

Dean Koontz – Star Quest
[This is his first book]

[Released as “Ace double” with Emil Petaja – Doom of the green Planet (Not included here)]

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[Original typos hasn't been corrected]

DIVIDED COSMOS

In a universe that had been ravaged by a thousand years of interplanetary warfare between the star-shatter-ing Romaghins and the equally voracious Setessins, there seemed now but one thing that might bring the destruc-tion to an end.

That would be the right catalyst in the hands of the right people.

The right catalyst could well be the individualist rebel, Tohm . . . he who had once been a simple peasant and who had been forcibly changed into a fearfully armored instrument of mechanical warfare—the man-tank Jumbo Ten.

But the right people? Could they possibly be the hated driftwood of biological warfare—those monsters of a cosmic no-man's land—the *Muties*?

**Turn this book over for
second complete novel**



Star Quest

DEAN R. KOONTZ

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STAR QUEST

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PART ONE "THE QUEST"

I

Jumbo ten was pulling out of the ranks.

"J-10, LOCK ON YOUR TIER: SWING TO ZERO STRESS. FALL IN, J-10!"

Jumbo Ten swung farther out of the advancing line, whirled and looked to the rear. He had been in the second wave moving toward the battle-scarred plain below. The third was crushing the very stones as it roared down the hill, an irresistible force, ten thousand tons of alloyed steel careening madly on to meet with the immovable object of the enemy front.

"J-10, ARE YOU DAMAGED? CHECK YOUR SYSTEMS AND MAKE REPORT SOONEST!"

He had to get away. For the moment, they thought he was simply malfunctioning. Before the truth seeped through their thick skulls, he would have to act. At most, he had only seconds to reach some level area and cant back, bringing his rockets into proper position. Escape was essential, for he had suddenly realized he was not a machine.

"J-10, REPORT!"

The tumult below made the plain a bad bet. Laser cannon erupted like acid-stomached giants, belching forth corrosive froth that even the alloy hulls could not withstand for any appreciable length of time. Forty Jumbos were clashing already—twenty on each side—and a hundred and twenty would be lobbing shells and exchanging beams within minutes. A compressed gas bomb sloughed into the earth a thousand feet ahead, exploded, tilting the Jumbos of the third wave, toppling three onto their backs where they lay spinning tread like helpless turtles. That opened a gap in the ranks. If he could move through the breach before the Generals realized he was not just damaged, he could make the top of the ridge and cant on the level brink for a blast-off.

He could feel the remote control fingers of the Generals probing his circuits to discover why he was not reporting.

But he knew who he was! And what he wasn't. He wasn't a machine. He wasn't a Jumbo, one of those all-purpose, highly sophisticated weapons systems. He was a man. They had taken away his body and left him only his brain—but that was still a human brain, an individual.

"RENEGADE! JUMBO TEN IS RENEGADE!" the probing officer shouted.

So, the seconds had dwindled into nothingness. He shifted his huge bulk into high gear, his atomic-powered engines roaring with only a fraction of the power they could deliver. Five hundred tons of alloyed steel whined and choked, surging suddenly forward and up.

"THIRD TIER CLOSE ON JUMBO TEN. CLOSE AND OBSTRUCT!"

He swiveled his cannon about in a hundred and eighty degree arc, fanning the third tier with his heaviest beam. *Fomp-fompa-fomp!* went his launch tubes as he fired smoke grenades to cover his retreat. The rocks crumbled to dust beneath him, his tread grinding the earth, ripping and gouging at the hill as it plunged him onward. The smoke was now a great blanket over all.

There was a movement to his left. Jumbo 34 came out of the fog. The red gem eyes of the radar swiveled about, locked on him and began glowing even brighter. A laser cannon came up. Jumbo Ten threw up a shield, struck out with an energy net and overheated J-34 until little wires melted inside the cannon, leaving it without a trigger mechanism. It would take J-34 some time to re-machine the needed parts from the twisted, useless ones and replace them. He rolled quickly on.

At the top of the ridge, he came out of his own smoke cover, bucked over the lip, crashing onto flat ground. Below, the panorama of combat was impressive indeed. Giant organic brain directed fighting robos tore at each other with a vengeance. Instead of blood, there was molten metal and shattered transistors. The Setessins had attacked the Romaghin home planet, landing with their Jumbos in the

Hellfire Desert. Over the last eighteen hours, they had pushed into the plains, but they would not go any farther. Already, the tide of battle was chang-ing.

But, he reminded himself, he didn't care any longer. He wasn't a fighting machine in the Great Cause of the Romaghin worlds. He was a man. A man from the village of the Giant Trees who had been shanghaied and deprived of his body. And of his love.

He canted the huge machine with its hydraulic blast-ing legs, extended the glistening, polished tubes of the rockets, and shut down all other systems but the radar-negative shield that would protect him against Romaghin missiles when he reached the upper strata of the atmos-phere.

Three Jumbos lifted over the edge of the ridge, whirl-ring, swung their head blocks one way, then the other, searching for him. There was a shrill whistle of recogni-tion from one of them just as he flipped the rockets to full thrust and burned the hill away in takeoff.

Past the missile danger zone, he deactivated the shield and slammed everything into the rockets. He wanted out fast. Very fast. His mind was suddenly overwhelmed with the events of the recent past and with his present position. He was a man without a body. The power of that swept at him like a great dark wave. Reluctantly, he allowed the wave to swallow him. He dreamed:

Once upon a fateful time, there was a village beneath trees whose leaves were as large as a man, dull red, hid-ing clusters of luscious yellow fruits that were globular and semi-transparent, misty and sweet and cool. To the left of this village, the clump of trees ended at the edge of a broad grassland that stretched almost out of sight to the foothills of the fabulous purple mountains (which were, naturally, worshiped) where the forests took over. Beyond the mountains were more mountains. Then more forests. Then additional plains. It was a primi-tive world. But that is not to say an unhappy one. To the right of the village was a beach which dropped gently to a crystal blue ocean. That great mirror of water sank toward the horizon and sparkled every evening with the oranges and pinks, the greens and blues of the sunset.

Once upon a fateful time, there were people living in this village. They ate of the fruit of the red-leafed tree and of the fishes of the ocean. Now and then, a great god-ship would come from the skies and leave them other and stranger foods. This ship had odd words painted on its side: Science League Ship No. 454/For The Preservation Of Primitive Cultures. That was the only intrusion by the outside world into this Eden, and it was accepted by the simple people of the village as a mani-festation of the God of Heavens and nothing else. These people were dark with straight, black hair and eyes like ebony chips that glowed with an inner light Nature had given them. Their skins were bronze, their bodies per-fect. The men were muscular and agile, the women gentle and graceful.

Then came the screaming dragons from the sky, viola-ting the halcyon world.

Moaning, spitting flame . . .

Scorching the plains, blackening the beaches, smash-ing the trees . . .

And bringing the men, the pale, chubby, worm-com-plexioned men in the strange breeches and the ruffled, starched shirts with plumed helmets and jeweled chin straps.

And guns . . .

Flames . . .

Pain . . .

Roaring as of gods in death throes . . .

And when the dragons, coughing, sped away, there was an empty village behind.

They had taken and would use everyone. But worst of all, they had taken a certain two: Tohm, the most handsome man in the village, the boy-man with dreams at the tips of his fingers and flashing lights in the words that he spoke; and Tarnilee, his love, his only, his sweet-est. Tarnilee of the soft form. Tarnilee of the eyes like the velvet of the night and the hair like spun darkness. Tarnilee with the body of pleasure and the soul of the earth, of the flowers, of the moons . . .

And even worse than that, they took these two and sep-arated them . . .

He had not seen his Tarnilee since. He was "frozen" and taken to a sunless chamber where he waited

until one morning they put him to sleep and he died. For all purposes, he had died, for he woke without memory of having ever lived. He woke as Jumbo Ten, that weird metal entity that fought for the Romaghin cause after being educated (in a manner that was really propagan-dizement) and imbued with a hatred for Setessins.

But the Fates, those fickle ladies, will often change their minds and lend a hand to those they have so callously crushed before. His web of life had been spun by Clotho who immediately washed her hands of it and moved on to another loom. Lachesis, who measured the length of his strand, decided to fray it down slowly to whittle it to near nothingness. But now, just as Atropos was coming forth with her golden shears to snip it completely, Clotho had a change of heart. Perhaps, she was unemployed and restless that day, looking for something, anything to do. In any event, she stopped Atropos with a kind word and a cold stare, and began spinning again more thread, a tougher filament for the man named Tohm.

In a giant machine that killed, a vial of narcotics began to run dry before its time . . .

An imprisoned brain began to divest itself of drug claws that had latched firmly to it . . .

Drip-dripity . . . dry . . .

A slow reawakening . . .

He lay quiet a moment after he regained conscious-ness, straining his aching mind to think. Tohm was his name, but Jumbo Ten was his form. That didn't matter. Jumbo Ten was a small city in itself, a huge, complex structure with micro-miniature components that allowed him to machine, create, build anything. Including a new body. Below decks, chemical tanks rested in a small room, their contents sloshing ever so slightly in the vacuum, waiting for the right seed to be planted before the various elements could come together to form a human body. Next to that room, intricate robo-surgeons were concealed in the walls, ready to transplant a human brain in-to the tank-grown corpse if the Jumbo ever crashed in enemy territory and the operator needed to escape. Even if the machine were immovable, a man with a sound body could do damage behind the enemy lines. Without further thought, he set the tanks to heating, planted the necessary catalyst, and notified the inhuman surgeons to prepare themselves. He would have a body again, even if it were not his own.

Opening the exterior lens, he searched all portions of space, staring for minutes through each of the seven cameras mounted in the turret on top of the head block. Blackness was everywhere and through everything. The heart of God?

He had absolutely no idea where he was. He, of course, had been given no stellar maps by the Generals, for this was not intended to be a space operation, merely a de-fense against invading Setessin forces. Now he was lost in the confusing starlanes, more alone than he had ever been in his lifetime, drifting aimlessly, thinking constantly about Tarnilee. They were to have undergone ritual joining in another month, after they had loved and proven the goodness of themselves to each other. He would find her, he vowed to himself. He would rescue her. Was she too the brain of a fighting machine? Had they hacked away her physical, beautiful, graceful self and stuffed her gray matter into an electronic mon-ster?

She would be confused, afraid. He remembered how, although laced with sedatives, he had been afraid as the Romaghins educated him prior to placing him in the robot. His primitive mind had been picked up and shaken violently by the facts that went against all he thought he knew, by the simple understanding that there were hundreds of worlds with billions of people throughout the galaxy. Tarnilee would be in need of comforting. As he slid through the slick emptiness, he decided he would most assuredly get his bearings and then his re-venge. Somehow, in some way, he would find her and the men who had taken her.

He was still brooding about it when the radar screen flashed and spat out a tiny *Bleep!* Searching the screen with an interior "eye," he located the small, green dot. It was closing fast. It was better than five times his size. He armed all weapons and prepared himself for the shock of the killing. Although he had killed before, it was under the effects of drugs and beyond his understanding. This would be decidedly different. But, since the dragons had come from the sky to the village under the trees, no one had dealt him mercy, and he had decided to trade like for like.

Winking on and off as if in warning, the green pickup grew larger and closer.

Calmly, he fixed the laser cannon solidly on the center of the oncoming bulk, flicked the magnetic heating shields into readiness, and waited. He had seven armed missiles lying in his belly. He would wait one more minute until a few hundred miles of the gap between them had been closed. He wanted to be certain.

“Ho there!” a voice snapped through the radio receiver in his guts.

He started.

“Ho there, I say! This is Floating Library No. 7. Do you wish any information, reading materials, or news?”

He swallowed imaginary saliva and relaxed a bit. Lowering his defenses, he said, “Where am I?”

“You don’t know where you are?” the voice said un-believablely.

“No.”

“Dear friend, you must come aboard for that information, star charts and all. We can converse more easily in person.”

“I can’t disembark. I’m a fighting machine—a brain encased in this hunk of metal.”

“Oh dear,” the library said. Silence for a moment.

“So could we talk by radio?”

“Look,” the library said, “I have an empty stock room. I’ll open the portal and let you in.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, trying to imagine the dimensions of the library that could swallow a Jumbo so easily. He was slightly astounded.

“You are a runaway?”

“I—”

“Well, there are three radar blips approaching from your rear. Before they pick you up, I suggest you conceal yourself.”

He swallowed again—as figuratively as the first time—and jetted gently to the giant cube that sparkled like polished brass. The portals swung open like the jaws of a massive alligator, revealing a warm, blue-lighted interior. He cut all engines and coasted in on the built-up thrust, breaking now and then with chemical retro-rockets. He cleared the sill and sides of the door easily. When all of J-10 was in and had grated noisily against the floor plates of the storage room, the mouth he had entered closed, gobbling up the last traces of him.

“Romaghin, I see,” the library said.

“Not by birth!”

“Of course not. Oh goodness, no. They wouldn’t use their own people for something like that. Tell me, how did you come to realize what you were—rather, who?”

“I found, since my discovery, an empty vial and a useless system of narcotic baths. From the looks of it, my vial ran out ahead of schedule.”

“I see. Oh, this is good. Very good!”

“Yeah, well, I just want to find Tarnilee.”

“Tarnilee?”

Visions of sugary fantasies . . .

“Yeah. My woman.”

“Oh my. Very grand. Heroic quest and all. Marvelous, marvelous.”

“So I thought you might tell me how to find her.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know about this particular young lady. But you could study up on Romaghin culture, learn something of the truth about them. I imagine you come from a primitive world, for that’s how they get most of their Jumbo brains—to the consternation of the Science League. You’ll need a great deal of educating to understand what might have happened to this Tarni-lou—”

“Tarnilee.”

“Yes, Tarnilee. You’ll need a great deal of educating, nonetheless, to understand what might have happened to her and what avenues of action might be open to you. Read the books on Romaghin culture, the *History of the Century*, volumes six through twelve, and the daily papers for the past month.”

“Lead me to them.”

“You'll be interested in the latest escapades of the Muties. Papes are full of it. Exciting stuff. They say the Fringe is actually beginning to wave negative under Mutie pressure and the shell molecule is rupturing in many cases, though total success has yet been denied them.”

“What?” That had sounded like nothing so much as doubletalk, trickspeak, or some such ruse.

The library was silent a moment. “Oh, I guess you *wouldn't* be interested. You wouldn't know about the Muties and all.”

“Muties?”

“We'll educate you. That's it. You'll learn all the won-ders of this galaxy. I—” the giant cube said, slipping into a soft, confidential tone, “am secretly in favor of what the Muties are doing.”

“Yeah, well, if I could find out about Tarni—”

“REPORT!” a familiar voice snapped, shaking the hull.

“Oh dear,” the library said. “I think we have guests outside.”

II

“What are they going to do?”

“Leave this to me,” the library said. He thought it giggled.

“YOU, FLOATING LIB SEVEN, REPORT!”

“Yes, sirs,” the library said reverently. “Can I help you? Reading material, research, news?”

“INFORMATION!”

“Yes, sirs?”

“WE WERE MONITORING A JUMBO, A RENE-GADE FROM ROMAGHIN. HE DISAPPEARED FROM OUR SCOPES IN THIS AREA.”

“Yes, sirs. Witnessed that, I did. Said to myself, said, now that looks like a bit of chicanery. Doesn't look good, I says.”

“WHAT DIDN'T LOOK GOOD?”

“A Setessin freighter scooped him up. Came in behind me, shielding itself from you gentlemen, and took him.”

There was a moment of silence while the three Jumbos conferred among themselves and with the Generals back home. “WHICH WAY DID THIS FREIGHTER GO?” one of them asked at length.

“It seemed to plot off toward that quadrant contain-ing *ypsilon* Sagittarii.”

“YOU CAN'T BE MORE SPECIFIC?”

“No, sir. I was much too alarmed by the fleet of battle cruisers hanging farther out, waiting for the freigh-ter to return.”

“BATTLE CRUISERS?” the voice said.

“Faint dots. Standing pretty far off. Maybe a dozen.”

“UH, WELL—” the voice said haltingly. It was ob-viously manned by a Romaghin who was preempting the primitive brain and controlling the machine.

“I knew you would want to search out the blackguards and teach them a lesson,” the library went on.

“WELL, WE'RE A LITTLE TOO BUSY AT THE MOMENT,” the Romaghin replied, picturing the dozen cruisers with their hundreds of guns and impenetrable shells. Then they were evidently recalled, for the blast of their rockets echoed dully inside the cube for a brief second.

He unplugged himself from the portable robo-link the library information bank had extended to him.

“Find anything?”

"They sell the women as concubines," Tohm said sourly. "On the world of Basa II, they have a slave market where the fairest girls are taken."

"And I imagine she was fair."

Tohm didn't answer.

"Well," the library said, "what did you think of the Muties' latest adventures? Exciting, huh?"

"I didn't understand a word of it," Tohm snapped. "What is the Fringe? And for that matter, what the devil is wave pattern negative or a shell molecule?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"I wouldn't ask if I did."

"Oh, dear. Well, let me start at the beginning. All the worlds of the galaxy were settled by men from the planet Earth. Most planets were peaceful and joined in mutual trade agreements which resulted in the Federation. The planets settled by the ancient political faction known as the RadRi became known as the Romaghin worlds, in honor of their first president, and were kicked out of the Federation because they refused to join in the disarmament plan. The exact same thing happened to the planets settled by the RadLef, which, for many years and through the last several centuries, was and has been the mortal enemy of the RadRi. These two factions built huge armies and navies and entered into a series of wars which have been in progress for eight hundred years. The entire galaxy has never known peace in that time. The Federation, unarmed as it was in the beginning and overwhelmed by the might of both combatants, has never been able to halt the battle. Thirdly, there are worlds like your own where exploration parties reverted and set up primitive tribes over the generations. These the Science League of the Federation is trying to pre-serve. Both war parties, however, raid these primitive worlds for brains."

Tohm sighed. "I understand that much."

"That's background. Now, these first wars were fought strictly with nuclear weapons. Fallout was tremendous. Naturally, mutated births began to occur. Both sides, however, instead of facing up to the responsibilities of this new horror, began killing the mutants at birth. Several groups of sympathetic normals, clergymen, and scholars, formed an underground that kidnapped mutants nearly upon birth. Over the centuries, a respectable colony of un-normals existed throughout the galaxy. Several times, the Romaghins and Setessins have launched campaigns to wipe out these semi-people. But they have never quite succeeded. Today, less than ten thousand Muties are living, but they are a vital group. They have discovered a way to rid the galaxy of the two warlike peoples. They have certain psi-talents (every mutant seems to be born with some) that enable them to envision a daring plan. The Romaghins and Setessins are afraid, for they realize the feasibility of the plan. The Muties are now under the greatest attack in their history. They are fighting for their lives."

"But how? I know the history, it is the method of obliterating the war mongers that confuses me."

"Well, the Fringe is the single molecule which is the barrier of quasi-reality between the realities that lay in infinite number. When the energy nets—"

Tohm sighed, interrupting. "What is a quasi-reality?"

