

IT WAS THE DAY OF THE ROBOT

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CHAPTER 1

You stand before the humming computers and you fight off terror. You feel a more-than-human wisdom crushing you to the earth, denying you the right to think for yourself. You know that the future should be in your own hands, but you can't wring that much independence of thought and action from the master controls.

The Big Brain can't know what a man is thinking, but the feeling is there — the guilt feeling. You want to escape but can't. You look around you and see your own face mirrored back. You see on gleaming metal the haggard eyes and tight, despairing lips of a total stranger.

The girl at my side was trembling violently. She'd punched her identity number, and the Big Brain's answer had struck her like a hard-knuckled hand in the dark.

I could see the punched metaltape gleaming on her palm — four inches of tape. I could see the torment in her eyes, the film of moisture she was furiously trying to blink away. She was staring straight at me, but I knew my face meant nothing to her. It could only have seemed the cold face of a stranger, trapped like herself.

The realization of her torment gave a sharp, heady quality to my anger. The guilt feeling dissolved and I felt only anger. She was so very beautiful that I succumbed to the universal human fantasy. I saw her as an outcast girl in a freedom ruin and there was the tang of death in the air and the rich, heavy perfume which outcast women wore.

She was standing against a crumbling stone wall, her large, dark eyes wide with desperation, her unbound hair falling to her shoulders. She was a hostage to despair, appealing to the primitive in man in the pitiful hope of awakening love that might know reverence and respect. I had come upon her suddenly and I was fighting for her in a canyon of crumbling steel against men lost to all honor.

Then I saw the light of the dome that arched above me glowing on her hair and the bright, dangerous, mind's eye vision was gone. I wanted to whisper to her, "A computation denying you the right to marry is a crime against beauty such as yours. Don't accept it. Insist on a more rigorous check on every phase of your ancestry." But I didn't say it. How could a man and a woman reach each other with sympathy and warmth when a terrifying weight of nonhuman wisdom denied them the right of courtship?

A glance is a beginning courtship, a word spoken in a certain way, the briefest of handclaps in a shadowed room. Even that was denied us; we were strangers. There could be no hands stretched forth in friendship and reassurance. If you listened carefully you could hear the humming computers. You could hear the click of the metaltapes being punched, being cut off sharply. You could hear a lifetime of misery and bitter frustration being punched out in exactly ten seconds.

Marriage privilege permitted . . . Marriage privilege denied.

The vault was like a prison, harsh with artificial sunlight, each of the twenty computation units guarded by heavy bars. You could look up at the glittering tiers of memory banks and stimulus-response circuits, and tell yourself that the Big Brain was society's only bulwark against decay from within. But if the unit before which you stood flashed its cold light upon you, the dryness in your throat wouldn't be from pride.

To the simple fellow yonder, the humming meant that the Big Brain was taking a personal interest in

him, as well as every man and woman in the vault, with a solicitude almost godlike. To the junior coordinator whose lips had gone suddenly white, it was quite otherwise. He was an educated man with a high I.Q. and he was waiting for the Giant Computer to make an impersonal analysis of data as unalterable as the stars in their courses.

It was the Giant Computer in the eyes of Society and the technicians who had designed and constructed it. But to the simple fellow and to me, "Big Brain" cut closer to the truth. For quite different emotional reasons perhaps, but what of that? Popular names have a way of demolishing all pretense, and whatever the pros and cons of logic and science, a machine that can destroy your happiness *takes an interest in you*.

Marriage Privilege Permitted . . . Marriage Privilege Denied.

There is more to it than that, of course. But you had to have good eyesight to read the micro-lettering, which told you exactly why you'd made a tragic mistake in allowing yourself to be born.

Biogenetic advances in electron-microscope Roentgen-ray an-a-lysis having made possible the exact determination of genes of human inheritance in the human adult, the individual's blindly instinctive urge to mate and have children can now for the first time be successfully controlled. Experience has shown that it is to Society's best interests to maintain at all times a perfect balance of the more desirable genetic types. It thus becomes obvious that curtailment of the marriage privilege must, of necessity, be directed solely to that end.

It was as simple as that. I looked down at my own tape, at the cruel words punched into the metal.

John Tabor . . . Marriage Privilege Denied.

Ironically, I wasn't an undesirable type. I was perfectly healthy mentally and physically. In a few years — fifteen perhaps — my type could marry again. But right at the moment there were too many of *me*.

If I married now I would be gravely imperiling the beautiful socio-biogenetic balance which had to be preserved — even if it meant enforced celibacy or a freedom ruin for a man who had thought to find his greatest happiness through marriage and a home.

The girl next to me hadn't turned. She was still staring at me and her eyes were clear now — clear and fearless. I hadn't intended to speak to her. I had fought the impulse, knowing what it could lead to. I thought of how vigilantly unlawful love-making was spied upon and guarded against, save in the privacy of a man's own lodgings, how every instrument of twenty-second century technology was arrayed against it.

It seldom escaped detection and the penalty — death, or in-stant, monitor-defying flight to the decadent, violence-ravaged ruins of Nuork. What seemed to some the greater punishment was actually the most merciful, for when survival depends solely on blind luck and a savage, animal-like cunning even the best of men will become brutalized in the end. In Nuork it was kill or be killed and no man could hope to stay alive in a freedom ruin and endure such an exile for more than a year or two. There can be no real freedom in a hunted existence that keeps you constantly on the alert, with violence and death all about you and the dread that you're powerless to cope with it menacing your sanity day and night.

The desires of youth have no beginning, no end. It wasn't sympathy alone that made me ask, "How bad is it?"

"My classical Mendelian ratio is too low," she said. "Too low, that is, for any one of the pooled offspring of a series of families where the parental mating types are almost identical."

She laughed a little hysterically. "I seem to have memorized it already, word for word. It's strange how you'll do that when everything stops for you and you want to die."

"If it ties in that closely with multiple-family data you can ask for another analysis," I said. "Computations based on more than fifty predictable ratios are sometimes in error."

I showed her my tape. "This is my third computation. I received my first two years ago."

She seemed not to hear me. She was looking at me with suddenly heightened interest, as if my sympathy had brought her new hope and courage. Just my sympathy and not what I'd told her about the multiple-family loophole.

She drew closer to me and suddenly there was a flame of yearning between us. I was feeling it and I

was pretty sure she was. Her femininity became so overwhelming that it frightened me. I was afraid to think of what might happen if she reached out and touched me. Just the coolness, softness of her palm resting against my arm —

I looked around the vault. A security guard stood by the door, but he wasn't watching us. His eyes were trained on another girl halfway down the vault, a wholly unattractive girl with angular features who stood with her head held high, as if defying the humming computers to deny her happiness.

Spots of color burned in her cheeks and in her eagerness to become a wife and mother she seemed for an instant almost beautiful.

I looked away quickly, feeling I had no right to stare. My temples were throbbing, but I refused to admit that I could be in danger. I had visualized what might happen if she touched me, but I felt confident I could keep that kind of madness at bay. If a woman I did not know was weak and wanted to touch me . . . I could be strong.

Her hand was suddenly warm in mine, our intertwined fingers shattering my self-assurance and exposing it for what it was — a desperate clutching at a straw.

"Tell me about yourself," she whispered.

Realization came with appalling suddenness. She could have asked anything of me and I could not have refused her. A woman's strength may be different from a man's. But it can be wholly irresistible. There is beguilement in it and subtlety and when the woman is very beautiful a request can be a command.

I told her my name, my occupation. I told her I'd just come from Venus Base and I told her why I was going back. "Hard work is the only real compensation," I said. "When you're engaged in a construction job on the planets you don't have time to think too much. You take pride in your work, in watching the big machines cutting tunnels through solid rock at peak efficiency. You watch the hills being leveled, the sea bottoms being filled in. You watch a city you've helped build rising from firm foundations, white building by white building, and it gives you a feeling of accomplishment. It's better than staying on Earth and seeking a substitute for happiness."

"But is that *real* happiness?" she asked. "Aren't you deceiving yourself?"

"Happiness is always relative," I said. "Life deals every man a few brutal blows, and the happiest men I've known haven't always been the luckiest. It's harder for them when the blows fall."

She nodded in half-agreement, a troubled look in her eyes. As if to dispel thoughts that were too painful to her she asked, "What is life on Venus really like, outside of the construction-project sites?"

I told her of the planet's savage beauty, and there was only one thing I kept back — how different I was from most of the men who sought escape on Venus Base. I didn't tell her how great and unusual were my telepathic powers. It was far too dangerous a secret to entrust to a woman. When a child has been born abnormally telepathic he learns caution at an early age — even though he cannot hope to conceal his secret from the Big Brain.

"There are no women on Venus," she whispered. She was standing very close to me and suddenly her hair brushed my cheek. I told her more about the construction work.

"Men who can't marry on Earth will have their chance," I said. "Women will be sent out. There are restrictions you can't impose on pioneers and builders. The biogenetic heritage requirements won't be quite so strict."

"Women will be sent out when you are dust," she whispered.

I pretended I hadn't heard her. I held on to Venus Base as a child will hold on to its most treasured toy, pretending it has found a way to make it yield adult pleasures.

"The restrictions will be gradually relaxed," I said. "Even now it is a free and easy world. You can travel from construction site to construction site, whenever the desire to roam takes hold of you. To quiet that restless urge women will be sent out. It slows down the entire project. And a new society cannot afford that kind of man-hour waste."

"They will let you die first. The Big Brain has not yet made its power felt on Venus. The monitors know that when men have tasted freedom, Society must move with caution." Her fingers tightened on my arm. "Society needs men like you for construction work on Mars and Venus, but those who come after

you will be a more docile breed. Society will never reward men whom it does not completely trust.”

“I’ll have to risk that,” I said.

She gave me an odd look. “I suppose it *is* better than sitting under a psycho-helmet dreaming about a woman who exists only in your mind.”

“Emotional illusion therapy can be a satisfying experience,” I said. “You can have beautiful experiences in dreams. Sometimes it’s so real you never want to wake up. The sleeping mind can be aroused and respond to tactile sensations that are memory-recalled without any actual —”

I stopped abruptly, because I wasn’t sure it was wise to take her clinical detachment for granted, even on a purely scientific plane. So much depends on the individual’s capacity to keep a discussion of the physical aspect of sex compartmentalized. It could take on an emotional coloration that will make what is being said seem outrageously candid and intimate, when nothing could be further from the truth. I had that capacity but the instant I saw a slight flush suffuse her face I hesitated to go on.

She seemed aware of my embarrassment, for she said quickly, “It can be satisfying, I’ve been told, to a man. But when you *do* wake up?”

“I went to Venus Base because I preferred to stay awake,” I said. “Does that answer you?”

Her eyes searched my face. “Did you ever go to a freedom ruin?”

I shook my head.

I would have gone to the freedom ruins, if the stakes had been clear-cut. To be permanently banished to Nuork or one of the other ruins would have been worse, by all counts, than a death sentence. But I would have gone to one for an hour — or a day.

If the stakes had been clear-cut. The women who went expected to be fought over and the men —

You found a woman you could love and you courted her until tenderness and desire flamed in her eyes. Then, unless you were completely a beast, she became your woman for as long as you could hold her. To hold her you would have to kill, to defend and protect her against attack. Not all of the men who went to the ruins in search of a woman were brutes. But they were desperate and de-spairing men, driven half out of their minds by a hunger the ruins alone could satisfy.

They knew exactly what the stakes were — that it was kill or be killed. And that alone can demoralize a man and make him accept a jungle code. If we are willing to take so great a risk, they told themselves, we have a right to do what every man who comes here must do to stay alive.

It was false and vicious reasoning, because to take a woman by force, even if you are prepared to fight to the death to guard her from further harm, is always a brutal act. And that’s why the stakes weren’t clear-cut and I had always shunned the ruins. It was possible for a man to go to the ruins and court a woman honorably and openly and win her love. But few of the women who went to the ruins, in a desperate search for a mate, expected to be wooed in that way. They accepted the inevitable and were prepared to submit to violence. Any other kind of lovemaking would have seemed strange to them, and by the same token, suspect. They would not have completely trusted a man who wooed them with tenderness and respect.

No society can exist without its safety valves. By computation a certain percentage of the cruelly denied would find their way to the ruins, just as, far back in the twentieth century, a certain percentage of men would seek out women who made a profession of the merchandizing of sex.

A certain percentage would find their way to the ruins and — a certain percentage would die. In that respect it *was* clear-cut.

I could almost hear the Big Brain whispering, “Society has taken certain regions and about them it has erected barriers of self-loathing and public disgrace. Beyond the barriers there is no law but the law of the jungle. Beyond the barriers my wisdom has no meaning. But it is well that some should go; it is necessary.”

If the stakes had been just a choice between living and dying I’d have accepted them gladly. But in the ruins men outnumbered women five to one, and that gave brutality too large a domain, and generosity and forbearance less than a fool’s acre of breathing space. A man could not stand upright in so small a place, and still think of himself as a man.

The eyes of the girl at my side burned into mine. Large eyes she had, a deep, lustrous violet which

looked almost black until you discovered that they could glow for you alone. “Do you know why women who can never have love here go to the ruins?”

“This is why!” she said. Her arms went around my shoulders and she crushed her lips to mine, so hard I couldn’t breathe for an instant. Then she stepped back quickly, her eyes shining. “Call it anything you wish.”

“There’s a name for it you don’t often hear in the ruins,” I said.

She came into my arms again and that was what I brought my mouth down hard on hers, bruising her lips a little and then drain-ing their sweetness like a thirsty wayfarer in a parched wilderness. It was a madness we couldn’t control and there was a terrible danger in it.

CHAPTER 2

We were saved from disaster by the totally unexpected.

Far down the vault a man was screaming. His fists were tightly clenched and he was screaming out imprecations against the humming computers. There was a hopeless rage in his eyes — rage and bitter, savage defiance. Even as he screamed he began to slouch forward, with the terrible weariness of a man trapped beyond all hope of rescue.

I had no right to interfere. It was a problem for the Security Guard. The guard was just starting to turn, the electro-sap at his wrist glittering in the harsh light.

The thought of what might happen made me almost physically ill. I had no right to interfere, but I did. I crossed the vault in six long strides, and grasped the sagging man by the shoulder. I swung him about and started slapping his face. First his right cheek, then his left. It may have been bad psychology, but I had to chance it. I’d seen men killed or crippled for life by electro-saps. Few of the guards were deliberately brutal, but they didn’t know their own strength.

Between slaps I spoke to the poor devil in a whisper, deliberately keeping my voice low, knowing that you can’t reason with a sick or mortally terrified man by shouting at him.

“Careful — the guard’s watching you!” I warned. “Don’t force him to use his sap. Do you hear? If you do you won’t walk out of here alive!”

Abruptly the poor devil stopped screaming, sagged forward, and would have collapsed if I hadn’t caught him.

The guard was instantly at my side. “That was quick thinking, friend. Maybe just a little too quick. Don’t you know that helping the wrong people can get you into serious trouble?”

I didn’t answer. I just waited, hoping he’d let my interference pass.

He glared at me, then said. “All right, I suppose you can’t be blamed too much. I might have done the same thing myself, if it wasn’t my duty to see that things stay normal here. When anyone goes off the beam like that, you let him alone for a minute. He may do or say something the Monitors should know about.”

He shrugged and most of the animosity went out of his stare. “Get his arm around my shoulder. I want to find out if he can walk.”

I stood watching the guard assisting the poor devil out of the vault.

It’s funny how tension can distort reality by blocking out what may concern you most by channeling your awareness in just one direction. I watched the guard pass from the vault before I turned back to reassure the girl I’d taken so impetuously into my arms.

She was gone.

For a moment I stood staring around the vault, shaken, de-spairing. Then, slowly, balance and sanity returned to my mind. I remembered what I’d told her about the mad impulse that had come upon us both at the same time. “Call it anything you wish,” she’d said and I’d replied, “There’s a name for it you don’t often hear in the ruins.”

But had I really meant that we’d fallen in love? In ten or fifteen minutes, when we’d been complete strangers to start with? Could love spring up between a man and a woman that fast? Had it ever been known to happen, actually? It’s the most precious thing in the world, but all really precious things have a

growth stage before they become precious to you. You look at a beautiful emerald and right off it dazzles you, sure. But unless you're as mercenary as hell that emerald doesn't become really precious to you until you've had it set in a ring and worn it for a week or two.

At least a week. You have to turn it about on your finger and hold it up to the light and admire the way it catches and holds the light and delight in the brilliance and splendor of it. It has to become *your* emerald, different from all other precious gems. It must, in a sense, grow into your flesh and sing in your blood and become completely a part of you.

Infatuation? Of course. That could be a singing flame too, and so overwhelming at times it could easily be mistaken for love. It was perhaps the beginning of love — the very first warning you get that you're headed for trouble or an eternity of rapture. Infatuation was seldom wholly physical. Sex entered into it, sure — maybe it was four-fifths sex. But it went much deeper than sex, because you can be physically stirred by a woman and not feel that you're in the slightest danger of becoming really involved with her. Infatuation is sex with something very important added that makes it just about as unique as love, though not as precious — to lead at times to a man's total enslavement.

All that I told myself as I stood there completely alone again, realizing with a shudder of relief by what a narrow margin I'd been saved from utter disaster. Unlike the screaming man, I could face the future with confidence.

I was a potential "marriage privilege permitted" type and I knew that hopes temporarily dashed wouldn't stay buried. I knew that when I left the vault and emerged into the clear, bright sunlight it would light up the world for me.

My heart was singing when I turned and walked out into the corridor and descended to the street.

I wouldn't be lonely any more! She'd be slender and very beautiful, with tumbled, red-gold hair; and when she came forward to greet me for the first time her smile would warm me as I'd never been warmed before.

I had spoken to the man and it was all arranged. I was on my way to pick her up. My beetle purred as it sped swiftly down the shop level driveway, red sunlight gleaming on its fused tungsten hood. The air was crisp, cool and invigorating and the future looked bright.

All I had to do now was conquer a tendency toward fuzzy thinking and face up to the facts. It was as if I could hear the computers humming, giving it to me straight. All right, the computers couldn't talk. You fed them your identity data and the answers came out punched into a metaltape. But it was as if I could hear the Big Brain itself whispering to me.

"Not for you a quiet fireside and a cloak around your shoulders when you're too old to dream, boy! You'll die on Venus Base. You'll be with the lost and forgotten men — or so everyone will think on Earth. But you won't be lost and you won't be forgotten, if you take your happiness while you can. It's yours for the taking, in full measure and brimming over.

"Make the best of things as they are. You've got strength and you've got courage far beyond the average — so take it in your stride. This is the year 2263! There are gadgets, a million satisfying gadgets — glittering and beautiful and new. Gadgets to make up for everything nature or Society or the perversity of fate has denied you.

"There are compensations for every bitter frustration, every handicap of body and mind, every tragic lack of the raw materials of happiness. Men infinitely more unfortunate than you have found substitute satisfactions for everything they've been cheated out of in life. So wade in and wise up. Take a substitute for what doesn't come naturally.

"Drive down to the shop level arcades and buy yourself a wig with synthetic nerve roots which will grow into your scalp. Buy yourself a bone ear, a music or art appreciation groove-in, a money-sense illusion, anything you'd care to name.

"You don't have to be reminded that there are some men who might say, 'There's no substitute for the real thing. You'll never get around it and you may as well stop lying to yourself.'

"But not you, boy! You'd never say that because you don't give up as easily as that. Naturally they've been keeping it quiet. You have to dial the right shop. You've got to speak in a persuasive

whisper to the right people. You've got to mention just how many trips you've made to Venus Base.

"*Buy yourself a beautiful android woman.* Naturally it's labeled: *For Spacemen Only!* If you've got something new and tremendous to see you'd be crazy to offer it on the open market, wouldn't you? Mass production takes years to build up. Until the mass production stage is reached high profits can only be made without State Bureau interference.

"Why not sell your products to men whose need is so great and urgent — they'll pay specialty prices, in an under-the-counter deal. Pay eagerly and disappear into space.

"It's the only policy that makes sense and you've no quarrel with it, have you, boy? You've spoken to the man and you know exactly what you want and you've the money to pay for it."

The Big Brain, of course, wouldn't speak quite so frankly. It wouldn't conspire with an outlaw firm to deceive the State Bureaus, much as it might want me to accept a substitute for the wife I couldn't have.

I was really listening to a separate, rebellious part of myself arguing with my more cautious self. My reckless self was now completely in the saddle, and I had no real fear that I would come a cropper. But arguments do not harm and it pleased me to listen to that inner voice hammering home the facts, garnished up a bit by the Big Brain's authority.

We'd better get it straight right at the start that artificial women are as old as the human race. There are Aurignacian Venuses from rock caverns in the Pyrenees you could date in your dreams with no effort at all. Big-bosomed women with flaring hips — the kind of women that Rubens painted and that some men prefer for variety's sake even today. Distinctly on the plump side, but what of that?

What is a statue, really? Hasn't a statue a definite mechanical function to perform? Isn't the statue of a beautiful woman a kind of android designed to delight the eye and trigger the sex mechanism in the human brain? No — perhaps not always designed for that purpose. But doesn't it do that most of the time? Can a normal male pass a shop window and see a beautiful wax mannequin without experiencing at least a faint stirring of sex awareness, even though he knows that a wax woman is quite different from a woman who can think and feel and is in all respects alive?

Consider it honestly. Has it ever failed to happen to you? There's nothing abnormal or perverse about it. The female form, even when it's just a wax replica of the real thing, can do that to the male.

Remember, a statue doesn't have to move at all to be functional in that respect. If a certain arrangement of synthetic lines and curves and dimples can evoke a response in the viewer you've got a mechanical prime mover and if that object happens to be a statue you've got an android in the strict sense. You can even do without the electronic stimulus-response circuits and the Cybernetic memory banks.

The Pygmalion fantasy is the key. Every man carries about with him a subconscious image of the one perfect woman. There's a biological norm and that norm constitutes the ultimate in desirability. Every individual woman departs from the norm to a greater or lesser degree. Nature is constantly attempting to alter the course of evolution through mutation and environmental departures from the norm — mutation plus natural and sexual selection — and that tendency toward variation keeps modifying the norm, throwing it off center.

Features too large or too small will distort or completely shatter the norm. A woman with a too large mouth, for instance, may have other features so perfect that she will still be beautiful. But her beauty won't be perfect if a single one of her features departs from the norm. The closer women approach the norm in all respects the more beautiful they are by human standards

It's important to accent the *human*. Complete symmetry of features may have a certain classical beauty all apart from sex, but in the main when we say that a woman is beautiful we simply mean that she seems beautiful to us because her features or her body trigger a sexual response. To a Martian — we know now that there is no life on Mars, but the assumption can still be useful — both men and women may seem completely unbeautiful, scrawny, white, hair-less bipeds not particularly well formed. We might feel the same way if we could be completely detached and scientific about it. But sex triggers a biological response which prevents us from realizing, in an emotional way, that the human race might not seem beautiful at all if the veil of glamor which sex casts could be stripped away and we could see ourselves as others see us.

There are other, completely human difficulties and complications. On Earth alone the norm varies, and a woman who seems beautiful to an African bushman may not seem beautiful to you. But that does not mean that she is less beautiful. You've got to go back to your ancestry for the key; you've got to find out precisely the kind of norm your ancestors mated with for hundreds of thousands of years.

You could marry any one of ten thousand women picked al-most at random, and be reasonably happy. But to be perfectly content, you have to have a perfect biogenetic mate.

And now, for the first time, you could get your norm girl. Your biogenetic tape recordings supplied the key. You gave the man your biogenetic tape number, all the data available to the Big Brain, and the firm did the rest.

Waiting for me was an android female with a living colloidal brain. The human brain is a colloid with a billion teeming memory cells, made up of molecular aggregates just large enough to be visible in a powerful electron microscope.

Just large enough to be visible. Visibility was the key, for a visible structure can be studied and duplicated. Not exactly, perhaps — we'll get that in another century or so. But enough of the structure could be duplicated to yield results.

