we should be able to meet them more evenly, and then—"

"And then what, Miller? Wipe them all out?" Balakirev's tones were contemptuous.

"Not that, surely!" Ramirez expressed horror. "I couldn't sanction that!"

"You don't have to." Balakirev prowled the room, thumped the desk where maps were laid out telling their sad stories. "We've done it before and I expect we'll do it again. One planet whiffed away is small price to pay for keeping the rest in order."

"There are some fine people out there." Hassett gestured. The situation had changed so drastically that he was still having difficulty adjusting. Adjustment was never easy for one of The Set, he knew, even with all his training.

"I agree." Miller glanced at the power tell-tales banked around the walls. They were all flickering as the needles gradually moved around the dials towards the red danger zones. Each tell-tale relayed information from a pickup point on the outer perimeter of the defenses, where the dull gray force screen was being eaten away by the ultramodern beams of the encroaching forces. It was very much like, Hassett thought, an army of mice nibbling at a round succulent cheese. Slow they might be, small the amounts taken away in each bite; but, eventually, they would crumble it all to nothing.

And, when that happened, the natives of Brighthaven, led and equipped by the missionaries, would burst in on the spacefield and the cathedral. What would happen after that to the men of Frome within was not pleasant to contemplate.

## Chapter Fifteen

The men who stared challengingly from the screen at Kirby did not look the type of men he had expected to find aboard an Interstellar Patrol ship, at least according to the descriptions of Wynne Statham. Kirby answered their call and was abruptly told to wait. He filled in the time, as the ships automatically matched orbit and locked airports, in studying the other ship and her occupants.

These men were of a type new to Kirby. He flattered himself he had knocked about the Galaxy as much as most, and yet he had to confess that he had never before met with the hard, jerky, tough, almost neurotic attitudes displayed on his screen as the men went about their tasks. What those tasks were, were as strange to Kirby as the men.

He supposed that being in uniform and having to do a job of work which they might not relish was the cause.

He chuckled at Statham's outrageous sense of humor.

"Black and silver uniforms," Statham had said. "Interstellar Patrol." Sitting, waiting with as much patience as he could muster, Kirby said: "Oppycock!" He'd have a word or two to say to friend Statham when they met up again. Although, that would be after he had dealt with Hasset. That thought dominated his entire outlook.

The men on the screen stiffened suddenly, each man standing rigidly upright, head thrown back and with his hands straight down the seams of his trousers. A most odd posture. The one who had spoken to Kirby and who seemed to be in charge abruptly brought his arm and hand up in a quick flicking gesture and snapped his hand against the visor of his cap.

Kirby decided that it took all sorts to make a Galaxy.

Then the newcomer centered on the screen. The others relaxed and the man who still had his hand to his hat said: "The man Kirby, sir." He brought his hand down with such violence that automatically Kirby winced.

The newcomer turned to face the screen.

Kirby looked into a pair of night-black eyes beneath a low and bushy single-bar eyebrow. The man's face was lean and lined, and Kirby could not identify the cause of those lines; certainly they were not the lines of laughter that were so familiar among the oldsters of The Set. The mouth

was by nature full and sensual, and yet some force, some strong habitual expression had tightened it into a straight thin scar of bloodless flesh in that tense and nervous face. Again, Kirby could not recognize what emotion might draw a man's mouth into such a slit of repressed passion.

The man who looked most like this amazing person was that missionary fellow, Tausky. Kirby decided he didn't like the look of this face staring like a death's-head from the screen.

When the man spoke Kirby recognized, at least, that the fellow was a member of The Set, although Kirby had never seen him around at parties. But he wasn't worried on that account, at least, for had he never met the man, it would have been soon enough.

"So you're Kirby?" The voice was as intense and dedicated as the face. "I have heard of you." There was the faintest rustle of humor in the voice. "I was a good friend of your brother Alec."

"Really?" Kirby suppressed a yawn. This might be amusing. Anything at all that anyone could tell him about Alec was useful. "Please, do go on. But first, wouldn't it be polite to introduce yourself? You have the advantage."