"Oh. Well, a quasi-reality exists but doesn't exist. It's a sort of no-man's land with the Truths on either side. Understand?"

"No."

The library flustered to itself for a while. "I never thought of the complexities involved when attempting to explain the twenty-ninth century to a twenty-second century man."

"Hey, I'm educated, you know!"

"Certainly, but you were given only the scientific understanding of the twenty-second century. The only thing you know after that is history. You know what has happened in the last eight hundred years, but not how or why. You're years behind in *concepts*."

"What would you know about anything," Tohm stormed, the pride of his people surging within him.

"Before I died, I was," the library said, "Chairman of the Department of Literature at Floating University One."

Tohm felt his pride sinking in a quagmire of shame. He had never seen a university, much less taught at one.

“The name is Triggy Gop.”

“Not really?”

“If you were a student, and if I had my old body, I’d flip you on your back and beat the tar out of you.”

“Sorry.”

“Forgiven. But you see, I do know something about modern concepts of life. I lived a full life of my own. My wife died in childbirth, and I was dying myself. In order to see my child as it grew, I volunteered my brain to the Federation, thus gaining near immortality. I’ve been a library now for twenty-two years.”

Tohm heaved another sigh. “I really have to go. I have star charts now. I know where my Tarnilee is, and I have calculated that she will appear on the slave market within a week,”

“Well, if you must go—”

“Perhaps we’ll meet again,” Tohm said. He felt an odd kinship with the professor-machine-library.

*“Perhaps in some lonely cabaret,
some black night, some bright day
with snow upon the ground or grass
turned yellow with days gone past.”*

“Huh?”

“Poetry. Mine. Not much to do after you read the papes and the new books. I never sleep, you know. Just like you. Weariness is electronically sucked off and the brain is rested a full eight hours in only ten seconds. So, I write my verse.”

*“I take my leave of Triggy,
I say goodbye.
He seems a little wiggy
but nice guy.”*

“Hey! Hey, limericks,” Triggy said.

The doors opened behind, and the blackness of space glistened impossibly dark. “Goodbye, Triggy Gop,” Tohm called.

“Goodbye, Jason. May you find your fleece that is the maiden Tarnilee.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Just, good luck.”

“You too,” he answered, drifting out from the hulk-ing cube. The portal closed behind.

III

He swathed himself in negative patterns to protect against every sort of radar and coasted in toward the bulbous fruit that was Basa II. He had researched to find why the “two” was hung after the name, but he found no reason. There never had been a Basa I.

Scoping the land masses through the cloud breakage, he found he was on the correct side of the giant lemon (the seas were yellow, and the clouds were an amber hue). The continent of Bromida Basa lay below. The capital city, Romaghin Cap Five, was on the edge of a peninsula that stretched into the great sea. Population: three million plus. Main business: trading of stolen merchandise, slave marketing, sin. He tried not to think about Tarnilee. He did not know how long it had been since they had parted or how

long it would be until she was totally beyond his grasp. Stretching his mind and studying everything Triggy Gop had to offer, he thought, perhaps, the month long period between capture and sale of a slave would be up this week. He hoped he wasn't just being optimistic. If she did come onto the platform to be sold, he knew it wouldn't take long. Not for a girl like Tarnilee.

Breaking orbit, he plunged down through the denser and denser layers of atmosphere, hull heating, eyes out for any missiles from anyone who might have broken the radar-negative shield and picked him up. The shield had been known to fail.

The clouds appeared to rush at him, up and up and up, though it was actually himself dropping down and down and down. He hit the clouds expecting a jolt and was plunging through toward the earth below. He splashed out analyzer waves and discovered the land below was composed mostly of loose sand. There was desert at the back of the peninsula. The sand was a hundred and two feet deep before it gave way to solid rock. He braked for a short moment, cutting his speed in half, and smashed head first into the sand, sinking immediately out of sight like a pebble tossed in a pond. He left a momentary whirlpool in the sand which eventually settled itself and lay quiet. Eighty-three feet below the surface, he slid to a halt and lay very still indeed. Minutes passed without result. No missiles. No warheads. Nothing. He eased up on his nerves, allowed them to unbunch themselves, and sighed.

He was on the planet of Basa II—in it, really.

He was only a dozen miles from the fringes of the city that held his Tarnilee. Tarnilee of the soft lips . . . Tarnilee of the sweet eyes . . . Tarnilee of the flower soul with the delicate laugh and the feet like crystal structures . . .

He searched into his bowels where the shock-proof chemical tanks and laboratories were working diligently. The body seemed perfect. It was tall, muscular, blond, and handsome. The process had been suspended until he was ready to have his brain deposited in the skull via cellular welding which would connect it to the nerves and life systems of the humanoid floating in the brackish fluid

He was ready.

Clipping the limited semi-brain of the computer into the controls, he set everything on automatic, ready to respond to his call for help but inert and unfunctioning unless needed. A mechanical brain could handle all functions minimally, but it took an organic brain to really operate a Jumbo.

The servo-robot trundled into the control center where his brain hung in a nutrient sack inside an energy net which was, in turn, sheltered within a shatter-proof, blast-proof alloy bowl. The brain was protected, for even if shot down, the Jumbo might provide a humanoid body for the brain—a body which would be in enemy territory and capable of doing more damage. Carefully, the robot lifted the bowl from the immovable pillar, where it had been latched, and carried it down through the decks into the operating theater. He directed it to hypo him to sleep, and he was obeyed.

Dreams flooded his mind . . .

Later, he woke with a clear mind, no traces of fogging drugs. The surgeon arms dangled above his head, all manner of instruments fitted to their metal fingers. Thin bladed knives, broad spatulas, hypodermics, every conceivable surgical tool hung in their nimble, steel fingers. He raised his own arm and looked at it. It was nothing like theirs. It was real, terribly muscular, and ended in five fingers with hair on the knuckles, fine, wiry blond hair. He shoved himself to a sitting position and surveyed his new body. Admirable. Quite admirable indeed. His feet were neither too tiny to provide a sound base nor too large, to be in his way when a situation demanded agility. His calves and thighs were exquisitely muscled, almost rippling with power even as he sat still. His waist was slim, his stomach flat. The barrel of his chest was matted with fine hairs that would, he knew, grow long and darker. His bull's neck was topped with a handsome face, the mirror showed him. There was no trace of the brain transplantation, not even a fine scar. A marvelous body. A fighter's body. He would need it.

Kicking onto the floor and flexing his arms and legs, he thought next about clothes. The auto-fact had been programmed with information on Basa II costume. He stepped from the blue chamber of the surgeons and into the bone-white chamber of the auto-fact delivery trough. It provided him, when he punched the delivery button, with a neatly folded bundle of garments wrapped and tied with red twine. Tohm broke the string and laid them out on the couch that was bolted to the wall. There was a red velour

of velveteen with a turtleneck ridged in black. The trousers were leotards, actually, black as the night is black. Slipper boots that came just below the knee slid on easily, almost of their own accord, comfortable, sleek, perma-polished. They repelled any form of dirt, maintaining that immaculate appearance popular among the wealthy here. Lastly, there was a cape of velveteen that fell just below his waist, a black and sinister thing with a quarter inch of tassel about the bottom. It tied about his shoulders by a polished brass chain whose links were studded by simu-pearls.

Turning before the mirror, he admired himself. A uni-form like this made a man seem so much more a man, so capable and magnificent. The grandeur of Basa II must be overwhelming, he thought, if this were standard dress. A grand and wonderful world. He had never been an aggressive man until they forced him to it, but in that getup, he felt as if he could reach out and stop the world in its orbit and rotation, black out the sun, com-mand the gods!

Cape fluttering behind, he walked back to the con-trol center and keyed the computer to bring him a car. The capital lay above and ahead, and he did not wish to delay. A moment later, the small, bullet-shaped ve-hicle rose through the floor elevator and sat purring like a contented cat, waiting for him to lift the transparent cap and climb in. He did so, strapping himself in and sliding the roof shut again.

The board before him twinkled with dozens of lights, the largest being a rotating map which glowed green like a radar scope and had a blinking red dot (the posi-tion of the Jumbo), a glistening shimmer of blue (his car), and a field of pink haze slashed by fine yellow lines (the city and its roads). Punching the starter be-fore him, he took the wheel, steered the car through the opening door, and came out in the bubble of air that surrounded the Jumbo. The shield was there to keep the sand back when he opened the ship's door. Now, door closed behind him, it blinked off and the sand came pouring back, burying him. Kicking the accelator aside into the slot marked Digger, he pressed down and watched as the dull, almost invisible flame ate out at the sand, fused it into glass, and built a tunnel slanting upward, dropping unused blocks of still hot glass behind.

He broke the surface at a gentle angle after three hours of digging. It should have been only eighty-three miles to the surface, but he had slanted the shaft and gone much farther. It was night. He cut the flames and turned on the infrared headlights. Nothing about but sand. Plenty of that, though. He decided it would be best to leave the car there, buried, and make it to the capital alone. It would not be prudent to make his appearance in a Romaghin war car when he wasn't even a soldier. That might arouse the suspicions of the local constabulary.

Getting out, he set the car to Settle and watched as it slowly, like a sand crab, covered itself. When it was out of sight and the humming of its motor had ceased, he turned toward the highway that slashed the desert a hundred feet away, and began to walk. At the road's edge, he gathered his directional sense, stared at the faint glow of lights that would be the city. Lying on the ground, he activated the concealed flybelt beneath his velour, lifted, and drifted silently through the cool air toward the city.

And Tarnilee.

Four miles later, he saw the campfire . . .

IV

He would not have stopped if he had not heard the screaming. But that drew him. His people had been prideful, honest, helpful people. They had known little evil in their daily lives, but they fought against that which they did find. Screams indicated someone in trouble, and he could not let anyone go unaided.

Checking his directions so that he would not lose the pathway to the city, he banked left toward the clump of scrubby trees and bushes that stood as a solitary monument on an ancient battlefield. The tallest trees cut at the dark sky like saber points brandished by the smaller growths. The fire lay to the edge, flickering and dancing like some frolicking beast. He cut into the dark portion of the woods and drifted

between the trees, seeking the forms of men he knew must be there.

And were. A band of men in old clothes sat about the fire. Actually, he saw, they were sitting around a very small boy. The men were unshaven, gruff-looking creatures. Nomads, he thought. Traveling the deserts of Basa II in search of what little there was to find, coming occasionally to the city to satisfy themselves with women of the houses, to stupify themselves with the ale and wines of the inns. The boy was a smaller version of the men. Unscrubbed, dressed in tatters, he sat in the center of the human semicircle. But in one way, he was different. His eyes.

White eyes . . .

Snow eyes . . .

They were not albino orbs, for they didn't have that pinkish cast. Besides, the boy had dark hair and skin. They were not simply light blue bordering on colorless. They were white, white eyes. White iris and even whiter pupil.

"Do it," a large man at the end of the semicircle said.

"One at a time. Maybe two," the boy said, his voice quavering.

"Sure," the man said. "Sure, and the others wait an hour while only two at a time dream. You've tranced all six before."

"I'm tired. We've been trancing all day."

"And will all night. Tomorrow we go into the city. You will make us feel good, hone our senses to the sharpest point so that everything we do is totally experienced, so that all we drink and eat we will taste completely, minutely, so that our moments with the women will seem like days, like months."

"Like years," a fat nomad said, wiping sweat from his cheeks before it could trickle down and into his beard.

"You'll kill me," the boy warned.

The first nomad who had spoken, and who seemed to be the nearest thing to a leader these people had, picked up a pair of tongs and lifted a glowing coal from the fire, blew on it to heat it even more, then tossed it at the boy. It bounced from his slender arm, leaving a brown burn.

The boy screamed again, the same scream Tohm had heard from the highway. It wasn't a scream quite like any he had ever heard. It was a dozen screams at once, each a hundred decibels above the last. Tohm thought they might go on into infinity, far above the human ear's perception, spiraling and spiraling, an eternity of screams.

"We tie you down," said the fat man, lifting his arm and pointing at the boy. There was a great wet patch under his arm, spreading down his side. "We tie you down and lay the coals on your face, one by one, then fan them hotter. They'll eat right through your skull, right into your brain."

The boy screamed again. Even the trees seemed to shudder, to hear. "All right," his weak voice said at last. "I will try. But I can *only* try." He closed the white orbs, covering them with dark lids.

Suddenly as he hung there, Tohm felt the world sway-ing about him. He moved to grab hold of a limb—and then was no longer Tohm. . . .

He was color . . .

A minimum of crimson in a sea of blue . . .

A droplet of cinnabar, swirling and tumbling, surging and falling, blending and rejelling . . .

Waves of lapis lazuli swept Mm into currents of ocher and gamboge . . . Splashing wetly, he crashed upon a beach of heliotrope spotted with cadim . . .

REDREDREDREDRED . . . RED . . . REDRED-REDREDREDRED . . .

There was no identity. The loss of self was relief, pure and fresh and wonderful...

A gestalt, single organism of all shades of red: rouge, scarlet, vermilion, madder, lake, cochineal . . .

All one . . .

. . . One all . . .

REDREDREDREDRED upon a land of iridescent pitch and prismatic purple . . .

Then all the colors began to fade, and there was a land and he was again a man. He was no individual, but an agglomeration of all a man wishes to be: large of body, great of intellect, full of

sexual desires and abilities. He was suave, yet an animal. He was cunning, yet innocent. He walked forth naked through the forests of swaying palms.

And naked came the maidens. The drifting leaves caught in the rivers of the wind began changing into women, all shades and sizes of women. Short and tall, thin and full, large breasts and small, they came. All were beautiful . . .

Ghost women . . .

Lovely women . . .

REDREDREDREDRED he swayed toward them like a wave, desire frothing within him . . .

Lilting, soft, lustful, they swam at him like—

Suddenly he was hanging in the air as before, staring into the campfire. He shook his head to clear whatever was left of the dreams. The boy was clutching his face in his hands. "I can't. Tired now. Let me rest. Later. Let me rest for now."

"Tie him down," the fat one said.

The others grumbled in agreement.

Tohm realized that it had been the boy making the dreams. He was a psychedelic, an organic, living hal-lucinogenic. He was reaching out with his mind and altering the fabric of reality, twisting things to show them what was not, to give them pleasure of the Never Would Be.

The men grunted, standing. The leader pounded a tent peg into the ground. Another. Yet another.

Tohm fumbled in his pockets and removed his gas pellet pistol. Floating into the clearing, he said, "That's far enough."

The fat nomad, despite his ponderous weight, moved quickly, heaving a throwing knife from the orange sash about his waist. Tohm dove like a swimmer, floated up above head level, dodged a second knife, and blasted the man. The pellet flashed away, sunk a few inches into the flesh before suddenly expanding, exploding the no-mad's stomach from the inside out.

The leader shouted orders. Tohm swung on him, pulled the trigger, saw the face blast open from the nose, spilling brains.

The others were running now, terrified, leaving all of their belongings. He turned to the boy, but the boy was gone. He searched the land about and saw that the boy was running with the four men—without being forced to!

"Wait," he called, "I'll help you. I won't hurt you, boy!"

But the boy was gone. He had been terribly fast for a weak, weary youngster. Tohm turned to the two bodies. He was confused. Why hadn't the boy come to him! He had stopped the nomads from killing him. Wasn't that grounds enough for friendship? And had these killings been in vain? Had he misinterpreted things?

He floated back to the highway, clouds of uneasiness and doubt drifting through his mind. He knew little of the world, coming from a prim village. Triggy was right; he could not grasp the concepts. Even the people seemed to act strangely. Paralleling the roadway, he set out at once for the city, trying to arrange the incidents at the campfire into a sensible order. He did not feel terribly guilty about the killing, for these were Romaghins. Perhaps they were not the ruling class, but they were as ruthless and cunning as their chiefs. And somewhere in the capital, they held his Tarnilee.

When he reached the tip of the peninsula, the city had vanished.

V

But that was impossible! A city simply did not disappear. He realized now that the glow of light had been gone when he left the nomad camp, but it had not struck him. Now it did. He searched over every hillock, oddly expecting an entire city to leap up from behind rocks and shout surprise. But there were no

rocks large enough behind which to hide a city. He cut the power on the belt and settled to the ground. The earth was virgin, undisturbed. There was no sign that a city had ever been there—no foundations, pipelines, sewers. There were not even footprints.

Dawn was breaking rapidly across the mountains, flashing up golden and orange fingers, testing the sky for conditions before setting out on the long day's journey to the opposite horizon. There were few clouds, and those were the fluffy yellow-white mists at high elevation, chunks of diluted whipped cream that had gone sour. The blue sky was much like that of his home world, as constant in its shade as a dyed cloth, marred in its bland perfection only by the sun as it yawned to begin its day, tinting the blue with amber.

Scrub grass tangled across the earth, a brown and shaggy carpet. It abruptly choked off the road at its precious entry point to the once-city. Now there was grass—undisturbed. Tohm stood, looked about. He walked to the bluffs that overlooked the sea, choosing not to fly, in this hour of unexplainable defeat, like a giddy bird. He had lived next to the sea all of his life and looked to it as a living thing, not merely a dead, soulless pond. One spoke to the sea, and the sea spoke back. Not in precise syllables, mind you, not in grammatic clarity, but it spoke just the same. Its voice was the keening of the wind whipping the surface waves. Its tongue was the white-foamed wavelets that licked at the sky by the thousands, babbling to one another, talking at night to the stars. Splashing, bubbling, chuck-ling, the sea spoke. If you knew what the sound meant, if you understood the language of the waters in all its detail with its many connotations and denotations, it might make you laugh. Or it might make you cry, depending on your nature.

Tohm sat on the bluff, legs dangling over the chopped off edge where it dropped straight down to the beach. Below, the sands were yellow-white like the sea, steam-ing hot, slightly acid. He wrinkled his nose and sighed. There was little use for ranting and raving. He felt more like being gloomy, indulging in self-pity. The sea was quiet today, and thus would he be. He looked along the beach, searching for some rock formations where the babbling could be heard, where the ocean would have lips, and he saw the wharf.

It was large. Piers of wood and stone jutted out into the water like lances plunged at the heart of the sea. They crisscrossed and paralleled. There were two levels to it, the bottom having bars and hotels for sailors. It was a facility to service a major city, though there was no longer a major city to be serviced. A dozen ships, mostly freighters, were tied to. Three large fishing trawl-ers stood, barnacle-covered, rusted, next to the dirty but cared for cargo vessels. Here and there, little specks that were people moved about. One of the boats, deck swarming with dots, began drifting away from the wharf, motors churning the stale waters into foam. He watched it from his great height, his knees drawn up under his chin. It was like a great automatic whale, he thought. Then the thought abruptly struck him that they might all be leaving. He looked for a way down. A thousand yards ahead, the cliff began to fade into the beach, sloping gently, navigable by a man on foot. He stood and ran.

“Hey!” he shouted at the dots. “Hey!”

At first they didn't hear him.

“Hey! Hey, up there!”

The dots were resolving into something more human. “Ho!” one of them called back, waving an arm to show they had seen him.