I had been warned that there would be no complex emotional overtones in the woman who was awaiting me. A seven-year-old level of intelligence perhaps, no more. Curiously enough, the limitation did not depress me too much. When physical beauty be-comes overwhelming you can think of nothing else. And she would be beautiful, completely my norm girl in her physical attributes. There are many different kinds of women in every man's ancestry, but one kind always predominates and establishes an individual norm preference which corresponds to the ancient tribal preferences of his remote ancestors in a general way. She would undoubtedly resemble quite a few of my great-great-grandmothers.

CHAPTER 3

The shop level arcades were a purple and gold glimmer for ten thousand feet. At night the lights are so dazzling that you can't see the individual shop windows, but in broad daylight every window stands out and the level becomes a tunnel of weaving lights and shadows.

It's like plunging into a revolving kaleidoscope to pluck out a rare and glittering prize. Come early, take your pick.

I knew that the shop where I'd left my order would be using some kind of false front. But I wasn't prepared for the beauty of the display which filled the window: a terraced garden with a fountain gushing silver spray, a breathtaking Watteau-gambol of fauns and satyrs in a twilight nymph pursuit.

In the window a little square sign read:

Enjoy Yourself Without Breaking the Law
Which shall it be? Ten Minutes of Emotional
Illusion Therapy or Ten Months of Freud?

For an instant I was tempted to go inside and forget to mention my name. I knew the routine of the illusion therapy shops backwards. If the human brain is paralyzed in certain centers and stimulated abnormally in others, you get an illusion that can only be compared to sheet lightning.

When I closed my eyes I was inside the shop, relaxing in the scented darkness. I could feel the incredible lightness of the big, impulse-transmitting helmet resting on my head. I could hear the therapist saying in a cool, soothing voice: "These women whom you are about to meet are incredibly beautiful. Not one woman, but seven. Now if you'll just relax —"

It's a swift, effective way to cure frustration. But when you wake up, the savor of living is dulled for you, just as heavy smoking often dulls the pleasures of the palate. There is no anticipatory thrill in knowing that the dream experience you've just shared with a non-existent woman can be repeated again and again, and is always available. When you emerge from an emotional illusion therapy trance you couldn't care less. I told myself I'd be crazy to pay that kind of penalty when I could have the real thing.

The man was expecting me. He was tall, quiet and soft-spoken; but I never really got a good look at his face.

You know how it is when you whisper over a wire. Someone has to be at the other end to take down your message. He may be young or old, an executive of the firm or just a front man, a go-between. Instinctively you're almost sure you're not going to like him. When you actually meet him, you see no reason for studying him closely. If he has authority to conclude the deal and wrap it up for you, you simply accept him as a vital link in the arrangement. He becomes a person with no real identity, a figurehead. He becomes — the man.

He looked me over carefully. It takes skilled training and insight to judge a man's occupation at a glance. Often as not it's a hit-or-miss task — but if you're really good at it there is always a high-salaried undercover job waiting for you.

He was good at it. You spend two years at Venus Base and it shows in your eyes, the way you carry your shoulders when you walk, the very rhythms of your speech. Spend a lifetime hoeing a field in blazing sunlight or pacing the deck of a ship at sea and you'll get deep creases in the back of your neck, crow's feet about your eyes and a leathery texture of skin such as you can't possibly get if you're a sedentary worker under glass.

Two years at Venus Base can't quite do all that to you, but a really good occupation-guess can tag you every time.

The man said, "I think you'll be satisfied, sir. But you've got to remember that a woman can be made for just one man alone and not quite satisfy him at first glance."

I wasn't sure I liked the way he smiled when he said that — as if he knew a great deal about women himself and was treating the matter as an amusing episode in the course of his philanderings. As if he'd discovered a girl that suited him fine, and was trying to palm off an old flame on the first gullible lad to walk into the trap. Some girl he'd decided not to like for no particular reason.

"I guess you know that caution is our stock-in-trade," he said. "We have to be careful right from the start. You've got to forgive me if I seem a little ill at ease. I'll be frank with you. The work I do here is not entirely to my liking. In some respects it goes against the grain. By natural inclination I am — well, I should have much preferred to be a creative artist, a painter, or a musician or something of the sort. But I guess we all get sidetracked. You're sidetracked in a bad way."

His eyes grew suddenly sympathetic and for a moment I found myself almost liking him.

"I've been married ten years myself," he said. "My wife is a very attractive woman, and very feminine. All woman, you might say. But you'd be amazed how strong-willed she can be at times. Seems to feel she has to compete, and that's always infuriating. A wife should cooperate with her husband, not compete — should give him support when he's going over the hurdles.

"What I'm really trying to say is that married life is never smooth sailing. But I wouldn't want to be alone on Venus Base without a woman. That's one thing I don't envy you lads. To have no woman at all in your life —"

He'd have gone right on talking if I hadn't reminded him that I was very eager to complete my purchase and be on my way. There was a hammering at my temples and my heart was pounding like a bass drum. I'm not being melodramatic. It happened to be true and it wasn't the least surprising. It was a terribly important moment for me, a critical moment, because if she was really my norm woman and all of my expectations were about to be fulfilled I would walk out of the shop a changed man. There would be so bright a future stretching out before me that the whole of my life — my work and my holiday excursions and moments of creative leisure — would take on a new dimension.

He seemed to sense what was passing through my mind, for he stopped being impulsively over-communicative. It's strange how a harassed man will bare the inmost secrets of his life at times to a total stranger — he nudged my arm and said, quite simply: "Follow me."

I accompanied him in total silence along a narrow, dimly lighted corridor and down a short flight of stairs to another corridor with three branching offshoots. We turned right, then left, then right again.

The room was huge and blank-walled. It didn't look like a laboratory where a scientific innovation tremendous in its implications had been successfully carried out, and until the lights came on my thoughts

were in a turmoil. Would she be as beautiful as I had allowed myself to believe?

I could see vague objects towering in the shadows. One caught and held my attention. It looked in the gloom like an enormous stationary globe with shining crystal tubes branching off from it. And that did make the room seem a little more like a laboratory.

The lights came on with a startling abruptness, flooding every corner of the room with a dazzling radiance.

She was lying motionless beneath the globe in a transparent tank filled with weaving lights and shadows, her long, unbound hair descending to her shoulders in a tumbled, red-gold mass that caught and held the radiance.

Her eyes were closed, and her pale beautiful face was turned a little sideways.

She was as I had imagined she would be.

In youth's awakening dreams she had smiled and beckoned to me. The magic of her features was a wondrously changing thing, like the flickering of tall candles on a shrine, or the sunglow on strange beaches in the morning of the world.

Had the poet Shelley dreamed of such a woman when he wrote by the blue Mediterranean: "Her steps paved with gold the downward ravine that sloped to the dawn's bright gleam."

I shut my eyes and we were walking together by the sea, her bronzed loveliness etched against the dawn glow, a miracle Time itself could not tarnish.

I opened my eyes, but for a moment the room seemed remote, unreal. Only the woman in the tank existed for me. She wore a simple white garment, belted at the waist. Her arms and shoulders were bare and her skin had the ruddy glow of perfect health — the natural bronze which only a warm tropical sun can impart to the skin of northern women who have long embraced its warmth.

Her cheeks were shadowed by long, dark lashes and her mouth was a curving rosebud and beneath the smooth-textured cloth of her belted tunic her young breasts rose firmly, twin bright mounds in a sea of billowy whiteness.

The sound was faint at first, a barely audible hum. I didn't know it was an alarm for a moment. It sounded more like the drowsy murmur of bees in a noonday glade. But swiftly it grew in volume, turning into a steady and much louder drone, filling me with a sudden uneasiness.

The man turned abruptly and gripped my arm. "It's a Security Police raid!" he whispered, alarm in his eyes. "We've got to get her out of here and upstairs fast!"

I stared at him in consternation. "But why should they raid this shop? Do they know about her?"

He shook his head, his lips white. "Of course not. If the big secret leaked out we wouldn't have just the police raid to worry about. We'd be smashed in a large-scale operation. It's not that at all. There happens to be a law against concealment in an emotional therapy shop — any kind of concealment. We're not supposed to have underground rooms, unless we can prove they're just used for storage purposes."

I'd forgotten about that. Emotional illusion therapy can break down all barriers and lead to actual physical orgies. When men and women are undergoing therapy together the trance will sometimes become a twilight zone between sleeping and waking and they'll behave as they would if they were freedom-ruin outcasts, but with no deep awareness of danger to keep them from going too far. A somnolent state can make even a strong-willed man abandon all restraint, and become the victim of his own inability to distinguish reality from illusion. Even the therapists had at times been overcome and brutally slain, and that danger was always present. It didn't happen often, but the Security Police had to keep a careful check.

"We've got to get her up upstairs," the man insisted, his fingers biting into my arm. "We've got to convince the police there's no-thing wrong. She's simply your wife, understand? *She came to this shop with you for therapy.*"

I looked at him, aghast. It didn't make too much sense to me, because married couples seldom needed emotional illusion therapy and if they did they seldom went to the same shop together.

It couldn't be completely ruled out, however, and in that kind of emergency you seized on whatever comes to mind that can give you a fighting chance of getting at least a toehold on firm ground, where

skillful lying can do you some good. He'd thought fast, and it dawned on me that he could have panicked and done just the opposite and I was grateful to him for not letting go. But that didn't mean I wasn't torn by doubts.

"She hasn't said a word to me!" I protested. "She's lying there in a deep sleep. She *is* asleep, isn't she? Speak up, man! What do you want me to do?"

"I'll wake her up," he said. "I'm going to attach an electric stimulator to her right temple and wake her up right now. Then you've got to help me lift her out of the tank. We haven't a moment to lose!"

He did exactly what he said he'd do. I watched him, a dull pounding at my temples, resenting the fact that she could not awake to me alone. For a few tormenting seconds I forget the danger we were in and the presence of an outsider seemed like a desecration. He'd become an outsider the instant I'd set eyes on her, and I regretted that she could not awaken to me in a moonlit garden in the first bright flush of dawn.

We had no chance at all to be alone, for the instant she opened her eyes, he removed the electric stimulator from her brow and turned to me in urgent appeal.

"Come on, we've got to hurry," he urged. "Help me lift her out. She isn't heavy."

I had an impulse to knock him down. If there was any lifting to be done I wanted to do it alone.

Then I remembered that you can't walk into a shop and make a purchase of any kind without assistance.

In another twenty minutes, if the police could be outwitted, the man would be an ugly, receding memory — nothing more.

Another thought struck me, incredible at such a time. I hadn't even asked her name. "I don't know her name," I heard myself saying, my voice suddenly out of control. "Tell me her name — then I'll help you."

He seemed startled and taken aback by my sudden vehemence. "You can give her any name that suits your fancy."

He lost his temper then, for the first time. "Do you want me to give you a catalogue of women's names? Gloria, Ann, Helen — the face that launched a thousand ships — Barbara, Janice — pick one quickly and let's get on with this."

His features hardened. "The Security Police won't be interested in your romantic ideas. They'll put you through a grilling. You'll have to know something about her, not just her name alone."

The shock of the sudden raid must have thrown me off my rocker. But I didn't feel like apologizing to him. I still felt that she should have a name.

I knew that if I named her under pressure I might regret it later. But I had no choice. *Claire* I thought. *Claire will do for now.*

I stepped quickly to the man's side and together we lifted Claire out of the tank, and set her on her feet.

In the tank with her eyes closed her beauty had seemed breathtaking. But the instant she was on her feet, facing me, the instant she opened her eyes and looked straight at me I couldn't speak at all.

"Say something to her!" the man urged. "You've got to get acquainted fast. Speak up — she'll answer you!"

"I cleared my throat. "I'm John, Claire," I said. "Look at me, Claire. Don't be afraid."

She had never seen me before, of course. But I knew that an artificial memory picture of my general aspect had been skillfully stippled into her mind. A colloidal memory-chain implant that would be activated when she saw me standing before her.

Her voice was low and musical and it matched in all respects the wondrous beauty of her features. "John," Claire said. "John, *John.*"

I knew that a bond of sympathy and understanding could only be established between us if I talked to her at first about simple things — a few simple things a man and a woman meeting for the first time and sharing certain basic memory patterns, would have in common.

"Yes, I'm John, Claire," I reiterated. "Do you like me?"

She stared at me as if puzzled. "I like you," she said.

My heart skipped a beat. I leaned forward and put my arm about her shoulder. "I am taking you away with me, Claire," I told her. "You have never seen the city with your own eyes. There are memories of the city in your mind, but they are not living memories. You will like the city, Claire."

"I will like the city."

I took her hand. It was warm and soft and the fingers closed quickly on mine.

A torturing doubt had crept into my mind. So far her words had done little more than parrot my own. I had dangled a promise before her, had opened a gate on shining adventure that would have delighted a child. Would not a child have asked, "Will it be fun?" or "Have you a beetle? Will we go riding?"

The man was becoming impatient. "We've got to hurry," he warned. "If the police find this room I can't answer for the consequences. They're probably checking everything over upstairs and that takes a little time. With no one in the shop, they'll be doubly suspicious if they have the slightest reason to suspect there's some-one down here. Our luck has held so far. But don't press it."

He looked steadily at me. "You've put her at ease. She's not as startled as I was afraid she might be. Be satisfied with that, can't you? Do you have to make love to her?"

His eyes flashed angrily when I didn't say a word. "We made her especially for you and you're not satisfied," he complained. "You have to start playing all the stops immediately. You wouldn't do that with a new musical instrument. You'd have more sense."

He had a point there, all right. But how wise had been my decision not to study him too closely? I knew that the memory of that moment would always hold emotional overtones of ugliness for me. It would always make the illusion a little less than perfect, a sordid reminder that he *could* compare her to a musical instrument, and that I hadn't met her in a moonlit garden at the home of an old and trusted friend.

He had nothing further to say and neither did I. I followed his advice and together we walked Claire out of the room, and along a corridor thronged with flickering shadows and up a narrow flight of stairs to the shop.

CHAPTER 4

There were two police officers waiting for us in the shop, close to the big metal helmets which gave the customers the kind of illusions that could shut out the Law completely.

For us the policemen were real and they were earnest.

The instant they saw us they did a slow double-take. One was burly with muscular shoulders and a florid, granite-firm jaw. The other was a skinny bantamweight.

The burly one did all the talking. The instant he saw us he asked, "You two together?"

The man answered for me. "Mr. Tabor is one of my regular customers," he said, quickly. "This is his wife."

The officer planted his hands on his hips and looked Claire up and down. "Married folk, eh? Did you put on the helmets to-gether?"

I knew that I had to think fast. The question was a deliberately insulting one, obviously designed to trap us.

"I just dropped in to make an appointment for next week," I said. "Mrs. Talbot doesn't take emotional illusion therapy."

The officer grinned. "No repressions, eh?"

If Claire had really been my wife the question would have infuriated me. I became angry anyway. The officer saw the flushed look come into my face and it aroused his suspicions.

He moved closer to Claire and studied her face. "Been married long?"

Claire shook her head. Such reticence wasn't natural in a wo-man confronted with that kind of smirking impertinence and I could see that the officer felt that he was making progress.

"I shouldn't think your husband would need emotional illusion therapy if you've just been married," he said. "I'm curious to know exactly how long you've been married. Seven months? A year?"

Claire didn't say a word. If she'd looked deeply bewildered or too angry to speak it might have helped. But there was just a look of awakening interest in her eyes, as if she couldn't quite decide what

the officer was talking about, but was doing her best to fit him into a new-impression category in her mind.

A very young child has to make such an effort constantly, for his experience is too limited to enable him to grasp the implications of the many startling things that keep taking place around him. He just isn't aware of how ugly and threatening life can be at times. Not until he burns his fingers and learns the painful way. And by then it's frequently too late.

"It's none of my business, I suppose," the officer said. "But it does make a difference. If you were married recently your husband shouldn't need emotional illusion therapy at all. It goes without saying that the woman a man marries may turn out to be the really cold kind. He can't always be sure in advance. You *could* be that way, but — well, if you were my wife just your looks alone would keep me out of an illusion therapy shop for at least five years."

It was envy, mixed with admiration, that was making him talk that way. He was the blunt, coarse type and that kind of man has to have some aggressive outlet for his frustration when authority goes to his head. I knew all that and perhaps I should have accepted it as inevitable, and kept my anger bottled up until he went too far and forced me to resort to violence. But you can't think realistically when rage makes you want to grab him by the shoulders and bang him around until he flattens out on the floor.

I might even have killed him, because something very primitive in me was ripping my self-control to shreds. An affront to yourself alone is one thing. You can sometimes exercise control when you know that the whole weight of Society can be hurled against you if you don't, no matter how unjustly. No man can hope to buck that kind of power. But when the affront is directed against a woman who has the innocence of a child and no way of parrying it, a woman who has suddenly become far more precious to you than your own life —

He went on as if he wasn't even aware of the danger he was in. "It's an important thing to get straight. In fact, there are laws against illusion therapy for the newly married, unless the head shrinkers decide there's some very drastic need for it. There's a waiting list for cases like that, a lot of papers to sign. Otherwise thousands of honeymooners would crowd in when there's no real need for them to compensate for anything and everyone has to try it at least once."

A cynical smirk twisted his lips. "Sex is like everything else — you feel you can never get too much of it, even when you know it makes no sense. Give a man a big, expensive dinner with all the trimmings, and tell him that there's another one waiting to be served to him, with a different main dish, and he'll forget that he won't be that hungry when he's through gorging himself. Especially if you tell him that everyone's doing it. Two big dinners every night — a popular fad. You have to prove you're as good as the next man at it, or you think you do. And Society suffers in the end."

Out of the mouths of babes a little wisdom sometimes comes and its just as true with the blunt, crudely outspoken types. Purely by accident a man like that can hit the nail so squarely on the head that you have to admire him a little, if only because there is more than a trace of forthright bluntness in all of us that is wholly on the coarse side. It's one way of giving that part of yourself a pat on the back.

But right at the moment I wasn't even thinking of that. If I'd given him a pat it would have hurled him back against the wall and turned him into a stretcher case.

He narrowed his eyes and looked at Claire even more steadily. "Now suppose you answer my question. Just how long have you two been married?"

Claire said, "John is my husband. I like John. John likes me."

That did it. The officer swung on me, the veins on his temples pulsing like seaworms on a mud flat when the tide is running out.

"Can't she answer simple questions?" he demanded. "What is she — a moron?"

"Now wait a minute —" I choked.

He didn't give me a chance to lunge at him. He beckoned to Skin-and-Bones and the little bantamweight grabbed my arm from behind. I was caught so completely off-guard that I thought for an instant that a muscular spasm had jerked the bones of my wrist right out of their sockets. Skin-and-Bones's fingers seemed to have the tensile strength of steel.

"We'll have to take you both in for questioning," the burly officer said. "She must have something to

conceal, or she'd speak up."

There was a shark-toothed rasp to his voice that made me think of the sea again, probably because there's a cold, cruel rapacity about the sea that even its great surface beauty can't hide.

There was nothing beautiful about the burly officer, on the surface or otherwise.

"She must have something to conceal," he reiterated, "or she wouldn't try to make me think she has no brains at all."

I went completely berserk then. I straightened my shoulders, wrenched my wrists free despite the bantamweight's eight-ply grip and gave him a violent shove. Skin-and-Bones gave a startled gasp, as if it had never happened to him before. Without turning, I grabbed Claire by the wrist, and we started for the door.

Instantly the burly cop stepped in front of us and barred our path. "Now you're really in trouble. You've attacked an officer in the performance of his duty."

There was only one thing to do. I took a slow step backward and sent my right fist crashing against his jaw. I put all of my strength into the blow, counting on the advantage of surprise. I followed through with a hard left to the stomach, the kind of jab that had served me well on Venus Base on a good many occasions.

He let out a yell, staggered back and collapsed against the wall, sinking to the floor with a grotesque swaying of his entire bulk.

I gripped Claire's wrist again. "Trust me and don't look back," I whispered urgently. "We've got to keep moving!"

We were out of the shop before the big officer could flatten out on the floor. We ran swiftly across the pavement outside and climbed into my beetle. I ascended first and helped her straddle the safety rail and settle down at my side, keeping a tight hold on her arm.

"You made him sit down!" she gasped.

"For a minute," I said. "He'll be on his feet again before we've gone three miles. I took the bark out of him, but not the bite. When he gets up a general alarm will go out and we'll be in the deadliest kind of danger."

"Danger?" she breathed. "We will be — in *danger*?"

When you're under great tension in the presence of a child and feel you must talk you're likely to say what's on your mind even if you know you can't count on adult understanding. You're really half talking to yourself and don't expect an adult response.

I didn't get one, but what she *had* said surprised me, because it was a big leap forward. For the first time she hadn't just parroted my words. She had spoken with a rising inflection, had asked me a direct question. For the first time there was strong emotion in her voice. It may or may not have been fear but I was pretty sure that the word "danger" had puzzled and alarmed her.

Swiftly the beetle picked up speed, sweeping up the driveway with a dull roar.

I looked at Claire, sitting straight and still at my side, and felt a fierce surge of exaltation. I'd broken the law for a beautiful woman for the first time in my life.

We were getting acquainted fast.

Perhaps it was the heady wine of an exhilaration that was completely new to me which made me reckless. At any rate, I said something to her I had wanted to say in the shop, in defiance of the man's presence.

"Claire," I whispered.

She looked at me as if startled. "Claire is my name."

"I know," I said. "You just said you liked me. Could you say, 'I love you'?"

"I love you," Claire said. Her voice was strangely toneless, automatic.

"Say it again," I urged.

"I love you," Claire said.

There it was, but it just didn't mean anything to her. I could tell by the way she said it.

Would it mean anything later? Would she ever say, "John, my dearest one, I will love you until I die."

Night and day you are never absent from my thought.”?

Whether the miracle would ever take place, right at the moment I knew I'd have to think and move fast and put every other consideration aside.

When a general alarm goes out every traffic tower becomes a scanning trap. With luck you can sometimes outwit a Security Police network, on the human level. The law isn't infallible and never has been. But when invisible beams fasten on you and start working you over, the odds against you really start mounting.

Put a frog in a glass of water — any ordinary bullfrog mottled green and brown — and it will start shedding skin cells at a prodigious rate. No two frogs are ever exactly alike, and a frog in a glass would have little chance of keeping its identity a secret from a determined research biologist.

We were in the same kind of trap. I knew that before we could travel a mile after the alarm went out, identity-ray projectors would scan my skin, hair and, optic disks. They would scan me from head to toe, with scant regard for my modesty. They wouldn't miss a square inch, and the whorl-findings would be flashed to Central Identification, and at Central my name disk would slide from the big general file and go clicking into an emergency alert slot.

They'd have me tabbed in almost nothing flat.

I reached over and gripped Claire's arm. "When we get out — keep close to me," I warned. "Do you understand? Close, right at my side. We've got to make a dash for it."

To make sure that my advice would be followed and remain clear in her mind I acted it out in pantomime the instant we were on the pavement. I took five swift steps forward, returned to her side and advanced again, making it plain that she should try to match her steps to mine and not let the distance between us widen by more than a yard.

She seemed to catch on. I'd halted the beetle in the middle of the block, flush with the curb, after making sure that an old subway entrance was less than sixty feet away.

I knew we'd have to reach it fast. As we turned from the car a siren started screaming, and out of the corner of my eye I could see that an orange-colored police beetle was heading straight for us at a distance of perhaps two hundred feet.

I hadn't driven the car right up to the subway entrance because there was a weed-choked, debris-cluttered lot on the street side, and the only way to get to it was on foot. The lot said as plain as word: "This is where it begins — the decay of order and public safety. This is where degradation begins. Society does not choose to beautify what it can barely endure. Let the rust and neglect and the slow crumbling serve as a warning, a symbol of what this portal stands for. To enter it is to be self-condemned and bear a burden of guilt which will grow heavier hour by hour, day by day — until death decides the issue in a freedom ruin for a man cut off from all hope."