"I apologize." The irony could not be missed. "My name is Kassem."

"Is that all? You talk like a member of The Set."

"That is enough for you to know. This Set foolishness will soon be settled for good and all. Then perhaps men can get back to some real work."

A thought occurred to Kirby. He said: "I assume that I am not talking to representatives of the Interstellar Patrol?"

There came a quickly suppressed gust of laughter from the other men in the control room. Kassem's expression did not change. "You assume correctly, Kirby."

"Interesting."

"I had a report from Tausky. He said that you had almost decided to join the missionaries. Well, I repeat his offer. I have no time to spare for you at this moment. A crisis has arisen, and your ship can be of great help to us." The brooding stare challenged Kirby. "If you wish to join us in our great work among the stars, now is your opportunity."

"I am searching for the man who killed—"

"I know, I know. Tausky reported all that. The Popsup Bureau are in a difficult position right this minute on the planet beneath us—Brighthaven. They murdered your brother. You can help us by fighting them. And you

will gain your revenge..."

"By fighting the Popsup Bureau?" Kirby could not repress the derision in his voice.

Kassem reacted violently. He was a man, Kirby saw, who had forgotten what personal criticism and personal humor was. He could chuckle at another's misfortunes; however, he could not abide any reflection upon himself.

A brisk metallic clanking began at once, vibrating into the *Mermaid's* control room. Kirby thought the noise originated somewhere along the midships portion of the hull, but he could not be sure. Kassem swung round and moved energetically off screen. Kirby opened his mouth to frame words of protest.

The harsh noise of his airlock being forcibly opened brought his head round and cut off his expostulation. "What in Galaxy is going on?" he said. He jumped up, bewildered, angry, and set off at once to the airlock. All the time the busy clanking went on, joined by a curious buzzing and banging. Kirby began to get furious. He barged into the airlock corridor in time to see a group of men run from his airlock in his own ship!

"What do you think you're doing?" he shouted.

They ignored him. They ran past him like a wave splitting to avoid a rock. Like well-drilled machines, they bypassed him and ran quickly into the control room.

Kirby flicked for his robots to throw the men out.

Three robots detached themselves from their wall niches and, tentacles waving, darted up the corridor. Kirby was breathing heavily. Two red spots burned on his cheeks.

The sound of heat weapons reached him, then the unmistakable sound, like tearing plastic cloth, of a flare gun. He watched grimly as Jeeves trailed back, emitting gusts of black smoke, half his control box shot away. Behind him James zigzagged crazily. What had happened to Thomas he did not like to think.

"I assure you, Kirby," Kassem's voice said from the airlock, "it is useless to resist us."

Kirby turned slowly. His features were set. He had never before known himself to get so angry. He was beyond caring or self-analysis now.

He began to take out his own .1 needle gun.

"Please do not force me to shoot you, Kirby. You can be useful. You

entirely misjudge the situation."

Kirby did not misjudge the flare gun in Kassem's hand.

He thought about Horace, his personal robot, and decided against turning the faithful servitor into a heap of junk.

"I realize that this sort of treatment has not been accorded you before, Kirby. Yet if you persist in living in a fools' paradise, you have only yourself to blame."

For the first time fear touched Kirby's mind.

Kirby's anger had begun to ebb. From the moment he had decided against sending Horace to certain destruction, he had been regaining control of himself. At Kassem's curt nod he dropped the .1 needle gun on the floor.

They went through into the control room.

Almost, almost but not quite, Kirby was more interested in the novel sight of human beings working at robots' jobs than he was in dealing with the situation at hand. In the control room, men were stripping out wires and replacing them with new circuits, taking black control boxes from ready supplies brought through the airlock and corridor as Kirby stood there, and linking them up. Kirby didn't understand what was going on and had no intention of finding out. That sort of thing was for robots. He turned on Kassem. "Would you mind telling me—?"

"Later, Kirby. Just sit down and keep quiet."

"But this is my ship!"

"What about it?"