Panting, he doubled his speed. He could not very well use the flybelt without stirring up suspicion. And if they were as curious and perplexed by the disappearance of the city as he was, they would be suspicious of anyone to begin with. Kicking up a column of powdered sand behind, he raced down the slope and pounded on the finer sands, gained the steps to the main pier.

When he reached the dock below the giant freighter where the waving man stood, there was no air left in his lungs. He stood there, leaning against a mooring post, staring up at the deck, his chest jumping up and down like a caged animal. A number of crewmen had come to the rail to look at him.

“Who are ye?” the man in the captain's hat asked.

“Tohm,” he said.

“Ye live here, Tohm?” The man had a bushy white beard, ruddy cheeks, and a nose like a beacon.

"Aye," he said, reverting to the speech pattern he knew was Basa II's own.

"Where were ye when the town itself vanished?"

"Coming home. Aye, coming home I was. I got here and seen there was nothing." He hoped they didn't ask where it was he had been coming from.

The captain ordered the entry ramp lowered, smiled down at him. In a moment, it clanked upon the dock, sending a booming echo the length of the wharf. "C'mon aboard, then."

He walked up to the gangplank, still exhausted, and stepped onto the deck. The captain was standing there with the crew behind as if seeking protection. He had no legs. A single limb of metal welded the stumps of his legs together well above the knee and ended in a floating ball which rolled about, taking him where-ever he wished. He rolled over to Tohm, conscious of the appearance he made, and liking it. "Ye look o' the upper class."

He thought quickly. "My father deals in concubines."

"Really now," the captain said, his eyes twinkling.

"What happened to the city?" Tohm asked, looking about uneasily. He was determined to find out as much as possible before someone asked a telling question and his disguise was revealed. It was difficult to tread knowledgeably on the ground of a world you knew the customs of but not the basic concepts behind them. Triggy Gop was indeed a prophet. He was going to have to grasp a better basis of understanding.

"Ye haven't figured 'it out yet?" the captain asked.

The men behind him grumbled.

"I . . . I've been away—"

"An awfully long time and awful far away if ye can't figger it out. The Muties, man! The Muties! Fooling around with the Fringe agin."

"I should o' known," he said, still totally in the dark.

"Ya. Ya, all trouble comes from them. But we are in luck! They didn't exchange it. They couldn't hold the Mollycools apart long enough. They didn't exchange it— only managed to move it."

"Move it?"

"Ya. We got a report from the capital radio and de-fense system. We first thought it was the end; one min-ute there was a city, the next—*poof*. But then our com-munications boy picked her up. The Muties set her down eight hundred miles farther up the coast."

Tohm shook his head in disgust, as he felt he was expected to.

"Be an improvement, actchilly," the captain said, roll-ing closer. "More moderate climate up there. The name's Hazabob. Captain Hazabob." He offered a weathered hand.

Tohm shook it. "Could ye use a crewman? I'll work my way up to the city."

Hazabob looked around to his men. Tohm thought the old bird winked. "I'll tell ye what I'll do, Tohm, my boy," he said, throwing a fatherly arm about Tohm's shoulder. There was a smell of dead fish and perspira-tion. "I don't need a crewman. Ye'd be in the way, ye would. But I'll take ye along anyway."

"Well thanks," Tohm said, grinning, his sunny hair windblown over his forehead.

"I'll take ye, think nothin' o' it. And while ye's talkin' about the city—" He turned and openly winked at his men this time. A few of them winked back, grinned. "While ye's talkin' about the city, perhaps I should say we'd like ye to persuade yer father to reward us, if ye knows what I mean."

Tohm looked blank.

"With a conkeebine o' our own, ye ninny!" Hazabob roared.

Tohm swallowed. "Certainly. My father always has a broad selection o' women. Ye may have yer pick."

"Heh, heh," Hazabob wheezed. "Fine. Fine indeed. The ship is yers to explore. Just stay out o' the cargo hold, cause we got a load o' delicate spices there. Yer breath might contaminate them if ye have a cold or something."

"Sure. O' course."

Hazabob snapped two brittle fingers together. "Jake, show Mr. Tohm to his cabin. Be quick about

it!"

Jake lumbered forth, a seven foot, three hundred pound giant. "Sure, Cap. This way, Mr. Tohm."

Tohm followed the man, listening to the faint rumble as the captain rolled away to see about the launching of the ship. He would have to make his getaway quickly when they reached the capital. These men wouldn't show any mercy to an impostor, especially one who promised them a concubine and then reneged.

"This is the guest room," Jake said, shoving the door open.

Tohm peered in. There was little luxury to the place. It was strictly utilitarian. The commode and shower were unconcealed. The bed was bolted to the wall, a wilted foam mattress and ratty woolen blanket draped across the springs. Springs, Tohm thought, which were probably broken and bent. But it was a way to the capital and Tarnilee.

"Meals are at seven in the evening and five-thirty in the morning. Ye makes yer own lunches when ye have a chance."

"Sounds perfect."

"Ain't bad." He lingered at the doorway, shuffling his huge, bucket feet.

"Thank ye, Jake," Tohm said, reclining wearily on the bunk.

Still Jake did not move. He wiped his left foot back and forth through the thin coat of dust that covered the floor plates.

"Is there something on your mind?" Tohm asked at length.

"Now that ye ask," Jake said, a dinnerplate-sized grin on his face, "there is something I wanted to ask ye."

"Well?"

"Ye see, I know what kinda conkeebine they's going to pick, them others. She's going to be tiny and delicate— awful pretty, mind ye—but awful tiny and terrible aw-ful delicate. I was wondering if—"

"Ya, Jake?"

"Well, I got a hunnert creds saved up, and I was won-dering whether yer father could maybe have a tall . . . well, a sorta large . . . a girl with . . . well . . ."

"An Amazon?"

He grinned, flushed. "I know a hunnert ain't much—"

"I'm sure my father can find ye someone, Jake. Some-one ye'd be just crazy about. And at yer price."

"Gee, Tohm," the ox said, blushing even brighter, "really?"

"Really."

"Jake!" Hazabob called.

"I gotta go," he said. "Thanks, Tohm."

"Yer welcome, Jake."

The shadow that had been flooding the room was gone.

Tohm stretched back on the bed and found it to be more comfortable than it had looked. Trying to untense every muscle and nerve, he took a moment to think about the events of the last day or so. What were the Muties trying to do? What exactly were the Muties? What was the Fringe? What was the quasi-reality? The Realities? What had the Muties been attempting with Basa II's capital city, and why had they failed? His nerves grew tenser than before as the confusion boiled in his mind. He never had liked to be confused. His curiosity had always driven him to find the answers to things that confused him in the village of his people. This world, however, was far more complex than any-thing he had ever found in that tiny settlement of dark people. Yet all of the things that perplexed him here were taken as common knowledge by the people who lived in this insane universe. But to him, coming barefoot from a land of thatched huts, it was a riddle. The library materials took a basic understanding for granted too, and thus they were only more confusing, not clarifying.

He closed his eyes, blotting out the stained, gray ceil-ing and the grease-streaked blue walls. Better to think. But his thinking was interrupted by a low moaning. A slap, like leather hitting leather. This moaning in-creased. It seemed to seep through the near wall. He got up and walked to the partition. The

noise was definitely louder. *Slap-crack!*

Moaning . . .

Slap . . .

Slappity-crackity-slap!

Now it was growing fainter. Bending, he found the sound was clearer next to the floor. He got down on his hands and knees, his ears alert as an animal's ears. The slapping had stopped, but the moaning was still there. It had sounded almost—but not quite—human.

“Did ye lose something, Mr. Tohm?” a voice asked from behind.

VI

He looked over his shoulder, his heart having slipped up next to his molars.

“Ye lose something?” Jake asked.

“Uh . . . yeah, a pearl fell from my cape clasp.”

“I’ll help.”

“No, no. That’s okay. Imitation anyway.”

“I come back just to say that I’d like her to have blue eyes, Mr. Tohm.”

“Who?”

“The Amazon. Yer father’s Amazon.”

He stood and brushed his leotards off. “Blue eyes it is.”

“Gee thanks, Mr. Tohm. I gotta go. See ye later.”

“Ya, Jake. Later.”

The giant thudded away again.

He closed the door before going back to listen for the noise. But there was nothing. He went back to his bunk after a few minutes and stretched out. And now a new question: what was in the cargo compartment? His cabin was right next to it. He was certain that spices, no matter how delicate, did not moan. Why had Hazabob lied to him? What was really in there?

His eyes were growing heavy, and it took him a few minutes to figure out what the trouble was. Sleep. He had been without sleep since being placed into the Jum-bo, and he had nearly forgotten about it. Pulling the tattered blanket up around his waist, he surrendered himself to the blackness, for he had pleasant memories of it.

When he woke, there was a fuzz in his mouth like a live thing trying to crawl down his throat and into his stomach. He wrinkled his face, wiped the matting from around his eyes, and blinked at the wall clock. An hour until supper. He had slept right through the heat of the day, and the rolling of the ship told him he had slept right through the launch and several hours of travel too. Pushing up, he gazed about the gloominess, yawned, and stood. He cast a last glance at the wall between him-self and the cargo hold, then left the room.

Whiffing the salty air as if it were a medicine, gagging on the slight sulfurous odor, he strolled along the deck, past the cargo compartment. There was a large, burglar-proof padlock on the door. Casually, he turned and walked away, exploring the ship at random until the gong sounded and everyone began moving below decks for supper.

The mess chamber was the only lively room he had seen on the vessel—if painted-over mediocrity could be considered lively. There were no trimmings. The steel beams were hanging around naked, the pipes of the sewage system filling the corners and gurgling now and then as various toilets were flushed and sinks drained. Still, everything was clean and bright—light peach in color. But not only the colors of the walls and ceiling were lively, for the crew seemed jovial too. Tohm had noticed an air of melancholia, gloom, ugliness about the ship. Here, in the mess, it didn't prevail.

The table was very long and broad, constructed of an odd wood he had never seen before, one that shone like polished stone, black and glossy. It was medieval in design, supported by crude, massive blocks of wood instead of regular legs. The chairs were a hodge-podge of styles and materials. Tohm had been given a seat near the head of the table to the left of Hazabob. "We believe in eating well," the captain said, chuckling.

As the cooks brought in the trays, Tohm could see what Hazabob meant. The white-smocked men, gruff and burly as the crewmen themselves, flashed about, moving like lightning bolts, depositing the trays, returning with more, setting things down, busy as all Hell. When they left, there were platters of unknown meat chops, two dozen servings on each platter. There were large bowls of peas and pea-like yellow vegetables steaming heartily, forming ghosts above the heads of the thirty sailors sitting the length of the table. Huge baskets of rolls and chips of butter were everywhere along the ebony surface so that no one had to ask for the bread to be passed. Two different varieties of beans were offered to Tohm. He took both, and both were delicious. He had been accustomed to a simple spread in his village, a few courses, always the same. The great variety nearly overwhelmed him. The wine glass was never empty; one of the cooks saw to that. And the wine was best of all. It was black, absolutely Stygian, and bittersweet like no fruit he had ever tasted.

While they were consuming the gobs of cream and cake that was dessert, Hazabob leaned over and tapped his arm. "Ye won't be forgetting to tell yer father about the way we fed ye?"

"I won't be forgetting a bit," Tohm answered, his mouth stuffed.

"Good," Hazabob said, spooning cream into his mouth. "I like ye, boy."

There was no orderly dismissal after supper. The men began to leave in ragtag order, staggering away with bloated bellies to go to sleep and prepare for the next day, dreaming about what the cooks would whip up for that supper.

"I believe I'll turn in," Tohm said to Hazabob.

"Oh?"

"Food makes me sleepy."

"Ya," the captain said, starting on his second dish of cake. "Ya, ye was probably used to those prissy dinners with little sanditches and cookies."

"And caca tea," Tohm added, smiling. He had read about that in the floating library.

"Yeah," Hazabob laughed, slapping the table with the palm of his hand. "Yeah, and caca tea!"

Caca tea was an aphrodisiac of the wealthy.

"Excuse me," Tohm said, standing.

"Umm," Hazabob replied, his face buried in dessert.

He left, climbing the companionway to the desk. The moons were out, two silver featureless faces on the blackness of the sky. The water slopped against the ship, and that was the only sound. Tohm walked casually to his cabin, closed the door behind. He would have locked it, but they had not seen fit to supply him with any such safeguard. He turned to the wall and looked it over. He just might be able to get through.

Standing in one corner, he sighted along the stubby barrel of the gas pistol. He didn't want to penetrate the wall and blow up something on the other side; he wanted to blast open the wall. That meant an angled shot. The gas pistol was a marvelous little weapon. It was good for a hundred or so shots before a refill was needed, and it was not bulky. A minute pellet of compressed gas left the barrel. When it sunk into the object fired at, resistance caused heat and expanded the pellet. The "explosion" caused thereby could down any man or beast. Or, he hoped, a metal wall. He wanted to strike the wall so that the pellet would have to travel through it at an angle, thus giving it time to expand before it crashed through into the storeroom. He depressed the stud.

Almost immediately, the wall ruptured, split back. From the same position, he fired again. Again. When he put down the pistol, the rent was large enough to squeeze through. He squeezed.

The place was dark. Very. There was a musty odor, part of it the dankness of any closed place, part of it food scraps, organic wastes. He stumbled about, looking for a light switch, found a palmer next to what seemed to be the outline of the door, and flooded the place with light. The door would be

watertight, and certainly, no cracks should be there to emit light onto the deck.

Blinking his eyes, he surveyed the room. There were a number of crates, unmarked, stacked about, lashed to the walls in columns and to rings set in the floor. There were walkways between the cargo boxes, but he could see nothing that might have moaned.

There was a rustle.

He looked to the floor for rats.

"Well," a voice croaked. It was like dragging a rake across tarpaper. "Well, what do you want?"

The renting wall had made only a soft screeching sound, so the person was unaware that he hadn't come in through the door. But what person? He didn't see anyone. It began asking him again, and it proved a good beacon to home on. He followed it among the crates and came finally to a cage. He jumped back. There was a face looking out of the cage at him. A face and nothing more. The thing was a head with a lump of ugly gray tissue beneath its pate where a neck ordinarily would have been. Several tentacles snaked out from that lump.

"Well?" the face asked.

One of the tentacles smashed down onto the floor of the cage.

Slap-crackity!

He now knew where the sound had been coming from.

"What the Hell do you want?" the face screamed.

"Shhh," he said, forcing himself to go closer to the cage, bending down, finally hunkering on the floor. "They don't know I'm in here."

The gray eyes looked at him calculatingly. "Who are you?"

"Wait. If I tell you, will you answer some questions for me?"

The tentacles slapped about in annoyance. "Okay, okay. God, let's not quibble."

"Then I am called Tohm."

"What do you do on the ship?"

"Nothing. I'm a passenger. I'm trying to get to the capital to hunt for my woman."

"Your woman?"

"Yes. She was kidnapped, as I was, by the Romaghins. I feel she will soon be sold. I must find her." To the other's further questioning, he recounted his history as a Jumbo and now as a man again.

"Why does this crew help you?"

"They think my father is a wealthy trader of concu-bines."

"Hah," the face said, puckered with glee. "Good. They deserve it."

"Now," Tohm said, leaning forward but not too close, "who are you?"

"They call me Hunk."

"Well," he said hesitantly, "what . . . what are you?"

There was silence a moment. "

"You mean you've never seen a Mutie before?"

"What's a Mutie?" Tohm asked, relieved that now he would finally find out.

"By the gods, you are a stoical bastard, aren't you! Very few people would have reacted so calmly to seeing a Mutie for the first time."

"Then you're a Mutie?"

"Yeah. I'm the result of all the nuclear wars the Romaghins and Setessins fought before atomics went obsolete and the laser cannon came into use. Radia-tion changed me as a fetus. I have a heart stuffed up here in my necks, a brain, and the digestive system of a bird, simple and compact."

Tohm swallowed, but found there was no saliva. His mouth was perfectly dry. "Then you're all—"

"No, no. Each is different from the last. I'm a very severe case. At least, I'm unique."

Tohm sighed. Things were beginning to clear in some corners. Still, most of his concepts were confused and in-complete. "What happened to the city?"

"Hah," the head said. It slapped tentacles against the floor and laughed again. Finally, tears rolling down its cheeks, it said, "That was good, wasn't it? Maybe we didn't carry through a complete exchange, but we came close. Damn close. That'll give them something to worry about for a while."

"But what did you do to it?"

"We put it eight hundred miles up the coast!"

"What were you *trying* to do with it?" Tohm asked exasperatedly.

"Exchange it boy, transfer it. Oh, we had the Fringe all shook, let me tell you. For a moment there, you could have transferred the whole damned universe through. But we weren't fast enough. Besides, I've dis-covered you can't hold the Fringe and transfer at the same time."

"I don't understand."

"What do you mean?"

"I come from a primitive world, remember. I don't even know what the Fringe is."

"It's the quasi-reality—"

"Between the realities," Tohm finished.

"There, see, you know."

"I know how to say it, but I don't know what it means."

"Well," Hunk said, crossing his tentacles in consterna-tion, "I'll be damned! I thought everyone knew."

"I don't. Everyone knows but me."

Hunk moaned, rolled around a bit. "Look, for eight centuries the Romaghins and Setessins have been fight-ing wars. The inhabited galaxy has not been able to live in peace, for even the innocent, neutral planets are forced into the game sooner or later. We Muties are try-ing to rid the universe of the Romaghins and Setessins. Without them, the galaxy would be better off. We Mu-ties might even be able to have citizenship and pen-sions. We might even be able to walk the streets without being shot on sight."

"You're the good guys."

"Yeah. You could say that." Hunk crept to the front of the cage, pressed against the bars. "Look, the old one-legger who runs this ship—"

"Captain Hazabob."

"That's him. Well, he located our party along the beach where we were hiding. He killed the others and took me captive. I'm sort of a wanted person aside from being a Mutie. They caught us just after we had dropped the city and were still a little groggy. They plan to string me up in the public square and have a gala cele-bration. Could you get me out of here?"

"I don't know. I don't see how. I can't jeopardize everything. I have to get to the city."

Hunk moved around in the cage, stumbling over his own snaking arms that dragged him about clumsily. "I know where the city is. I could guide you. What was this girl's name again?"

"Tarnilee."

"Suppose, when we get to Cap Five, I help you find your Tarnilee?"

Tohm stared into the gray eyes. They appeared sin-cere. "What could you do to help? I mean—"

"There is a Mutie underground nearly everywhere. We evacuated the city when we tried to transfer it, but by the time we reach there, the Old Man will have the remainder of our cell, who didn't accompany the transfer group, back in business."

"Old Man?"

"Yeah. We have a chief."

"And this entire underground will help me?"

"I guarantee it. Look, I discovered something impor-tant in the attempt we made back there. We shouldn't try to hold the Fringe and lift the city too. Strangely enough, it's easier to transfer large bulk instead of bits and pieces. We have to transfer all the universe *except* the Romaghins and Setessins. Just the reverse of what we've been doing. It was a moment of revelation. May-be the others saw it too, but the others are dead. I'm the only one with the theory, and I have to get it back."