For half a century no subway entrance had been cleared of rubble. They were ugly defacements in the midst of whitely gleam-ing streets and tree-lined squares. But the weight of a firmly established tradition can override Man's dislike for ugliness and turn an entire society schizoid by giving it a blind spot.

I was sure that Claire did not know what "schizoid" meant. It was not necessary for her to know. Only that the danger had become so acute that our lives hung in the balance. I reached for her hand and we started off.

"Don't look back!" I warned.

Surprisingly, Claire was good at running. She ran swiftly at my side, her feet clattering on the hard pavement. I let go of her hand almost immediately, for I had merely grasped it to give her reassurance. The siren sound rose higher, became a steady, terrifying drone.

Halfway down the block three Security Police officers in uniform descended from a careening beetle, and raced toward us, letting the car plunge on under automatic controls.

It was then that Claire made her first serious mistake. My advice must have made a deep impression on her, for she kept close to me as she ran — too close. Thinking she was at least two feet from me I swerved sharply and collided with her, hurling her violently back against a traffic guidepost.

The post was magnetically energized and it caught and held her firmly. It startled and frightened me. I

grasped her by both shoulders and stared at her in alarm. "Hold perfectly still," I cautioned. "One wrench will free you, but you mustn't move."

Obviously there was a band of metal under her dress. It shocked me to realize that I hadn't even had time to ask the man about that. Just how much metal had been used to manufacture Claire?

When I had helped the man lift her from the tank her body had seemed soft and yielding enough. But just how much metal had been used? A band less than four inches wide would have held her fast to a magnetized traffic post. But what if Claire was more of an artificial woman than I had dreamed?

It was the worst possible time to have such thoughts. It was also the best time, because the danger we were in prevented me from tormenting myself by letting my mind run in that direction for longer than a second or two.

I told myself that metal magnetized to only a moderate extent wouldn't hold fast if I gave it a really violent wrench.

I exerted all my strength and Claire swung clear. As she lurched forward into my arms one of the pursuing officers opened fire on us. The bullet went wild, splintering the traffic post at its base. I grabbed Claire's wrist and we started running again.

She was still good at it. It seemed only an instant before we reached the subway entrance and were swept into its dark, protective embrace.

As the clamor from outside fell away our feet set up a hollow echoing that resounded through the darkness until even the terrifying siren wail dwindled to a far-off, ghostly mockery of sound.

Then we stopped to regain our breath, and Claire swayed to-ward me. I caught her in my arms and held her tightly, whispering words of reassurance to her until her trembling ceased.

I hadn't intended to kiss her. It wasn't the right moment for that, but there was no way I could have controlled the impulse, for it sprang from a threefold need. I had to know if her lips would part as the lips of the girl in the vault had done and yield an even greater sweetness. I had to be sure that they were as warm and alive and vibrant as they would have to be if I wanted to kiss her again and again, tomorrow and the next day and for as long as we were together with all of my doubts swept away . . . And I had to make certain that I would be glad that we had been lovers if I had only that to remember, if disaster overtook us before we could experience the whole of love's rapture and surrender ourselves to long hours of just being alone together in the silence of the Venusian nights, with the wilderness of stars overhead and only night-flying birds to spy on us.

She gave a strange little cry when I brought my lips down on hers, not hard or crushingly, for I did not want to frighten her, but so gently that I felt almost foolish and ill at ease for a moment. Can lovemaking ever fail to be impetuous and still transport you into another world, full of light and fire? Can you make love passionately without hardly seeming to do so, keeping your arms resting lightly on a woman's shoulders, and not even venturing to caress her hair?

I would not have thought so until her lips melted into mine and the gentleness of kisses became so prolonged, sweet and intimate a miracle that I could have asked for nothing more. I was content with the kiss alone.

Once or twice in my life I have experienced the wonder of such a kiss in my dreams. A girl in the first flush of young womanhood, fragile and lovely beyond belief, can kiss you that way in a dream and when you wake up you're glad you didn't let yourself have somehow marred the perfection of an experience so unforgettable.

Cynics may sneer, and far back in the twentieth century an orthodox Freudian would have been quite confident that he knew exactly how to interpret that kind of dream. But he would be wrong. It wasn't dividing sex into two categories and only letting yourself go with the really wanton kind of woman. It wasn't having a fear of letting yourself go with the super-respectable, super-chaste kind. It just wasn't . . . because that slender, incredibly young girl was sex personified. You could have let yourself go easily enough, with no inhibitions and no restraint. But a kiss alone can be a kind of idealization of love on a super-romantic plane, and can linger hauntingly in your memory for days — all the sweetness and wonder of it. In a way, it *is* complete physical intimacy, if it is passionately sensuous and prolonged . . .

The very attenuation of the experience seems to make it more intense and hauntingly beautiful, so that

you're stirred to the depths. It could stem to some extent from a Western European culture-complex distortion in regard to sex — a Medieval troubadour over-glorification of just the romantic aspects of sex. But that doesn't mean that such an over-glorification isn't basic to human nature everywhere on Earth, only waiting for the right soil, the right historic moment, to take hold of Man's unconscious in an almost compulsive way.

It's basic enough and from whatever source arising, the old Freudians would have been wrong.

"Darling, they would have been wrong!" I said.

I didn't expect her to understand, of course. But when I re-leased her, the way her eyes seemed to be shining made me almost sure that the way I'd felt when the kiss had gone on and on had somehow gotten through to her. She didn't say a word and it was too early to take even that for granted. She could have felt nothing, for her response could have been wholly automatic. She'd been made for me, hadn't she? All of my norm-woman data requirements were on punched tapes, and the firm knew exactly what kind of a romantic fool I could be.

We were still in great danger. Ordinarily the Security Police have no arrows left in their bows when you plunge into a subway entrance and flee toward a freedom ruin. But they have been known to continue the pursuit, if what the Big Brain tells the monitors about you is alarming enough. They have even been known to go right into the ruins after men and women whose defiance has been so outrageous that Society cannot permit them to escape. They do not hesitate to risk their lives against overwhelming odds, if the emergency is grave enough, and the right to be an outcast, guilt-tormented and exposed on every side to brutal violence, can't be countenanced without setting a precedent others might seize upon. A deliberate, willfully planned rebellion could blow the top right off the safety-valve provided by the ruins, and the monitors knew it.

CHAPTER 5

Claire continued to keep close to me as we moved forward through the echoing darkness, her face mirroring a strange, new wonder. The blue steel tracks seemed to fascinate her. She kept stopping to stare at them; once she bent and ran her fingers over a gleaming rail, back and forth, as if the coolness of the metal surprised and delighted her.

There was one rail I was careful not to touch, even with my feet, as I ran. It was known as the third rail, and touching it was supposed to bring bad luck; the superstition was as ancient as the tracks themselves.

How it originated nobody knew. Maybe when people rode on the trains centuries ago young daredevils descended into the tunnel and ran recklessly along the third rail until a train came roaring toward them. It would have been a game — wild, reckless and fearfully dangerous — quite as mentally intoxicating as filling the chambers of a primitive hand gun with six bullets, pressing the gun to a vital center, and letting your life or death be decided by a single, quick turn of the revolving cylinder.

How many of the young daredevils had leapt aside in time? How many had died hideously beneath grinding wheels, their bodies crushed and mutilated without reason, primitive victims of the old Freudian "death wish"?

It's curious how the human mind will seize on strange ancient rites and customs in moments of great peril, as if there was something in human nature which made the dangers and follies of the remote past seem an audacious pathway by which modern man could escape to a more primitive level of consciousness. When men lived with their whole bodies, and not just with their minds alone, danger took on an intoxicating, heady quality which our own age has lost.

"Why do we walk here?" Claire asked.

"Don't be frightened," I said. "We'll come to an exit soon."

Her next question startled me by its childlike innocence. "Will it stay dark?"

"No," I assured her. "We'll go up out of the darkness into light."

I kept looking at her face. She wasn't a child in her beauty, her strange and vibrant warmth. Why did I keep forgetting that I had what few men before me had ever possessed — the rare grace and loveliness

of a perfect illusion?

Her perfection was absolute. Could any man with the blood warm in his veins have asked for more? There was something eerily poetic about her speech. She spoke of darkness, light, fire, walking, running, as if each new experience was the personification of some elemental force, much as a child looking up at the new moon might croon with pleasure, and ask to be taken for a ride through the night sky in a chariot of fire.

What right had I to feel disappointed? I told myself that I ought to feel grateful and very humble in the presence of that kind of thinking, imagining.

But what I told myself, and what I wanted with every mad impulse of my heart and brain, were two different things. A man wants to be able to swing an adored woman around impulsively, and whisper: “Darling, remember that tune? Remember the last time we heard it? Remember how funny you looked with your strawberry curls whipped by the wind? Remember how rough the sea looked, with the whitecaps dancing up and down? Remember the fishermen coming in from the beach, and how their nets caught and held the sunlight?”

“Remember, darling? Remember, remember? The balcony was just like this one, but you look even more beautiful by moonlight. What are we waiting for? Come on, let’s dance!”

She saw it before I did, the light flooding down over the tracks a hundred feet ahead. She gasped with delight, and broke into a run.

I stared at her, startled. It was her first completely impulsive act, breaking away from me like that without a word. Maybe she had a better brain than I had dreamed.

When I caught up with her, she was out of breath from running and my hope leapt high. But then she spoke, and something went dead in me. “I did not want the light to go away.”

She nodded, obviously pleased by my quick understanding. A child’s mind, poetic and strange.

I stared up at the platform looming darkly through the shadows. Very carefully I measured the distance with my eyes. “I’m going to put my arm around your waist and lift you up,” I told her. “Do you understand?”

“No,” she said.

I stared at her in dismay. “Well — hold still, anyway,” I pleaded.

For the first time I put both my arms around her, and held her tight. I was aware of her breathing, the rise and fall of her bosom.

A line from a half-forgotten poet flashed through my mind: Man begins by loving love and ends by loving a woman, but a woman begins by loving a man and ends by loving love.

I told myself angrily that such a thought at such a moment was absurd, and I forced myself to counter-balance it by repeating to myself another line: *Love is a conflict between reflexes and reflections.*

I could feel her trembling as I tightened my hold on her waist. “Up we go!” I whispered.

She wasn’t very heavy. It’s curious how, when you get started on quotations, you can’t easily stop. Another line came to me, urging me to make haste. *Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that is the stuff that life is made of.*

She wasn’t heavy, but lifting her to the edge of the platform nearly wrenched my arms from their sockets. The platform was three feet above my head, even when I stood on tiptoe, and Claire let me do all of the hoisting.

I lifted her over the edge and waited until she started crawling away from me on her hands and knees. Then I climbed up beside her and helped her to her feet.

We went up the crumbling stone steps into the sunlight.

For how many generations had the abandoned subway entrances loomed as symbols of escape to a freedom debased and turned into a cruel mockery by a jungle savagery beyond Society’s control? Tradition had left them standing for a purpose, surely, for each one led to the same central wasteland of crumbling stone and steel.

When you enter the ruins, with no intention of turning back, resolute of mind and will, the first half hour is the worst. You’re without firm anchorage of any sort. You know that eventually you’ll find a place

to live, you'll make friends. But until you do, your life hangs by a thread.

No man or woman can go it alone in the ruins. You've got to take root fast. You've got to send sturdy roots deep into the strange new soil before a bullet crashes into your spine, or a knife buries itself between your shoulder blades.

I tightened my hold on Claire's hand and we moved along the ancient streets in complete silence. We walked past rubble-choked intersections which had once pulsed with light and traffic. The buildings were dark with age, their walls rusted and overgrown with climbing vines. The doors swung idly on their hinges, and there were ominous, blood-hued shadows and sagging signs everywhere.

Bakery. Tilson's Gas Station. Cut Rate Drugs.

So far not even a shadow had crossed our path.

Were the ruins deserted? I'd heard of ruins abandoned in superstitious fear, ruins where women — made desperate by loneliness — had refused to be fought over. They'd done their own choosing, picking one man and killing four, laughing as they discouraged all further pursuit.

Outcast girls were often crack marksmen. I pictured myself crushing such a woman in my arms, a man of her own choosing, crushing her and holding her while I watched the fury and contempt in her eyes turn to an unfamiliar warmth which startled her, and widened her eyes, and brought her lips tight against mine.

There were depths in human psychology I could never hope to fathom.

I saw a door standing half-open, and on impulse kicked it wide. With my arm about Claire's waist, I pushed forward into the shadows.

The music was a wild, frenzied burst of sound. It came from a towering, rainbow-colored shape of metal and glass which stood against a crumbling wall spattered over with dark stains.

There were several tables standing about, and at one of them sat a girl with jet-black hair, and wide, startled eyes. She was staring straight at me in the gloom.

Quickly my eyes passed over her, lingering on the one-piece, silvery-textured suit, and the bared right leg with the small stocking knife held well in place. There was mud on her ankles, and her shoes were worn down from running on pavements and crumbling stone and gravel like a hunted creature of the night.

"Come in, and shut the door!" she pleaded.

The door seemed to come loose in my hands. It closed with a frightful rasp, and a chink of light came through from outside, spilling across the floor and pointing directly at me like an accusing finger.

I said automatically, "Were you waiting for someone?"

Her eyes bored into mine in a level, challenging stare. "For you."

I recognized her then. She had gone out of my life fast, and returned fast. Only, this time, there was no punched metaltape gleaming on her palm, no Security Guard watching us from the shadows.

Poetry again, a crazy line flashing through my mind. *Her young breasts brightening into sighs.* The fantasy I'd succumbed to in the vault had come true; I could only stare, moisten my lips, and wonder if I had gone quite mad.

I looked at Claire, standing straight and still at my side. She was staring at the outcast girl with friendly interest, as a child might stare at a performing bear in a carnival of animals.

How close can a man feel to two women at the same time? If you hold one in your arms, and she's tender and yielding, and her lips are fire, can you look over your shoulder at another woman with a childlike stare who speaks in monosyllables, and whisper, "You'll never know how much you mean to me, my darling!"

In some ways Claire was closer to me than the girl at the table. I had held her in my arms too; I knew her name — and how could I fail to be stirred by her trust and utter dependency?

Don't be a fool, a voice whispered deep in my mind. You're drawn to both women. It's as natural as breathing for a man to be drawn to two women — a dozen. It can happen at any time.

Surprisingly, Claire's hand had crept into mine. Her fingers tightened and relaxed, then tightened again.

I tried to keep my voice calm. "How did you know I was coming here? You couldn't have followed

me when I left the vault. I had my own beetle, and I drove fast.”

“And looked behind to make sure?” she inquired, mockingly.

She laughed at my sudden alarm.

The police raid *had* puzzled me. Emotional illusion therapy shops are seldom raided before noon. Treatments do not, as a rule, take place in the early hours of the morning, and what herdsman would send beaters across an entire mountainside to capture one goat?

Had she actually followed me from the Giant Computer vault to the therapy shop, and notified the police? The thought seemed incredible; I rejected it, even before she said, “When I left the vault I knew we’d meet again. Your need was as desperate as mine.”

Her eyes brightened with a sudden, wild yearning, with a hint of voluptuousness startling in its candor.

“Your need was as desperate as mine, and I knew we’d meet in the ruins. I knew you’d come in search of me, with the memory of my lips burning yours. I knew it would be only a matter of hours until you found me.”

Suddenly, she seemed to see Claire for the first time, to realize the significance of Claire. Her eyes narrowed, and her voice became less assured. “You did not come alone,” she said. “Where did you find this girl? Who is she?”

“Her name is Claire,” I said. “I did not meet her here, and I did not come here in search of you.”

Her eyes widened in swift amazement, then narrowed again, fastening on Claire in angry disbelief. She half rose from the table, the quickness of her breathing revealing how deeply she had been hurt.

To appease her I said quickly, “We had some trouble with the police. I could have identified myself and straightened it out, but Claire needed my help desperately. They could have held her on a technical charge, just out of spite. A minor infraction, of no importance, but you know how the police can be when they’re envious of another man’s interest in a beautiful woman.”

“You’re interested in her, are you?”

“I’ve known Claire for a long time,” I lied. “She’s younger than you’d suspect — just turned eighteen. You ought to realize it’s natural enough for a man my age to take a fatherly interest in a second cousin as young and inexperienced as Claire. There’s nothing serious between us, if that’s what you’ve been thinking.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking,” the girl from the vault said.

For a moment I was afraid that her anger would continue to mount. But after what must have been for her a bad moment, she resumed her original position at the table, making no effort to conceal the shapely grace of her bared right knee.

“That was cattish of me,” she said. “Why shouldn’t I believe you? You are not the kind of man who would allow himself to be trapped in a lie — even to a woman so foolishly and recklessly emotional that she would hold you quite blameless.”

She cast down her eyes suddenly, allowing her fingers to stray for an instant to the securely sheathed stocking knife.

“It is easy enough to say that jealousy is for children. It is easy enough to say that a man or a woman in love should be completely an adult. But we know better — you and I. You have been to Venus Base, and I have been denied a woman’s right to happiness.”

She raised her eyes and looked directly at Claire, her lips curving in a smile. “Hello, Claire!” she said. “I’m Agnes.”

Claire sat down quietly and folded her hands in her lap. She looked at me, as if to make sure I did not disapprove.

“Tell me about yourself, Claire,” Agnes urged. “Just how did you get in trouble with the police?”

I started to intervene, but was stopped by a sudden change in Agnes’s expression. Her eyes had widened in alarm; she was leaning sharply forward, gripping the table with both hands.

CHAPTER 6

I swung around. Three men had entered the tavern and seated themselves at tables near the door.

They were surly looking ruffians of muscle and bone, and they sat watching us with a stillness that was ominous.

The one nearest to me was big — really big. I could see at a glance that he had been in a good many fights, and that each fight had left its mark on him. His nose was badly battered, crooked and flattened at the tip. His ears were misshapen, mere fleshy lobes flattened grotesquely, so that they spread out over his cheeks like crushed cauliflowers. His right cheek was further defaced by a livid scar, and there was something about the scar which made me see him in another situation — facing three or four men trying with insane rage to cripple him for life.

It was a mind's-eye vision, but it was so vivid I could see the flash of the knife as it grazed his cheek; I could see him backing away without a sound, a faint smile of contempt curling his lips.

He certainly wasn't a very handsome-looking baby, but all of my instincts warned me that what he lacked in looks he could make up for in other ways.

He was staring at Claire. Not at Agnes, but at Claire, with a curious intent look, his eyebrows arched as if in amazement.

His attitude did not surprise me. Girls like Claire were not often seen in the ruins. In the ruins, striking beauty really stood out. Put a flaming orchid in a rock garden overgrown with weeds, and that one solitary bloom will create a world of its own, so dazzling that the wrong kind of man will kill to possess it.

It didn't take Ugly Face long to recover from his surprise. When I saw his eyes leave Claire's face and pass down over her, I had a pretty good idea how long it would take him to whip out a knife.

What I did was the logical outgrowth of what I was — a telepath, a man who could read the mind of an adversary in a moment of deadly danger.

There was one table between us. The instant he started to rise I leapt toward it, gripped it firmly and raised it high. The speed with which I moved seemed to cast a spell upon him. He froze facing me, his hand arrested half way to his hip.

Before the spell could snap I hurled the table straight at him.

This is Ugly Face, and you've hit him with a table smack on the chest! Try it sometime. Shudder to the impact of solid wood crack-ing against muscle and bone. It will make you want to cry out with the torturing uncertainty of it. Something will tighten inside you, you'll have a wild impulse to follow up the assault with flailing fists, a bellow of rage.

But if you're wise, you won't move in too quickly.

The table spun Ugly Face around, sent him staggering back against the wall. First one knee gave way, then the other. He went down in a lopsided kind of sprawl, and that was the moment I picked to hurl myself upon him.

He let out a yell, and drew a knife from his hip with a swiftness which said the play had been rehearsed and put into actual practice a thousand times, with a trip-hammer efficiency. But it couldn't have been too perfect a play, for the instant I planted a blow right under his chin his neck stretched out a foot and the knife went clattering.

To make sure he'd had enough, I knelt beside him, raised up his head, and asked him pointblank. He didn't answer me, and I saw that there was no recognition at all in his eyes. I decided that it would be safe to let him sag back, and go to sleep.

The instant I arose, the tallest of Ugly Face's two friends was right over me with a drawn gun. I'll say this for Number Two. Despite the massiveness of his shoulders, and his ill-proportioned wrestler's look, he had a refined face.

Mild, almost baby-blue eyes he had, and a mouth that was smiling almost gently at me as he took careful aim.

"I saw what you did to my friend," he said. "I can't let that happen to me, can I?"

He might have added, "It's a nice evening for dying, isn't it?" but I moved quickly to forestall him. I jack-knifed upward, and caught him in the stomach with one sharply bent elbow, and the top of my skull.

He went down like a segmented plastic dummy, dropped from a cut wire in a garment display case.

His knees folded, and he toppled forward and then back, as I lashed at his jaw with a sharp right, and delivered a left-handed blow to his solar plexus that almost broke my wrist.

He flattened out at my feet.

Number Three was still seated. I looked up quickly and saw that he was watching me, his expression strangely impassive. He was sturdily built, but far less formidable-looking than Ugly Face; I wasn't too worried about what might happen if he came at me with a knife.

I need not have worried at all. He either saw the gun lying at my feet, and decided to play safe — or he just had not stomach for a stand-up, drag-out fight. But whatever he decided or thought, his behavior was incredible. He simply rose quietly from the table, nodded to me, and walked out of the tavern without a backward glance.

I swung around to face the two women. Agnes had leapt to her feet, and was staring at me with shining eyes. I looked at Claire, and was amazed to discover that her eyes were more puzzled than alarmed. There was no warmth in them; if she was relieved to see the two ruffians lying limp and unmoving on the floor, she gave no sign.

I felt suddenly closer to Agnes. She, at least, could share my alarm; I could reach her more quickly with an appeal based on simple common sense.

"We've got to find a safer place to stay," I said. "This was an ancient entertainment center. It still is — to men who think of women in only one frame of reference. You must have known that when you came here."

She nodded, her eyes searching my face. "Yes, I did. Does it disturb you so much?"

"Why do you ask me a question like that?" I flared. "If one of those brutes had started to paw you —"

A mocking look came into her eyes. "There was no danger of that. They had eyes only for Claire. I suppose I should be insulted, but I happen to be a realist. If a man is primitive enough, a girl with Claire's kind of beauty will drag him down very quickly to the level of a savage with a bow and arrow, mounted on a wild stallion."

The mockery in her eyes grew more pronounced. "A woman must come to a place like this if she doesn't wish to be claimed too quickly. Few men would have the courage to come here alone, and for a woman there is safety in numbers. I knew you'd never find me if I hid myself away in an upstairs room in one of the safer places."

"We've got to find a safe place," I said. "Immediately."

I turned to Claire. "When we leave here, we're going to walk very fast until we come to a place that looks safe," I said. "Do you understand?"

Agnes laughed. "You can tell, I suppose."

"It may sound crazy to you, but I can tell if a building *isn't* safe. Do you want to come with us?"

She looked at me steadily, the mockery gone from her eyes. "Just try and lose me."

Holding Claire's hand firmly, I walked to the door and kicked it open. It rasped on rusty hinges; for an instant, I feared that it might collapse. But then, slowly, it swung shut behind us.

I went out into the street again, with Agnes on my right, and Claire on my left, and no man ever had two more physically disturbing companions.

Of one thing I was convinced. Agnes couldn't know how I felt about Claire. Physically, Claire was the more perfect of the two; but there was that strange child-look in her eyes, the complete lack of adult understanding which chilled and disturbed me every time I glanced at her.

Agnes, at least, would have understood my desperation. She would have understood why I had turned to an android for warmth and sympathy — if I had chosen to tell her.

Did she suspect the truth already? I tried to read her expression for the answer as we moved along, hugging the dark, ancient buildings. But she hardly glanced at Claire, and her mind told me no-thing. That, too, puzzled me. I had never before met a woman whose mind I could not penetrate at all.

Had she told me the truth about herself? Had she really come to the ruins in search of me? Was it that important to her?