"What ab—!? Why, you can't come in here and—"

"Oh, go away and keep quiet, man! We've got a job of work to do, real work, something you know nothing of." Indignation became Kirby's prime emotion. He sat back and took a good look at himself and his actions in relation to what was going on around him in his own spaceyacht. He decided to play it as clever as he could, bearing always in mind that he had collided headlong with a way of life and an attitude to living totally strange to him. These men might well be aliens for all the sympathy of outlook they possessed in common with him.

The activity in the control cabin had reached a peak, and now the frenzied scurryings slackened off. Kassem became approachable. He was looking with satisfaction at the quickly-rigged control board. His second-in-command was seated before the board, running an initial test.

Kirby said: "Look, Kassem, you caught me totally unawares. I was wondering how I was going to talk my way past the Interstellar Patrol, when—"

"How's that?" asked Kassem, still looking at the control board. He seemed to understand what Kirby had said. "You mean, you were trying to get through to Brighthaven? Why?"

"You already know that. I want to settle accounts with the Popsup man who killed my brother."

Kassem cleared his throat. It was as near to a laugh as he could get, Kirby surmised. "He's there, all right. He's cooped up with that pal of yours, Miller, and one or two others. We are going in for the kill!"

Kirby felt quite frightened in the face of events and dimly perceived Galaxy-wide machinations that were far greater than anything he had hitherto dreamed of. He smiled, and plunged ahead. "Look, you know I told Tausky that I was going to join the missionaries. Well, what made you take over my ship this way? You should have realized that I would have co-operated with you without force."

"There is no time. But I am glad you have decided in the logical way. Brighthaven is the beginning. This is the spot we have chosen to make our stand, to open the campaign. With Brighthaven as a blazing symbol of freedom in the Galaxy, all men will see the truth and join us."

"All? The men of the golden worlds?"

"I care nothing for them. You don't know the full details yet, Kirby. We're going down on Brighthaven now. I can tell you that one of our ships was roughed up by the Patrol and we need a ship to fill the firing pattern. We have installed a force projector in this ship, and she will be the last link that will smash their dome below."

"I see." Kirby could at least recognize the symptoms now. Kassem had taken a decision, and now he had to wait until some unspecified time in the future to see his plans fulfilled. Kirby was getting over his shock and sense of outrage, and it seemed to him that now was the time to draw Kassem out; the man wanted to talk.

The screens showed the thick cluster of stars in space. One of those chips of light was Stuyvesant, another that Welsh planet where Molly and he had bought the twins. Now, they were dropping down onto a world where action and violence sprawled across a planet that, only a year ago, had not known that any others beside itself existed. In that year the missionaries had set a match to the fuse, arousing the hatred of the

people, fanning their resentments over the baby buying and the food buying, cleverly sidetracking the bounteous payments made by Frome in recompense. The story that Kassem told Kirby was familiar to him in parts; other parts made him realize in sudden wonder how widespread were the currents in the Galaxy that the peoples of the golden worlds did not dream existed.

It seemed to Kirby, listening to the dry, matter-of-fact voice of Kassem, that the golden worlds were as ignorant as the black.

"But what about the genuine missionaries?" he asked. "Did Alec know of this revolt?"

"No. We had use for such men. They gave a respectable cover to our deeper activities. I liked your brother, Kirby. He was naive and simple, but he did his job well; and that is the important thing to a man like me."

"So your ships have stocked up this planet with weapons, you have inflamed the natives, and you have organized a revolt. All this I can understand. But only as actions in themselves." Kirby was genuinely puzzled. "Why, Kassem? *Why* have you done all this?"

Kassem, for the first time since Kirby had met him, spoke quietly, reflectively, without that false bombast and demagoguery.

"There have always been revolutionaries in every society, Kirby—men who perceive that the present order is bad, and who have decided to do what they can to alter it. I believe that the Galaxy is wrongly organized, and is heading for early and total extinction. As a good Earthman I do not like that. I believe that we can be a great race among the stars; I mean that I believe in man." He shook his head. "I do not like baby buying. I do not like to see worlds kept in ignorance, slaving so you of The Set may live in luxury. All these things, and others, are wrong. So the missionaries decided to alter them."