"I don't understand a thing you're saying."

"Transferring ninety-nine point nine percent of the universe would be easy, for the bulk would serve to hold the Fringe without our aid once the process was begun. We lift and the stuff goes through slick as all Hell. But never mind. Will you help?"

"You promise me Tarnilee?"

"I promise you a good chance of finding her, nothing more."

Tohm thought a moment. "Fair enough."

He unlatched the cage by using a crowbar from the tool rack to twist the sturdy lock apart. Hunk directed the carrying of himself. He could move only at a crawl by himself. Tohm set the Mutie on his shoulder and watched while the thin tentacles laced themselves under his arm and across his chest. He now had two heads.

"I have a flybelt," Tohm said. "We'll coast to the city from here, follow the shoreline until we hit it"

"You're in charge now," Hunk said.

They walked back to the rent in the wall, stepped through into the guest rooms.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Tohm?" Hazabob asked, standing in the doorway.

VII

"I see," Hazabob said to Jake, who stood next to him, "that we have a pervert amongst us."

Jake was scowling.

"Perverts are the only kinds who are friendly with Muties, Mr. Tohm."

"Look, so I'm a pervert," he ad-libbed, "so what?"

Hazabob chuckled. "So perverts are hung with their Mutie friends."

"You won't get a concubine from my father. You won't get anything."

"I think ye aren't the son of a merchant. Suddenly, yer speech is different. Yer don't even sound Rom-aghin, boy."

"Yer crazy," he said, recovering and realizing the blunder. "My father is a merchant. We rich are perverts and get away with it. Privilege of class."

"Then what is yer father's name?" Hazabob asked shrewdly.

Tohm grasped out at any combination of syllables he could find. "Branhosi."

Hazabob turned to look at Jake, who was clenching and unclenching his fists over and over again. "Ye recollect a slave merchant o' that name?"

"No!" Jake roared, his face red and nostrils flared.

"Jake doesn't remember," Hazabob said, looking back to them.

Tohm had a picture in his mind, suddenly, of Tarnilee being sold because he had not made the city on time—or had not made it at all. That was all the incentive to action he needed. They would think him unarmed, for his clothing would not serve to conceal an ordinary weapon. The gas pistol, however, was quite small and inconspicuous. He brought the gun from the pocket of his velour and caught the captain in the stomach. Blood splashed out, bones prickling through the torn flesh, and the man fell, dragging the wheel-leg, a final gasp of surprise frozen on his features.

Jake charged like an animal. Tohm whirled, fired. The man's side splattered against the wall. The charge spun him around like a doll but did not topple him. He lunged, snarling; no longer the passive dolt he had seemed. Tohm fired again and again, bringing the giant down with only moments and inches to spare.

He broke from the doorway then, running, fumbling with the flybelt with one hand and clutching the pistol with the other. He needed the gun first. A dark-haired man with a face like the bottom of a garbage can blasted at him with a hand laser, missed. He didn't get a second chance. The pellet slammed into him, tore open his shoulder, sent his arm spinning away from his body.

He climbed the rail with Hunk, who was shouting curses at the sailors and waving his single free tentacle in fury. Laser beams slid around them, spurts of light sinking through the darkness, eventually touching the stars or lighting the water for a moment on their death ride to the murky bottom. Leaping, he activated the flybelt, felt it jerk him as it caught hold, and soared away. The shouting died. Once, the

searchlight flashed on, scanning the sea, but they were too far away by then. The crew gave up after several minutes.

"Very good, Tohm," Hunk said from his shoulder.

"How far to the city, do you think?"

"Quite a ways. I'm lashed on tightly, though. Let's move."

The sea mist cooled them as the stiff wind whipped it about. They moved along the coast, not stopping until late the following afternoon.

"There is a village along here somewhere," Hunk said. "I recognize those rocks. We should eat."

Tohm looked to that portion of the cliff that the pseudo-arm pointed to. Natural stone pillars stood tall and straight as the red-leafed trees of his home land. The cliffs were dirty brown, but the pillars, composed of a different substance, glittered whitely, magnificent, wind-weathered things.

"How far?"

"I don't know," Hunk said against the whistle of the wind. "About five miles inland, I guess."

Tohm banked toward the shore and coasted over the rim of the cliffs. They buzzed the pillars for a while, admiring their fine, gale-carved faces, the intricate patterns of the god of the winds. Dropping lower, they cruised out of sight behind plain, pine-needled trees, looking for some clue of the village. Eventually, they found a road. In a short time, they discovered a hover-craft loaded with vegetables and fruits. There were swollen apples colored orange rather than red and wicker baskets of berries on the back.

"Hold them up," Hunk advised.

"Steal it?"

"They won't give it away. Especially to a Mutie. Muties are killed on sight—sooner, if possible."

"Well, all right." The growing hunger in his stomach was driving him to criminality, but he didn't care so much anymore. The bellyful from last night's supper on the ship had worn off by now. His gut bubbled like a geyser, growled like a beast.

They dropped in behind the cart, hovered directly over the heads of the unsuspecting driver and passengers. "Stop this cart!" Tohm yelled at them. They looked up—a man, bearded and with a bushy head of hair, a raven-headed woman with a too full bodice and eyes filled with hate. And the boy. The same boy that he had tried to save from the nomads now looked up at him out of white-white eyes. Tohm looked to the woman, looked into her horrid normal eyes and decided the boy was no better off than before. "Stop this cart!" he shouted again.

The driver shrugged his shoulders. Tohm fired a warning shot, tore the front fender apart. The bearded man reached for the lever of the brake and settled the cart gently to the ground. "What ye want?"

"Just a little food," Tohm said. "Set down a melon, some berries, a little of everything."

The driver got out and began selecting a variety. Gun drawn, Tohm drifted toward the boy. "Why did you run away?"

"Leave him alone," the bosomy young woman snapped.

"Why did you run away?" he persisted.

The white-white eyes glared at him.

"Leave him alone," Hunk said uneasily.

The boy smiled.

"I saved his life," Tohm explained. "I saved his life, and he ran away with the men who were going to kill him."

"Get away from him!" Hunk screamed at his friend and only transportation.

Tohm strained his neck to look at the Mutie. "What's the matter?"

Suddenly colors washed over him . . .

Waves of color ridden by nubile maidens . . .

He brought up the pistol while he still had time and some sense of reality. He fired. The shot burst above the head of the boy but was enough to scare him into stopping the dreams. The driver crawled back into his seat. "The food is there. Let us go."

The woman flashed an evil stare at Tohm as the boy buried his head in her ample breasts, doing more—Tohm thought—than a mere boy should have been doing there.

“Go,” Hunk said for him.

The driver lifted the brakes, started the cart, and floated away.

Hunk sighed. “It wasn't the same boy you saw before. You can be sure of that.”

“But it was! Who was he?”

Hunk flapped a tentacle in the direction of the fruits. “We had better eat before they get to town and have the police after us.”

VIII

It was two o'clock in the morning when they reached the capital. Tohm thought that whatever the Muties had done to the city the attack must not have been too un-usual, for everything seemed quite normal and calm. Everyone was asleep. Or nearly everyone, anyway.

They whistled in from the sea, climbed high above the city, and dropped down on the buildings unseen in the pitch night. The buildings were of every size and shape. There were spheres of all hues, forty story rec-tangles composed almost completely of windows, square box structures without any windows at all, and even a pyramid temple. Lights lined the main streets, green globes like fruit on the metal trees of the lamp posts. There were few lights inside the buildings, and most of these seemed standard night lights.

“How do we contact your underground?” Tohm asked, hovering over a giant rectangle, peering down into the flower-planted medial strip.

“Same way I always did before, I guess. The Old Man would have kept the same headquarters. We operate from caves.”

“But,” Tohm said, “I thought you transferred only the city. How far down did you move things?”

“You wouldn't understand.”

“Try me.”

“Well, the city is, in a strange way, an entity. It is connected, each building to the other, each lamp post to the sewers, and—in the mind of we Muties—the caves are also an integral part. When we pictured the city, we pictured the caves with it just in case we failed— as we did—and needed the caves later.”

“But there was no hole in the ground where you up-rooted the city,” Tohm said.

A hovercraft sped by on the boulevard below.

“Oh, it's not actually uprooted, as you're thinking of it. It just never was in that spot as far as space-time laws are concerned. When we found that we could not push it through the Fringe, we allowed the space-time cur-rents to sway it, moving with them, placing the city in another location that could, by natural laws, accept it. For all intents and purposes, the city has always been in this spot.”

“Okay, I don't understand. You were right.”

Hunk swiveled his face about on the shoulder that was not his. “East. Slowly. When I see the building, I'll tell you. The longer we stay out in sight, the more dangerous for the Mutie cause as well as our lives.”

Tohm banked himself by extending an arm and tilting it like a wing, leveled off, and coasted slowly across the roofs of the buildings, rising and dropping with the man-made topography.

“There,” Hunk said at last. “That mauve stone without windows.”

“What is it?”

“Local court house. Drift in to the wall, then hug the shadows to the ground.”

Tohm did as ordered. The Mutie head was beginning to feel like a ton weight on even his massive

shoulders. He was in just as much of a hurry as Hunk to get into those caves and relieved of his burden. He eased down, constantly searching the sidewalk below for late night citizens. Every city had its night people. On Earth, the night people partied until all hours of the morning. On Chona, they pulled practical jokes for people to find and stumble onto in the morning. On Frye, they sucked blood (the very, very night people). And here on Basa II, a Romaghin planet, they killed Muties. And men who aided Muties.

They settled into an alley illuminated only by a faint blue bulb that cast a double set of shadows for every-thing. If he looked at the ground, his shadow made him an odd creature indeed, two bodies and four heads. Siamese twins, two-headed.

"That grating at the end of the alley," Hunk said, raising a tentacle and waving it at an area below the light.

Tohm advanced and stood on the grill. A draft of warm, dry air trickled up. "Now what?"

Hunk seemed to be counting the bricks. Shaking a ten-tacle out, he lingered over the smooth surface of the stone, tapping it out like a blind man reading braille. "This one, I believe." Bending the tentacle against it, he pushed. The brick popped in, held an inch deeper than the surrounding blocks, hummed slightly.

"What—" Tohm began.

Then the brick snapped back out, the grating fell away, and they were dropping through darkness. Down.

Down through the sable-hued tunnel, they dropped. Darkness covered by neatly painted layers of blackness, lacquered over with Stygian pigment and laminated in jet, pitch, crow, ebony. The blackest place Tohm had ever been in. It brought ancient fears boiling into his mind, his heart, roiling over one another with bared fangs. His people had not long been from the cave. The memory of fanged things and clawed things, of man-eaters and child stealers was still strong in his mind, in his racial memory. He wanted to scream and flail, but he saw that Hunk was not perturbed, and he managed to divine that this was supposed to happen. He held his natural rage in.

Abruptly, the winds stiffened, still warm, and grew strong enough to slow their fall. Giant air hands eased them down, holding them as if they were fragile children. It was nothingness with a sense of touch, drawing them into the bowels of the earth. Again, Tohm suppressed his urge to scream. Far, far away, a small red dot glimmered like a monster's tongue, the devil's waiting mouth. They were settled before it gently, gently. A door slid open beneath the red dot, blinding them suddenly with the harsh yellow light of the next room.

"Go in," Hunk said.

Trembling in his stomach, he walked in, shielding his eyes from the glare.

"*Stay right where you are,*" a voice boomed from the walls which he was just now beginning to see.

"Don't move an inch," Hunk advised.

He was wondering what sort of trap he had fallen or been led into. If he moved, would they kill him? Was Hunk involved? Then the primitive fear called paranoia surged through his mind. He could suddenly picture a situation wherein the entire galaxy was set up just to lure him into this room, that his whole life had been for the purpose of falling into these people's hands.

"*State your names,*" the walls said demandingly.

"My name is Tohm," he said, his voice quavering.

"I'm Hunk," Hunk said.

Tohm could now see the blunt snouts of laser guns zeroed in on them, peeking out from the seam where the walls met the ceiling. Twenty. Twenty little mouths ready to vomit out death.

"*What's the password?*"

"In the old city, it was Soulbrother."

"*It still is,*" the walls croaked.

The lights dimmed. Another door opened into a third room, and its opening brought the voice again, only softer, "Welcome home, Hunk."

"Go on," Hunk urged him.

He moved through the door, watched it close behind him. The room was an ultra-modern, comfortable-looking place. There were a number of couches, three desks heaped with papers, a "living" map of the capital, a map of great and surprising detail, showing all buildings and streets, and a number of gray areas which seemed to represent underground pockets of Muties. The lighting was indirect, the ceiling blue, the walls a tasteful bone-white, and the floor smooth concrete. That last brought him out of his contemplative reverie. For all its apparent luxury, the room was still a rebel stronghold, a place where the business of overthrowing a world—several worlds—was carried on.

And there were people. Or, rather, Muties. A fellow about Tohm's age moved forward. He was thin, his face creased with heavy lines of worry—and he had no eyes. In place of orbs, two splotches of gray tissue lay in the sockets, pulsing now and then with various shades of yellow. "Welcome, Hunk. We thought you were dead."

"As good as. Tohm here saved my life."

The eyeless man turned to "stare" at Tohm. "Tohm, I'm Corgi Senyo. Those are two words which mean 'bat eyes' in my native tongue. I'm the . . . well, manager of this link in the underground. I thank you for all of us. Hunk is a valuable man as well as a friend."

Tohm flushed. "He said you would help me."

"He comes from a primitive world," Hunk explained. "He was kidnapped by the Romaghins for use in their Jumbos. He knows nothing of our plight. He wants to help to find his woman, who was also kidnapped, and probably brought here to be sold. I said that we would help him find her."

"Of course," Corgi said. "Certainly."

"Her name was Tarnilee," Tohm managed to say. He was not quite able to believe that he had found an entire block of friends. After all that he had been through, he thought all men were out to drink the blood of all other men. But, of course, these were not exactly men. These were Muties.

"A very beautiful name."

"A beautiful girl," he answered.

"I'm sure. And now, maybe you'd like to know the names of those here."

Tohm nodded politely, although his mind was on a dark girl and the finding of her.

Corgi turned and waved a hand at a man sitting at one of the massive desks. The Mutie had a pen in his—claw, working carefully over sheets of graph paper. There were red, raw-looking gill slits under his jaws, ringing the top of his neck. Under the hair and on the backs of his hands, the skin, for patches, seemed to become scales, gray and shiny, then faded back into skin once again. His fingers were narrow and long, ending in a thin prong of nail. "This is Fish," Corgi said. "His real name is something very long and foreign sounding. Most of us do not go by our real names. Our parents forsook us as did the rest of society; in fact, like the others, they would shoot us on sight. We have no great fondness for family history. We're making our own history."

Fish nodded, his eyes bleary and wet-looking.

"Glad to meet you, Fish," Tohm said, feeling slightly inane.

"And this is Babe," Corgi said, pointing to another, smaller man.

Babe stood about four feet high. He was chubby, a virtual ball of flesh. It hung in pink rolls under his chin, circled his middle like an inner tube. His fingers were tiny, puffy, pink like the rest of him. His eyes were blue as the day sky. And he was smoking a cigar.

"Hiya, Tohm!" Babe said around the tobacco tube.

"Babe never grows up," Corgi said. "At least, externally. He'll always look like a pre-schooler and that is, finally, that. He used to use it to our advantage. He could move in the outside world because everyone thought he was a boy. Then they caught on. Today, Babe is one of the ten most wanted Muties by both the Romaghins and Setessins. He doesn't dare show his face."

"The fortunes of war," Babe said, waving his cigar. It was larger, by far, than the fingers that held it.

"We also think he's immortal."

"Bah!" Babe snapped.

Corgi grinned. "But how old are you?"

"Two hundred and twenty-three. But there's an end somewhere. I'm just another Methuselah. He

died eventu-ally, you know.”

Corgi smiled again. “Then—”

He was interrupted at that moment by the woman he meant to call. The door opened from the interior rooms of the shelter and the most stunning creature Tohm had ever seen entered the room. She was feline. Positively cat-like. She wore a black leotard suit which helped to give the impression, but even without it, Tohm knew, she would be a sleek, sensuous cat.

“This is Mayna,” Corgi said, eyeing Tohm, expecting the reaction the woman was getting. “Mayna, this is Tohm.”

She was about five and a half feet tall. And lithe. She glided rather than walked. Slid rather than stepped. Her body was a sensuous mass of rippling muscles and soft flesh. Her legs were full but streamlined, her feet tiny. Tiny paws. The toes, as she stood in bare feet, were stubbier than normal and joined abruptly with the main part of the foot, topped by tiny claws. The bottom and edges of her feet were covered with a tough pad. Her belly, he noticed as he reversed the direction of his perusal, was flat. Her breasts were as large as his fist, upturned. Her neck was a graceful architectural wonder as it arched up to support her head. Her lips were full, sealed and bursting with honey when closed, stung open by a bee when she spoke. Her teeth were fine and white, sharply pointed behind those lips. He could see that when she smiled the most disarming smile he had ever seen. Her nose was slightly pug. Her eyes were green as the sea is green. And they were quick. They took him in, in a moment, relaxed on his own and watched him survey her. Her dark, smooth face was framed by oceans of black, silken hair that made her look all the more animal.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Tohm,” she said, walking, rippling, flowing toward him, extending her hand. He didn’t know whether to kiss it or shake it.

He shook it. It was a warm, very warm, and dry hand.

“He saved Hunk’s life,” Corgi contributed.

Mayna turned, seemed to see Hunk for the first time. She ran to him, weeping, and engulfed him where he slouched in a leather chair after freeing himself of Tohm’s shoulder.

“Are you hungry, Tohm?” Corgi asked.

“Not really. I was wondering—about Tarnilee.”

“Yes. Yes, in the morning. Tomorrow.”

“Then, perhaps there is some place where I could lie down and sleep.”

“Certainly. Babe, how about showing Tohm to a room?”

“This way,” Babe said, uncrossing his fat, fatigue-cov-ered legs. He toddled through the door from which Mayna had made her grand entrance. Tohm cast one look back at the girl where she sat conversing excitedly with Hunk, then followed the immortal man-child.

They passed down a long corridor with rooms to either side, some with doors, some without. Those without doors seemed to be lounges, small offices, and file areas. Those with doors, he imagined, were sleeping rooms. Once, before this cell had been destroyed by Captain Haza-bob, all sorts of fantastic creatures must have scuttled and thumped and slid about. Now most rooms would be empty. They turned a corner and bumped into a very old man with white hair curling under and over his shriveled ears. He had a slit for a mouth, only the nostrils and none of the cartilage of a nose, and two overlarge eyes. His face was a mass of wrinkles. Rag face. He was weeping. Silently, though, without sobs and moans: a simple flow of lacrimal fluid, the trembling of the body as he stumbled along. He passed by them without a glance.

“Seer,” Babe said.

Tohm looked back to the man-child. “What?”

“That’s his name. Seer.”

“But why is he crying?”

“Suffice to say that he *sees*.”

“Sees what?”

“Not now. In time you’ll come to understand. You won’t like it.”