In spite of Claire, in spite of myself, Agnes's intoxicating nearness overcame me for an instant, as it

had in the vault. I had an impulse to stop, take her violently into my arms again, and tell her how glad I was that I had found her.

The building was gray and towering, with at least twenty vacantly staring windows and a great door. The feeling of security as we came abreast of it was strong in me, overpowering. I knew that it would be a safe sanctuary.

The power was so strong in me that I knew instantly that it was a building of numerous empty rooms. I knew that the rooms were huge, and littered with rubbish.

I had never been to the ruins before, but I knew that the building would remain safe for as long as our luck held. In the ruins, as elsewhere, men and women preferred a few, well-beaten trails. Nine-tenths of the buildings remained unoccupied simply because they were too bleak and forbidding to appeal to the human herd instinct for proximity in danger.

I turned, and spoke to Agnes. "We'll never find a safer building than this. We were lucky to have found it so soon."

I tightened my hold on Claire's hand, and we passed into a dark interior; we climbed a flight of narrow stairs to a double row of rooms which ran along both sides of a dismal, refuse-littered corridor.

With the two women at my side I went into one of the rooms and shut the door.

It was huge and completely furnished, with cracked walls and a high, sagging ceiling festooned with cobwebs. Through the two dust-smudged windows we could see a patch of sunset sky.

There was an empty crate standing in one corner, still bearing a faded label: *California Figs*.

Claire sat down on it and looked at me. "Is this our new home?"

It was the most intelligent question she had ever asked.

I took her hand and pressed it gently. "Yes, Claire."

"She's taking too much for granted," Agnes said. "But we should be here long enough to get acquainted and reach a real understanding. There are a good many things I'd like to ask Claire."

She turned to me with a mocking look in her eyes again. "You won't mind, will you, if I share this room with Claire? You can sleep in one of the rooms across the corridor."

The request took me by complete surprise. It was a direct frontal attack which I hadn't anticipated — more against Claire than against me.

I was tempted to put up a furious argument, then thought better of it.

Sleep across the corridor! In the ruins, that sort of thing was ridiculous on the face of it. If a woman couldn't trust a man that far, under circumstances so desperate, her presence in the ruins at all was a mockery and a sham.

But what could I say? How could I tell her that Claire needed looking after? Could I say: I don't want you to give Claire any ideas she can't assimilate without advice from me! I don't want you to confuse and frighten Claire with jealous woman talk. She's just a sweet, innocent child, and if you're going to start being callously inquisitive and prying you may inflict a grievous mental wound on her.

How could I tell Agnes that? If I encouraged her to start thinking of Claire as a rival, how could I know where it would end? How much would she find out about Claire if I left them alone together? Could she be trusted to look after Claire? The thought that the night might end in a violent quarrel, with Claire distraught and abandoned, was appalling to me.

But I decided that I'd be risking too much to make an issue of it then and there.

Could she be trusted not to harm Claire in any way? I decided to take the risk. I'd go across the corridor and leave the door of my room ajar. I was a light sleeper, and if anyone came into the building during the night I'd surely know, and wake up in time.

It was better than risking a jealousy flare-up immediately. I needed sleep if only as a safety precaution, to keep my nerves alert.

I pressed Claire's hand again, looking defiantly at Agnes.

"I'll see you in the morning, Claire," I promised. "I'll be very near you. Do you understand? Agnes will see that no harm comes to you."

I whispered it, so that Agnes wouldn't hear. Then I turned back to Agnes. "There are a good many

things I'd like to discuss with you," I said. "But they can wait until morning."

She smiled, and put both her hands on my shoulder. Before I could stop her she kissed me, so hard her teeth bruised my lips.

She stood back abruptly, triumphant mockery in her eyes. "Good night, John," she whispered.

Claire was staring at us both, her face strangely flushed. For the first time a curious, pained look had come into her eyes.

I went up to her again, and patted her shoulder.

"Don't be disturbed, Claire. That was just Agnes's way of say-ing 'Good night!' "

I turned then, and walked out of the room, Agnes's lips still burning mine. She had deliberately hurt Claire, derided me, and I hated myself for allowing it to pass.

The room across the corridor was as big, empty and dismal as the room I had left. It contained a broken-down chair, a small table, and a chest of drawers dark with mildew. The windows were shut tight; and the ventilation was so bad that it hardly seemed a fit habitation for rats which I could hear scurrying through the walls.

I tried to open one of the windows, and gave it up as a bad job. I was too tired to care. I lay down on the floor, and almost immediately fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 7

How long I slept I had no way of knowing. A vision of Venus Base was before me. I had my arm about the slim waist of a girl, and she was pressing close to me, and I could hear her excited breathing.

"Look down there, John," she whispered. "Kiss me first — then look."

A vision of Venus Base, and a woman's lips on mine. "Look down there, John. The men have courage, I'll grant you that; and the women are very beautiful. But they are traitors to society, and must be punished."

I saw her arm go out, white and slim. She was pointing downward, but I had eyes only for the whiteness of her flesh. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, and I was angry because she kept insisting that I concern myself with other matters.

"John, look down," she pleaded. "There are at least five thousand conspirators. Each must be identified and brought to justice. Tell me. Do you recognize any of the men below? Any of the women?"

I lowered my eyes at last to her bidding. Eight or ten couples were threading a narrow bridge at the base of a cliff. The men wore Venus Base uniforms; the women were slender and very beautiful, with gleaming white shoulders and lustrous dark hair whipped by the wind.

They were heading for a rock cavern on the far side of the lake, and one man and a girl had run on ahead and were almost at the entrance.

Close to my ear a soft voice was whispering. "They are defying society, John, setting up a new society of their own where men will be free to choose their own mates in completely primitive fashion. Surely there is no greater crime against future generations!" The voice grew tender and cajoling. "We must fight them, John — you and I together. It was arranged that we should meet in the Computation Vault, and you have been watched ever since.

"Listen carefully, John. You were denied the right to marry so that you might become desperate enough to help Society fight this conspiracy. The raid on the illusion therapy shop was arranged so that you would bring Claire here and I could talk to you as I am doing now. There is a thought bond between us, John. It is a gentle thing and not compulsive. But you must hear me out, and I have come to you between sleeping and waking, and brought your mind close to mine so that there will be no barriers of mistrust between us."

I groaned and turned on my side, fighting the voice as a be-guiling false thing that made no sense. But it did not pause. "You are under the hypnosis of love, John. Your need for me will make you forget Claire. When I kissed you just now I knew, I could tell. You will be permitted to marry, but I will be the woman you select. We will go to Venus Base together and fight this conspiracy. We will fight it with the aid of your extrasensory faculties. Society needs telepaths desperately."

I could feel her hands on my face, and the yielding pressure of her body against mine became startlingly real again.

Quite suddenly I was fully awake. The feeling of trancelike unreality and the agonizing helplessness was gone and I could see her face distinctly. I could remember kissing her in the twilight zone between sleeping and waking. I could recall every word she had said to me.

She had asked me to kiss her and my only thought had been to tell her how beautiful she was and to lift her up and carry her to a secret place and unfasten her dress and make violent love to her as her breasts slipped free.

But she had refused to let me do that. She had held out a promise of complete fulfillment, but first I must promise to do something which was unthinkable, which did violence to everything I believed in. She had asked me to help Society expose and destroy a conspiracy I knew very little about. I only knew I was in complete sympathy with the men and women I had seen in the pass. I would have gladly joined them and fought to the death to defend that kind of revolt, if what she had told me about it was true.

What did it mean? Had she attempted to implant in my mind a post-hypnotic suggestion which I would be powerless to resist on awakening? Can a man be made to fight for what he hates, to defend a way of life that has become intolerable to him? Perhaps . . . if the rewards for an integrity-destroying betrayal are great enough. But I did not think I was that kind of man.

There was something else she did not know about me. To a telepath, a post-hypnotic suggestion has no meaning. Words whispered to him when he is in a trancelike state will be recalled when he awakes, with complete accuracy by his conscious mind.

That was just one of many things she did not know about me. *But what did I know about her?* Perhaps she had lied to me deliberately to test me, to find out just how deep-seated my rebellious impulses were. If I seemed to waver, to give even the slightest heed to a plea that should have made me turn upon her in rage, she would know that I was not what I pretended to be.

In the vault she had shared my anger, had spoken out fearlessly, had not attempted to hide how she felt about a computation that denied her the right to marry. What if every word she had just whispered to me had been a lie and she was wholly in sympathy with the rebels in the pass? What if she were not just a fighter in the ranks, but a key figure in the revolt, an organizer? It was a possibility that could not be dismissed out of hand.

There was a startled look in her eyes, as if she had not expected me to wake up so soon. It vanished in an instant but the look that replaced it was just as much of a giveaway. I could see that she was disappointed. Frustrated and angry as well, although she did her best to hide it when she saw I was staring at her so intently I could hardly have failed to suspect what was passing through her mind.

She was wearing a sleeping garment which she must have put on under her dress before coming to the ruins, for she had carried no garment-bag with her. It was jet black, completely opaque, and even more abbreviated than the dress she'd taken off. It would have given her an almost death-harlequin look if her warmth and beauty had not completely dispelled such an illusion.

I wasn't sure what excuse she'd give for going to sleep in another room and waking up right beside me. I only knew that it would have to be a good one, for she would be forced to do a lot of explaining. Why had she abandoned a girl as young and fearful as Claire on her first night in the ruins, after promising me that she would look after her? And how could she explain away what she'd whispered to me in my sleep if I let her know, by word or look, that I remembered every word of that conversation?

I decided not to make it too difficult for her, to pretend that I remembered nothing and was just as surprised as she to find ourselves side by side on a floor thick with dust and cobwebs, with rats scurrying back and forth through the walls and the rafters overhead.

I pretended that I was still a little drowsy, and covered up for the steady way I'd been staring at her by pretending to blink sleep from my eyelids and muttering an apology.

"I thought for a moment you were Claire. That sleeping garment —"

She cut me off abruptly, her voice tremulous with anger.

"She wears sleeping garments like this, does she? I was pretty sure you were lying to me about her. There's very little that girl doesn't know — about men and sleeping garments. I'm sure of that. I'm

convinced she's considerably older than she looks — perhaps twenty-three or four.”

“You've talked to her about it, I suppose? And just why did you leave her? You should never have done that. She's just a frightened child. Why did you come here, when you know how terrified she'll be if she wakes up and finds herself completely alone?”

“She isn't alone,” she said. “She's with another man.”

She had gotten to her feet and was nodding toward the door.

I stared at her in stunned horror. For an instant it was too monstrous to grasp. It slipped away from me, went shrieking away into a nightmare world where cruel shapes with iron talons glared down at me out of a yawning gulf filled with nothing but darkness. She made no attempt to spare me.

“He was coming up the stairs, creeping up like a thief in the night when I went out into the hall to find out where the sound that had awakened me was coming from. I don't think he saw me, because there was only a faint glimmer of light and I flattened myself against the wall. He went right past me into the room, and shut the door. That was ten minutes ago. If she hadn't found him acceptable she'd have screamed by now.

“Oh, he could have clamped his hand over her mouth to keep her from crying out, I suppose,” she went on quickly. “But no matter how brutal the men who come here are, there is usually enough decency left in them to give a woman a chance to accept their lovemaking without resorting to violence. They seldom meet with resistance from the kind of women who come here, and vanity enters into it —”

In a nightmare when taloned shapes pluck and tear at your vitals the torment is often delayed, put off until you wake up scream-ing.

But I woke up quickly enough. I gripped her by the shoulders, swung her about and slapped her across the face, hard. I don't know why I didn't kill her. There is a rage you can't control, that backlashes in your brain like a whipcord — in so terrible, lacerating a way that the pain alone makes you want to kill.

“Why did you leave her?” I demanded, shaking her, coming close to slapping her again. “He couldn't have prevented both of you from screaming. You could have fought him off until I got to you.”

She didn't seem to care about the slap. Her voice rose in sud-den, desperate appeal. “John, listen to me. That girl is a freedom-ruin strumpet to her fingertips. It's written all over her. I know the type. Hard, calculating, not really needing a man the way most of the girls who come here do. It's an easy way of not working at all, if you're coarse-fibered enough. Women of that type even like brutality, seek it out. She gave herself away, because a woman like that knows that when she goes about with a wide-eyed, helpless look she'll appeal to the kind of man who is brutally sadistic. John, no woman could be *that* innocent. Surely you must realize it's nothing but a pretense to cover up what she really is.”

I didn't let her go. Whatever she may have thought about brutality, I gave her another sampling of it. It wasn't sadistic by *any* yardstick. It was just something she'd brought upon herself by what she'd let happen to Claire. I gripped her by the shoulders and sent her spinning back against the wall.

It threw her off-balance and forced her to sit down on the floor. The rage I'd felt was gone now. She no longer mattered to me, one way or the other. She'd jumped to a conclusion about Claire that was wholly cruel and unjustified, and had deserved the slap. But the only reason I'd sent her reeling back against the wall was to make it plain to her that I wouldn't tolerate her getting in my way when I crossed the hallway to the other room.

CHAPTER 8

I knew it might be too late. What chance would Claire have of defending herself against a man who didn't even suspect that she was a child-woman who had never been made love to in an abrupt, brutally demanding way? How could she know what would happen to her if, in her innocence, she was more bewildered than angered and made him think that she would accept him as a lover if he abandoned all restraint?

The instant he turned brutal, if he thought she was the kind of woman Agnes had been talking about. But I had no intention of condoning him even that much. If he'd harmed her in any way he wasn't just

going to end up dead. Unless he killed me first there'd be an ugly mess for the next tenant to clean up. A man with a bashed-in skull —

I was just starting to cross the hall when the door opposite was flung open and he came out of the room with Claire in his arms. She was beating with her fists on his chest and her eyes were wild with fright. But he had clamped one hand over her mouth to keep her from crying out.

He didn't stop when he saw me, just increased the length of his stride and was a third of the way down the stairs before I could reach the top, the blind rage making me stagger. I moved just as fast as he had, but I had six feet of hallway to cross, and lost a second or two getting a firm grip on the stair rail.

I had to do that to size him up physically. When you hurl yourself at a giant with the sole purpose of crippling and killing him it's vital to know just how big he is and if there's a look of flabbiness about him.

If he looks flabby you hit him first in the stomach, putting all of your strength into the blow to jolt the breath out of him. Then you really set to work on him, pounding away at his kidneys and fielding right hooks to his jaw until he topples.

The trouble was . . . he didn't look flabby. He had the firmly knit build of a very large man who keeps himself in trim by exercise and doesn't allow any excess weight to widen his waistline and make him short-winded.

I'd caught only a brief glimpse of his face. But it didn't seem like a face that would change its expression and take on a scared look if the first few rounds of a fight went against him. He wasn't quite as ugly looking as the muscular six-footer who had come at me with a knife the night before, but only because his features weren't battered out of shape and defaced still further by a scar two inches in length. All in all, he was ugly looking enough.

But I didn't let his ugliness or the way he was built interfere with what I was going to do to him — unless he had a knife and managed to stop me by burying it up to the hilt in my chest before I could reach out and grab him.

He was out of the building before I reached the bottom of the stairs but I didn't let that deter me either. When a man is carrying a woman in her arms he can't move as rapidly as a man who is unencumbered, and I caught up with him before he had gone thirty feet.

The light of dawn was harsh on his features as he turned to face me.

Claire was still beating with her fists on his chest, but he centered all his attention on me the instant our eyes met. He stood very still, looking me up and down.

Claire was staring at me too, her eyes very wide. Suddenly she stopped struggling, and the terrified child look I'd expected to see in her eyes had either vanished or hadn't been that kind of look from the instant she'd started to struggle. Her expression seemed now wholly that of a grown woman aware of her peril, but overwhelmingly relieved and grateful that someone in whom she had complete trust had come to her rescue.

"You've made a bad mistake," I said. "She's my woman. If you put her down you'll have a better chance of making it my life or yours. Using her as a shield won't help you because there are holds I can clamp on you that will make you release her. If your arms aren't free you're going to be in trouble."

That wasn't strictly true, because as long as he held on to her I'd be at a disadvantage. I couldn't start working him over without running the risk of seriously injuring Claire. But I hoped he'd be too dumb to realize that or too enraged by the unexpected opposition he was encountering to think clearly. Just to have his claim to her disputed must have irked him, and in the ruins a struggle to the death to retain possession of a woman taken by force was so basic to survival that it made a resort to violence almost instinctive.

He wasn't dumb. But I'd guessed right about how he might feel about killing me or getting himself killed and settling the issue with the free use of his arms.

"She may have been your woman last night," he said. "But you might have a hard time proving that, because she's been fighting like a wildcat. A woman who comes to the ruins knows what to expect and I've never before met one who would only let just one man make love to her. So I don't think she was your woman to begin with. There are women who won't let any man touch them. She seems to be that way, but it won't take me long to make a real woman out of her."

He narrowed his eyes and looked me up and down. “I don’t think you’ve got what it takes, chum. So she’s better off with me. Why don’t you just fade and give her a chance to become a real woman.”

He was baiting me with the deadliest insult he could think of, and it convinced me that he had no intention of using Claire as a shield. He was going to set her down, all right, and do his best to batter me to a pulp the instant I closed in on him.

I was right on all counts, but my closing in was delayed for a second or two, because when he eased her to the pavement he took a slow step backwards, and kept a tight grip on her wrist.

“Get this straight,” he said. “I’m going to let go of her, but she stays right here, where I can see her while I’m making you wish you’d taken my advice. If she tries to run I’ll go after her and I’ll have to hurt her — real bad. Is that clear?”

I knew that if Claire ignored the threat his rage might become so great that he would be capable of killing her. And I wasn’t sure I could keep him from breaking away from me, even if I threw a hammerlock on him, and kept pounding away at his kidneys.

Much as it went against the grain I had no choice but to warn her. “Do as he says,” I told her. “You’re not to run. Do you understand?”

She nodded, the look of complete trust still in her eyes. “I will not run,” she said.

“She catches on fast,” Giant Size said. “I’ll give you this much. She pays attention to what you say. It’s too bad you haven’t got what it takes to make her your woman. That’s what I can’t understand. Why are you willing to get yourself killed for a woman you can never hope to make *feel* like a woman. With me it’s different. I’ve never met a woman yet I couldn’t change, even the cold kind that pretend to hate the very sight of a man and clamp their teeth together when you try to kiss them.”

“I’m going to change you in a lot of ways,” I said. “Maybe you won’t be so good at that when I’m through with you.”

He let go of Claire’s wrist and she moved back against the wall of the building next to the one we’d just left and a crazy thought flashed across my mind for an instant. Why hadn’t Agnes followed us out and watched two men fighting over the kind of girl she’d been sure Claire was, even though it was the exact opposite of the truth? It should have given her a grim kind of satisfaction.

We started squaring off, and if someone had told me right at that moment that anything could have prevented what seemed certain to happen I would have accused him of believing in miracles.

It’s always a mistake not to believe in miracles. I don’t mean the wand-waving kind, but the way life has at times of playing fast and loose with the laws of probability.

When you’ve nothing but your own bare fists to fight with you can surprise an opponent in two ways. You can lash out at him very fast, before he can come at you, or — you can hit him so hard he’ll be too dazed to retaliate. I was getting ready to hit Giant Size so fast and hard he’d be staggered by the first blow when the miracle happened.

Around the corner, less than fifty feet from where we were standing, came two Security Police officers with compact little handguns joggling in black metal holsters at their hips.

I couldn’t believe it for an instant, but in another way it didn’t surprise me at all. I’d been half-expecting them to come into the ruins in pursuit of us, because when the sound of the sirens had died away in the abandoned subway entrance it had still seemed to be echoing in my ears and it had accompanied me along the blue-lit tracks and remained with me, at intervals, all through the night.

The moment they came into view I knew that they wouldn’t want Giant Size to even try to kill me, because taking me alive would be of the utmost importance to them.

For a second or two I rebelled against the miracle and was almost sorry it had taken place, because I still wanted to do to Giant Size what he was hoping to do to me. But when more than your own life is at stake you’ve no right to resent an opportunity to split up the odds against you and turn the resulting confusion into a weapon that can give you the upper hand.

I didn’t try to hide from Giant Size just how startled I was. I made a production of looking scared, and gesturing toward the corner in so alarmed a way that he’d realize instantly that the danger was too great to let a personal feud ruin our chances of staying alive.

Whether he had a knife or not I didn’t know. I’d been prepared to have him come at me with a knife

from the instant he'd set Claire down, but I was sure he knew that a knife couldn't help him now, for a Security Police handgun was a much more formidable weapon.

It was an intricate weapon as well, and it couldn't just be drawn and fired from the hip. You had to trigger and aim it and it took close to a half-minute to do that if you wanted to have a fair chance of bringing down a running target at a distance of seventy feet. And we could widen the distance by that much and more in twenty seconds if we ran fast enough.

"They haven't drawn yet!" I shouted at him. "They've just seen us. We've still got a chance if we can get to the end of the block before they open fire."

He either caught on as fast as I'd hoped he would or was way ahead of me, for he forgot all about what he'd threatened to do to Claire if she tried to escape the instant I swung about, gripped her by the wrist and we both broke into a run, heading for the cross street at the opposite end of the block. He broke into a run too, without even looking at us, his fear of the police making a fight to the death for a woman he coveted a luxury he could no longer afford.

I'd made one bad mistake. I'd misjudged by a few seconds the time it would take to reach the end of the block, and the first blast came when we were still directly in the line of fire and not around the corner out of sight.

I heard an agonized gasp close to me, and waited for Claire to sag against me with a constriction tightening about my heart. But she kept right on running, her hand so steady in my clasp I knew almost instantly that she was all right.

It was Giant Size who had been hit. He had fallen behind and when I looked back to see how bad it was he was down on his knees on the pavement, swaying slowly back and forth. He was clutching his stomach, a look of bewilderment in his eyes. Blood was trickling from between his fingers and all at once the red glistening turned into a gush and he collapsed forward on his face. Apparently the bullet had gone right through him.

Another blast came then, so deafeningly close to us that it made my ears ring and I could feel the pavement vibrating under my feet. Then we were at the cross street and no longer in danger of being cut down by a straight-line blast. There was a piled-up mass of bricks and mortar extending outward from the building on the corner and the instant we were on the far side of it we slowed down long enough to catch our breath.

The third blast was followed by a clanging sound and a cloud of dust spiraled upward and hung suspended in the air above us for an instant. I tightened my grip on Claire's hand and we broke into a run again. The cross street was quite long, but we could see clear to the end of it. Our chances of getting to the end just by running were certainly not good.

There were a lot of branching side streets in the ruins and dark, weed-choked alleyways between buildings. Some were basement-level cul-de-sacs, or dead-end alleys terminating in brick walls too high to scale. But a few were open at both ends, and you could cross through them to a street running parallel to the one you happened to be on. If you were very lucky, you could even come out two or three blocks away, for there were passages that were like the inside of a horn. They circled around underground and doubled back on themselves, and you couldn't tell where you'd be when you emerged into the sunlight again.

We desperately needed to find that kind of passageway, because I doubted if coming out only one block away would save us. They'd seen us turn into the alley and follow us . . . and you can be just as dead on one street as another.

They were shouting at us to stop now, warning us that they'd shoot to kill if we kept on running. But there were no more handgun blasts. I was pretty sure I knew why they were withholding their fire. They'd rounded the rubble and seen how long the street was and were confident of overtaking us. Either that, or they were putting their chips on the alleyways between the buildings, knowing that if we plunged into a dead-end one we'd be trapped with a vengeance.

Taking us alive would have pleased them better than killing us. I was certain of that, but the fact that they had blasted at all convinced me that if they had to kill us . . . they'd do it.

They'd killed the wrong man with a shot intended for me and had missed again before we'd turned

the corner. But it could hardly happen a third time, for the Security Police were crack marksmen. It had been freakishly accidental, and must have infuriated them. In fact, their pride had taken so terrible a pounding they might well decide to forget the warning they'd just given us and blast anyway. Just knowing how easy that would be for them increased the feeling I had that our prospects of staying alive if we remained in the open were at a very low level.