"And so you incite the natives of this planet to kill men of the Popsup Bureau?" But Kirby's heart was not in his chiding. He found himself agreeing with Kassem.

Kassem's second-in-command looked up. "Request permission to commence firing, sir."

"Carry on, Vronsky. Heat up their damned defense shell and roast them into the open!"

"Yes, sir." Vronsky bent above his controls.

On the screen now the planet showed as a blue-green sickle, gigantic and beautiful. The surface rushed up. A town spread out, a town with

railway stations and streets and a cathedral—and a dull, featureless gray dome.

Through the ship Kirby could feel the thrum of the force projector. Beams were lancing into the gray dome from all sides, from the ground and from the ships hovering above it. There was no sign of the Interstellar Patrol. They had been brushed aside from this planet where the fate of the Galaxy was to be decided.

Kassem swung round on Kirby, his face showing some emotion now, some breaking-through of that iron composure.

"All the godlike golden worlds are rotten!" he said vehemently. "All degenerate, decadent, stinking in their own refuse. Now we open up that pit so that everyone can see. Now we prove to the Galaxy that the day of the golden worlds is over."

A fingering beam lanced up from the dome below, scanning for prey. Kirby, horrified, saw a ship plunge into that pointing finger, like a fighter hurling himself upon a firmly held *épée*. The ship disintegrated in a blossom of flame, an expanding concentric sphere of awful, yet beautiful, color. Kirby winced.

The two things were happening at once. Inside the ship, he was at last penetrating to the truth of the mysteries withheld from him all the days of his life. Now they became revealed like the peeling-away of the skins surrounding an onion. And outside the ship, the gigantic nuclear forces of man's science sledgehammered at each other with the titan blows of giants. Kirby's senses reeled. He felt the ship, his ship, shudder under the impact of a glancing blow of one of those probing beams from the dome.

The whole atmosphere about them was livid with color and fire and heat. Clouds broke and streamed away under the thrust of greater man-made clouds. As far as the eye could see, the surface of the planet was lit by the lurid glow around the dome.

And the dome was no longer the dull gray, featureless enigma of an hour ago. Now it sparkled with color, ran and scintillated with prismatic glitter, as it strove to blanket and nullify the enormous torrents of energy pouring upon it from the weapons of the missionaries and their allies.

Kassem's missionaries were well-trained fighting men. The wonder of that struck Kirby when he remembered the gentleness of Alec. There had been two sides to that organization, just as, it seemed, there were two sides to the way you regarded the Galaxy.

Now the skies of Brighthaven, from horizon to horizon, were going mad.

Luridly aglow, fuming with gigantic smoke clouds, and shot through-and-through by the miles-long beams of force projected by the darting, weaving ships above and the crouching, fermenting dome below, all the heavens were a shrieking bedlam. Kassem was keeping the *Mermaid* out of the thickest of the firing. And as his larger ships flung themselves upon the dome, he waited above, like a gaunt gray spider who spins his web in the sunshine.

Kassem and Vronsky, his second-in-command, had gone into a huddle over the exact moment to commit themselves to the battle. Kassem wanted to drop right down now; Vronsky urged caution, reminding Kassem that they had taken the *Mermaid* just so that a battleship could be released for the fighting. Kirby, watching them, flicked for a cigarette.

Nothing happened.

He stood with his mouth foolishly half open. He clicked again, his fingers snapping sharply in irritation. Still nothing.

Then he remembered the shambles made of his robots. He flushed with anger. But there was still Horace. He ought—

"Here's a cigarette, chum," offered one of the missionaries. Dazedly, Kirby took the cigarette and accepted a light. The man went on: "We had to cannibalize most of your personal robots. War's hell, you know." And he laughed.

A deep shame burned in Kirby. He said a brief and ungracious thank you and then added: "I'm just going along to the lounge." He had to get away, suddenly, from this grim and chilling atmosphere in the cabin, where great things in the Galaxy were being planned and carried out. He wanted to think.