He shrugged and followed the little man. These peo-ple could keep him waiting in the dark if they

wanted to— as he had found out with Hunk and the white-eyed boy. Best to follow and wait for the answers. And hope there were a few.

“This is quite an elaborate setup,” he said as Babe showed him his room and bath. “The entrances and the offices, these rooms. How could you build them if you are not able to venture out in public? I mean, there would be the procuring of materials and all.”

“The Old Man,” Babe said. “He has access to robots. We programmed them to dig out the caves wherever silt had collected and to use the all form plasti-jell in making the walls and ceilings—and most of the furni-ture. The Old Man has a credit card. He can get any-thing with his unlimited funds through the black market and have the bill list the purchase as something entirely different. No one knew what he was really buying.”

“Then the Old Man isn't really a Mutie?”

“Not strictly speaking,” Babe said, exhaling a thin stream of odorless smoke between his teeth.

“Who is he?” Tohm asked, plopping down on an ex-tremely comfortable bed.

“Oops! Secret. Mustn't spill the major fruits of the tree.”

“Sorry.”

“Get some sleep. Can you find your way back to the control room in the morning?”

“I think so.”

“Good night then.” And he was gone, closing the door behind.

Tohm stretched out on the bunk, palmed off the lights. His head was swimming with things, hundreds of things, each more confusing than the other. He had come to hunt Tarnilee, but he was finding himself react-ing to the catgirl Mayna. He believed in fidelity. Strong-ly. But the juices that poured through him when he thought of the sleek form, the paw-feet, the lips . . .

The door opened suddenly. He sat up just as quickly. Seer looked in at him, eyes vacant, watery. “What do you want?” Tohm asked.

The old man looked at him, nothing more . . .

Somewhere in the distance, there was weeping, weep-ing somewhere far, far down in the guts of Seer, far, far down in his soul. . .

Just as suddenly as he had come, the Mutie left, closing the door with a solid thud. His footsteps scraped over the concrete, fading down the hall.

Tohm was sure he could not sleep now. In only days he had been plucked from a horizontal society of one plane and plunged down into a vertical, horizontal cross-hatch of meanings and purposes, drives and goals, cur-rents and undercurrents. His own purpose was even beginning to cloud. He had to think to remember what Tarnilee looked Like. At first, he pictured her with green eyes. Was that what the modern world did? Did it squash all love and memories of love? Or was this himself, changed? Ignoring all these doubts, still he would not be able to sleep. The place was crawling with eerie things, eerie people, an illegal operation as it was. He was sure of it. He was certain. But he fell into slumber almost instantly.

IX

He woke and smelled himself.

It wasn't pleasant. He got up and undressed, went into the bathroom and showered for half an hour, wash-ing away all the things he had covered himself with in the past days, all the things other than dirt and sweat, the things that couldn't be seen or smelled but were nonetheless there.

The water gurgled, babbled, talked as the sea talked.

Water, he thought, was like a womb. Water was an aperture in the earth's belly from which life crawled forth to be spanked by the hands of the Fates and the Furies. And water cleansed life, washed

away the dirt, leaving only the pure things which Nature first brought forth as her own. In the spring, it fell out of the heavens and splashed lightly onto the ground, dribbled away, cleansing the earth of the stain of evils endured. And in the winter, it drifted gentle and white, a virgin mantle to restore the hymen of the land, to make things once again pure and sweet and innocent.

Listening carefully, he conversed with it for half an hour, laughing at the tales it told, sighing at the confidences it imparted, frowning at the philosophical comments it made on its way to the sewer.

When he went back to his room, his old clothes were gone and a set of fatigues, olive drab, was waiting for him. This, he recognized, was the uniform dress of the lower class of the Romaghin social structure. He slipped into the rugged yet snug clothes, pressed the ends of the magnetic belt together, slipped into the black boots that were exactly like his old ones except that they broke at mid-calf rather than just below the knee—another sign of the lowest class. It seemed to him, from what history he could remember from Triggy Gop's books, that rebels always identified with the common people—in this case, even though the common people were just as ready, willing, and able as anyone else to blow their heads off.

He strapped the flybelt on and pocketed the gas pistol that had also been left undisturbed. He was warmed by the realization that these people were trying to show their trust for him. He had forgotten that some people could be trusted. And were trusting. Opening the door, he collided with the catgirl. “Oof!” he managed to gasp.

“I came to escort you to the dining hall. We didn't expect you to sleep until lunch,” she said, laughing.

“Your accommodations were too good. I think the bed injected me with some sinister narcotic.”

“Dragon blood,” she said in a mock whisper. Her eyes were like stars.

She led him to the end of a side corridor branching off his own and pushed open a door. “This is it.”

He held it. “Ladies first.”

He thought she blushed.

“Thank you,” she said demurely, entering the room.

They were all at the table. Corgi and Hunk sat side by side at one end. Babe sat across from Fish, and Tohm was shown to a chair next to Mayna. Seer sat in the corner, babbling something to himself, endlessly weeping.

“Oh,” Tohm said suddenly, “if I'm taking his seat—”

“No, no,” Corgi said, his eyes rippling with brilliant gold.

“But after all, I'm just an intruder, and—”

“He sits in the corner always,” Corgi said.

Everyone seemed to be uneasy.

“We can draw another table up to this one. I can sit there,” Tohm said.

The cat paw came, and the thin finger touched his arm. “I feed him after we are done. It is always like this.”

Tohm looked about at the others, then back to Mayna. “He can't feed himself?”

Her eyes suddenly sparked with a bright light that glittered behind the green little globes. “No, he cannot feed himself! Yes, he is next to helpless! So what is that to you?”

He sat, mouth open. “Well, I didn't mean—”

“Of course you didn't,” Corgi said quickly. “You don't understand many things. Mayna gets carried away at times.” He gave her a stern look.

She was no longer breathing heavily. “I'm sorry,” she said, looking directly at him. “I didn't mean it. Corgi is right. The pressure.”

They ate in continued uneasiness, although everyone had made an apology. Tohm wanted nothing more than to get through the entire experience without offending anyone. If Triggy Gop had only had material that would have given a stupid man the basics . . .

The food was, though more refined than that on Haza-bob's ship, every bit as good as any he had ever eaten. There were thin, delicious sprouts of some green vegetable done in butter sauce and sprinkled with tiny black nuts. Three different varieties of fruit salads dotted the table. The main course was a noodle casserole in some delightful custardy sauce with miniature onions.

"We don't eat meat," Corgi said from across the dish-littered table. "Too many of us are semi-animals in appearance. Somehow, it would be like eating a brother. We stick to fruits, nuts, vegetables. Mayna can do some marvelous things with them."

"Mayna cooks too?" Tohm asked, looking at her with new admiration.

"Oh, yes. And Mayna is an expert with the hand laser too. Best marksman—rather, markswoman, we have."

She smiled at Tohm and nibbled daintily on a snaky green bean.

"Perhaps you would be interested in knowing what each of us does here," Corgi said, warming to his subject. "Babe, as useless as he seems, is the best man on explosives in this arm of the galaxy. Often, we have to rescue Muties from Romaghin clutches. Babe can make a bomb out of ice and water."

"Not quite," Babe said through a mouthful of casseroles.

"Just about," Corgi continued. "There are times, Tohm, when we would not have succeeded in springing our soulbrothers had it not been for Babe. The Romaghins and Setessins will fight fiercely to hold them for torture and execution. Technically, since they created us, they should be supporting us or at least be letting us have jobs and citizenship. Instead, they kill us on sight. It is an old trait in men. I think it is an attempt to salve their consciences for the wrong acts that caused us. If they pretend we are evil, attribute to us a relationship with the devil or with the enemy, killing us makes sense. And when they have murdered all of us, they will no longer have to face the mistake they made."

"That Black Beast, the superego," Babe said.

"Then Fish," Corgi continued, "comes in exceedingly handy. He can get by on land using his lungs or in the sea by closing them up and working through his second respiratory system. You noticed the gills. When a passing ship is taking Muties to the docks to be unloaded and penned for execution, he can swim out, board it, and usually complete his mission with great success."

Fish didn't bother to look up. He was, Tohm could see, the loner of the group.

"Hunk is invaluable, because he is slightly telepathic."

"An Esper?"

"Yes. The Romaghins tell you there are no such things. But he is a living contradiction."

Hunk lifted a tuft of lettuce and munched on it.

"Hunk tells us when he senses any Muties in distress. When an individual, especially a Mutie, is under pressure, in pain, or just plain scared, he radiates a stronger thought pattern. Hunk can then pick it up. We go into action on his advice. Not every hutch, which is what we call this place, is lucky enough to have a telepath."

"Hunk tells you when a ship with Muties is approaching."

"Exactly," Corgi said, taking a sip of his wine, an amber fluid that sparkled like prisms, refracting the light as if it were a gem and not a liquid. "And I have a multi-plex brain."

"A what?"

Mayna nibbled away at another bean.

"A multiplex brain. I see what is happening now and can plot the possible futures for it in an instant."

"You see the future?"

"No, no. Nothing so wonderful and horrible as that. I see the possibilities. There are thousands, millions, countless possible futures. I scan them at any moment of crisis. If ninety percent of the futures say we will fail in the mission, we do not jeopardize ourselves. If the chances are fifty-fifty or better in our favor, we go through with it."

"Fifty-fifty odds are not so terribly good," Tohm said.

Corgi shrugged and sipped more wine.

Tohm sipped more wine.

"And of course," Corgi went on, "we all can reach Out There, and we all have the power to distort the Fringe. That's the psi benefit we all seem to have inherited."

Tohm set the wine goblet down. "That's what I don't understand. What is all this business about the Fringe and shell molecules and exchange?"

Corgi shifted heavily in his chair. "It's rather hard to explain to someone who doesn't understand the

basics of physics or the general common terminology involved. But there is a way to rid the universe of the Romaghins and Setessins. And, to my fellow Muties, I want to announce now that Hunk has brought me information which changes all our plans.”

All heads turned to Hunk.

“I don't know,” he began, folding his pseudo-arms on the table. “Perhaps it was the force we exerted, greater than any group has yet. But being that close to it, I had a *satori*, an insight. We are trying to hold back the universe while lifting parts of it—the Romaghin and Setessin worlds—and holding the rent in the shell mol-ecule open for those parts to pass through. I saw it, our mistake, and wondered why the Hell no one ever thought of it before. We attributed our failures to our undeveloped talents which we hoped to strengthen. But the fault lies in our method, not our means. Look, the idea is to lift the entire universe and leave the Romaghin and Setessin worlds behind. The size of the passing universe will hold the Fringe open of its own accord. We won't have to worry about that.”

The hush continued around the table for some seconds.

“By God!” Babe said.

Fish flapped his gills excitedly.

“Hunk, I love you,” Mayna said.

“I have contacted the Old Man,” Corgi said. “In a week, he says, we will be ready to try it. We're going to agglomerate our forces on the pro-Mutie worlds of the Federation and hope that the Romaghins and Setessins do not discover that something is up before we can act.”

“Wait,” Tohm said, his voice shaky. “What about my Tarnilee?”

“Good God!” Fish said. “Don't you realize that this is much more important than any one person? Don't you see what this will mean?”

Tohm stood, suddenly angry. “I see that it means you will not help me, that you'll all go back on your word. I see I've been a fool!”

“Wait!” Corgi shouted, standing too. “He's right. We did promise him. We can make arrangements to be the last group evacuated and still have time to help him find his bride.”

“I agree,” Babe said.

“Me too.”—Hunk.

Mayna sat in silence.

“Tomorrow the search will begin,” Corgi said. “To-day, since we cannot accompany you into the streets, you will memorize the street plan of the city. I'll help you. We have teach machines to hypno some of it in, the rest we'll club you with until you have scars to re-mind you. You'll know the capital inside out, upside down.”

They both sat down once again.

“We never want to become like the Romaghins or the Setessins. We keep our word. We are fighting hypoc-risy, friends; we don't want to give in to it.”

The remainder of the afternoon was passed with intermittent sessions in the hypno-teacher and with Cor-gi and Babe pounding him with questions, testing what he had learned, strengthening his weak points, visu-alizing the positions of the buildings which the hypno-teacher had given him. An hour before supper, Corgi suggested he go shower and rest, noting that they would continue in the evening. Tired, he agreed.

He left the central control chamber and entered the halls. There were about a dozen of them, he understood, all with empty rooms, rooms once filled by other Mu-ties. He reached the twist in the corridor that would take him to his own room, and he heard the singing.

Lilting . . .

Lilting, sweet, the notes rose to his ears, faintly, like a siren singing from her rocks . . .

Soft . . .

Melodic . . .

Almost trancing . . .

He followed the sound, bending from one corridor to another. Eventually he came to a hall that ended in na-tural stone, dipping down into what appeared to be a cave. Here the robots had stopped spewing

out all form plasti-jell.

Lilting . . .

He walked to the cave mouth, sidled through the narrow entranceway, and looked about.

Melodic, trilling of birds but not quite . . .

Limestone stalactites plunged down and met stalag-mites soaring up, wedded them midway. The stones spar-kled with different colors. A film of moisture lay on the floor, and droplets of limy water dripped from the ceiling. The water was speaking to him even here: *kerplosh-kerplosh*.

Lilting . . .

Kerplosh . . .

Melodic . . .

Kerplosh . . .

The singing was louder now and was tinged with a faint echo. He followed the sound through a narrow tunnel and came out into a much larger room where a small underground stream emptied into a shallow lake that reflected the uneven ceiling with mirror clarity so that the water almost denied its own presence.

She was sitting on a rock overlooking the water, her knees drawn up, curled much like a cat sitting upon a window ledge. Her back was to him, her hair falling to the middle of it, sleek and shiny.

"That's beautiful," he said.

She didn't turn around. "I knew you were there. Thought you were watching in secret, huh?" She did turn around now, smiling.

He could do nothing but smile in return.

"I have ears like a cat," she laughed. "I heard you when you first stepped from the hallway."

"I'm clumsy by nature," he said, sitting next to her. "What are all these caves?"

"The land about here is honeycombed with them, for we transferred them with the city. We have an exit, a back door, through these caverns." "The song you were singing—"

"One of the songs Fish wrote."

"Fish?"

"It has the currents of the waters in it, don't you think? The noises of the ocean. The words are nonsense words written merely to evoke a feeling of the sea."

And as she sang more of it, he realized it did exactly that. He could nearly feel the eddies in the water, the waves. There was that quality of sea-talk he had often heard.

"You certainly are a talented group," he said at length.

"You gain something when you lose normality, Tohm. Nature mutilates your fetus, smashes you about in drunk-en folly, then repents and, at the last moment, presents you with many talents, some even superhuman. Every Mutie I know has, besides the ability to sense and affect the Fringe, some talent, some beautiful ability."

"I see."

"I doubt it," she said, standing.

They began walking the rim of the Lake.

"No," he said. "Really, I do. I can understand what it must be like. This is not my original body. I went through something similar."

He explained his history, the chemical tanks, the brain transplant, the machine buried eighty-three miles under the sands back near the City That Used To Be.

"That's fine," she said, wrinkling her tiny, perfect face into an expression of distaste, "but it shows you don't really understand."

He looked at her, felt his tongue tying itself in knots. From the glint of her eyes, he could see that something was about to happen. But he didn't know what, and he was powerless to stop it. He didn't even know if he wanted to stop it.

"You never thought that with that machine of yours, one of the rare Romaghin Jumbos, you could give Hunk a real body! You could take Babe out of that farcical shell of his and put him inside a big, strong, hulk like your own."

He swallowed his heart. Twice. “Of course! How stupid of me! We’ll go back now. I can do that for every Mutie you bring me.”

“No.”

He stopped tugging at her. “What do you mean—no?”

“Are you even more stupid than I thought? No means no! No, we don’t tell Corgi. No, we don’t tell Babe. No, we don’t put any of them in he-man bodies!”

“Come on. Let’s find Corgi—”

“No!”

“But you said—”

“I baited you. I wanted to see if you have even the slightest glimmer of understanding about us, Tohm, wonderful Tohm, Hero Tohm.”

“Now wait,” he said desperately, clutching her hand. He could feel the final rumbles as the volcano began to surge with lava. He didn’t think he wanted to see the eruption.

She jerked her hand from his. “*You* wait! What makes you think Babe could adjust to being normal, huh? Two hundred and twenty-three years he’s been a Mutie. Two hundred and twenty-three years he’s been a child. Just overnight he takes a he-man body of a normal and thinks nothing of it? And Hunk. Precious goddamn Hunk. Hunk spits out his bodily wastes, a green liquid that smells damned unpleasant. Hunk, you think, could just up and be normal without any trauma involved, no mess up in his mind.”

“The machine surgeons are good. They won’t make a mistake in—”

For a moment, she seemed to snarl. “I’m not talking about the physical end of it. Psychologically, man. Way down there in his id and his ego and his superego, even, all these years he has been suppressing the desires that were human and fostering the ones that were Mutie because the Mutie desires were the only ones he could satisfy. All those years, his ego has been building him up, telling him that he is more than a normal, better, happier, less prejudiced, more liberal, more talented. You want to change his id, turn it upside down, smash the old and slip in the new. *Oh, boy!* You want to tell him that all those human desires that were unsatisfiable are suddenly his again. You want to smash his ego by telling him that he was lying to himself, that being normal is better. You want to crush, mash, burn, and blow away the ashes of his life. And you can’t see where it would mess him up.”

“I never thought—”

She spun about, facing him with something akin to hatred in her eyes—but not quite. Nothing seemed to be quite anything anymore. “You never thought! You never added it up. And, Mr. Tohm, what makes you think we even want to be like you? What makes you think being normal is such a lack? We want equality, man, not conformity. We want a world where we don’t have to hide in cellars like rats. We don’t want to be humans, normals. We’re different. We aren’t the same but, God, we aren’t all ugly. Most, almost all of us are intriguing, not hideous. We’re the new mythology for this world, Hero Tohm, but we aren’t a mythology on paper. We live, breathe, walk about—fantasies in flesh. You should see some of those in the other hutches on this world and all the others—some of those who died under old Hazabob’s hand. Beautiful. A phantasmagoria of wonderful creatures, beings hidden in the folds of creative imaginations for a million years—now stepping through the womb and popping up alive. They *are* better than normals.”

He grabbed her by the arm, swung her around. “All right. I grant all this. But why take it out on me?”

“You wouldn’t understand!” she hissed.

“Everyone, goddamn it, says that I don’t understand. But no one will explain it.”

“You *couldn’t* understand it.”

“Shut up!”

“You couldn’t!”

He slapped his hand across her face, stared at the red imprint it left. The smell of her was strong, sweet and somehow musky. When he plunged his lips against hers, he was not thinking so very much of what he was doing. Not very much at all. Frustration and confusion had mounted within him and found its form in this. She kissed back for a moment, then tore herself from him and ran back toward the hutch. From the main cavern, she called to him, “Supper will be almost ready. The men cooked it tonight. It

might not be good, but you had better hurry.”

And she was gone.

X

“The market of concubines,” Corgi said, staring at him with eyes that perceived only fuzz patches and blips.