I could hear their footsteps clattering on the pavement behind us, but I didn't look back to see how close they were. We passed an alleyway that ended in a high wall and another that was choked with rubble and bisected by an iron bar. But then we came to one that looked more promising, if only where it led. But it was the wrong time to speculate about the risks we might be taking if we plunged into it. They were shouting at us to stop again, their voices so loud now they could not have been more than a few yards behind us.

I tightened my grip on Claire's hand and whispered urgently, "Walk now . . . slowly. Stop running and walk. We must seem to be obeying them. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, her steps slowing.

"We're going into that alley," I told her. "Turn when I do — and don't let go of my hand."

We came to an almost complete halt before we turned. I wanted it to look like the first move in a surrender that would keep them from blasting again.

CHAPTER 9

We needed only two or three seconds of grace and the strategy worked. They had no way of knowing we'd come to another alley and we were in the passageway and running again before we heard them cry out in rage.

The alley was open at both ends. Sunlight from the adjoining street glowed at the far end and we could see the glimmer before we were a third of the way through. We could also hear them shouting at us again, but they continued to withhold their fire.

The alley curved a little and was as dark as pitch and their reluctance to blast wasn't hard to understand. A few dislodged bricks from high overhead could have cracked their skulls, despite their protective headgear; and in the ruins just a loud shout had been known to bring a ten-story building down, its crumbling framework undermined by the vibrations alone.

We came out into a street as narrow as the one we had left. It was just about the same length and there was only one thing different about it that stood out. It wasn't deserted but was clamorous with sound, and the sound was coming from a careening fifty-passenger beetle filled with excited riders who were leaning out of the windows and shouting at the top of their lungs.

There was a frayed banner stretched across the front of the beetle but the lettering on it had a bright, recently gilded look. The lettering read: SIX-DAY BICYCLE RACE.

The beetle was coming straight toward us at so rapid speed that I had less than two seconds to make up my mind. We could either leap aside and let it go careening past, or risk getting ourselves killed by grasping the guardrail and attempting to climb on board.

It was a risk either way, because if we leapt aside the Security Guards would be free to do exactly as they pleased about letting us go on living.

Coming to a quick decision was easier than making Claire understand, in just those two seconds, what would happen if she failed to grasp the rail with both hands and hold on to it with all her strength while I leapt aboard ahead of her, bent over and lifted her into the vehicle by taking firm hold of her wrists. I couldn't have remained on the pavement and just hoisted her up. The beetle was moving too fast.

We made it. But if someone had asked me just how, when we were safely inside, breathing harshly and swaying back against the twenty-odd passengers who blocked the aisle, I couldn't have explained it to him. In a really desperate emergency there are reflexes which seem to take over while your brain issues automatic commands. If the beetle hadn't been moving quite so fast we probably couldn't have accomplished it, for even Claire seemed to realize how vital it was to make every second of exertion

count.

All of the seats were occupied and the standing passengers filled every foot of aisle space. There were ten or twelve windows, but we could only see the occasional glint of sunlight on glass and were denied a view of the passing buildings as the bus continued on.

I held tight to Claire's waist as the bus swayed. It had all happened so suddenly it had left me a little dazed. The men and women around us were in an abnormal state too. But they were not dazed. They were shouting and gesturing and elbowing one another aside in an effort to see out of the windows. It made very little sense, because the bus was merely on its way to the races and it was too early in the morning for the streets to be lined with people.

It wasn't too surprising, however. They were almost frenziedly anticipating what they were about to witness, and had to share their wild elation with every pedestrian who happened to be within shouting distance. A craving for excitement on the most primitive of all levels — that of a hunter stalking a jungle beast solely to bring it down and watch it die — had taken complete possession of them. What had once been a spectator sport had become something quite different, and if the bus had struck one of the pedestrians and killed him they would have rejoiced in the spectacle. They were powerless to stem the rampant brutality which had been unleashed in them, and would have regarded the accident as a favorable omen, increasing the likelihood that they would not be disappointed when the races got under way and the death toll started to mount.

"Where are we going?" Claire whispered, her voice so low I could barely catch what she was saying. "What is a bicycle race? Are we still in — in danger? Does danger mean that we will die soon . . . unless the danger goes away?"

I thought for an instant she must have read the banner draped across the front of the bus. Then I remembered how often the words "bicycle race" had come to our ears just in the past three minutes, and realized how unlikely that was.

But could a child have grasped it so quickly, just by hearing the words? She must have associated a bicycle race with the destination of the bus very swiftly in her mind, for her question convinced me that she was both bewildered and frightened by her lack of knowledge of how dangerous a bicycle race might be.

I had no intention of telling her about the death toll. But before I could decide on the best way of keeping the truth from her without seeming to lie it came right out into the open at the far end of the bus.

There was a sudden commotion at the far end, and the pressure which was keeping us hemmed in became a violent jolting that hurled us back against the guardrail. It was as if someone far down the aisle had been hurled backwards and caused fifteen or twenty other passengers to lurch in almost as violent a way. You've seen it happen to a collapsing row of cards. You give one card a vigorous tap, and the entire row goes backwards as the tap is relayed from card to card.

The swaying and lurching of the passengers blocking the aisle was followed by a prolonged, agonized screaming. It went on and on until it was drowned out by an alarmed clamor and the shout of a woman who was clearly on the verge of hysteria.

"He's been stabbed! They were arguing about the races, and he whipped out a knife. The other one wrenched it from him and stabbed him twice. They were both standing right next to me."

"Where is he?" a man's voice shouted. "Why didn't somebody grab him?"

"He leapt off the bus!" the woman replied, her voice still raised in a shout.

"There's nothing much we can do for this one!" a third voice called out. "He's dead!"

"That could get us all in trouble!" The woman almost screamed the words. "The Security Police don't pay any attention to dead men in the streets. But a stabbing on a bicycle race bus is different. It has a socio-political look —"

"In the ruins? Don't be a fool, girl."

"I'm not a girl. I know what I'm talking about. I've seen the Security Police stop every bus at the track, to make sure the passengers aren't socio-political troublemakers, and didn't just come here to get themselves killed over a woman. I tell you, it could happen. It wouldn't be the first time, and not one of us would escape suspicion."

“The Security Police don’t often come to the ruins,” the man who had spoken first protested. “They’re afraid to risk it. They know what could happen to them.”

“Where are your eyes? We passed two of them a minute ago.”

“She’s right!” another passenger called out. “I saw them. We’d better toss him out right now, to be on the safe side.”

“Are you sure he’s dead?” someone else called out.

“We haven’t time to make sure!” the woman shouted. “If there are more police at the track we may all be facing the death penalty, so why should we have any scruples about it, one way or the other? It makes no sense to me.”

“We may as well make sure.”

“Well . . . it won’t take us long to make it official, if a few of you are that crazy. You there — and you. Take a look. See if his heart is still beating. Clear a space now. Let them get to him.”

It all seemed like a mad nightmare. But in a nightmare you’re often obscurely aware that you’ll wake up before it is too late to find that the frightfulness could not have harmed you. But reality is never that merciful. Even when it takes on a nightmarish aspect you never get the feeling that you’re going to wake up bathed in cold sweat, but with a wild gratefulness sweeping over you.

I wasn’t sure I could hear the thud of the slain man’s body hitting the pavement as the bus careened. But I could tell he was no longer on the bus by the abrupt silence which had followed the shouting a moment after they’d made sure that he was dead.

It was a callously brutal way of erasing all evidence of a crime. But it was a relief to know that the victim was beyond caring. If the man had not been dead and a few of the passengers had not been swayed by pity it would have been the kind of atrocity that can keep you awake nights, shaken and tormented by a depth of evil you don’t like to think about.

I could almost hear the Big Brain mocking me, telling me what a fool I was. “Don’t you know what human nature is like? Haven’t you learned yet? When a man has ceased to follow my guidance there is no crime that he will not commit. Only my wisdom protects him, the scientific accuracy of every answer he receives to the questions he asks about himself. Without my wisdom to control him, waking and sleeping, he would become wholly a brute. If there were no tape recordings Society would become a jungle and every man would be forced to resort to violence solely to stay alive.”

I had only one answer to that. It was not the kind of answer the monitor would have liked to hear, but I would have staked my life on its accuracy.

“A mechanical brain cannot think as a man does, or feel compassion for human suffering or understand the tragedy of unfulfilled desire. Thwart a man’s basic impulses, deny him the right to love and be loved, and live his life to the full, and he will cease to stand upright in the sunlight and think of himself as man.

“But even when his spirit has been broken, his self-respect shattered by a frustration beyond his capacity to endure, the flame of pity still remains unextinguished. It may dwindle to a spark and seem to disappear, but it never completely goes out. And that is Man’s glory, and his triumph. Remember this. They did not hurl a cruelly wounded man from the bus to die alone in torment. They made sure that he was dead first. In only a few was compassion more than a spark. But the spark was in all of them, or the few could not have made their will prevail.”

“How sure are you that the few will prevail if your own life is threatened,” the Big Brain might have replied. “Turn and look behind you. Look into the eyes of a man who hates you for no sane reason. There is no spark of pity in him at all.”

That, too, would have been a lie, for I had already started to turn and the Big Brain could not have known that I was completely aware of the man’s malicious thoughts beating in upon me, and knew exactly why he hated me. When hate becomes that intense a telepath isn’t likely to be deceived.

The man standing directly behind me hated me because he had seen Claire and knew that she was my woman, and her great beauty had filled him with envy and savage rage.

CHAPTER 10

I turned slowly. I wasn't sure he was one of the men who had tried their best to clear a space for us when we'd ascended into the bus, because the commotion had shuffled the passengers about a bit at our end of the guardrail.

The instant our eyes met I still wasn't sure. I only knew that I hadn't really taken him in before, because he had the kind of face you can't look at steadily for half a minute and ever completely forget.

His nose was blunt, almost snoutlike, and his entire face had the kind of elongated look that you'll see occasionally in men whose simian ancestry seems open to dispute. *Piggish* was the word for it. But a pig, as a rule, is a docile, good-natured animal and the gimlet eyes that bored into mine were blazing with animosity.

It could have been just an accident of nature, for I'd once known a gifted poet who had very much the same cast of countenance. But I was pretty sure there wasn't anything poetic about Gimlet Eyes. A poet can be filled with just as much animosity as the next man, if frustration rides him too hard. But imagination and sensitivity can usually keep animosity from boiling over. If I was any judge of character . . . sensitivity couldn't do for Gimlet Eyes what it could do for a poet, because I didn't think he had an apothecary's grain of it in him.

I wasn't so sure about imagination, because the first words he spoke seemed to indicate that he had covered all the angles.

"I saw those two Security Policemen too," he said. "They were just coming out of a between-building alley when you climbed on the bus. They couldn't have been more than fifty feet behind you. Maybe nobody else noticed how close they were to you. But I'm good at noticing things."

He continued to regard me steadily, a mocking smile on his lips. There was no need for me to probe deeply in a telepathic way to know what he was going to say next, because luck had dealt him a royal flush, or, at the very least, three aces.

He was about to turn the cards face up, so that everyone on the bus could see what kind of hand he was holding. But first he was going to threaten me, to prolong his moment of triumph a little and gloat over the way he hoped I'd look when he denounced me and started another commotion.

I didn't give him a chance to threaten me. "If you're smart you'll keep what you *think* you saw to yourself," I said. "They'll turn on you if they believe what I'll tell them — that you're a Security Guard. I'll say I saw you in the computer vault a few days ago. They won't stop to ask themselves whether it's true or not."

I paused an instant to let that sink in, then went on quickly: "There's something else I'll tell them. I'll say we were waiting for a bus to pass and when we saw that this one was overcrowded and wasn't going to slow down for us we decided to board it anyway. We didn't want to miss the first race, and were afraid the next bus would be just as crowded. I'm sure they'll believe that — after I've tagged you with a Security Guard label. Think it over."

I didn't believe that there was much likelihood that he would, because the Security Police *had* been as close to us as he'd said, and a dozen or more passengers would leap to his defense the instant he jogged their memories. But it was important to find out how credulous he was, because what I had in mind if he refused to take the Security Guard threat seriously would call for steady nerves and the most difficult kind of bluffing.

He was the opposite of credulous. "What sort of a fool do you take me for?" he sneered. "If this bus wasn't on the way to the races you'd be lying in the street right now, as dead as you'll be five minutes after I tell them what I saw. Men on their way to the races don't use their heads much. They can see something that could get them killed — like two people leaping on a bus with Security Police right on their heels — and just go right on shouting their lungs out and thinking about what they'll see when they get to the track. But it will come back to them quickly enough, when once I've jolted some sense into them and told them why you climbed on board."

He was one hundred percent right, of course. The stabbing had made at least a few of them

remember that the bus had gone careening past two Security Policemen emerging from an alley and that it wouldn't take much to make them remember how close we'd been to the alley when we'd ascended into the bus at the risk of our lives.

There was still a chance that our ascent over the guardrail had passed almost unnoticed amidst the tumult and the shouting, for crowded buses were often boarded in that way. But the instant Gimlet Eyes started denouncing me there was no doubt in my mind as to what the outcome would be.

All I had to do was prevent him from denouncing me.

My small, experimental bluff had failed. But it was the big one I was counting on most and I told myself that it must not be allowed to fail.

I kept my voice low, because I didn't want the passengers who were standing on close to him to hear me.

"Have you a knife?" I asked.

The question must have startled him, because his pupils dilated until Gimlet Eyes no longer seemed a very apt name for him.

"What makes you think I haven't?" he demanded.

"I was just curious," I said. "There's no percentage in carrying a knife if it isn't right in your hand when you're in danger."

I contracted my forefinger and jabbed the knuckle into his stomach just above his belly-button, just firmly enough to make him think it was the blunt edge of a knife blade I was prodding him with.

"You're in danger now," I said. "If you shout or say one word that will carry I'll slash you up and down and straight across. Is that clear?"

Being forced to put it to him that brutally went against the grain, but I had no choice. It was no time for squeamishness.

He was standing so close to me there was no way he could have looked down to see the glint of a blade if it hadn't been just my knuckle I was prodding him with.

I could tell by his sudden pallor and the terror that flamed in his eyes that I didn't have to worry about his not believing me.

"All right," I said. "Now suppose you just ease yourself over toward the guardrail. I'll go with you. If you move as much as a half-inch away from me you'll end up dead. You're going to jump right off the bus when I tell you to make the leap. Do you understand?"

His lips moved but I couldn't catch what he said. It didn't matter, because he was so scared he nodded vigorously and the nod told me all I needed to know.

"Go about it in a calm way," I warned. "You've suddenly decided you don't want to go to the track. You're fed up with the races. You've seen too many of them and you can no longer stand watching me die. But be careful not to look as if you were afraid of dying yourself. I'm not holding a knife pressed against your stomach. I'm just a close friend who is in sympathy with you but who feels that jumping off a speeding bus might be a little risky. He's doing his best to talk you out of it. Have you got that all straight in your mind?"

He nodded again, just as vigorously.

"All right, start moving toward the rail. One wrong move, and you won't live long enough to do any talking."

We moved together toward the rail and I was careful not to let the pressure of my knuckle become less than firm. But that didn't prevent him from trying just once to save himself. He was clearly too frightened to risk getting himself stabbed by shouting or deliberately attempting to break away from me. But just as we reached the guardrail he drew his stomach in quickly, in a desperate effort to outwit me by widening the gap between his flesh and a knife that wasn't there.

If the gap had widened enough he would have probably swung about and grappled with me, counting on the suddenness of the move to swing the odds in his favor. But I thrust my knuckles so swiftly into the pit of his stomach that he grunted in alarm. He couldn't have looked more terrified if he'd felt the knife slicing into his flesh. Maybe he did, for the mind can play strange tricks on a wildly terrified man.

"Don't try that again!" I warned. "The bus will slow down a little before it turns the corner that's right

up ahead. Jump when I tell you — and not before. I'm giving you every chance to stay alive."

I didn't think the other passengers would be too startled when he made the leap. Men on their way to the races behave in strange ways at times, jettisoning reason in a half-demented gamble with Death. Men had leapt off speeding buses before and sometimes for the very reason I'd impressed on Gimlet Eyes when I'd given him his cue. Quite suddenly the races lose their appeal. The death toll appalls them, and their only desire is to widen the gap between themselves and Death. Even the passengers on a bicycle race bus seem like accomplices of Death to them and they are seized with an uncontrollable impulse to escape, by hiding themselves in the anonymity of the ruins again. The instant they've leapt off the bus, they may experience a change of heart. But by then the bus will have passed out of sight.

The beetle was rapidly approaching the corner where I'd told Gimlet Eyes it would slow a little, but I was far from sure that its speed would decrease. I was only sure that he'd be getting off, whether it slowed or not, because I couldn't risk giving him a chance to outwit me a second time.

Just before it reached the corner it swerved a little and that retarded it just enough.

"All right," I said. "Leap. You'll never get a better chance and I'm not giving you one."

He leapt straight out over the guardrail and I saw him land on his feet at the edge of the curb. He went reeling backwards, collided with a rusty spiral of metal that had once been a street lamp and was hurled still farther backward by the graystone wall of the building on the corner.

I had no way of knowing whether he was seriously injured or not, because the last glimpse I had of him was too brief. He was just sagging to his knees when the beetle careened around the corner and I never set eyes on him again.

I didn't feel guilty about it, because it had been his life or ours. If he had denounced me, Claire wouldn't have been spared. I was sure of that. He'd been hoping to get me killed and claim her as his woman, but that only went to show how dumb he was.

I elbowed my way back between the passengers at the rear of the beetle, found Claire and put my arm about her waist and held her firmly.

"We're safe now," I whispered. "Just trust me and don't become frightened. When we get to the track we'll disappear in the crowd."

"A bicycle race," she whispered. "What is a bicycle race like?"

I'd hesitated to tell her before the trouble with Gimlet Eyes had started, and I was still afraid to bring it right out into the open and try to explain it to her without window dressing.

What were the bicycle races like? You had to see one to really understand the depths to which human nature could descend and how terrible an unmasked, totally uninhibited glorification of barbarity could be.

What were the bicycle races like? What was the sadism of the ancient world you read about on punched metaltapes like . . . when the Big Brain was giving research historians the answer to questions they seldom asked? What was the ancient Roman Colosseum like?

Men and women by the thousands thrown to wild beasts. Gladiators, bloody-thewed, battling to the death solely to provide entertainment for an entire society turned decadent and accepting such brutality as a matter of course, without blinking an eyelash.

What was Attila the Hun's mountain of corpses like? And his wild horsemen of the plains? What would they have seemed like if you had been there and witnessed such horrors with your own eyes?

How could I tell her the full truth — or even a part of the truth?

A six-day bicycle race was supposed to be a sport, the sole surviving remnant of the great Age of Sports which had reached its apex two centuries ago. But it was no longer a sport in a strict sense, because it had been transformed into a carnival of death.

It was another safety valve, permitted by the monitors and ignored by the Big Brain in a row of stippled dots when it was asked how Society could best protect itself from men and women who were driven by frustration to glorify death. The men who participated wanted to die, unconsciously at least, and the spectators could watch them die with the feeling that they were venting their hatred of life on sacrificial victims who were powerless to save themselves.

Technological brilliance is not confined to men in the good graces of Society. The most desperate

and despised of outcasts may be a mechanical genius, and the bicycle races were the outgrowth of human inventiveness criminally applied. The changes that had been made in the bicycles alone —

I shuddered and shut my eyes for a moment and when I opened them again the stadium was just coming into view. But I saw Venus Base again before the careening beetle left the area of narrow streets and crumbling buildings through which it had been traveling and emerged on the wide stone highway which led directly to the track.

Several of the passengers had left their seats and crowded into the aisle, and we had been elbowed forward a little and could see directly out of one of the windows.

The tele-visual screen was a hundred feet square and it towered above the buildings on firm metal support. It had been erected by the monitors in compliance with the Big Brain's instructions, three miles from the stadium and a short distance to the right of the open highway. It had been erected to serve as both an enticement and a warning.

It was almost as if the Big Brain itself had materialized directly in the path of the careening bus, and was advising the passengers to leave the ruins and accept a different kind of exile before it was too late.

"My wisdom can protect you," the metatapes seemed to be promising. "This is Venus Base. Men are freer here than they are on Earth. You will not be put to death if you return, and confess your guilt and ask to be sent to Venus Base. If there are too many outcasts — Society will be forced to move against the ruins and every man and woman who has rebelled against my wisdom will pay for their defiance with their lives. It may be later than you think."

But it wasn't the Big Brain we saw on the lighted screen. It was Venus Base in sound and color. I saw again the rugged plains, and the distant mountain ranges, veiled in purple mist. I saw the huge construction projects, and the clattering, earth-tunneling machines. I saw the breed of men I'd stood shoulder to shoulder with for two long years, lusty, brawling, authority-defying men, shouting their independence to the skies. I saw them leaving the construction site, with heavy packs on their backs, setting out across the plain for another construction camp. In a wilderness paradise perhaps, where they would be free to sit around campfires at night and break new ground in the first flush of dawn, free to lay the foundations of a new city with the certain knowledge that generations to come would be grateful to them and regard them as legendary giants.

No matter how great the tyranny may be under which he labors, you cannot take from a man that kind of glory, for no man lives in the present alone. The future is also a part of him, integrated into his bones. Even if he has no heirs who are flesh of his flesh, he adopts tomorrow's children and they become his heirs.

I saw the twenty rocket-launching pads, and the shining metal prefabs, barracks two hundred feet in length where a hundred men could lie on narrow cots and dream of a new tomorrow, when the newness and the bigness and the brightness would be increased ten-fold.

I saw that all, and for an instant my heart leapt with joy. I had been a part of it, and could be a part of it again.

And yet — And yet—there was something wrong with it. There were men on the screen who could shout their independence to the skies. But nowhere were there any women. And how can a man take pride in his independence and proclaim that he is really free when he cannot make love to a woman, and feel her slender sweet body moving beneath him, and experience a rapture that blots out the present and the past, and makes only one moment seem eternal, as long as forever is.

CHAPTER 11

The nearer the bus swept to the lighted screen the more tremendous the tele-visual image sequence became. We saw the valleys between the mountains and snowy-plumed birds winging their way skyward. We saw the miles upon miles of jungle that dwarfed the rain forests of the Amazon, for every tree was as huge as the California redwoods and was interlaced with blue and vermilion vines.

We saw emerald-green lakes and gleaming white beaches and two dozen jungle-encircled construction camps. We saw buildings in every stage of construction and fenced-in areas filled with

rocket-transported supplies. We saw men bathing in the lakes, shouting and laughing and trying their best to convince one another that all was well.

But all was not well.

There were no women anywhere.

For a moment I felt closer to the passengers on the bus, for it was still their privilege to fight to the death over a woman and keep her for an hour or a day — if they were lucky enough to survive the flashing knife of an antagonist as desperate as they were for love, and just as reckless in his pursuit of it.

No women anywhere. No women at all.

Then I remembered Claire and how different it would be for me if I ever returned to Venus Base.

For me the image on the lighted screen did have meaning, did hold out hope. Just how serious had my rebellion been? It had to be serious, or the Security Police would not have entered the ruins in pursuit of me. But could I still confess my guilt and return to Venus Base?

I had struck a Security Police officer in the performance of his duty. And the circumstances under which I had struck him had been unusual, adding to the gravity of the offense. An emotional illusion therapy shop was a dangerous place in which to strike anyone with the authority of the monitors behind him. And what if I had been under suspicion from the first and had been followed to the shop from the computation vault?

I had questioned my original computation and demanded another analysis and a third one after that, and I had just returned from Venus Base, where so much freedom was accorded a man that a marriage-privilege-denied computation should have seemed to him a small thing.

In the eyes of the monitors — this is a completely trivial limitation on his right to live his life to the full in the natural paradise that was being produced on the screen. That alone could have made me suspect.