In the lounge he flung himself on a magnecouch and flicked for a robot to answer an incoming call on the screen. Remembering that he had no robots, that he was, in effect, naked and helpless, he reached up and took the call himself. This screen linked through to the control cabin and, as the call had not been answered there—doubtless the screens were full of the battle raging outside—it had been shunted through to this satellite screen.

It was Miller.

"Hullo, Dick, thought we recognized the *Mermaid* skulking up there." Miller looked tired, and the graveness of his expression was heightened by his very inconspicuousness. He rubbed his forehead and shut his eyes briefly. Then he smiled wanly. "Hell of a stink going on here."

"What the blazes are you doing, Miller?" Kirby was surprised. And yet his surprise was deeply tinged with some other, acrid emotion. Shame? "How are you making out down there?"

"Not too badly. We might last out. I must confess I am surprised and disappointed to find you ranged on the side of our enemies."

"I don't know, Miller! There's a man aboard who took over my ship, a fellow called Kassem..."

"Kassem!" Miller spoke urgently off screen. Then he swung back. "Is he listening in?"

"No. All the control screens are filled with the battle. I'm on a satellite in the lounge. I wish..." Kirby paused, and then said simply: "I wish I understood what was going on."

Miller was heavily sarcastic. "I assumed Kassem had given you the details."

"Please, Miller. Can't you see what a stew I'm in?"

"I won't say you've only yourself to blame—but I could." Miller's image wavered and then steadied. "Don't forget that we're under bombardment here. We might be killed any minute, but *you're* in a stew!"

Another man centered on the screen, talking to Miller. Kirby heard what he said. "Yes, we can reach her, Miller. As soon as you give the word."

"Righto, John. Thanks."

Suspicion tightened in Kirby. He shouted at the screen, bringing both men's heads round.

"Here, you! Are you Hassett?"

"That's right." The voice, despite the situation and the shaking of the image, was pleasant.

At last, Kirby thought, at last we can drive down to the heart of the matter, and to hell with the Galaxy.

"Do you, Hassett, have a blowpipe like Miller's?"

"Yes."

Kirby took a great breath. "Answer me, Hassett, since you will surely be killed in an hour. Tell me the truth. Did you murder my brother Alec at Kraswic's party?"

Hassett's eyes crinkled. He was quite serious. "No, Kirby, I didn't."

"You were at the party, you had a blowpipe, and an agent of the Popsup Bureau killed him. That adds up to you, Hassett."

"All correct except for one thing." Hassett was about to go on speaking when Miller turned and, suddenly galvanized, disappeared off the screen. Kirby could hear him talking rapidly to a man whose voice rumbled in exultant glee. Hassett was listening and his face lightened. Miller came back on screen.

"Listen, Kirby. Forget your brother for now. I'm asking you to rise to a supreme occasion. For all that you've ever believed in, for all you hold sacred, whatever that may be, you've got to hold Kassem there. You've got to stop him breaking this dome!"

"Why should I?" said Kirby roughly. "Hassett killed my brother and I demand justice!"

"Justice!" Miller's contempt lashed Kirby. "What do you know of life? You, a member of The Set, cooped up in your golden worlds full of debauchery and decadence? Can't you understand that the fate of the Galaxy hinges on what happens on this planet in the next half-hour?" He flicked his fingers off screen and a portable screen was wheeled so that Kirby could look into it. "Take a look at this, Kirby!"

In the tiny screen Kirby could see a ship's control room, filled with men in black and silver uniforms. Staring at him was the white face of Wynne Statham. "Hold on, Miller," Statham was saying. "We're coming as fast as we can."

"Wynne!" said Kirby through the link to Statham. "What are—?" And then he stopped speaking, very suddenly. Standing just beside Statham was Eva... and Molly.

Kirby could say nothing.

"Dick!" Molly said, and the back of her hand went to her mouth. "Oh, Dick!"

"Listen," Miller said crisply. "This is the situation. Kassem is aboard Kirby's ship. Our dome here is due to go down in about a quarter of an hour. Your ships, Wynne, won't be here for—"

"Half an hour or so."