“On the Street of the Pleasure Sellers.”

“Mapwise, what quadrant is that?” Babe asked.

“Second.”

“Name the different merchant's platforms in the mar-ketplace in the order in which they appear.”

Tohm strained back through the hypno-lessons, the drills of the afternoon. “Raddish, Fulmono, Kinger, Fadsteon, Frin, Rashinghi, Talaman, and Froste.”

“Very good,” Corgi said. “Very good indeed.”

“All the platforms are owned by the same people— the Romaghin board of governors. There is no free trade in the slave market, though the board of governors wish-es to convey that impression.”

“Where'd you get that?” Babe asked, puffing on his odorless cigar.

“Reading on my own—some history books I pored through once.”

Corgi ran through his mental list of questions, which seemed to be endless. “How do you find the hutch in that quadrant if you need help or shelter?”

“I go to the comfort station near the prison, take the third stall from the end, and depress a brick ten up from the floor and five in from the left partition.”

“Okay. I deem you prepared. Now, you will leave at dawn when the markets are preparing for the day. You will make your way to the Market of Concubines. I have contacted the Old Man and told him about you, and Hunk's plan. He agrees on Hunk's idea and on your being given a chance to find Tarnilee. He is contacting all other groups and evacuating them to friendly but unarmed planets. We are scheduled to join a large Mutie group on Columbiad. We will put our plan into action then. I hope you understand what we want to do. We are going to create—that is not the proper word, but it will serve—a universe without warlike worlds. We hope to live in peace. If you wish to come with us, be back here no later than twenty-four hours from the time you leave. You must find your woman in that period. We have shown you the city via maps and have tutored you in the customs of the lowest class so that you can move more freely than many people in the upper strata of so-ciety. Babe will give you one thousand credits with which you may, with some luck, bid for your woman should she come up on the platform. There will also be another fifty credits there for the miscellaneous. We can't accompany you, only wish you luck.”

“I'll find her and bring her back,” Tohm said, standing.

“Now I guess I should catch some sleep while there's still time.”

“You'll need it,” Corgi said.

“Goodnight.”—Babe.

“Goodnight,” he answered, moving through the door and into the corridor, conscious of their eyes and semi-eyes on him. His mind was in a turmoil. His conversa-tion with Mayna hung heavy about him, made him feel strangely inadequate, impotent. Somehow, he was not as excited about the search tomorrow as he should have been. Would finding Tarnilee mean returning home? Although baffled by it, he was charmed with the civi-lized worlds. The red-leafed trees, the fish and the fruits were no longer enough. The simple life had fled from him and left a hole in his being, in the delicate fabric of his soul.

His thoughts were intruded upon by a strange noise that competed for his attention. He stopped and listened. He had heard—and yes, there it was again—an animal sound, a rumbling noise and a weeping.

Very strange indeed. It seemed to be coming from Seer's room.

Again.

But Seer didn't cry aloud . . .

Seer shook, yes . . .

And Seer wept, certainly . . .

But Seer did not cry out as if in pain . . .

Not normally . . .

There was a sudden screech again, louder this time. But it seemed that whatever was making the noise was trying to suppress it, to seal its own lips from the outcry of its own lungs . . .

Quietly, he moved across the hallway to the door, pushed it gently open, peered in . . .

And stood transfixed.

Frozen . . .

There, on the old man's bed, was Mayna. Her leotard suit was pulled down to her waist. Her breasts were naked, and Seer, nestled in her lap like a child, was drawing upon one. The breasts were longer than they were wide and were mostly fleshy nipple like an animal's teat.

Suddenly, almost spasmodically, she jerked her head to face him.

"You—" he started to say.

"Get out!" she screamed.

The words hung back in his throat, choking him with their reluctant syllables, their hesitant fingers of meaning . . .

"Get out!"

He closed the door, his head spinning. Why with Seer of all people? Why with, a babbling idiot? Even Babe would have been better. Or Corgi, certainly. He turned and ran, throwing his hands over his ears to block out any traces of the weeping. He found his room, fumbled the door open and shut, and fell into bed without palming the lights. Why, why, why? And why the Hell should he care? It was bad enough that she did it, but why was he all hung up over it? Forget it. Wipe it out. It's nothing to you. If she wants the old man, let her have him. The idiot! The slobbering moron!

The door crashed open, and she was there, dressed once again, standing in the rectangle of light that flooded through the open portal.

"Get out!" he snapped.

She slammed the door, palmed only the nightlight which brightened the room—but not too much. "You," she said, hissing in tones that were more cat than woman and that made the single word a paragraph.

"It's my turn to say get out!" He bunched his fists, searching for something to strike out at, wondering all the while why he was so enraged. "You're in my room. I want you out."

"I don't give a damn," she hissed again, her foot claws trembling in and out of their sheaths, retracting, springing, over and over. "I don't give a little good damn what you want! What right have you got to snoop in other people's rooms?"

"I thought he was in trouble. I heard the weeping noises—like someone in pain."

"He bit me. He bit *me*, Hero Tohm, not you!"

"I thought he was alone; old fool like that hurt—"

"Shut up!"

"Get out!" he snapped back, determined, this time, to fight her viciousness with cunning and hatred of his own.

"No. Not until I've told you really what a worm you are, Hero Tohm!"

"I'm not a hero."

"I know that."

"Get out!"

"No. I started to tell you some of this in the caves before supper. You thought, by appealing to my animal characteristics, my lust, you'd buy time for yourself. You thought a good kiss would get me all heated up."

“You aren't heated by anyone but old fools—”

She leaped on top of a chair, sitting on the back, perfectly balanced, ready to spring upon a mouse. She looked down at the bed. “Old fool, is he? You don't know half of what he knows. None of us does. None of us can imagine just what he sees, Hero Tohm. Fool indeed! You're the fool. A damn fool, Hero Tohm. He has reason to babble: he *sees*. He sees it!”

“It?” he asked, interested despite himself.

“God!” she boomed, leaping from the chair to the dresser, sitting with her exquisite back to the mirror. “God, Hero Tohm. Seer sees God, and he can't take it. Does that mean anything to you? Does it suggest any-thing? Seer looks down into the very heart of things, past the stars, beyond the realities and semi-realities and quasi-truths and what we call the Real Truths. It is all chaff to him, Hero Tohm. Seer looks around the bends we don't even know are there and peeks into corners we have forgotten about or never seen. He looks upon God. And it has driven him insane. Does that mean anything to you, Hero Tohm?”

“I—” He started to sit up.

“No. It wouldn't. You don't understand the concepts. But God, Hero Tohm, is a concept you should certainly be able to understand. Vaguely, at least. Don't tax your mind. You had God on your primitive little world, didn't you? Some kind of god. Wind God. Sun God. But God is nothing like you imagine him or I imagine him—or like anyone has ever imagined him. Seer knows what He is like, and Seer has been driven insane by the knowl-edge. So, Hero Tohm, what the Hell is God? What is it that could be so horrible that it has kept Seer babbling and weeping all these years? Maybe he doesn't see any-thing—just vast emptiness, pitch, void, godlessness. May-be there is no God, Hero Tohm. But I don't think that's it. I think Seer could recover from that view. God is there. But God is something so horrible and with so many facets of terror that Seer never ceases to be horri-fied into insanity.”

Tohm grabbed his head in his hands as if to burst it, to smash it open. All he wanted was Tarnilee. He *thought* that was it. Wasn't it? He couldn't really put his finger on anything else. At least, he wouldn't let himself.

She hissed scornfully. “Certainly I suckle him. He can't eat. It's not only a case of not being able to feed himself; there's more, much more, to it. He has reverted, Hero Tohm. If he could get his nourishment from a tube connected with his belly, he would be happy. He wants back in the womb, Hero Tohm. He wants swallowed. But he can't have that. Damn it, he should, but he can't. So there is nothing but breast feeding; that's the farthest back he can go. And he would starve if he didn't have that. Hell, maybe that would be better. Maybe it would be merciful to let his stomach curl in on itself, shrivel and toss about in agony, trying to gobble him up for nourishment. Hell, maybe we *should* put a bullet through his head and rip up his brain, let him bleed his soul out on the cement. But I won't. Corgi won't. The Old Man won't, and the Old Man has more guts and brains than all of us. There's something horri-ble about Seer and something holy too. Something holy that rubs off from that undescribed demon called God, Hero Tohm.”

“I didn't know.”

“Okay,” she spat. “Then you didn't know. You *don't* know. But don't be so goddamn superior! Don't judge me, Hero Tohm, by what you think I should and should not do. Don't go setting my moral standards and values when you don't have the least understanding of what I am! Don't give me goody-goody nonsense. By now you should know the world is not goody-goody.”

He stood, crossed the space between them in a near leap, clutched her and dragged her from the dresser.

“Get away from me!”

“Mayna, listen—”

She purred as he ran his hand through her great pile of hair.

“Listen, I was confused. Hell, I don't know any-thing. I didn't ask to be here. I didn't ask to be ripped free from my village and plunged into confusion.”

She laced her arms around his back, cried into his shoulder.

“I came looking for a girl. At first, I wanted only to find her and go home. I don't know any more. I have to find her now because that has been my motivation all along, that has been the thing that has kept

me alive. It would be like cheating a dream if I stopped. So if I trampled on anyone, maybe it is worth it, maybe not. But I don't mean to trample.”

She was shivering. He lifted her slight body and carried her to the bed with him.

“The Seer,” he said. “Hell, that's terrible. Terrible, not only for him, but for everyone who understands him.”

Her hands were caressing him. He forsook all conversation, pressed his lips to hers. Her small, pink tongue flicked inside his mouth. He squeezed her breast. And suddenly her claws came up, raked his side. He leaped off her. Blood was oozing thickly out of the long, fine scratches, staining his shirt.

“What did you do that for!”

“I'm still nothing more than an animal to you, Hero Tohm! You want to see what it would be like. You never say 'I love you'; you just start groping around. You want to see if there is anything good about me.”

“Bitch!” he snapped, massaging his tender side.

“You want to know whether my tummy is furry.”

“Is it?” he wheezed, blood sticky on his fingers, his mind on fire.

“You'll never know,” she said, running for the door. “Never in a million years!” She slammed the door, leaving him alone in the darkness.

For a long moment, he stood, clutching at the fire in his side, trying to diagnose the fire in his mind. But no answers would come. He treated the bodily fire by washing the shallow slashes. They were not deep, and the job required little time. He rinsed them with alcohol, salved them, and applied two hand-sized adhesive bandages.

Washing the blood out of the sink, he felt even less real as the crimson patterns in the water grew fainter and fainter. Everything was beginning to seem like a dream—dozens of dreams and nightmares piled upon one another.

He went to bed then, his eyes fixed to the ceiling, and tried to sleep. But sleep was a long time coming . . .

XI

Mayna was not around the next morning when Corgi, Babe, Fish and Hunk gathered to send him off. He looked for her constantly and hoped that she would come. But she did not.

“Now remember,” Corgi said, his eyes a misty gam-boge-flecked gray, “you only have twenty-four hours. Get back here with Tarnilee, and you can come with us. Otherwise, I'm afraid you'll be stuck here in this universe with the Romaghins and Setessins.”

“I'll try, Corgi,” he said, shaking the preferred hands and tentacles.

“Remember, you can go to the other hutches if you need either help or shelter,” Hunk said.

“Don't hesitate,” Babe urged.

“I won't,” he assured them. He stepped back into the tunnel from where he had first made his entrance seemingly years ago on the cushions of air. They closed the doors to the hutch. Taking the periscope scanner, he checked the alley above as they had taught him. He saw no one and, therefore, activated the blower that reversed the air streams and lifted him gently but firmly up, up, up and through the grating which clanked back into place behind him and served as a landing zone when the winds abruptly ceased.

He could hardly believe it. He was finally in the capital city, near the slave market, perhaps in time to buy back his Tarnilee. He tried to think of what she looked like. He couldn't get a clear picture.

The day was going to be a beautiful one. The thin yellow clouds that would burn off before even the noon-day sun appeared were the only things marring the otherwise perfect sky. The sun had just risen and had not yet heated the cool, pleasant air of night.

He began walking, turned from the alley into the streets. The stores were open for

business—ultra-modern, clerkless, giant chain stores, and the little, open front shops that always seem to flourish in a desert community no matter what its size and sophistication. At one place, homemade pretzels were for sale, salty and soft. He bought one with his miscellany money and munched on it as he walked. His insides were jumping with excitement and fear, but the most important thing was to seem calm externally, to appear as if he belonged there.

He passed fruit shops where large baskets of berries of every chromatic dispersion lay in heaps. Some were similar to those he and Hunk had stolen from the hover-craft, but others were unlike any he had ever seen. He wished to taste them all, but he knew there were only twenty-four hours. He might need that time and more to find her. He walked on.

In an open-air market where sides of animals lay in bloody pools, and cuts of steaks and roasts lay on chipped ice in unpainted bins, a Romaghin government inspector checked over the flesh, stamping it as the butcher slipped him (not so discreetly) a large coin for every animal approved. Flies were already congregating about the front of the place, and Tohm could well imagine what it would look like when the heat of the day lay like a blanket over all. And what it would *smell* like.

Next door to the meat market was an automated butchery where meats were kept in refrigerated glass cubes, constantly on display. The prices were about three times those of the cruder merchant, but Tohm felt that he wouldn't mind paying the difference. If he could gag meat down any more. Even looking at all that raw flesh, he realized, was making him ill. The customs, likes and dislikes of the Muties were, he knew, rubbing off on him too.

A man in a fluttering cape like the one the auto-fact had provided him with many days ago came strutting along the walk. A grossly fat man with a pig's face, he picked at his teeth with a sparkling nail. The lower classes stepped into the street to allow him passage, even though it wasn't a physical necessity, the walks being wide enough for seven or eight men abreast. Tohm, however, did the same. He was not out to call attention to himself, to arouse suspicions.

Once, crossing the busy street, he saw the boy with the white eyes go by in a limousine. A very wealthy woman sat beside him. The boy showed no signs of recognition. Tohm wanted to run after him, but he didn't. There was something about the boy he didn't like. He couldn't say more than that. Perhaps it was Hunk's fear of the boy, and Hunk seemed afraid of so little. If the Mutie feared the boy, there was a reason. Something beyond the dreams. He made the other side of the street and struck out for the Market of Concubines, having entered the Street of the Pleasure Sellers.

The Street of the Pleasure Sellers was not really a street at all, but a square. In the center of the square, a large fountain with the mythological creatures of Romaghin religion pouring water from pitchers over the heads of marble nymphets bubbled gaily. There was a festive air to everything here. Buildings were colorful and in good repair. Multihued pennants were strung on glittering poles. Already, men were flocking into the square, the clots of upper class men painstakingly segregated from the fatigue-shod peasantry. But peasants, too, could visit the square, for the board of governors placed no social lines between the poor and the rich man's credits. One bill was as good as the other. Money, not ability, is the only thing that makes men equal.

"My yacht is parked in a low orbit," one rich man was saying to another. "I brought my half-miler, for I plan to take home fifty beauties."

"My tastes," the other man said, fiddling with his pencil line moustache, "are not so easily satisfied. I find only one girl—if any—worth buying at an auction."

"You are just being snobbish," the first man said.

Tohm moved on. The majority of peasants were going to frequent the House of Love or the House of Nubile Maidens, where two bills brought fifteen minutes. Few had enough money to purchase their own slave girls, their own mistresses. They watched longingly as the merchants set up their rostrums on their respective platforms.

Slowly, as the minutes passed, more and more people began drifting into the square. There were about two hundred now, seventy-five percent peasantry. A group of caped socialites were hunched around a Kill a Mutie/ Save Your World sign posted on the bulletin board, arguing politics, all in favor, of course, of killing Muties—differing only on the proper methods of destruction.

A gong sounded, and a jester announced in singsong lyric that the market was legally open for business. The young peasants pulled out their money and ran for the doors of the pleasure houses. The older peasants were content to wait for an experience which, though necessary and desirable, was not so terribly unique any longer. The few young peasants who had denied themselves and saved their bills over months and months, stood watching the platforms, unsure to which they should run. Some would buy foolishly and quickly the-first girls they saw. Others would wait, wait until all had been shown and none were being held back.

A moment later, as if at a hidden signal, the mer-chants came from behind the curtains at the rear of their platforms and began hawking their wares. They were foppishly dressed in jewel-studded capes of brilliant colors with inch- rather than quarter-inch fringe. The Merchant Kinger, directly in front of Tohm, waved his hand at the curtain, beckoning forth a woman. She was truly stunning. She was blonde, very tall, six feet at least. Her great breasts were pushed upward by the thin brassiere of purple shimmercloth she wore. Her silken loincloth did little to hide the vase of her pleasure.

"I ask you gentlemen—" the merchant was saying.

Tohm swept his gaze around from platform to plat-form. He couldn't risk watching only one merchant and having Tarnilee sold behind his back. Raddish was offer-ing a red-skinned lovely from Shawnee, the Indian settled and often raided planet near the rim of the galaxy. The bidders were growing frantic. She promised to bring a higher price. Fulmono was selling twins, dark maidens from the Amazon basin on Earth itself, he claimed. Fasteon was running the point of his walking stick over the legs of a lass who looked scared quite to death at all the leering faces but who seemed determined not to show fear. Fasteon remarked on the fine fullness of her calves, her dimpled knees. Rashinghi was—

His mouth fell open, closed, opened again. Rash-inghi's girl, the one who would pass among the audience collecting the money of the successful bidders (all pay-ments in cash—no refunds) was Tarnilee! She was wearing a robe of brilliant purple with a black hem. The swell of her breasts broke the "vee" of the plung-ing neckline. She was smiling idiotically from her seat on the edge of the platform. Rashinghi was selling a very attractive girl at the moment, but Tohm's full attention was on the face and form he knew so well. What was she doing as the merchant's woman? Why did she seem to be enjoying herself?

The excitement in the square had built to a high, sustained peak. He shuffled through the crowd, jostling rich and poor alike, trying to reach the area in front of Rashinghi's platform. He hung to the back, watching her. She laughed at things the bidders said as she col-lected their money in a black sack she held by a golden chain. She didn't see him. He realized, with a small shock, that she would not know him if she did see him. He was fair-haired now, not dark, not anything like her Tohm.

The lithe young girl-woman Rashinghi had up at the moment went for seven hundred and six bills.

Cheering of friends as the rich man paid . . .

He could smell perspiration all around him . . .

Tarnilee was smiling and speaking confidentially with a fat upper class man who leered rather than smiled . . .

The noise of bidding pounded upon his ears . . .

His head was spinning nearly out of control. What was she doing this for? Why was she a helper of a merchant? A bid collector was always the merchant's most trusted and favorite wife. Was she married to Rash-inghi? No! Or yes?

He resolved, at that very moment, to kill Rashinghi for whatever he may have done to her. But first, how to talk with her? He felt the pouch of money in his pock-et. If he bid on a girl, bought her, Tarnilee would have to come to him to collect the money.

At that moment a slim, blonde girl waited on the stage, seemingly more anxious to be bought than the others, displaying her wares with bravado.