But what if I returned and made a full confession, what if I accepted the promise the Big Brain seemed to be making to every man and woman in the ruins? What if my life was spared and I was permitted to return to Venus Base with —

With Claire? Would I be able to do that, even if I succeeded in concealing the truth from them? I would be watched twice as closely. I would be under constant surveillance. My very confession would keep them on the alert for any attempt I might make to take even a concealed weapon with me to Venus, let alone an android woman.

No, I'd have no chance at all. The promise was meaningless as far as I was concerned.

It was more than meaningless. To have gambled on it would have been a betrayal of everything I believed in. And suddenly, just as the bus careened past the enormous screen, I remembered what Agnes had said to me between sleeping and waking in the room where I had left her slumped back against the wall.

She had asked me to betray the men and women I had seen in the pass, had pleaded with me to turn traitor. And I had awakened to find her clinging to me, her lips warm against mine. But the instant she'd told me that Claire was in danger she had meant nothing to me and I had struck her in rage.

Was I less sure of what I had to do now, just because I'd seen Venus Base on a screen that was an ugly kind of propaganda attempt to make the ruin outcasts think that there was still a chance for them to exchange one kind of bondage for another? A worse kind of bondage, actually, because there were women in the ruins, and any kind of woman — even one who was a strumpet and a pawn to every man who fought to possess her — was better than no woman at all.

My thoughts returned to Claire again and just feeling the warmth of her slender body pressed close to me, and knowing how beautiful she was, strengthened my determination to remain a rebel, even if I couldn't be sure of outdistancing Death when I got close to the finish line.

The enormous screen was completely transparent, and even when the bus was on the far side of it I could see the images which were still making some of the passengers lean from the windows to get a better view.

And quite suddenly, the Big Brain did appear. The Venus Base scenes vanished and the many-tiered bulk of the Giant Computer filled the screen. I could see all of the winking lights and clicking computation circuits, and the triangular slots at its base into which the punched metaltapes fell.

It filled the screen for an instant and then receded a little and the entire computation vault came into view. There were five tormented men and women in the vault, standing before the slots, but they did not look tormented on the screen. The monitors had made sure that they would look calm and assured, as if they had complete faith in the Big Brain's wisdom and would gladly accept what they read on the tapes, even if it condemned them to a lifetime of frustration and permanent exile on Venus Base.

Two Security Guards hovered in the background, with kindly expressions on their faces, their electro-saps well concealed.

I couldn't help wondering just whom the monitors were hoping to deceive. I was quite sure that every passenger on the bus — every man and woman in the ruins, in fact — had stood more than once in the computation vault and had seen how the Security Guards usually looked. I was equally sure they'd become ruin outcasts solely because they couldn't endure the way the future went blank for them when the metatapes informed them there was no hope at all. Particularly when the guards nudged them with their electro-saps and told them that there were other men and women waiting to die inwardly and the space they were taking up no longer belonged to them.

When propaganda is nine-tenths a lie, the right words spoken with eloquence can sometimes make all of it seem reasonably sound. Someone down in the right hand corner of the screen was doing his best to make the passengers forget how they'd felt when a marriage-privilege-denied computation had come clicking out of the slot to fill them with bitterness and despair. But I couldn't hear what he was saying, because the bus had passed out of range of the screen's sound track. I could see the gestures he was making, and that was all. I wasn't even sure whether he was a monitor or a Security Guard. Possibly he was just a glib talker with no official stand-ing who had been stationed there by the monitors to speak for the Big Brain.

At least fifty buses would pass the screen on the way to the races and some would slow down a little and catch more of the message, and a few would be traveling so fast the passengers would only get a two-minute glimpse of Venus Base in full sound and color. But the monitors must have felt it would average up pretty well in its propaganda impact, for the enormous screen was the only new construction project in the ruins, and setting it up had been a risky un-dertaking. Fifteen construction workers, guarded by Security Police officers, had spent a week in the ruins erecting it. They had been forced to carry it in sections through an abandoned subway station, and along eight miles of track before it could be reassembled three miles from the stadium.

A half-ton of heavy equipment had been carried into the ruins as well, to make sure that the screen would be protected and that anyone touching it would be instantly electrocuted. So far no at-tempt had been made to demolish it.

The bus was less than a half-mile from the stadium now and I could see the crowds surging about the base of the big gray building. There were fifteen or twenty other buses in the parking area to the left of it, and four were just unloading. I could see the five projecting tiers which completely encircled the building and the wide en-trances with their clicking turnstiles on each level.

When I shut my eyes I could almost hear the clicking and it struck a chill to my heart, for it seemed like a clock with a red second hand ticking off the minutes that must pass before Death could take over and become master of ceremonies.

The passengers were all shouldering their way toward the rear of the bus in their eagerness to be the first to descend and it was hard for me to maintain my balance and keep Claire from being forced back against the guardrail. A man could protect himself with vigorous elbow jabs but a woman was in danger of being crushed if there was no one between her and the guardrail. I managed to keep her well away from it by gripping her arm tightly and rotating her slowly about as I interposed my shoulders as a buffer zone.

There was a wild shouting as the bus entered the parking area and began to slow down, crossing diagonally from the gate to a cleared space about eighty feet from the stadium. It came to a jarring halt beside another bus that was no longer crowded with passengers. The driver was still at the wheel, however, and an outsized, corded-necked man was just getting off, carrying a struggling wo-man.

She was screaming and kicking, but the instant he descended he slapped her face to quiet her and

kissed her with such savage violence that she went limp in his arms. She made no further protest when he twined his fingers in her hair, tightened his hold on her and started walking toward the stadium without a backward glance.

A moment later I was also descending with a woman in my arms. Lifting Claire up and carrying her off the bus seemed the only way of making absolutely sure she wouldn't be injured in the crush. The passengers were in such haste to get to the stadium they no longer cared how violently they had to shoulder their way to the rear guardrail and leap to the ground.

A half-mile beyond the stadium, with its double spiral of tracks that extended for several hundred feet to the right and left of the massive structure, the ruins became an area of narrow streets and crumbling buildings again.

When I'd told Claire we'd try to lose ourselves in the crowd I had been visualizing that area as the one we'd head for, if we could get to it on foot without making ourselves too conspicuous. But the instant I set Claire down we were caught up in a surging crowd of passengers from two other buses which had careened to a halt on opposite sides of the vehicle we'd just descended from.

It's easy enough to lose yourself in a crowd of two hundred shoving men and women. But it's the opposite of easy to keep from being swept along with it when it's moving in just one direction. We were right in the center of a crowd that had only one thought in mind, to get to the stadium as quickly as possible.

We were swept along and had no chance at all to move in the opposite direction or even fight our way to where the milling, closely packed throng thinned out a little. If I'd been alone I could have shouldered my way out, but with Claire to protect it was out of the question.

I made one brief attempt and gave it up as hopeless. We had to move with the crowd and trust to luck that before we got to the stadium we'd get a chance to clear a path for ourselves when the pressure behind us eased a little. A third of the shouting men and women would probably break ranks ahead of the others when we drew close to the turnstiles. Or so I told myself.

I was being too optimistic. More buses had drawn up in the parking area, some from the ruins on the far side of the stadium, and the crowd increased in density as we approached the turnstiles.

We were hemmed in with a vengeance. But that didn't mean we'd be forced to pass through a turnstile into the stadium. All of the spectators ahead of us would have to await their turn in single file, and before a turnstile could start clicking the rotating mechanism had to be firmly grasped and set in motion.

We could have rebelled and come to an abrupt halt before one of the turnstiles, forcing all of the spectators behind us to control their impatience. We could have insisted on our right to walk toward the stairway at the rear of the stadium, and ascend to the tier above, where there was another long row of clicking turnstiles with fewer spectators using them.

It would have caused a commotion and aroused a great deal of bitter resentment. But we could have gotten away with it. We could have ascended to the tier above and passed quickly along it until we came to another stairway and descended to ground level again. Then we could have mingled with a smaller crowd and left it unobtrusively and headed for the crumbling buildings a half-mile away with a very good chance of not being stopped by anyone.

We could have gotten away with it if I hadn't happened to glance upward and seen the four Security Police officers standing on the circular tier directly overhead, staring down at the crowd that was hemming us in. I'm not phrasing that in just the right way. The instant I saw the Security Police officers I knew we'd have had no chance at all of getting away with it.

For an instant I couldn't seem to breathe and my temples swelled to bursting. Then I remembered how close-packed the crowd was, and how hard it would be for them to get a good look at us from above when we were just two of several hundred people.

Even if we had to pass through the turnstile one at a time and become conspicuous for an instant there was a strong likelihood that they wouldn't recognize us. If we passed into the stadium quickly enough just the glimpse they'd get of us from that high above wouldn't be as much help to them. They'd just see the tops of our heads, for they'd be directly over us. Perhaps Claire's great beauty would give them the edge, because there's something about that kind of beauty that's hard to mistake, no matter

how brief a glimpse you may get of it. But we had to chance it.

I put my arm around Claire's shoulder to steady and reassure her, without making any further attempt to resist the pressure that was keeping us moving forward so swiftly that the men and women in front of us were already advancing in single lines a few yards from the turnstiles.

"We're going into the stadium," I said. "Don't look up. We must pass through the turnstiles as quickly as possible. Do you understand?"

"We will go into the stadium," she said.

"Yes," I whispered. "Through the turnstile right up ahead. I'll go first and the moment you come through I'll be facing you. Give me your hand instantly. We mustn't get separated, so don't let anyone come between us, and prevent you from following me. Watch what I do when I pass through. You press down on the long metal bar and the turnstile will begin to turn. It will keep turning until you're inside."

I stared into her eyes and was sure that she understood. There was no bewilderment in them or the slightest hint of incomprehension. But just to make doubly sure I added, "Turnstile — *gate*. We're going into the stadium through that gate right up ahead."

"Gate," she said. "We are going into the stadium to watch a bicycle race."

"We will have to watch them," I said, "to keep the danger from harming us. Are you sure you understand? Danger. You asked me what danger was and I told you."

"Yes," she said. "You told me."

I was afraid to let her pass through the turnstile ahead of me, because I didn't know how tumultuous the crowd might be inside. There was a greater risk of our becoming separated if she went first and was caught up in a swirl of people and swept along toward the track.

We didn't have to do much standing in line. For about ten seconds my heart stood still and I could feel the eyes of the Security Police trained upon me from high above. Then the turnstile started clicking and I was through, waiting to grab hold of her with a wild shouting at my back.

I died a little death just in the four seconds it took her to come through. She hadn't forgotten what I'd told her and I didn't have to grab hold of her. Her hand darted into mine, and we turned together to face a blaze of light and a clamor that was deafening.

CHAPTER 12

We stood at the base of the stadium's ascending tiers, staring down at the shining tracks and the swiftly pedaling cyclists. The tiers extended above us for two or three hundred feet and were almost filled to capacity. There were at least twenty thousand spectators in the two lower tiers and the upper ones were only a little less crowded.

I'd often wondered if the Big Brain, in the silent watches of the night, was not haunted by the horrors which its metatapes re-corded. If a thinking machine can assemble and correlate the data in its memory banks, how can we be sure that it cannot experience emotion and be tormented by dreams it would prefer not to re-member on awakening? And if the Big Brain had, in the midst of such a nightmare, coined a name for the races, might it not have been the one that came into my mind unbidden as I stared out across the track? . . . *The Contest of the Deadly Cyclists*.

It was just barely conceivable. But I did not really think that the Big Brain could be nightmare-haunted. I was only sure that some of the monitors were, and knew on what dangerous ground they were treading when they buttressed their tyranny with that kind of safety valve.

The contestants rode furiously around oval tracks on vehicles very similar to the bicycles that boys and young men must have ridden through the ruins' narrow streets when trains roared through the underground tunnels and the subway entrances had provided a more rapid means of transportation to every part of a city that had not yet become a wasteland of crumbling stone.

I had seen three such vehicles in a museum of historical antiquities and the grotesquely shaped beetles which dated from about the same period and were even more popular as a means of transportation. Only the beetles looked odd, for the cycles still in use are much the same — two-wheeled, slender, pedal-propelled and gaudy with bright, contrasting colors and flying pennants.

The riders were armed with long, spike-like weapons and metal balls on chains. If one of the spiked lances became enmeshed in the wheels of a racing cycle coming abreast of a competing rider, the man on the abruptly stalled vehicle would be sent hurtling through the air to land on the edge of the track, quite often with a fractured spine or fatal internal injuries.

To the spectators it was the penalty for defeat in a display of daring that merited thunderous applause and carried no stigma, since in every race some of the contestants had to lose and the vanquished, if they were lucky enough to survive, could become the victors in another contest.

The flying metal balls were even more deadly, for they were heavy enough when hurled with violence to crack another rider's skull and even decapitate him. But it was to the contestants' credit that they seldom used the metal balls with the intention of killing a competing rider outright before he could use his lance, but solely as a last-resort defensive measure.

There were accidents, however — failures in precision timing which could be ghastly.

What made the races so ancient-world barbaric was the spectator participation privilege. Soon after the race started half of the original riders were either so seriously injured that they were incapable of remaining in the race or were lying mortally injured at the edge of the track. At that point it was customary for a dozen or more spectators to descend from the tiers and leap upon the abandoned cycles.

The contest continued without further interruption until several more cycles were abandoned. The race went on for days. Each race was numbered and there were half-hour pauses between every third race to enable the victors to return to the tiers and be embraced and accepted as mates by women who had come to the ruins expecting to be fought over. That a bicycle race victory was more to an outcast woman's liking than a knife-wielding victory by a man who could not hope to win such acclaim was hardly to be wondered at, for it flattered their vanity and gave them a wider choice of mates.

The race that was just starting had already caused two bicycles to go spinning from the track and a third to overturn. One rider was lying sprawled out at the edge of the track, his limbs grotesquely bent and another was stumbling toward the tiers with a look of agony on his face. His right arm dangled and just before he reached the tiers he swayed and had to be helped up the steps a little to the right of where we were standing.

No one need envy a telepath. I was not only almost tormentingly aware of how the cyclists felt, but the emotions which the spectators were experiencing beat in upon me in tumultuous waves. Deep in my mind a thousand voices seemed to be clamoring to make themselves heard.

I could usually close my mind to thoughts I do not wish to share, by making a deliberate effort of will. In fact, telepathic communication was largely like a two-way street. The traffic moving in opposite directions seldom collides if the street is wide enough, and if you're driving in a beetle you have no opportunity to communicate with the passengers in the swiftly passing cars.

You have to be moving in the same direction as the mind you wish to tap and unless the wish is present the thoughts of others seldom sweep through your mind like a tidal wave.

But it happens sometimes, when you're in the midst of a very large crowd swayed by emotions that are tumultuous and completely uninhibited.

I could barely endure the thoughts of cruel anticipation and the murderous rage that goes with frustration and a craving for the release from tension which the witnessing of a barbarous spectacle seems to bring about in some people.

Not in me. But the tidal wave was so all-engulfing that for a moment the way I normally thought and felt went spiraling away from me, into dark depths that were shark-infested. A wave of revulsion surged up in me as I fought against that tide of malignancy and hate. But I knew also how the most brutal of prison guards felt when they were free to inflict irreparable injuries on the helpless men and women in their charge.

High up in the tiers a woman was thinking, "If he is killed, watching him die will give me pleasure. But if he kills the opposing rider that pleasure will not be denied me, for the defeated man will be the one I will watch die. Then he will return to the tiers in triumph, with grievous wounds that he will make light of, and take me into his arms. I will not resist him, for his triumph will be mine. Death and love. What more

could a woman desire?"

And in another part of the stadium a man was thinking, "In a moment I will descend to the tracks. It will be *kill or be killed* and I do not care too much which way the scythe swings when Death decides that a big sleep is the best cure for one of us. Do I really want to go on living? A woman? That's a cure too, and I came to the ruins looking for one. But maybe Death is better. In half the books you find in the ruins, in libraries choked with dust and rubble, Death is a woman. Why shouldn't Death be a woman? To die is like going back into a big, dark womb, isn't it? That's what Death is, all right — a woman. I've known it all my life."

And still another man was thinking, "I'll swing the metal ball straight at his head before he has a chance to mesh the wheels of my cycle. I'll brain him. Sure, there'll be a protest. If I do that and return to the tiers they may kill me. Well — let them try. I'll go down fighting, laughing at them. I'll laugh until my lungs burst. Bad sportsmanship is what they call splintering a rider's skull before he has a chance to do it to you. What a joke that is, when you think about it. They don't know the meaning of sportsmanship. I've seen it once or twice on a metaltape when the Big Brain is punching out big words as a cover-up for what it has done to us. Goes back to the big Age of Sports. Baseball, football, boxing. But in those games you didn't get killed so often. You could afford to give good sportsmanship a twirl."

Then, quite suddenly the cruel, oppressive thoughts were gone, and other thoughts impinged on my mind. A far-off voice seemed to be whispering to me, urging me to leave the shark-infested depths and swim with vigorous strokes sunward. Sunward through the brightening water until the last lingering trace of darkness vanished.

"We are very close, you and I, because I am your biogenetic norm woman," Claire seemed to be whispering. "I know you even better than you know yourself. You would never welcome Death and turn away from the sun. You love life too much.

"Beauty you love and the great sea when it breaks and the wonder of a woman in your arms, her eyes misting with ecstasy as you caress her. You would never surrender your birthright."

I turned and stared at Claire in stunned disbelief, and for a moment I found it impossible to accept that kind of miracle. How could I accept it when her eyes were still those of a bewildered and frightened child and she was clinging to my arm as if I were her only support in a world that was the opposite of childlike.

But surely no one else in the tiers could have sent such thoughts winging toward me. They were not the thoughts of an outcast woman who had suddenly decided I was just the right man for her. How could such a woman have known what I looked like, even — one distant man in a multitude? Even if she had been sitting in the lower tier and could see me clearly, would she have spoken of herself as my biogenetic norm woman?

There was one way of making sure. I could turn stern and hold Claire at arm's length and ask her why she had lied to me from the first and pretended to be a child-woman. And if she refused to say a word or went right on lying I could read the truth in her eyes.

Or could I? How could I be sure that she wasn't more skilled in the art of deception than any woman I had ever known?

Still — I had to know and it was the most promising way of getting at the truth that I could think of. But before I could look at her accusingly and try to make her realize what a tragic barrier deception could erect between a man and a woman, a wild burst of shouting swept over the tiers.

Two more riders had been hurled from their cycles and the lance of one was still spinning through the air. But it was not that double defeat which had caused the spectators to leap to their feet in wild excitement. It was the collision of a third rider with one of the stadium's high stone walls. His cycle had gone completely out of control and the impact of the collision had hurled him back against the wall with such violence that a dark stain was spreading across the stone as he slumped to the track.

Scattered across the track were three discarded lances and two metal balls, one of them still attached by its chain to the outflung wrist of a badly injured rider. He was writhing in pain and trying to get up, and another rider had stopped pedaling for an instant to avoid crashing into him.

There was a tele-visual screen projecting outward over the upper tiers and so strategically placed

that all of the spectators could see it. It was not a Big Brain propaganda screen, but had been erected by the strong-willed men whose combined genius had rebuilt a crumbling stadium and kept the races an unchanging freedom ruin sport for two full generations.

There were always men who must exercise authority and keep the rules from being broken, even in a freedom ruin. It does not matter if the rules are barbaric, the activity over which they exercise control the most brutal of sports. They must seize power and hold it — or perish.

It was as if the Big Brain had whispered to them: “You are outcasts and exiles. But you can still make men obey you if you can maintain absolute control over a freedom ruin sport that has become as indispensable as the most pernicious of habit-forming drugs to every man and woman in the ruins.

“The races are a safety valve which must be preserved. And because of men like you, a marriage privilege and the right to make love would be meaningless if you could not also exercise power and make yourself feared; you have no choice. You must help me to preserve this safety valve. You are not just a ruffian sulking in a dark alleyway, but a stadium builder. You walk about with guards at your side and are protected from violence night and day. And some outcast women are very beautiful. There are rewards which only a stadium builder can claim. You have no choice, because you are what you are.”

There were many such men in the ruins. They had kept the tracks in repair, the bicycle race beetles running. But I did not admire them.

CHAPTER 13

The screen had been blank when we'd entered the stadium. But now, quite suddenly, it lighted up, and the head and shoulders of a black-uniformed man appeared in the midst of the radiance, his thin, sharp-featured face creased by a frown.

He waited for the shouting to subside a little, then raised his hand to enforce a silence which would enable him to make himself heard.

His voice was harsh and deep-throated and the magnification of sound provided by the sound track caused it to reverberate throughout the stadium like a steadily beaten drum.

“These are the rules,” he announced. “They must be obeyed by all of you, riders and spectators alike. Every spectator is privileged to participate, but remember — there are only fifty cycles. If you are a spectator you must await your turn. You must also be one of the few lucky ones.

“You must wait until twelve cycles have been overturned before you descend from the tiers and claim your spectator privilege. If a dispute arises in the tiers and more than twelve of you attempt to descend to the tracks you must settle it among yourselves. But remember this. Only twelve spectators will be permitted to descend to the tracks at any one time.

“At the base of every stairway the supervisors have stationed men armed with handguns who will blast you down without compunction if you disobey the rules. Only twelve spectators will be permitted to cross the tracks when a race is in progress, even if more than twelve riders have been unseated.”

He had failed to mention that that particular rule was not always rigidly enforced, because a cycle lying riderless at the edge of the track grated on spectators and made them resent the fact that fewer riders would die. Sometimes as many as twenty spectators were allowed to cross the tracks and leap upon the abandoned cycles. But no rule in any sport is ever rigidly enforced when it goes against emotions that basic. I had put my arm around Claire's waist and knew that she was trembling.

I seemed to hear again the clicking metaltapes as the Big Brain answered the most puzzling of all questions — why a rule becomes strengthened when expediency makes it just a little elastic. “A rule must never be permitted to impose a tyranny that is absolute. Rules are made to be broken — up to a point. It must be made to seem that generosity is being exercised, a broad and understanding tolerance, a winking and a secret elbow-nudging as the rule is stretched a little.

“Men and women must be made to feel that the monitors are very human and would not be above stretching a rule or two themselves if they thought they could keep it a secret. The monitors — or the men who enforce rules in a freedom ruin. Completely human and generous-minded, with a deep understanding of human needs and aspirations.

“Even the need to be brutally inhuman when watching a brutal spectacle in a freedom ruin when decadence has taken over must seem to be sympathized with and understood by the upholders of the rules.

“There’s a little sadism in all of us, chum. Don’t think we’re any different from you in that respect. So go ahead and stretch the rules a little. We’ll look the other way and don’t think we won’t be secretly envying you. We’re all in this together. It’s your sport and our sport and the only reason we have rules is to keep a sport like this from disintegrating. You want to keep it brutal, don’t you? Well . . . so do we. But we know more about such things than you do. If you don’t have rules the brutality will become chaotic and the entire sport will fall apart.”

As I said once before, the Big Brain wouldn’t have phrased it in precisely that way, because the Big Brain’s wisdom is always Society-orientated. The Big Brain would never have quoted ruin outcasts, even if they happened also to be stadium builders. Unless, of course, the Big Brain itself had a hidden rebellious streak and could fall asleep and have nightmares. I’ve mentioned that before too, as a possibility it would have been hard for me to take seriously.

The man on the screen had paused an instant, as if he’d said enough about the danger the spectators would be running if they stretched the rules too far, and was about to give them some less threatening instructions.

When he spoke again his voice had lost its harshness. “Re-member — the races will continue for six days. Five or six thousand of you will have an opportunity to participate. Not all of you came here to participate and there is no stigma attached to remaining a spectator.”

A half-smile appeared for an instant on his lips, as if he wanted the spectators to think him a man who could unbend in an appealingly human way, and did not hold humor in contempt.