"... so that means you've got to hold Kassem off, Kirby. You must!"

"I regret to say," came Kassem's hard voice from the screen, "that your friend Kirby is in no position to do anything."

On Kirby's satellite screen, the superimposed image of Kassem, in the

ship's control screen, laid a mocking, ghostly shape upon Statham and Molly and Hassett and Miller.

"Kassem!" said Miller despairingly.

"Dick!" called Statham. "Try—"

Molly said, cutting through the others' words: "Why, that's the man who was talking to Alec when we arrived at Kraswic's."

And Hassett said: "So there you have the man who murdered your brother, Kirby. Your friend and ally, Kassem."

The screen went black.

## Chapter Sixteen

Kirby believed him. He remembered the man who had been talking to Alec at the party, and he remembered the speed with which that man had walked off. Molly had gone with him, and Molly had had other things on her mind just after that. He remembered the duel. And he remembered finding Alec with Kassem's gelatine dart melting in his cheek. He did not bother to twitch the screen off; there were no robots to do the trifling task for him. He was tantamount to being naked without his omnipresent robots.

Yet he still had to deal with Kassem. That, at least, he owed Miller and Hassett. "Half an hour," Statham had said. Half an hour before the rockets could arrive, and in twenty minutes or less the dome would be down.

A tremor of cunning flicked in his mind. Kassem had cut the satellite screen off from the control screen. There was a slender chance that he, in trying to stop Kirby's friends from telling him any more, thought he had succeeded, and might now be congratulating himself on a smart piece of work. There certainly had been a wavering of images in that last charged half-minute ...

He went to the door of the lounge just in time to be met by two of Kassem's men, who silently escorted him back to the control room.

Inside, Kassem was radiant with victory. The screens showed the dome as a single pulsating globe of scarlet fire.

"Ah, Kirby. I apologize for cutting off your little chat. But there were things I did not wish you to hear, at least, not yet."

Kirby risked it. "So you cut off! I thought the dome had fallen in when

they stopped speaking. They were trying to ask me something but I couldn't make out what it was. Can you tell me?"

It was supreme bluff, supreme impudence. Of course, it did not succeed.

Dryly, Kassem said: "They were asking you to stop me from crushing their dome. Your friends were pleading with you to save their lives."

Kirby continued to try. "Why keep calling them my friends? Didn't the Popsup Bureau kill my brother?"

Kassem cocked an eye at Kirby and then returned his stare to the screens. Kirby guessed that as long as the missionary was prepared to talk and to split his attention, then that was how long the dome would continue to last. The dome! The dome was beginning to achieve the status of a fetish symbol in all of their thinking.

"So you didn't hear their final attempt?"

"You must have cut in too quickly. What was it?"

"Oh, they seem to think that their way of life is worth fighting for. They must consider it worth dying for because that is precisely what they are doing."

Although all the odds were against the event, Kirby began to feel that Kassem had swallowed the bait. He was taking Kirby's remarks at face value. The man had to cope with an enormous load at the moment; his own plans, carefully nurtured, were working out before his eyes. He couldn't be thinking with a hundred percent clarity on any other channel. It made the man human. It showed Kirby that the fire of fanaticism could blind as well as inspire.

But it could not quench his loathing for the man. Here stood the man who had murdered Alec! Kirby had to hold himself forcibly in check; otherwise he would have flung himself on Kassem and choked the other's life out without pity or repugnance. Or, at least, he told himself bitterly, would have tried to. Long before he had reached the missionary, his henchmen would have brought their guns into play.

Maybe... maybe if they did, they would wreck enough of the controls to send the *Mermaid* down off balance and bring her within range of the few remaining beams springing from the dome. It was a chance worth taking. His life, along with his brother's, to avenge that waste would be worth the mite in the scale that might tip the balance.

He had to get Kassem off guard. He said through lips suddenly dry and raspy: "How is it that you're a member of The Set and yet bear them such hatred?"