"Fifty bills," a rich man said.

"Seventy," a second chimed in.

He sucked in his breath. "A hundred!" he shouted.

Every head swiveled in his direction.

Rashinghi leaned, strained his eyes. "This is cash, boy. Have ye cash to be bidding so?"

He took the money pouch from his pocket, opened it and fanned the credits. "My life savings."

The rich man roared with laughter.

"He may have her," the first bidder said.

The second man, however, looked at him contemptuously. "Two hundred!"

"Two fifty," he found himself bawling.

"Four hundred!"

"Five!"

"Six!"

"Seven-fifty." He felt the perspiration trickling down his chin, running under his collar and soaking his shirt. He should have dropped the entire thing. He should have bought someone nobody wanted. After all, he was only buying her to be able to speak with Tarnilee. But now that he had raised the rich man's ire, he knew the fellow would continually outbid him on every girl he tried for.

"I have a bid for seven hundred and fifty bills," Rashinghi said, delighted that such a common tart—although attractive—was bringing as much as one of his virgins. "M. Glavoirei," he said to the wealthy bidder, "do ye wish to top that?"

M. Glavoirei looked over the heads of the people at the peasant who dared to bid against him. "Top money," he said. "One thousand bills!"

The crowd gasped as if it possessed a single set of lungs.

"One thousand and twenty-five," Tohm said, shivering in expectation of defeat.

M. Glavoirei frowned, spat on the ground. "I have only a thousand bills with me. I will write a voucher—"

"No!" Tohm found himself shouting. "This is illegal. No checks or credit cards. The terms are cash."

"He is right, M. Glavoirei," Rashinghi said.

"Then permit me to call for more funds. They will arrive within the hour."

"He must have my permission to delay the auction," Tohm said, remembering what he had learned from Trigg Gop's books. "I deny him that permission."

"Then," Rashinghi said, turning to Tohm, "she is most certainly yours."

The rich man's friends set up a howl of protest. Rashinghi waved them to silence. "It is only fair. Peasant, I will have her bathed and anointed to join ye at the fountain." He turned and clapped for the entrance of the next item on the agenda.

Tohm scanned the crowd for the head of Tarnilee. He had won the fight to speak with her. His mind was full of questions.

"One thousand and twenty-five bills, dear sir," she said from beside him.

He looked down quickly. "Tarnilee!"

Her mouth opened slowly. "How do you know my name?"

"I am Tohm."

"Tohm who?" she asked, suddenly impatient.

"Your Tohm. Your man."

She looked back at him, her eyes wide. "You are not Tohm. Tohm is dark. You are fair."

"That's true. But I am Tohm. I was killed after the Romaghins kidnapped us—rather, my body was killed. But they saved my mind, and I have a new body now."

"You speak nonsense. One thousand and twenty-five bills, please."

He took her by the shoulder. "Look, Tarnilee, I—"

"Take your hands off me, please, dear sir."

Hesitantly, he removed his hand. "Look, I can prove it. Do you remember the red-leafed trees, the one above our hut. We lived and loved on a grass mat which you always said was filled with patterns that resembled people, faces. We were to be married in a month."

She looked at him a moment. "That I said, and that we were. Where did you learn all of this?"

"I am Tohm!"

The bidding was getting heated on the latest girl. Numbers were called out to cheering on both sides

while Rashinghi urged them higher and higher. Tohm talked louder. "Do you remember the sea and how it talked? I used to listen to the sea, converse with it while we sat on the beach. You said I was insane but that you loved me anyway."

She twisted the money bag anxiously in her small hands. "So what. So what . . . what if you are Tohm?"

"So what? You can come with me. That's so what. I've crossed Hell a dozen times getting here."

There was a sudden gleam in her eye, and her voice changed subtly. "But how are you sure I am Tarnilee?"

"But you just said—"

"My name is now Rashingiana."

"You have assumed the feminized version of Rash-inghi?"

"My name is Rashingiana."

He felt himself swaying. "Tarnilee, you're not married to that . . . to that—"

"My name is not Tarnilee," she said firmly.

"But why him?"

"He is good to me."

"I was better."

She frowned. "You never showed me the wonders of the universe, the foods, the wines, the places and the things."

He sighed, wiped perspiration from his upper lip. "Look, Tarnilee. I just discovered these things myself. I never knew of them."

"My name is not Tarnilee. Besides, if it were, and you were Tohm, you are nothing but a peasant. You could not fill the desires these new things have raised in me; you could not feed the hungers."

His mind was aching with the new order, the clearer understanding of human nature that was suddenly being thrust upon him. This was an old scene—thousands of years old, but he did not know that. The sun seemed like a huge candle whose melting wax was dropping upon everything, hazing over the buildings and the people, seeping through his ears and encasing his brain. He clutched her arm, dug his nails in. "Look, Tarni— okay, Rashingiana. In a few days, you're going to be stuck with a smaller, different universe. I don't understand how, but I know the Muties are going to—"

"Muties?" she said. "You associate with them? You're a pervert?"

He dug his nails deeper, hoping that, beneath the toga, blood was seeping. "Listen—"

"Help!" she shouted. "A pervert. Mutie-lover!"

The crowd turned. Several rich bidders surged toward him. Clutching her even tighter, he brought the gas pistol into his free hand. M. Glavoirei was the first to go down, his leg a shattered hunk of meat worse than anything one might see in the open-air meat markets.

"You're coming with me," he said, dropping her arm and wrapping his own burly limb about her slim waist.

"No!"

A hand touched his neck. He ducked, swung, and blasted out the man's intestines, sending him down, kicking for a moment before he lay still. The others stopped their advance, eyed him warily.

"Let me down, you peasant!" she screamed.

The wax of the sun was hotter. The first layers of it were beginning to solidify over him. If he didn't move quickly, he knew he could never move at all. He fiddled with the flybelt, lifted, turned toward the center of town and the hutch. Then the small, whirring sphere that had dislodged itself from the muzzle of a policeman's rifle burst beneath him.

Sweet perfume . . .

Blue mists engulfed him, swallowed him, dragging him through denser and denser fogs into total black-ness . . .

Into death?

XII

No.

Not death.

Although, he reflected, it might as well have been. It would be. He was penned on the third floor of the Capital City Prison in a maxi-security cell. It was less than a yard by a yard. He could sit, and that was all. He sat looking out the window, through the massive steel bars at the gallows they were erecting in the courtyard. His gallows. For his neck.

Trial was certainly speedy here; one could not complain about judicial procrastination. He had been arrested, tried, and sentenced to death within three hours of his capture. The account would be all over the city by now—in the papers, on teevee. In the morning, just about when his twenty-four hours would be up, a crowd would gather in the courtyard to watch the floor jerk out from under him and to hear his neck snap in one, brittle, final comment.

Swift.

Clean.

Nearly painless.

And, strangely enough, if he could have known the answers to a few questions, he would not have minded. After all, what had kept him moving was dead: Tarn-ilee's love and his love for her. Hers had expired naturally; his had been murdered back there in the market. She had shot it full of ugly holes. The world was not goody-good. Mayna had been right. But he still wasn't ready to die. Curiosity gave him the willpower to live. Ever since that little vial of dope had stopped dripping and his brain had come awake, he had been plagued with so many mysterious concepts, ideas, people, that he could not sort them out anymore. Once, he would have prayed, but he could not now. He thought of Seer babbling, horrified, mummified, a vegetable cowering before some unknown terror that faced everyone—would face Tohm himself—when he died. That was another reason he didn't want to die. What lay on the other side of the veil, across the gauze between life and death?

A few answers. That's all he wanted now. What was the Fringe? What were shell molecules? Would the Mu-ties succeed or fail? What, exactly, were they trying to do? Were they demons or angels? And Mayna. If only he could understand and solicit a smile from Mayna, perhaps dying would not be as difficult to face. But strangling to death out there without any answers was not a pleasant future.

At supper time, they brought him a bowl of worms.

He didn't eat them, even if, as the guard had said, they were the only fitting last meal for a pervert.

He contented himself, in the darkness of the night, with sitting and watching the stars blinking, fluttering like so many consciences pinching the brain for penance. Dragon eyes. Sparks of dragon breath. Hellfires. He tried to think of as many metaphors and similes as he could, keeping himself awake and sharp. He was determined not to fall asleep on this, his last and only night alive.

The wind was cool through the bars.

He thought about Tarnilee. Quite often, the mind likes to torture itself by throwing up its mistakes, its wrong turns and blunders. He had misjudged the love of this woman. He tortured himself now. There had been tears when he first was thrown in the cell and realized what she had done to him, but all the tears had been wept now. He had come from a gentle world to a rough one. He had changed, and so had she. He had not, however, learned to expect that change.

He thought about Mayna, sleek and soft . . .

He thought about Hunk, twisted forever within his pitiful body . . .

He thought about Mayna, warm and smooth . . .

He wanted, somewhere deeply, to be nursed too, to crawl to her and be sheltered by her . . .

He wished she didn't hate him, or just hated him a little less . . .

He thought about Triggy Gop, the brain living after the body had perished. For what reason? So that he could, periodically, see how his child was growing. Twenty-odd years Triggy Gop had been floating through space looking for readers, people hungry for information, and found mostly warriors. He tried to remember what the librarian had said about seeing him again, a poem . . . *Perhaps some . . .* He tried to remember. Yes. Four lines the man had composed himself. He re-peated the lines to the twinkling dragon eyes.

*“Perhaps in some lonely cabaret,
some black night, some bright day
with snow upon the ground or grass
turned yellow with days gone past.”*

“Very poetic,” a voice said almost directly in front of him.

He started, jumped up, stumbled over his chair.

“For goodness sake,” Mayna said, looking through the bars. “Be quiet! You want to have every cop in the world up here?”

“You again.”

“Shh!”

“But how—”

“Cats can go anywhere, Hero Tohm. Even up the sides of sheer buildings, accomplishing the impossible. If there's a convenient rainspout, that is.”

“You'll get caught,” he said, looking over his shoulder to the cell door.

“We will if you insist upon being so damnably loud,” she hissed, hooking a metal prong onto each bar where it met the sill at the bottom, covering each hook with thick, green putty.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you out. Lay down on the floor. This isn't noisy, but there's one helluva lot of heat.”

He got down on his stomach next to the door and did not argue. Mayna backed away from the window, cling-ing to the wall by whatever impossible manner she had scaled it. There was a sudden *pfft*, then no noise at all. He could feel the heat on his back through the thin material of his shirt. Once he glanced up to see exactly what was happening. There didn't seem to be any light, unless . . . He looked closer. Yes, the flame was very dark blue, almost black. The room was stifling by then.

“Okay,” she whispered.

He stood up, reached out.

“No! Don't touch. It's hot yet.”

She took a small can of white crystals from the ruck-sack on her back, sprinkled them over the sill. There was steam, a *crackle-snap* noise, and ice began forming across the bars and on the cement.

“Okay,” she said again, putting the can away. “Now. Grasp the bars and bend them back, away from the sill. Only the bottoms are burned through.”

“Uh,” he grunted, straining at them.

“You can do it, Hero Tohm, if anyone can.”

He never knew, later, whether he could have done it without that goad. At the time, it smacked him in the pit of the stomach, churned up adrenalin. He twisted the bars back and up until he could squeeze through onto the wide sill. He sat on the window ledge, clinging desperately to the bars. A small ledge, only an inch wide, a decorative trim actually, broke the smooth façade of the building. It was that that Mayna perched upon, standing lightly on her toes, perfectly balanced.

“Do you have a flybelt?” he asked.

“They aren't as easy to come by for everyone as they are for you.”

“But I can't walk on that goddamn ledge!”

“Shh! We made allowances for that. We knew you were a poor, incompetent normal.”

He didn't say anything.

She took a strong nylon cord-rope from her rucksack, tied one end through the bars, almost

knocking him from his perilous perch. “Use your feet against the wall to keep from sliding down and burning your hands. And please do be quiet—if that isn't beyond your meager talents.”

He grabbed the rope, swung away from the building, wriggling around to face it on the first outward arc, planting his feet against the wall when he swung back. As easily as possible, he moved down.

Swinging . . .

Jumping . . .

Swinging, jumping, swinging . . .

A human spider . . .

Mayna waited, watching him go.

Her eyes glinted green in the starlight . . .

“Very good,” a voice said below.

For a moment, he froze, imaging gestapos below. But then his mind cleared itself and he recognized the voice as Babe's. He dropped the last few feet, letting the rope slap against the wall. He looked up. Mayna still waited on the ledge, looking somewhat like a great vampire woman nestled there in the shadows. But now she was turning very adeptly and moving along the narrow ledge toward the rainspout.

“Here,” Babe said, tugging urgently at his shirt. “The shrubs.”

They ran, Tohm crouching to match Babe's height, and made the shelter of the bushes without incident. They turned and watched Mayna creep easily down the building, using the rainspout very little. She swung grace-fully, down, down, down . . . Hitting the earth, she bounced on the balls of her feet, rocking back and forth for a short moment. Then, bent almost in two, hugging the ground and nearly blending with it, she ran across the courtyard to where they waited.

“C'mon,” she said, moving behind the hedge that paralleled the street, taking the lead.

Tohm followed her swinging hips, losing the dark form of her in the still darker night, recapturing sight of the vision when the lights of the street broke through gaps in the hedge and glimmered in her hair, trapped like fireflies in her silken cage. Babe brought up the rear, an unlighted cigar clamped between his teeth. They weaved along, skirting the rear of the House of Nubile Maidens, stopping suddenly at the edge of the main avenue.

“What's the matter?” Tohm asked her as she peered into the street from their hiding place behind a number of garbage bins in the alleyway.

“Listen.”

Then he heard it too. The faint *slip-slap* of boot heels on pavement, snapping out a rhythm. They hunched themselves down in the shadows, peeping through the crevice between wall and garbage bin. In moments, a cadre of Royal Romaghin Guards moved past, their colorful, plumed uniforms somehow out of place in the dark night streets. There were twenty of them, moving to positions along the city wall and at the city gate to change duties with guards already there. The officer would march these men from position to position, losing some and gaining the tired sentries coming off duty, eventually to return to the garrison at a slightly slower pace and a slightly more slipshod rhythm. It seemed to Tohm that the Romaghins were paranoid in the fear of the Muties. And ironic in that they were trying to keep Muties out of the capital by guarding the gate while said Muties were actually living in it—rather, under it.

“We'll wait a few minutes before crossing the street,” Mayna said.

He put his mouth close to the delicate shell of her ear. “Listen, I want to thank you for saving my life. This was a lot of trouble and danger to go through.”

She turned, smiling a smile that did not exactly indicate pleasure. The corners of her mouth were strained in their upturned mimicry of joy, her sharp teeth glittering brightly. “Hero Tohm, I would just as soon have left you rot there. But they would have tortured you before the hanging, trying to get information about us.”

“Torture?”

“And they are good at it. We couldn't risk your spill-ing everything to them. We *had* to come and get you.”

He eased away from her glumly, and sat silently waiting.

“Okay,” she said at length. “One at a time across the street and into the alley over there. Run on tiptoes and don’t make a lot of noise.”

She moved first, like a piece of airy fluff hardly touching the ground at all, totally silent. She gained the darkness at the mouth of the opposite alley, waved an arm for the next.

The street was a broad, open plain with lights that seemed almost, at this moment of exposure, to be brighter than the sun at noon. But he ran anyway, trying not to bring his feet down too heavily, meeting with less success than he had hoped. He made the shadows in relative quiet, although not so easily as she had. Babe followed. He waddled rather than walked.

“Ho! Stop there!” a voice called from up the street.

Babe doubled his efforts.

Two Romaghin guards had turned the corner and were pursuing him.

“Stop or be killed!”

Mayna leaped into the open, crouching, a hand laser aimed down the avenue. Before the guards could even finish drawing their own, they were seething masses of bubbling flesh on the street. She, indeed, was a champion marksman.

“Thanks,” Babe wheezed, pounding into the alley, his belly shaking, his double chin bathed in sweat.

There was scattered shouting on the street and the *clip-clip* of boots on cement. Evidently, the soldiers had been off duty, reveling at some private orgy and had turned the corner just after Mayna had gunned down their two friends. Now they would be hunting. No one gunned down a Romaghin soldier on his own world—no one but a Mutie.

“Hurry,” Mayna said, disappearing into the darkness.

They followed, trying to be as quiet as she, not succeeding. The faint echo of their steps was sure to attract the guards. And did.

The walls along the alley glistened wetly as hand torches of low-beam lasers lit up the entranceway they had left, searched slowly, closer, closer, much closer. Tohm felt, as well as saw, the light wash over him for an instant, then flick back and hold.

“Halt!”

There was a louder pounding of feet behind them. Tohm no longer tried to be quiet; he concentrated only on watching the catgirl’s feet and matching her speed. She turned abruptly into a side alley. They were moving now into the slum areas of the city where not as many lights burned and the ways between buildings were twisted and crisscrossed into a maze they might be able to put to their advantage. The cobblestones beneath their feet were slimy with garbage tossed out through windows. The laser torch was no longer on them, but the voices were still close behind, several turns away. They turned again. Again.

Mayna pulled to a stop and stood panting. Tohm was surprised and pleased to see that this seemingly indefatigable creature was registering exhaustion. Almost as much as he was.

“Look,” she said, “these alleys to the right all connect with the Avenue of Beggars. The wall between the Avenue of Beggars and the next street isn’t high. If we climb it, it is only a block to the alley and the entrance to the hutch.”

“No,” Tohm said flatly.

“What do you mean?” she almost snarled.

“No. All of those alleys do *not* connect with the Avenue of Beggars. If you want to get there, we go straight ahead, not right. You’ve lost your sense of direction.”

“You’re insane. Follow me.”

He grabbed her shoulder. “Okay, so you hate to be proven wrong—especially by me. But, remember, I have a memorized street map in my head.”

Footsteps and voices were growing louder.

Somewhere an owl moaned as the search disturbed his home . . .

“Babe, who do you stick with?” she asked, facing the boy-man.

He looked at Tohm, back to her. He was thinking of her fast action and good shot that had saved his life back there. “You, I guess.”

"Hell," Tohm moaned.

"Either go with us or go on your own."

"Lead on, lady," he said.

She turned into a corridor between two buildings that had been roofed over for weather protection. It was pitch-black. They moved carefully but steadily, now and then aware of the soft bodies of rats bumping against their legs in an attempt to get out of their way. There was an odor of sewage and of rotting food scraps. Vapors of animal wastes and the unpleasant perfumes of garbage-suckling plants lay over all, smothering.

When they left that and ran into the next street, they were directly in front of the garrison on Royal Guard Avenue.

"I—" she started to say.

A laser blast smashed into the bricks just above their heads, sent orange powder cascading over their shoulders.

A second blast slightly lower . . .

"Now will you follow me?" Tohm roared.

That had been a hard way to prove a point, but he was gloating.

Her face showed confusion, the first time he had seen it there, twisting those beautiful features into something approaching agony.

Sssang! A third shot.

Babe screamed.

They turned, saw the black scar across the arm and the blood beginning to bubble out. Babe twisted his face in pain, clutched at the wound.