“I am quite sure,” he went on, “that many of you have found women greatly to your liking. You would have nothing to gain by exchanging a woman you’ve risked your life to possess and who is properly grateful to you, for a woman you know nothing about. If you will permit me to be blunt — most men who participate in the races do so with only one thought in mind. They will return to the tiers with the certain knowledge that their strength and daring will have given them a victor’s privilege and they will enter a contest that will end in another victory . . . that of the bridal couch. Or am I mistaken about that? Every man must answer for himself, for what man can be sure of victory when he is alone with a woman in the dark? Perhaps that is that most dangerous and uncertain of all contests. I have won many such victories in my life, but if I were to tell you of the defeats —”

The man on the screen seemed carried away for an instant by an impulse to turn the screen into a confessional and bare all of his wounds to the public gaze, by disclosing every closely guarded secret that had tormented him across the years. He quite obviously had what the ancient Freudians would have called a Casanova complex. For when a man is willing to confess that he had often met with defeat in his lovemaking, he is hoping to convince everyone that his victories have been so numerous that he can afford to be completely honest in that respect.

For an instant I felt a twinge of pity for him, for there is a little of that egotistical absurdity in all of us.

He saved himself by what was clearly an effort of will that he found difficult to maintain, for he had to lower his eyes for an instant to pretend to himself that there were no spectators watching him and a confession would have been wasted on long rows of empty stone seats. A shudder passed over him and the half-smile vanished from his lips.

When he spoke again he was once more in command of himself and talked as a rule-upholder should, in a precise, matter-of-fact tone.

“When you enter the contest you’ll have enough freedom of movement if you just strip off your outer garments. Some riders may prefer to strip to the skin and the rules permit it. But it is the opposite of wise. An inner garment protects you when a glancing blow might otherwise lacerate the skin over a wide area. It’s just as well to take every reasonable precaution.”

I wondered why he cared until I remembered what I’d said on the bus in reply to the Big Brain when I’d seemed to hear the humming computers mocking me. Something had prevented the passengers from hurling a fatally wounded man from the bus to die alone and in torment on the pavement. They had

insisted on making sure that he was dead first.

The man on the screen was not wholly without pity. It had dwindled to a single glowing ember, perhaps, but it was still there.

“Don’t keep too close to the edge of the track,” he went on in the same matter-of-fact voice. “If two riders come abreast of you at the same time, raise your voice in protest, and wave toward the tiers. They will be forced to abandon their cycles and will be subject to the death penalty.

“Remember that your prime objective is to mesh the wheels of your opponent’s cycle with your lance. He has the right to try to unseat you by striking you on the body — but not on the head — with the flat of his lance, below the spiked tip. He must not deliberately aim the lance at your head, throat, chest or any part that could fatally injure you. And when your own wheels are meshed you must observe the same rules of combat.

“But if you should be unseated, if your cycle is overturning, you may deal blows of a more dangerous nature. This is your right as a last-resort defensive measure. You may even hurl the metal ball. But even in so desperate an extremity you must not aim at the head or try to kill him. The justification for such a rule of combat may seem strange to you. But it is not without a basis in logic.

“The risk of receiving a mortal injury at your opponent’s hands must be present. That risk alone makes the contest what it is. Without the constant risk, the certain knowledge that you may be killed at any time by a blow aimed too high or too low — not deliberately, but with miscalculation — there would be no glory in victory. A contest such as this must test a man’s courage and steadiness of nerve to the utmost or it becomes a hollow mockery.”

“But what if they’re not killed, just seriously injured,” a voice said, so close to me that I thought for a moment it was Claire who had spoken. Then I realized that no woman could have had a voice so deep and resonant, even if she had been a virago. It was a man’s voice, with nothing womanly about it.

Before I could turn and look at the speaker he went on quickly: “What fools they are. What incredibly blind fools. A crippling injury is a high price to pay for a moment of punch-drunk recklessness. If you have to drag yourself back to the tiers with a fractured spine you’ll no longer be thinking what a privilege it is to have your pick of a dozen or more women. There are injuries that can make a man wish that he *had* been killed. He said nothing about what happens when a cycle’s wheels are meshed and the rider is hurled to the track, or back against the walls of the stadium.”

I turned then and looked at him. He was big, with the boyish look about him that often goes with a bear-like massiveness in a man even when he’s over forty. He had deep-set blue eyes and tousled light hair that straggled down over the right side of his face as if he’d been facing a windstorm and hadn’t had time to brush it back with his hand.

He brushed it back abruptly, and I saw that he had a very high brow.

“You’re new to the ruins, aren’t you?” he asked. “Is this the first race you’ve let them sell you on?”

I stared at him, hoping he wouldn’t suspect how much the question had startled and alarmed me. What had made him so sure I was new to the ruins?

“What makes you think I haven’t been here a month — or two or three years, for that matter?” I demanded.

He grinned then, just as abruptly as he’d brushed back his hair and I saw that he was looking at Claire.

“All that time — with a woman like that? And no one killed you and made off with her?”

“How do you know I didn’t take her away from another man an hour ago?” I countered, my temper rising. “Two can play at that game. You can fight for and claim a woman again four times a week. And you don’t always end up dead.”

I hated myself for being forced to answer him in that way, because I didn’t want to think of Claire as a woman I’d just fought for and could lose again, even if it wasn’t true. I had fought for her against the man who had tried to take her from me, even if it hadn’t been with a knife. But it went against the grain just to lie about any part of it, because I couldn’t endure picturing myself taking Claire away from a man who had been her lover before me. Fitting her into that kind of mind picture was hateful to me. In a way, it was an insult to Claire.

But I was just angry enough to want to hurl the statement he'd made back into his teeth, to prove to him how wrong he could be, and how stupid it was to jump to a conclusion about me with so little to base it on. And it was important to find out, too, if he was lying and really did have something more solid to base the conclusion on.

There was no way I could find out, for he dropped the argument I'd started as if it had suddenly ceased to interest him, and apologized in the friendliest imaginable way.

"You're right," he said. "I like to think I'm pretty good at character analysis. Most people have some one thing that's a little special or different about them, and you can usually tell a great deal about them just by observing them closely. But not always. It's a kind of game with me. But it's quite unlike the game that is being played down there."

"There are no other games like that one," I said. "In the ruins or on Venus Base — or anywhere."

He looked at me steadily for a moment. "Have you been to Venus Base?" he asked.

I saw no particular reason for keeping it a secret. If he was good at character analysis he probably knew anyway, for you can't disguise the way Venus Base construction workers pronounce certain words. There's a slight accent change, and the words have a distinctly different ring to them, as if the wind and sun and the rain had made the speaker want to sing or waltz about and shout at the top of his lungs. It's a change you adopt unconsciously when you've been on Venus Base for as long as two years.

"I wish I were there now," I said. "If you've never been to Venus Base you don't know the meaning of freedom. There is no real freedom in the ruins. A man is not free when Death is pacing him at twenty feet or breathing down his neck, and he must kill to stay alive."

I'd picked a strange time to speak my mind that openly to a total stranger, when men were dying right before our eyes, and the tier arched above us was a swaying sea of spectators with sharks weaving in and out in the shallows. But somehow he no longer seemed a total stranger. I had suddenly found myself liking him.

It was a strange time to bare my inmost thoughts to anyone. But if I'd picked a different time I wouldn't have been thinking of Death with quite such an intensity of loathing and staring straight down at the tracks, and I would have failed to see them before it was too late. Not just two or three Security Police officers, but thirty!

They were advancing along the high stone wall at the base of the stadium a few yards from where the tracks ended, and two of them were already climbing the stairs which ascended to the lower tier.

The pair on the stairs saw me before I could turn and move further back into the crowd. I was sure of it from the way they stiffened and their hands darted to the gleaming metal holsters at their hips.

My first thought was of Claire and whether she'd realize how fast we'd have to move to lose ourselves in the crowd before they got to us. Just the fact that they'd recognized me so quickly convinced me we'd have to move very fast, because they would feel outrageously cheated if they were unable to clinch that advantage like hunting dogs within sight of a quarry they'd spent hours in tracking down.

I'd forgotten all about the big man at my side I'd suddenly found myself liking. But he hadn't forgotten me.

His hand shot out and fastened on my wrist. "We'd better drop the play acting," he said. "I know who you are and why the Security Police are after you. I'm telling you that because you're going to have to trust me."

He must have known what two such jolts in the space of half a minute could do to a man who had to think fast and clearly, because he went right on talking with a blockbuster kind of urgency. "They'll blast you apart if you don't get moving. Head for the stairs on your left, and descend to the track. There are ten discarded cycles down there now, and that's close enough to the number you're supposed to see lying overturned before you start down."

His fingers bit into my wrist. "If you just cross the tracks and leap on a cycle as if you had every right to enter the race they'll be afraid of angering the spectators by blasting you down. If you wait for the rush to start you won't have a chance. But if you head the rush your boldness in taking such a risk will encourage the others to follow your lead. I'm absolutely sure they'd never open fire on that many participants, when there are ten cycles lying overturned. But you'll have to be the first to put it to the

test.”

He was blueprinting it for me, all right — even if he didn’t fully realize just what a setback the Security Police would get if I mounted a discarded cycle and stayed on it until the end of the third race. I was sure for a moment my thoughts had gone racing on ahead of him by that much at least. But it was just a mistaken idea I had.

“If you can unseat ten or twelve riders and stay in the race you’ll be lifted up when you get back to the tiers and carried on the shoulders of the spectators all the way to the top of the stadium. It happens about fifteen times in every race, and if the Security Police tried to break in on that kind of celebration and take you out of the stadium under guard they’d be massacred to a man. They’re risking their lives just by coming here.”

If I’d been alone on the tier what he was urging me to do would have made sense. But with Claire to consider there was a fatal flaw in it. The Security Police wanted both of us, and entering the race without knowing whether she’d manage to disappear in the crowd would have been just another way of dying.

He had a solution for that too. “She’ll be safe enough, I promise you. I told you I know who you are. It shouldn’t take a telepath to find out just how much trust he can place in a promise.”

I turned and looked steadily into his eyes. There was a moment of torturing uncertainty when I felt I couldn’t be sure, and then — I *was* sure. Completely, with every doubt swept away.

The promise he’d given me he’d keep — unless the odds against him became overwhelming and he could save neither Claire nor himself. For some reason I could not fathom he felt honor-bound to help me, even at the risk of his life. But I still might have hesitated if he hadn’t said, “You spent last night in the ruins, on the second floor of a four-story building. There was another woman with you. Her name is Agnes. She has a tiny transmitting instrument concealed in her clothing. The message wasn’t intended for us, but we intercepted it. Can you find your way back to that building?”

There were a dozen Security Police officers on the stairs now and the first two had reached the tier and were elbowing their way toward us, slowed down a little by the shouting spectators at the top of the stairs.

“I can find it,” I said, knowing I’d just have to keep in mind how closely it had resembled a funeral vault when I’d left it.

“All right, that’s where you’ll find us,” he said. “Now get going!”

I drew Claire close and whispered, “We’ll be together again soon. I want you to trust this man and do exactly as he says. Do you understand? *You must trust him.*”

“I will . . . trust this man,” she said.

I turned then and headed for the stairs on my left, not daring to look back, fearing that just the thought of parting with her would become unendurable and I’d jeopardize the only chance we had of staying alive and going to Venus Base together.

He’d guessed right about everything. I had to resort to some close to brutal elbowing to get to the stairs on my left and five enraged spectators awaiting their turn in line made a grab for me. But I fought my way past them and was halfway down the stairs before the Security Officers on the other stairway saw me.

I had a bad moment as one of them leveled his handgun and then seemed to change his mind about blasting. He would have been asking for trouble if he’d opened fire on me across sixty feet of intervening space, and blasted down three or four spectators. Just getting me would have put him in about as much jeopardy, because of the way it would have looked from the tiers.

A moment later I was at the foot of the stairway and the armed upholder of the rules standing there could have shot me down without running the slightest risk of killing a spectator. I was within ten feet of him. But there was a shouting right behind me. His eyes were on the stairs and he must have realized that the rush had started. He was so torn by indecision that he couldn’t move at all.

Then I was past him and heading straight out across the tracks toward the nearest discarded cycle, stripping off my outer garments as I ran.

CHAPTER 14

The cycle was lying at the edge of the track fifteen or twenty yards from the high stone wall of the stadium. The Security Police officers might still have been thinking of throwing caution to the winds and blasting me down before I could start pedaling. But it was a possibility I refused to let unnerve me.

I covered the distance fast, running in a steady natural way without straining to increase my speed.

I reached the cycle before I came to the only discarded metal ball that was not chained to a dismounted rider's wrist. I grasped the cycle by its handlebars and raised it from the track, and the instant it was vertical I ran on with it, letting the wheels spin without attempting to mount. When I came to the metal ball I swooped, attached the dangling chain to my wrist and headed for the nearest discarded lance.

I was fully armed when I mounted and rested my feet on the pedals, casting a swift glance behind me. A spectator who had been the first to follow me out across the tracks was not in undisputed possession of another cycle which had been lying a little beyond the one I had headed for. But it had taken him longer to arm himself and mount, and the cycle he was on was now the nearest one to the tiers and about forty feet behind me.

The spectator-turned-contestant was lean and muscular, with unusually long legs and a rugged, craggy-featured face. He appeared to be about thirty years of age.

I did not like the way his muscles rippled and the firm set of his jaw. There was no particular reason for the sudden mistrust I experienced when my eyes swept over him — only a vague premonition that I was looking at a formidable adversary who would come after me fast and give — and expect — no quarter.

I did not wait for him to start pedaling. I swung out into the middle of the track and entered the race as a fully armed and forewarned contestant, keeping firmly in mind the rules which the man on the screen had stressed.

The cycle was easy to manage — a remarkable vehicle which seemed almost to propel itself. The slightest touch on the steering apparatus was sufficient to keep it on a circular course around the track, which was several hundred feet in circumference.

The chain on my left wrist in no way interfered with my riding and permitted me to move my steering arm freely. It was an extremely light chain, but undoubtedly it possessed sufficient tensile strength to make the metal ball the deadliest kind of weapon. The ball itself, which was far heavier, rested by my side on the seat. In my other hand I held the spiked lance, half-poised and in instant readiness.

I tried not to worry too much, to put out of my mind the thought of a pursuit and engagement which was certain to be quickly forthcoming. I resisted an impulse to look back and concentrated on the pedaling, casting only the briefest of glances at the riders immediately ahead of me.

I knew that with luck I might outdistance Long Legs until he himself was overtaken by another rider and his vehicle overturned before he could come abreast of me. I had seen that happen. In fact, one of the contestants had been in the race from the beginning and had been a steady, continuous victor whom no one could unseat.

That solitary, victorious rider had been overtaken eight or ten times, but each time he had put on a superb performance, meshing the wheels of the pursuing vehicles with an agile twisting of his lance. Twice he had hurled the metal ball just as his own cycle was overturning and managed to bring the vehicle swiftly back into equilibrium again.

Speed — speed was really the secret. It was also the most difficult problem the riders had to content with. The cycles speeded up and slowed down constantly and it was hard to control the speed with accuracy, because each of the cycles responded instantly to the slightest acceleration in the pedaling.

There was always the danger that your speed would become too great, and you'd lose control of the cycle, leave the track and go crashing into the stadium wall. You had to slow down abruptly at times in self-protection, and that gave the rider directly behind you a better chance of overtaking you. All he had to do was stay alert and increase his own speed just as you slowed.

No matter how skillfully he pedaled every rider was certain to be overtaken sooner or later — once, twice or a half-dozen times.

I had forgotten for a moment that the main purpose of such a contest was to test a man's courage to the utmost and that he was supposed to think only in terms of striking skill and aggressive action.

My most important adversary, the one I must try to unseat as quickly as possible, wasn't the one who was coming after me with a similar deadly purpose in mind. If I was overtaken Long Legs would, of course, become my most immediate and important ad-versary. But until that happened it was the cyclist directly in front of me I should be concentrating on.

The contest was not primarily a flight from danger with each cyclist thinking of himself as a possible victim, with the need to keep his wits about him in a desperate struggle just to stay alive. That psychology could be fatal. It was a "fox-pursued-by-hounds" psychology and could sap a man's stamina and capacity to survive before he got started.

It took skill to outwit a pursuer and a fair measure of courage as well, but that courage and skill must not be contaminated by fear. And the best way to keep fear at bay was to go on the offensive and work up a steady, controlled rage against the cyclist immediately in front of you.

Maybe that rage should not even be controlled. Maybe it should take complete possession of you, become savagely destructive and as primitive as the jungle night.

But could you work up that kind of rage against someone whom you had no reason to hate? I didn't know, because I had never tried it.

Could I make myself believe that the cyclist directly in front of me had done me a great and irreparable wrong — a wrong that would not be avenged unless I killed him? Not just unseat him and send his cycle spinning but deal him a mortal injury.

Wasn't it just barely possible that a rage so great would give me a feeling of strength and supremacy that would enable me to laugh scornfully and deal him a lesser blow — a blow that would bring him down but not prove fatal?

Would that work? Could that kind of rage ever be less than wholly destructive? When reason was completely absent could a man so enraged ever be capable of sparing his victim?

Well . . . and why not? Grit your teeth and begin to hate. You dislike the cyclist ahead just on principle. You don't like the set of his shoulders, the color of his hair. Give reason a slight rein at first. Justify your dislike to yourself.

Then forget about reason. Don't you see? Your hate is getting stronger. You don't need reason any more. Forget about it entirely. You've got it cooked. Your rage is becoming a splendid, barbaric thing. You don't need to have any reason for hate. What ever made you think you needed a reason, what ever gave you such an idea in the first place? Hell, everyone has to fight to stay alive, doesn't he?

I shuddered and set my lips tight. I just couldn't do it — couldn't work up that kind of rage against anyone, let alone the cyclist in front of me.

But I knew I'd have to work up some kind of rage if I hoped to survive at all, *because the cyclist directly ahead of me was — Winner-Take-All.*

I couldn't just shut my eyes and pretend he wasn't there, the contestant who had been overtaken eight or ten times and had sent as many cycles spinning with an adroit twist of his lance.

Thirty feet of gleaming track still separated us, for he hadn't slowed down once. For a full minute the distance between us neither lengthened nor shortened and that must have annoyed him, for quite suddenly he turned his head and stared back at me.

I could see the harsh set of his features as the sunlight slanted down over him, but what angered me the most was the look of cold animosity in his eyes. He had never set eyes on me before, but he'd made a very good job of convincing himself that he ought to hate me. If it had been a savagely primitive kind of rage it would have angered me less than the cold, calculating way he'd allowed pure venom to spill over in his mind.

I stepped more firmly on the pedals and my cycle shot forward with a speed that startled me. The distance between us diminished to twenty feet — and then to fifteen. The whirl of the wheels was loud in my ears, louder than the beating of my heart. I fought against an impulse to clutch the steering apparatus

tightly, realizing just in time that a too firm grip would have started the cycle zigzagging and perhaps sent it hurtling from the track.

Winner-Take-All straightened in his seat, clearly aware that I was about to overtake him. He could have increased his own speed by stepping on the pedals as hard as I had done, and lengthened the distance between us to twice what it had been. But he chose not to do so.

His neckcords were stiffening now and his lance arm was in swift, preparatory motion. But an instant before I swept abreast of him he glanced back once more, and that was a mistake. He had to turn swiftly again to steady his cycle, and I picked precisely that moment to strike.

I could see the glint of terror in his dark eyes as my lance meshed the back wheel of his cycle and brought it to a grinding halt.

He had only one chance to save himself, and he did not hesitate to resort to it in the life-endangering way that was sternly forbidden by the rules. As the cycle teetered and hung poised he raised himself a little and hurled the metal ball, aiming it straight at my head.

The backlash of the chain made a shining arc in the air and if I hadn't ducked the instant I'd seen the ball coming it would almost certainly have splintered my skull.

The rage I'd fought against and didn't want to feel was boiling up in me now. Maybe there are times when a man has no choice, when he has to let the caged savage loose.

I didn't wait for his cycle to overturn. I descended to the track and hurled myself upon him, gripping him by the wrist and dragging him to the track, chain and all. I used the chain as a weapon, raising his wrist and lowering it as I brought it forcibly into contact with his skull. I was careful not to let him slug himself too hard — just hard enough to prevent him from getting to his feet and hurling the ball at me again.

I stopped the instant he slumped and I was sure that he had blacked out.

Between us we'd made a big rent in the rules and I had no idea how the spectators were going to feel about it. I could only hope the supervisors at trackside had noticed how close he'd come to killing me when he'd hurled the metal ball. If they had and were convinced it wasn't an accident all they'd have to do to clear me and keep the spectators from becoming enraged was activate an electronic circuit and the man on the screen would announce that Winner-Take-All was a loser all the way. When he woke up he'd be facing a death sentence and all I'd get would be a disciplinary reprimand for descending from a cycle voluntarily, which was also a violation of the rules.

I didn't really think they wouldn't see it as an accident — if they'd noticed it at all. But I was wrong. They activated the electronic circuit and the man on the screen started to talk about it with anger in his voice.

He didn't get far, because the applause had already started and it became thunderous before he'd spoken twenty words.

I'd never heard anything quite like it. It was a wild ovation that shook the tiers, and made the tracks vibrate. It was so tremendous that it stopped the race. The riders drew in to the side of the track and dismounted and the armed men at the base of the tiers had difficulty in keeping several hundred spectators from descending to the two stairways and swarming out over the tracks, headed in my direction. A few of them actually got past the upholders-of-the-rules and were running toward me.

It stunned me for a moment, until the machinery of my brain started moving again and I began to understand what had set it off.

Winner-Take-All had covered himself with glory. To unseat ten or twelve riders in just one race was a feat that probably had never been equaled before, let alone surpassed. And when a man has been built up that way his admirers don't like to think that they've been completely taken in and that he is a coward at heart. When he hurled the metal ball straight at my head they'd seen him for what he was.

Disillusion and rage had made them transfer their allegiance to me. I'd dragged a popular hero down from his pedestal and slugged him unconscious with the chain at his wrist. And I'd meshed his gears before he could score another victory in a contest of skill.

I wasn't particularly proud of what I'd done. For a moment I had let the caged savage loose. It had been his life or mine and I'd acted solely in self-defense. But still the savage had helped me, and I was

sorry I'd been forced to let him out of his cage. He exists, I suppose, in every man but I still wasn't proud of what I'd done. The quicker he was hurled back into the cage again the better, and if I could starve him to death on a bread-and-water diet for the rest of his life so much the better. But the spectators had no way of know-ing how I felt.

I was popular hero number one now, and for an instant I was still too shaken to fully realize what it meant.

Then I grasped it in its entirety and knew exactly what it meant. The crowd would lift me to their shoulders just as the big man had predicted before I'd descended to the tracks, and carry me to the top of the stadium and there would be a stairway leading straight down from there to the entrance gate and I could be through it and on my way to rejoin Claire without running the slightest risk of being stopped by the Security Police. I'd be a popular hero all the way down and my only problem would be to keep so many admirers from accompanying me down that it might slow up my progress a little.

And that's the way it worked out. Only — I didn't even have to square my shoulders and walk calmly back to the tiers, like a popular hero everyone was proud of — except myself. The spectators who had managed to get past the guards were suddenly taking firm hold of me and lifting me up and I was carried back with the thunderous applause still echoing in my ears.

The applause went on and on, but a half hour later I could no longer hear it, for I was out of the stadium and threading my way through a maze of narrow streets toward the building where I had spent the night.

CHAPTER 15

The street did not seem quite the same when I came to it and stared down its rubble-strewn length, and the building where I'd spent the night looked more bleak and desolate — perhaps because the sunlight was beginning to wane a little and the crumbling piles of masonry on both sides of it had a reddish, almost sanguinary look.

But I was sure it was the right street, the right building. You can't easily forget a building and a street where you've had a close brush with Death, and a woman you'd have trusted with your life has been guilty of treachery and betrayal.

Two women — and one had gone out of my life almost as quickly as she'd entered it and the other had stayed with me and not gone out of my life at all. But I'd lost them both in different ways, because when a woman is no longer at your side and you don't know what has become of her, you've lost her.