Kassem took his gloating eyes away from the screens and stared at Kirby. "I suppose you're suffering under the same delusion as the rest of your fellows in the Galaxy. You think that the golden worlds and the people of The Set are the true masters of the Galaxy? Well, you would have had to find out when you joined us. The true masters of the Galaxy are the people of the white symbol worlds—the men who control the machines and production, who produce the needs of the Galaxy and who control the new populations."

"The *white* worlds? But, surely, that's not—"

On the screen the dome's fiery red had changed to orange.

"What do you know of it? In the old days when this system was begun, the tycoons of industry who had separated so far from the ordinary people decided that their women could no longer stoop to the indignity of bearing children. A partying they would go! And it took very few years for the fashion to set in; women bought their babies conveniently packaged."

The dome had brightened from orange to yellow.

"So what was wrong with that?" demanded Kirby.

"At first, nothing. Orphans, unwanted children, all the millions of outcast babies were taken. But the demand was insatiable, and soon women's children were dragged from the hospitals before they had even seen them." Kassem was working himself up, and Kirby could clearly see that in this recounting of the old wrongs, the missionary was reliving the long trail that had led him to this moment of victory.

"If that's true—"

"Of course it is! And we have worked to take over and let the golden worlds go hang. They are parasites, living on through sheer sentimentality. They must all be swept away!"

From yellow the dome deepened now to green.

Halfway.

Kirby, in talking, had edged alongside the control board. He stood now with bent head, assuming a tired and bewildered air. That control board meant very little to him. He set up his co-ordinates and told the robots to do the rest, and knew that their infallibility guaranteed safety. There were men, he knew, of The Set who could handle a spaceship without robots; Kirby could not.

"You said the white worlds were the real masters," he said to keep the conversation going, to distract Kassem's attention and still to split that

attention between conducting the battle and giving expression to the man's overweening pride. The wonder of the white worlds' domination would come to Kirby later.

"Of course they are. The golden worlds are a relic from the past, allowed to continue through sentiment and, I suppose, because they give rise to artists and musicians and other worthless good-for-nothings." Kassem issued crisp instructions to Vronsky, who relayed them to the battleships closing in for the kill. Kassem went on: "All these men working so well—you don't suppose that they, or you for that matter, could be so healthy and so active if they had been born of the people of the golden worlds, do you? Your precious Set are decadent, degenerate; adoption was a necessity. Otherwise the race would have stagnated and died out."

"That I can understand."

"Some of your men from The Set are strong-minded enough to be fit for life in the Galaxy, people like Miller, and his friend Hassett. Most of you are soft! Rotten!"

The dome was deepening ominously from green to a liquid, electric blue that shimmered like a gigantic gem.

Two to go, now, to extinction.

Kirby was aware of a dry mouth and a heart that fluttered sickeningly. Kassem had killed Alec, and Kassem was about to kill Miller and Hassett and to drag down to destruction the golden worlds and all the people that Kirby called friend.

He could almost hear those people appealing to him.

"Yes, rotten," Kassem repeated, mouthing the word with satisfaction. "Even though they choose the children with extravagant care from the black worlds, so that only the fittest are taken, life in The Set saps their manhood before they come of age."

"So that's how we retain our health despite our robots and lack of exercise," said Kirby. He had decided. He had at last made up his mind. To be truthful, he had decided some time ago. It had taken courage to find the courage to do the job; it was pleasant to find he was not a coward.

Kassem was thoroughly enjoying the situation. He had everything under control. The dome had but two more color changes to go through and then it would turn black and crumble and the beams would be through. He waited for that with intense pleasure, and while he waited he paraded his own pride and self-aggrandizement before Kirby, who was a poor fool at best, but still a willing audience.

"I shall change all the present system," Kassem said. "When we have shown the Galaxy what can be done on this world, the rest will rise. And I shall go to Frome not as a suppliant but as a conqueror!"

Kirby took a deep breath, saw the dome had gone from blue to indigo, and faced Kassem squarely so that the missionary was between him and the rest of the men.

"Kassem," he said distinctly. "You enjoy playing God, don't you?"

Kassem reacted. Before he could give vent to the black rage that boiled up in him, Kirby spoke again.

"I know you killed my brother Alec. So now I'm..."

Kirby flung himself full length at Kassem, taking the man off balance. He got one hand on his throat, hauled the missionary around on top of him and held him there tightly as the beams hissed past overhead. Kassem's men stopped firing. Shouts and heavy feet battered at Kirby.

His side seemed to cave in under a savage blow. He still clung stubbornly to Kassem. He could see Vronsky waving a gun and shouting. Another man ran across and aimed a blow with a gun butt at Kirby's head. Kirby twisted and ducked behind Kassem. The blow crashed on the missionary.

"Hold on," Kirby said to himself, through the pain. "Hold on."

Kassem was unconscious, and both men were draped over the control board. Kirby scrabbled desperately for Kassem's flare gun, pulled it out clumsily and shot the man who had tried to strike him. Vronsky gave a shrill yell and scuttled for cover. Kirby played the beam around, shouting, not caring that this was his ship.

"So I don't know how to control a spaceship!" he shouted. "I don't! But I can destroy one!"

The flare gun turned the cabin into a shambles. The controls burned away in spitting sparks. Redness and anger and a tearing sorrow blinded Kirby.

Just before he shot out the last screen, he saw an anguished face, a face of a missionary captain of a ship, shouting in horror as the man witnessed what had happened to his leader. This, Kirby knew, was what Miller wanted done. Before the dome changed from indigo to violet and then to black, the attacking ships would sink away. This, in that odd, final moment of consciousness, Kirby knew; he knew, too, that with the ships gone, the ground forces would not take the dome unaided.

Then the ludicrous situation burst on him. The *Mermaid* had lurched and gyrated wildly. Now Kirby and a very dead Kassem floated about in the center of the control room, and Kirby, for one, felt very, very sick. A feeling of endless falling claimed him, rushing down upon him so that he vomited in violent nausea.

The next thing he understood clearly was being on the receiving end of a hypo. The drug revived him. He looked up from the magnegrav couch into the faces of Miller and Hassett and Statham and Molly.

"So you did it, Dick!" Molly said. Her eyes were like stars. Kirby thought about that and wondered why he insisted upon putting a sentimental construction upon the most ordinary reflection of light in eyes filled with tears. He laughed.

"Yes. I did it. I may be a degenerate of the golden worlds, but Kassem and his missionary gang seemed to me to be worse." He considered that. "I did it not because he'd killed Alec. I did it because... because..."

Miller said: "Because, Dick, you knew he had a sick mind. The white worlds run the Galaxy; you know that now. The golden worlds are gradually running down, gently declining into the grave. Now we take only the babies that are not wanted. We give them a good home, we don't cheat or steal from the black or red worlds. And, gradually, they are integrated into the Frome Federation, not as color symbol worlds, but as free planets in the commonwealth. That's why there are no new white or golden worlds in the Guide. One day, Dick, and soon, there will be no more color worlds at all; only a great brotherhood of free planets in a great Galactic Commonwealth."

"And through the years we've kept the human strain pure; all the debauchery and decadence of the declining golden worlds has not tainted the blood of Homo sapiens." Hassett, for all his toughness and roughness, was smiling down on Kirby.

"Oh, Dick," Molly said again. He became aware that she was holding his hand.

"As soon as the medic robots have patched you up, Dick," Statham said, awkwardly, "you'll be a new man again."

A fragile, wispy, ethereal little man leaned across. "Your ship fell on top of my cathedral, young man. It smashed ship and church. But the beauty of our civilization is that we can always order more. A new cathedral for me—"

"No!" Kirby pressed Molly's hand. "No new spaceship for me for some

long long time. I've a task to do on Beresford's Planet—a *real* job that demands all a man's energies."

"Apartyng?" someone asked.

"No." Kirby lay, relaxed, waiting for the medic robots to put him together again, all the while knowing that only he could put his mind and spirit back to health. "No. With Molly's help we'll be raising kids."