Would I find them both here, Claire and the man who had promised to protect her? If he hadn't been overconfident and the promise had been kept the nightmare would be over for an hour or a day, with no guarantee we'd be spared another one. But if he'd failed, if the Security Police had blasted him down, the nightmare would never lift, for Claire would be lost to me forever and I would never know what had become of her.

The street was deserted, but I paused for an instant before entering the building to make absolutely sure that I hadn't been followed. A few feet to the right of me a gigantic rat scurried into a crevice in the masonry and bluebottle flies were making a buzzing sound where the pavement sloped to a patch of exposed soil. A dead starling lay on its back in the middle of the unpaved patch, its plumage still iridescently gleaming and the flies were just settling down over it.

On Venus Base there were no starlings, dead or alive — or rats either, for that matter. It was of no great importance but when a man is under tremendous tension, thoughts which are ordinarily trivial and meaningless seem to take on an obscure, half-mysterious significance.

Perhaps it is the pulse of nature, of all life everywhere, that we become aware of at such moments, making us realize how close is the link between living and dying, and how little basic difference there is between a man with the blood warm in his veins and a dead starling.

I ascended the stairs slowly, because there is a time for haste and a time when it is better not to hurry. There are disappointments so bitter that few men can endure them without crying out in torment, and it is well to steel yourself in advance when such a disappointment may be awaiting you. So I climbed

the stairs slowly, step by step, and the nearer I drew to the floor above the less sure I became that I would ever see Claire again.

She opened her eyes then and looked at me. Her arms went around my shoulders and her breathing quickened and there was no need for words between us to make us aware that we were alone in a miraculously intimate way. Not only was the world shut out, it had ceased to exist. *We* were the world, as all lovers are when a blazing intensity of emotion enables them to create a new universe of light and fire.

She shivered a little, tilting her head back and opening her lips as I loosened the gold clasp at her shoulder and parted the outer garment which she had worn on awakening in the Emotional Illusion Therapy shop and never taken off.

I removed it now, with fingers that trembled a little and let it fall to the floor.

“Darling,” I whispered. “My life and my bride . . .”

I need not have feared that there was a metal band under the garment and that her body was not as I had hoped it would be.

She was all woman.

Later, as she was putting the garment back on again, her eyes were shining as she reclothed the beautiful body that had been made for me alone.

She spoke then, for the first time. “He told me that you would not be killed. He could not wait here with me, because there are others who must be protected, and barely time to make sure that we will not be in danger again. But he told me that you would come back and I would be safe here if I locked the door and waited for you without making a sound.”

She smiled then. She had never before smiled, in all the dreams of my youth; and I had never fully realized just how beautiful a biogenetic norm woman could look when the universe became all light and fire, and every barrier to complete fulfillment had turned into a gateway to the stars.

“I would have locked the door but the key would not turn. I would have kept on trying to turn it, but I was so afraid that you would never return that what happened to me seemed not to matter very much.”

She paused, as if searching in her mind for just the right words to make clear something she feared would seem incomprehensible. I knew exactly why people will sometimes feel that safeguarding themselves can be postponed, but I let her go on.

“You asked me to trust him and I did. But how could he be sure that you would not be killed? And if you did not return I would have died too. And I stopped trying to turn the key because I had begun to die a little and when you are dying you do not always try very hard to stay alive. You do not really want to die. But you are not sure that life is any better than letting yourself die, because when you are dead there is no longer any torment. I did not intend to stop trying. But I was in such torment that I had to lie down and close my eyes and let myself die a little more. I thought if I did that I might find the strength to turn the key. So much of me would have died that the torment would not have been so great —”

I nodded. “I know how it feels to die that way,” I said. “You don’t have to explain. There isn’t a very wide gulf between sleep and death and you needed the help of both. I felt the same kind of torment coming up the stairs, not knowing whether I’d find you here or not. Maybe that’s why I found the strength to turn the key.”

“The door was still open, so you must have turned it after you came into the room,” she said. “I am glad that you did that. You were locking out the world because you wanted to be completely alone with me. That’s why you turned the key.”

“I was locking out the kind of world you find in the ruins,” I said. “I was locking out the Big Brain, and the monitors. Well, yes — I was locking out all of the other worlds as well.”

“Even Venus Base?” she asked.

“Even Venus Base,” I said.

I suddenly remembered that I hadn’t said one word to her about my two years on Venus Base. And there was so much that she would have to know, because if we lived to see another sunrise I’d be taking her there.

The knocking wasn't very loud and for a moment I wasn't sure that another flurry of wind hadn't swirled up the stairs and caused the door to creak a little on its rusty hinges, for sometimes just a creaking can sound like a succession of swiftly repeated knocks.

But I wasn't left long in doubt. The knocking became louder and more insistent and a voice called out with sharp impatience. "You may as well let me in. The Security Police will be here in a moment, so you have nothing to gain by keeping the door locked. If you're wise, you'll listen to what I have to say. Or would you prefer to wait until the police get here and break the lock?"

If it had been a voice I had failed to recognize I would not have opened the door. But it was a voice I had heard in the vault amidst the hum of the Big Brain's computation units and the night before whispering to me between sleeping and waking. It was the voice of a woman I had struck in anger, because she had violated a trust by using another woman as a pawn and had been guilty of a double betrayal.

Anger rose up in me again and I walked to the door and turned the rusty key that had locked out the world for me. I opened the door wide and Agnes walked into the room.

She stood very still for a moment, staring from me to Claire. She held herself in a tense, arrogant way, as if she welcomed this chance to release her pent-up feelings and had the authority now to threaten us with more than words.

"I was sure that you would both return to his building," she said. "When you left here this morning you escaped from two Security Police officers by boarding a bicycle race passenger beetle. You escaped again at the stadium. The man you met at the stadium helped you. He brought Claire to this room and told her to lock the door and admit no one.

"Oh, it was all very cleverly planned. The man who helped you is a criminal conspirator, a rebel. He intercepted a message I sent to the Security Police last night, but because he is not a telepath — as you and I are, John — he did not know that you had left this building until he intercepted a Security Police alert which informed him that you were at the stadium."

She was looking directly at me now. "He's had specialized training in undercover spying, and had no difficulty in finding you, even in so huge a crowd. He knows exactly how to scan a crowd with electronic magnifying devices, and a woman like Claire stands out.

"He helped both of you escape, by bringing Claire here and urging you to enter the races before the Security Police could place you under arrest. I was probing your mind when you descended to the tracks and it was all very clear to me. I had left the ruins and was in the computation vault, making sure that every step we are taking to crush the rebellion will be in strict accordance with the Giant Computer's instructions. But if I had been at the stadium I could not have been more sharply aware of everything that was taking place there, because I was probing his mind too.

"You're a remarkable man, John. He must have been as sure of that as I am — or he would never have urged you to enter the race. He must have thought you'd have a very good chance of winning the kind of victory you'd need to make the spectators turn on the Security Police in rage. He couldn't have known, of course, just how remarkable that victory would be."

I shook my head, because I wasn't flattered by her praise. Somehow it angered me.

"It was blind luck," I said. "The rider whose cycle I overturned made the mistake of looking back to see how close I was just as I came abreast of him."

"It takes great skill and steadiness of nerve to take instant advantage of a mistake like that," she said. "You have exceptional qualities of body and mind and you're making a tragic mistake in wasting them on a woman like this, and joining a conspiracy that's certain to fail."

I had an answer for that one too. "If you're so sure," I said, "how do you square a rebellion that's certain to fail with a man who was more than a match for the Security Police? There must be other men just as extraordinary on Venus Base, or the conspiracy would have been smashed before —"

She cut me off abruptly. "Then you do admit that you're an extraordinary man?"

"Not at all," I said. "I'm talking about the man who helped us and who doesn't seem to be here now."

"You know as well as I do that a telepath can't always trace a man's movements with complete accuracy when he's doing hardly any thinking at all, just concentrating on getting to his destination as

quickly as possible. I knew he'd be bringing Claire here, but the visualization contact broke down right after he left the stadium. He's familiar with the ruins and didn't have to stop and look around him, and visualize this particular part of the ruins to get here. I didn't think he'd get here quite so fast or leave quite so quickly. It was a natural enough mistake under the circumstances. Just the fact that he escaped in time — and even what he accomplished at the stadium — doesn't make him extraordinary."

Her face had lost its harshness and she seemed, quite suddenly, almost to be pleading with me not to go on accusing her. "John, I will say it again. It is you who are extraordinary. I knew it from the first — when we stood side by side in the vault and you took me into your arms. You talked wildly, rebelliously — even scornfully. You derided the Giant Computer, denying that it cannot make a decision which is not wholly wise and in the best interests of Society.

"John, listen to me. You talked rebelliously, but I knew that deep in your mind you did not really feel that way."

"If you knew that," I flung at her, "why did you lie to me? Why did you pretend to agree with everything I said and made me think —"

"Make you think what, John?"

"That your anger was greater than mine. When I talked about Venus Base in a less harsh way, you were more derisive than I had hoped you would be. For I was less honest with myself than I am now, and did not quite want to believe that women would never be sent out . . ."

She moved closed to me and a look of almost desperate appeal came into my eyes. "John, suppose I told you I had a reason for lying. Suppose I told you that Society is so dangerously threatened that it must ignore what an extraordinary man says and continue to believe in his capacity for loyalty. If the rebelliousness had not gone too deep, it may not be too late. He may still be able to save himself."

CHAPTER 16

I looked at Claire and saw that she was standing motionless, staring at Agnes with his lips tightly compressed. If she was startled by what the other woman had just said, she gave no outward indication of it.

I would have gone to her and put my arms about her if I had not been so sure that what Agnes had said would not make Claire less sure of my loyalty to the world had shared together.

Agnes must have sensed that too, and suddenly she realized that words alone were not a woman's only weapon, for she swayed toward me as if she were about to fall and almost instinctively I reached out to steady her. It was just about the most foolish thing I could have done, for it gave her a chance to cling to me and wrap her arms about my shoulders — so tightly I could not have un-clasped them without an effort that would have seemed brutal even to Claire, angered as she must have been.

"John," came an insistent whisper. "John, listen to me. *Do you really think Claire is an android?*"

There was a sudden stillness between us, as if the words themselves had a fateful quality and she dared not go on too quickly.

Her embrace became a little less clinging, but I was too startled to grip her by the wrists and force her arms to her side.

"Oh, it is all so clever, John, so carefully planned. The conspirators select reckless young spacemen, cut off from life and fulfillment by what they shrewdly but falsely call the tyranny of the Giant Computer. They appeal to them through the android shop scheme. Don't you see, John? The rebel women pretend to be androids.

"They *pretend* to be androids, John. The biogenetic norm data of each pilot is carefully examined in advance and women who conform to the data of individual pilots are sold to that man in the shop. The women have to keep up a skillful pretense of having child minds.

"Until they are in space, John, and the pretense can be thrown aside. Then the pilot is told. Since the woman conforms in all respects to what he has always sought in a woman he is not likely to turn back. If he is human, he is not likely to regret having thrown in his lot with her. If a woman is beautiful enough there is no folly a man will not commit for her sake."

For an instant the dream experience of the night before seemed almost to be recurring, for I felt myself, for the barest instant, to be remote from the room in which I was standing and even from the woman who was whispering to me.

But this time I was inside a cave — vast, shadowy and filled with smoke. Human figures moved waveringly through the gloom. I saw a man with his head bandaged, a woman supporting him. There were crimson stains on the bandage and his hair was a solid mass of clotted blood.

Some of the men were seated; others stood straight and resolute in shafts of reddening sunlight. But each was accompanied by a woman, and each had the look of a seasoned fighter struggling against desperate odds to preserve his independence and self-respect.

“Society is keeping the struggle secret, John. It has just begun, but it is spreading fast. So far, we have contained the rebels, have driven them from the central camps to solitary outposts. But reinforcements keep pouring in. The android shop scheme is working dangerously well.

“A hundred spacemen arrive daily, and the women inspire them in the struggle, stand by their sides through bloodshed and despair. Eventually, we will have a formidable army to repel.”

I awoke completely then from the strange spell. The cave vanished, and was replaced by the firm contours of reality. At first I saw only the dim oval of Agnes’s face, a white and moving blur. Then she moved her head a little more, and the three inches which had separated her eyes from mine widened to five or six, and I could see all of her features distinctly.

“You must listen to me, John,” she pleaded. “You must believe me: I, too, have unusual extra-sensory faculties, as I told you. When I shut my eyes, scenes not clear to the senses present themselves to me with a startling clearness. I can see scenes on Venus Base now, just as you have seen them. Our thoughts, our inmost thoughts, have been joined by that bright inner vision, by the clairvoyance which is our strength.

“I will be your woman, John Talbot — and together we will fight this conspiracy and destroy it. We will share other visions on Venus, and every move that the conspirators make will be known to us. We’ll inform Society of their every maneuver, and we will not rest until they have been brought to justice.”

I really made an effort then to untangle her arms, deciding I’d be rough about it if I had to. But she resisted my angry tugging, and clung to me with a desperate urgency.

“Do you doubt what I’ve told you? Do you need proof? Shall I give you proof?”

Before I could reply she pressed her lips to my throat and kissed me, so hard her teeth bruised the flesh a little. A man doesn’t have to have a gram of masochism in his nature to be thrilled by that kind of “love bite” — if the woman hasn’t become hateful to him. But now, more than ever, I wanted Claire to be the woman in my arms while I was making it clear to Agnes that the way I felt about the Big Brain and the monitors couldn’t have been changed if I’d been offered a harem on Venus Base with from fifty to a hundred women in it. Unless, of course, they all looked like Claire and the Big Brain agreed to blow itself up when all of the monitors were standing right under it.

“Move back against the wall, Agnes,” a cold voice said.

The sound of Claire’s dress was no more than a rustle but I knew she was standing very close to us. Agnes stiffened in my arms, but before I could turn, Claire spoke again. “I’ll not warn you a third time. Stand away from him and move back against the wall.”

I had been right about Claire’s nearness. She was standing within three feet of us and her eyes met with mine the instant I turned. She had reached down and drawn the stocking knife from Agnes’s ankle. It glittered in her hand.

There are revelations so staggering that your mind goes off on a tangent. There is a moment of shock, of stunned disbelief, when you just can’t get a firm grip on reality.

She was a changed Claire. Her eyes were clear and determined — and blazing with anger. “It is all true, John,” Claire said. “She has opened your eyes more widely than you think. She is a very clever woman. The monitors trust her and are unwilling to believe that with her great beauty and clever tongue she will fail in her mission.”

Agnes was moving reluctantly back toward the wall now, but all of my attention was centered on Claire.

She was standing very still, the knife firm in her clasp, when I whispered: “You can’t be —”

“I am,” Claire said.

“A real woman.”

“Look at me, John. Can you doubt it? You should have known the instant you looked upon my unclothed body and told me that I was all woman.”

“The most beautiful woman I ever held in my arms,” I whispered. “And real!”

“Yes, John.”

“I was in love with you from the first moment I saw you,” I said. “Did you know that?”

“I was sure of it, John. They studied your biogenetic norm data very carefully. I was the only woman they could find who was just right for you. It works both way, John. You are just right for me.”

Agnes cried, “That’s a lie!”

“I think not,” Claire said. “He was infatuated with you, but he loves me. He loves me enough to fight for a new life of freedom and independence on Venus.”

Her eyes narrowed and she added with a candor that startled me: “Elementary sexuality can be a powerful driving force in all men and women. But it doesn’t become really glorious until something more imperishable enters into it. The undying love of one man for one woman — his love for her as a *person*.”

Agnes’s eyes narrowed and she advanced on Claire with a cold fury in her stare. “Neither of you will live to join the conspirators,” she warned. “In a few minutes you will be prisoners. You will be bound and thrown into prison. Your trial and punishment will be swift, I promise you.”

I knew instantly that she could make good her threat. As an agent of Society, she would not have made a single warning move against us without complete assurance. I knew that if she struggled furiously precious time would be lost, our peril dangerously increased.

I stared at her for an instant in stunned incredulity. She was superb and resourceful, even in her desperation; Claire seemed to have sensed that resourcefulness instinctively, and was girding herself for a physical struggle that could have resulted in disaster for us both.

I leaped forward and seized Agnes about the waist. I clamped my hand over her mouth and shouted to Claire. “Get out! I’ll join you down below. Hurry, darling — there’s no time to be lost. The Security Police will be here any minute now.”

Agnes fought like a wildcat, bit, clawed and scratched. I saw Claire turn and run through the door, and I heard her footsteps descending the stairs to the street.

“You’ll never get away!” Agnes’s voice was choked with a de-spairing hatred.

“We can try,” I said, almost whispering it. I tightened my grip on her waist; then with a violent wrench I freed my left arm, and sent her spinning back against the wall.

I swung about and headed for the door. I heard her cry out, but I did not turn. I leapt out into the corridor and slammed the door shut behind me, the rusty key in my hand.

I locked the door from the outside, and headed straight down the stairs to the street. Claire was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs, standing white and motionless with one hand pressed to her throat.

“Come on,” I urged, “we’ve got to keep moving. They’ll be after us quickly enough.”

We joined hands and ran together out into the street. We kept close to the buildings as we ran, our shadows lengthening grotesquely before us on the deserted pavement. We skirted walls crumbling and time-eroded, ducked in and out of refuse-littered alleyways and ran for a short distance in the open, the early-morning sunlight beating unmercifully down upon us.

We were in the open when we heard the first chill far-off drone of the sirens.

I tightened my hold on Claire’s hand and whispered urgently, “We won’t have time to reach the subway entrance. We’ll be hemmed in from all sides. We’ve got to hide out while the search is on.”

“Where?” Claire breathed.

Ahead of us was a towering structure of crumbling gray-yellow stone. I gestured toward it and we headed for the darkly yawning entrance.

We passed together in a vast, dimly illuminated hall. On all sides of us towered incredible instruments of science crumbling into rust. We fled straight down the hall and climbed up behind a gigantic, dynamo-shaped object that vibrated hollowly as we jarred it with our bodies.

Suddenly out of the darkness a voice droned, "This is Occupational Advisory Unit 34 GH. Pick your pattern for work and living. We want you to relax fully and completely while you observe the future, as we have planned it for you. You must have mechanical aptitude of a high order or you would not have come to this Unit.

"Take your time in choosing a profession. Wander about the hall at leisure and observe the many fascinating three-dimensional cinemascopic recordings. Study steel-welding, tool-making, metal-craft designing in all their intricate ramifications. It is *your* future you are planning here. Remember — *your* future.

"The choices you make now will influence your entire future. Remember. If you make a wise choice now half of the battle will be won."

I tightened my hold on Claire's hand. "This was an ancient occupational advisory unit building," I whispered. "What you just heard was the last gasp of an expiring free society. That metatape recording pretends to offer a choice of occupation to the poor dupes who found their way here. But even then there was an ominous undertone: *observe the future as we have planned it for you.*"

"I know," Claire whispered. "In daring now to plan our own future we may well have chosen a design for dying. But the choice had to be made; I am glad we had the courage to dare greatly."

I had learned the trick, years ago, of keeping a watertight compartment of my mind alert to danger. In one little portion of my mind a whisper in the dark, an approaching faint footstep, or dark undercurrents of hostile thoughts beating in upon me, could put me instantly on the defensive.

I suddenly knew that we were not alone in the building. I gripped Claire's wrist and drew her back into the shadows. Then I leaned cautiously forward and stared down.

There was a flickering on the stone floor far below, a faint shifting of light and shadow between the projection instrument and the cinemascopic recording screens. I realized abruptly that some-one was climbing up toward us. When I strained my ears I could hear the "someone's" faint breathing.

I should have taken the initiative then and there. I should have leapt out, carried the battle to the unseen climber. I could have quickly discovered him, and his position directly beneath me would have placed him at a disadvantage. But I waited too long, and the ugly bulk of him came suddenly into view and before I could leap to my feet he covered the distance between us in a powerful but well-timed rush.

I only just ducked in time as he swung at me, both of his fists flailing. He was a Security Police officer; at his wrist an electro-sap that could have cracked my skull like a mace. It described a flashing arc with his lunge, and I could hear the deadly swish.

He went spinning past me, shifting his weight as he went to preserve his balance. He almost thudded into the wall behind me, so great and furious had been his initial onslaught. But when he pivoted about on his heels and came swinging back toward me I was ready for him.

I hit him in the stomach with a slashing right uppercut, and brought my left fist flush with his jaw with all the violence I could muster. He groaned and reeled back, and I kicked at his Achilles tendon with the tip of my boot. The kick seemed to hurt him more than the blows; he let out a yell, ducked low, and weaved back toward me.

For a moment we traded blows, fierce and heavy; and I had to keep jabbing at him with both my fists to keep him from opening a twelve-inch gash in my chest with the electro-sap.

I floored him with one very heavy blow delivered with desperate calculation.

I'd been so busy taking care of him that it wasn't until he lay sprawled out at my feet with a little ribbon of crimson trickling from his mouth that I realized that another struggle was going on in the shadows.

I turned just in time to see Claire standing with a knife in her clasp in complete isolation from Agnes. If I'd turned a moment sooner, I might have seen Agnes emerge into view between the projection instruments, and rush straight at Claire as the Security Police officer had rushed at me. I might have seen Claire draw the knife in self-defense.

But at least I had turned in time to witness the crucial stage of the struggle. And for that I was grateful.

I was grateful in another way, for it could only mean that the Security Police had arrived to free

Agnes a minute or two after we'd heard the drone of the sirens. Obviously they had trailed us to the Occupational Advisory building — the only large structure in the area — and if our departure had been delayed and they'd come after us a little faster we would have had no chance at all.

Agnes's eyes were narrowed and she was advancing on Claire with a cold fury in her stare. "Give me that knife!" she warned. "Give it to me, or I'll take it from you!"

"Just try!" Claire said.

Agnes grabbed Claire's wrist and swung her about. Before I could get between them they started struggling.

What happened then was like a scene in a dream: fantastic, wildly terrible. Agnes backed Claire against the wall and twisted her wrist cruelly. Claire resisted and fought back, but Agnes got the knife.

She let Claire break free, and then started for her. She went for Claire with the knife upraised, a killing rage in her eyes.

She went for Claire fast — too fast. Her foot slipped, and she went down face forward; and as she fell the knife twisted in her clasp.

A look of almost childlike astonishment came into her eyes.

For one awful moment she writhed about on the floor, her fingers still clasping the knife. Then a convulsive shudder shook her. Her face twisted in agony, and a dull gaze overspread her pupils. Slowly, horribly, her eyes lidded themselves and her breathing became less harsh, finally subsiding entirely. She lay still.

If you've ever seen it happen, you'll want to forget it as quickly as possible. You won't want to be tortured by it as I was, even though for one merciful instant my mind became a recording instrument solely, a gray film which registered only that quick and involuntary act of self-destruction. I felt no horror, no shock.

I was standing motionless, staring at Claire, when four men and four women emerged from the shadows. The men wore Venus Base uniforms; the women were all very beautiful, with skins like rose petals and large dark eyes that searched my face in eager curiosity. The big man who had helped us at the races stood very straight and still, staring from me to Claire with a relieved and grateful look in his eyes. He seemed even huger in his uniform. We would be indebted to him until we were too old to dream.

A tall, red-haired girl with sympathetic eyes went up to the limp form on the floor, knelt and made a hasty examination. After a moment she raised her eyes, and spoke to Claire. "Does he know?"

Claire shook her head.

"You'd better tell him," the girl advised.

Claire looked at me, her eyes compassionate. "Agnes was the android, John," she said. "Agnes was the most successful of a hundred android robots made and trained by Society in strict secrecy to spy on our activities."

The red-haired girl said, "Usually our chosen mates are not told the full truth until they are safely on Venus. But when you brought Claire here, you made a dangerous situation more complicated. Our task now is to get you both to the spaceport as quickly as possible."

She smiled. "You're as good as there already, for you'll be guarded every foot of the way by members of our organization."

I looked at Claire.

She looked at me.

I thought of Venus Base, and I thought of Claire lying in my arms, her face hidden.

Just how lucky can a man be?

THE END