"This way," Tohm said, grabbing both of them and turning back into the covered lane. He ran first, Babe between, Mayna bringing up the end. They broke into the alley they had just left seconds before, confronting the guards who had first chased them.

Tohm launched himself at the largest, a muscular man in the red plumes, gold cape, and gray pantaloons of an officer. They crashed into the stone street, the officer's head striking the wall of the building. Mayna turned a second guard's head to mush, whirled and burned the legs from a third, who didn't even have time to scream. Tohm smashed a fist into the officer's face, saw blood, was nauseated and excited at the same moment. His stomach flopped, and for an instant he hesitated as the conservative side of him momentarily dominated the sadistic. The other man took advantage of the lull, heaved, twisted loose, kicked out with a foot that caught Tohm in the chest, tossed him against the wall. Mayna had turned, fanning the beam into the covered alley-way, interfering with any approach from the garrison.

"Oof," Tohm moaned as the larger man leaped and landed on him. He grunted as the heavy arm of the Romaghin pressed against his throat, cutting the air off, crushing his vocal cords. Only his left arm was free. He brought the edge of that palm down hard against the officer's skull, lowered his aim to the back of the neck, slammed down again, again. His throat was trick-ling blood on the inside, and his head was looping the loop with wild abandon, his eyes swimming out of focus, in, out, in-out, in-out, in-out. His karate hand was a separate object. It did not seem to be part of him any longer, but merely a *thing*. Distantly, he saw it hack at the flesh of his opponent. Smashing. Again. Suddenly there was a crunching noise of cartilage or bone giving way to pressure. For a moment, he was not sure whether it was his own throat or the other man's spine. But the inrush of fresh air and the dead weight upon him told him which. He wriggled loose of the Romaghin, managed to stand, swaying.

"They've stopped trying to come this way," Mayna said, motioning to the covered alley. "But they'll be hunting new routes."

"How's your arm?" Tohm asked Babe.

The Mutie gritted his teeth. "Hurts like Hell, but it isn't bleeding much. The burn cauterized the wound, closed up the main gash."

"Good," Tohm said, his throat sore, his lungs grasping at the air as if it were gold and they were the hands of Midas. "Now," he said, turning to Mayna, "follow me."

They moved straight forward, listening uneasily to the voices of soldiers on both sides as the guards

searched the maze of streets and semi-streets, alleys and walk-ways. Eventually they came to the end of the slum system that the Romaghins so cleverly hid in the heart of the city behind a facade of new buildings and looked out upon the Avenue of the Beggars. It was deserted at this late hour, littered with the paper scraps and food bits that were the remnants of the day, when the poor had clustered there to meet the clergymen who daily distributed alms. Tohm pulled his head back into the gloom.

“One trouble,” he said.

“What?”

“A guard. Halfway up the block. He can survey most of the street. He'll see us before we make the wall.”

“I lost my laser running,” she said. “It's back there somewhere.”

“We won't need it if you're game,” he answered, searching out the green glint of her eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“There is a ledge, much like the one at the prison— only wider—running a dozen feet above his head. If you can climb the wall in here, move around the corner and onto the ledge out there without being seen, you could get above him. Perhaps you could jump, knock him down, confuse him until I can get there with-out being beamed down. I'll run the moment you jump. I'll try to knock him out.”

She looked around the corner, surveyed the guard and the ledge. It was as he had said. Without comment, she scaled the wall of the alley like a spider spewing her invisible net, her feet finding every crack a good toe-hold, moving unfailingly ahead. She inched around from the ceiling into the street and held her breath. The guard had not seen her, for his peripheral vision was occupied in the scanning of the street, not the walls. He stood fifty feet away, his rifle across his arms. She gained the ledge and moved silently down, balanced perfectly, her tiny feet like gyroscopes, trembling but always on an even keel.

Tohm tensed himself to dash the second she leaped. He would have to move quickly.

In a few minutes of nerve-shattering tension, she was standing above the guard; aphonic, she left the little outcropping of cement as if she were flying instead of falling. She collided with the Romaghin's back, her feet striking first, toppling both of them to the street.

Tohm ran from his concealment. His legs pumped up and down like pistons. But when he got there, there was nothing to do. The guard was dead. Neat rows of claw marks slashed his neck. Blood gurgled out. His eyes were open, staring in bewilderment. There had not been time for a scream.

He looked up at her.

“Let's get moving,” she said, not returning the stare.

Babe came from the shadows. Mayna and Tohm topped the wall first, then reached down and lifted the smaller Mutie. From there, the alley and the grating was a very short step. There were no guards around those streets yet. They ran freely, more anxious for speed than secrecy. They gained the grille and the warm cushion of air without incident.

When they reached the hutch, Corgi rushed to greet them, his eyes flashing with all shades of yellow in riotous waves. “We leave in three hours. The Romaghins have caught on to our attack date. The pressure is on. They might invade Federation worlds to kill us. The Old Man will be here to move us out in exactly three hours.”

PART TWO

“NEW DESTINIES, NEW DESIRES”

XIII

They were flushed with the heat of love . . .

Lying naked on their grass mat in the cool darkness of the hut . . .

He rolled over to kiss the lips that he knew to be sweet and soft and warm . . .

And she had no face . . .

It had not been torn off, ripped bloodily away in rage, but had simply faded out of existence.

“Tarni—” He began to say. But her name was slipping away too, dis-solving from his memory . . .

He strained to remember the face . . . As if, by sheer power of the will, he could undo whatever the gods had done to their relationship . . .

For a moment, a mouth appeared with a greedy tongue. But that was worse than the blankness—that one, grotesque feature on the barren plain of the face. He stopped trying to remember. He simply ran . . .

He ran from the hut, weeping . . .

He ran through the coolness of the night with the stars overhead . . .

He ran with the booming of the surf in the dis-tance . . .

He ran beneath the moons, wishing he could howl . . .

He ran through the bushes of amber leaves. . . .

He ran through orange flowers, stopping suddenly to listen to something. What? What was it? What had he heard?

A hissing. An animal hissing in the bushes nearby . . .

“All right,” someone said, shaking his shoulder. “No more time for naps.”

He pushed himself off the couch, wobbling as he stood.

“We meet the Old Man in forty minutes on the edge of town. There is a passageway through the caves that will take us under the city wall.” Corgi's eyes were still flushing with brilliant color. He was excited about the swift culmination of all their years of work, the finish line of their centuries-long race.

Tohm stretched, blinked the last traces of sleep from his eyes. “I'm anxious to meet this Old Man of yours.”

“Quite a person, quite a person. Come along now. We mustn't be late.”

They entered the caves where he had first heard Mayna singing, where her hatred for him had bloomed, mushroomed into sight for a few short moments. She hadn't spoken a word to him since they had entered the hutch after escaping the Romaghin guards. She was perturbed, he was sure, by the fact that it had been her fault that Babe now wore his arm in a sling and had it patched with heavy heal-and-flex bandages. Corgi and Mayna took the lead, Fish guiding the Seer next, and Babe and himself with Hunk on his shoulder bringing up the rear. Moving past the lake, skirting its shores, they snaked downward for a time through phospho-rescent corridors, then turned upward and finally struck out in a straight tunnel with no nonsense to it. Tohm estimated ten or twenty feet to the surface, perhaps as much as thirty.

The weight of Hunk was already burdening him down, sending throbbing pains through his shoulder. There was no flybelt now to support them, and he was taking all of the Mutie's weight himself with no help from the limited de-grav and propeller plates in the magic waist-band.

“Not much farther,” Hunk said, sensing his discom-fort.

“I can't believe it,” Babe said, puffing away on his tobacco cylinder. “I can't believe we're finally

ready for the big show.”

“I wish,” Tohm said, “I understood what this big show is all about.”

“You will. In time, you will.”

Tohm tried to remember how long ago it had all begun. Strangely, he could not. Whether it had been a week or a month or a year, he did not know. All he knew was that he had come a long way, from hut to Jumbo to “pervert.” He had crossed millions of miles of space and thousands of years of civilization. Somehow, his destiny had become linked with these semi-people. There had, in the beginning, been few people in his life. Parents, a girl whom he had loved—or thought, in his inexperience, that he had—and a few tribal friends. Now there were many people and semi-people in his life whom he had directly or indirectly affected for better or for worse for as long as all should live. He had killed, it suddenly came to him with a bitterweet shock, as many people in this week-month-year as he had known all together in his previous life.

“Another half mile,” Corgi said, calling back over his shoulder.

Another half mile to what? What was going to happen when the Muties got together and did their thing? Who was the Old Man? What was the Fringe? Did he want to be a part of it, and would they let him even if he did? The last thought struck hard. He thought they liked him—aside from Mayna—but how could he be certain? Could one judge these people on normal human standards? Mayna herself had told him not to force his mores and values on her. Did they really want a peaceful world, or was that some front for a larger design they had on things? His mind was wrapped in on itself. Whatever was coming, however, and whatever had been left behind, he could not imagine anything but being a pervert. Their cause, at least, seemed just, the first righteous cause or purpose he had seen in civilization. Personally, he was hooked on these people: comical Babe, songwriter Fish, competent Corgi, incomparable Hunk, possibly even Seer now that he understood him . . . *And there had been hissing in the bushes . . .*

“This is it,” Corgi said, as they all gathered around him.

A small cavelet yawned upward at an angle.

A fresh breeze swept down, stirred their hair and tickled their nostrils with freedom.

“We cleaned out the mouth of this a long time ago, broke through to the surface. A back door for emergencies. It comes up in a clump of rocks just outside the gate. There's no cover for about a thousand feet. Remember, when you're out, run. The walls are very near, and you don't want to draw any attention. *Don't stand about making a target of yourself*”

Then he was snaking up through the blackness, moving amazingly fast if one thought of him as eyeless, progressing normally if one remembered he had radar cells. Dirt crashed down in handfuls, but there was no sign of a cave-in. Mayna went next with Seer, passing without notice, blending with the walls. Gone. Fish followed, then Babe, at his insistence. Hunk and he were the last. Heaving mightily, he lurched upward. He was grateful for his new and powerful body, for without it, he could never have done what was expected of him.

They broke ground in a pile of rocks just as Corgi had said. Straight ahead a clump of brush and trees loomed darkly. He wondered whether they had transferred the trees as well as the caves, then decided they hadn't. There were many other clumps of growth further out, exactly like this one, and they would not have transferred them all. Possibly, in the old city, this clump of brush and trees had been closer to the outlet. A thousand feet was a terribly long way when the guards were so close. He swiveled his head about, taking Hunk's with it, to look at the wall which was not even two hundred feet away. Once he had reached the trees where the others now waited, the growth would conceal their retreat to the meeting place the Old Man had chosen. This was the only dangerous ground, this open space. Heaving again, he cleared the rocks and began running, his ankles twisting slightly in the loose sand. But he would have made it—would have if some citizen had not been leaving the gate then. The huge portals swung open, and floodlights flashed on to show the traveler the road. The light caught him and Hunk. Plainly. Brightly. Less than half a dozen seconds passed before a stronger light snapped on, found him. The sand began boiling as near-miss laser beams splashed around him. The shrubs seemed an eternity away.

The searchlights began fanning the bushes, more than a dozen of them now, picking out darker forms that were Corgi, Babe, the others. Beams lanced in, setting the desert weed on fire. The brush erupted quickly, jump-ing from a tiny tongue of flame to an impenetrable wall of fire. The others were running from it. He saw Mayna fall on her belly, take aim, and laser out a searchlight. Another. Another still.

He ran, his tongue lolling from the corner of his mouth much like the tongue of a dog. He dropped onto the sand next to the others and drew his own pistol. Hunk had one clutched in his tentacle. They fired. Now and then he saw a guard slump away from the wall where he had been hiding. The majority of the Roma-ghins, however, were behind portions of the wall that were too well fortified and were too wary of the lasers to let themselves be injured very easily. Mayna pumped steadily at the lights, every shot counting, every shot making their hiding place a little less brilliantly illumi-nated. But the wall guards were searching out the source of her beam, trying to fix the exact location. Every shot she fired added to their basis for calculations, helped them vector in on her. A block of guards came through the gate, the front line blasting steadily to cover their advance.

“Run!” Corgi shouted, following his own advice.

They leaped from the sand and rounded the wall of flame, momentarily putting a barrier between themselves and the troops. But the Romaghins would soon clear it too. And suddenly they *had* cleared it. There was a scream. Tohm turned to his right and saw Fish grabbing at the air, his arms stroking as if he were swimming through very thick water. Then he fell, burning, rolled several times, and was still.

Tohm looked at his watch.

At first, nothing seemed to focus. Then his vision cleared through sheer willpower. There were still ten minutes until the Old Man arrived. Ten minutes, he real-ized, as Seer lost his head in a blaze of purple light and crashed to his knees, would be much too late. Much.

XIV

They were behind a ridge of sand, firing at the mass of Romaghin guards that had collected in the windblown dunes ahead. It was only a matter of minutes, Tohm knew, until the officers would direct their flanks to spread out and surround the Muties. And worst of all, they were too outnumbered to do anything about it. Far away, the roar of a desert tanker droned steadily forward, closer, louder. When the tanker moved in be-tween the Romaghins and Muties and began lobbing shells, they would be dead to the last. He realized that the guards would not risk their own lives when a deadly and efficient machine like the tanker could kill for them.

Mayna was crying about Seer and Fish. It was the first time he had seen her cry real tears.

Corgi was cursing the oncoming artillery.

Just that suddenly, the thought of artillery reminded him of Jumbo Ten. Somewhere in his brain, a memory was dug out of storage and dusted off. The small com-munications bulb in his ear! He lifted a finger to the fleshy lobe. The bulb was still there, a little lump in the fat. He pressed it between two fingers, smashed it, activating the chemical broadcasters. Instantly, J-10 would be firing loose of the sands, homing in on the beam. Eight hundred miles at 24,000 miles an hour top speed. That meant it would be there in—he began doing some swift calculations . . .

But before he could even decide on a relative arrival time, he heard the roar of the mighty engines, the whine of the air being squeezed out of the way, rent in two like an old, rotten curtain. The retro-rockets fired a hundred miles off, lighting the sky. Then, abruptly, the giant machine was crashing down a hundred yards ahead, blocking his view of most of the Romaghins.

The tiny, sonic scope twiddled about, hunting his voice which it had recorded on its memory bank tapes.

“Behind and to the right,” he said. “Kill those soldiers.”

The Jumbo readjusted its position. The Romaghins, thinking at first that it was their own machine sent some-how, miraculously, to aid them, stood and began running toward it, laughing. Most ceased chuckling and guff-awing when their first ranks were gunned down with laser cannon. They turned to run. But cannon beams and gas shells tore up the sand and the men indiscriminately. The armored tanker, seeing the gargantuan ro-bot, wheeled about, tried to retreat. It made a dozen yards before the laser cannon melted it into slag.

The Muties were cheering. Babe had hold of Tohm's neck and was nearly strangling him with one arm while clubbing him with the cast of the other.

"Yours?" Corgi shouted.

"Mine!" He turned to Jumbo Ten which sat with all weapons ready. "At ease."

The humming softened.

"We'll walk before it to where we meet the Old Man. We keep that Jumbo," Corgi said excitedly. "We may need it before this is all over."

"Hey!" Mayna shouted, pointing toward a sled that had drifted in low from the gate. There was a single figure on it. Small. As it came closer, Tohm could see that it was the boy with the white eyes, the albino who wan't an albino.

"Tohm!" Hunk shouted. "Order the Jumbo to—"

But then there was no Jumbo.

There was nothing for Tohm for one split second, then:

A lightningbolt smashed!

Another blasted down!

And yet another!

And out of the mists of their ozone clouds she came, faceless, moving easily, graceful, slinking

...

But no face . . .

And no name . . .

He concentrated on her face, on what it should be, on what he knew it must look like . . .

Green eyes . . .

Green, green, greengreengreen ...

Lips bursting with sweetness: a tiny, pink tongue licking little teeth in show of passion . . .

Hissing. . .

There was a scream that was not part of it. For a moment the dream cleared and he felt himself gaining control of his body again. Then the dream clamped down tighter than ever:

A lightningbolt smashed!

Another blasted down!

And yet another!

Hissing . . .

He placed his hands upon her breasts, looked into her faceless face . . .

Another scream. It was very close this time. In his ear, really. For a moment the world opened up again. The white-eyed boy was kneeling on the ground, the sled upset beside him. Hunk's tentacles were throbbing, wig-gling. Hunk was screaming!

A lightningbolt smashed!

And another!

Out of the mists she came . . .

He wanted to violate—

Hunk's screams had been but a prelude to the latest from the boy. It covered all ranges of a scream. It vi-brated on every decibel. It was a million-billion screams careening out of the void, smashing upon the rocks of his ears . . .

A lightningbolt smashed!

Naked, she—

But the dreams were not holding. They receded like the tide, weaker each time, coming in less and

less. He wished Hunk would stop screaming.

A lightning—

And out of the mist—

Naked, she turned and—

And yet anoth—

The scream of all voices ceased and with it ceased every scrap of nightmare, every vestige of dream. Grog-gily, he looked about. The others were just coming to their senses too. Half a dozen tanks were rumbling across the sand, moving in under the screen they thought the boy was still putting up.

“Shell them!” he cried at the Jumbo.

Raising its barrels and launch tubes, the robot rapid-fired grenades and gas shells into the tankers, puffing them to ashes, smashing down the wall of the city and driving the other guards back into the heart of the cap-ital, away from the walls.

He felt Hunk's tentacles begin to loosen. For the first time since the boy had attacked, he twisted his head to look at the Mutie. There was blood dribbling from his lips. Tohm dropped to his knees and lifted Hunk off, laid him gently on the ground. The others were gather-ing around. Hunk's lids were heavy, blotting out half of his eyes. Blood seeped from his mouth, out both ears. He was pale. He was dying.

Tohm felt the tears coming now. Fish had been nothing to him. Fish was withdrawn, a loner. It had been a blessing for Seer—this thing called death. But Hunk . . . He wanted to wade through the rubble of the city and slit the throat of every guard he saw. Rage boiled within him, fired his basest fires. And still he cried; with all the rage at hatred, the tenderness still surged to the surface.

Blood gurgled in a steadier stream from the lips.

“Hunk, my God, who was he?”

“He wasn't the same boy,” Hunk said thickly.

“Who?”

“A . . . Mutie.”

“But he was working against us!”

Hunk coughed clots of red, wheezed. “Tohm, can you imagine a Mutie born without a body? No, I'm not delirous. The others will back me up. Born without a body, as a mind, as a pure entity with no flesh shell.”

“I don't understand.”

“The White Eyes always look like one another, always the same. He is a living dream maker, a psychedelic drug. He creates his pseudo-flesh, the body that we see, from the raw force of men's desires. Lust is the strongest of man's basic emotions, it seems. So strong in some men that the White Eyes can spin it into a body, take the energy of those thoughts and create a shell of substance. Men once had a drive for food that was their strongest thought pattern, but now no one is hun-gry. Once it was self-preservation, but that is not so strong anymore. A dead man can often be rebuilt. Death is not always permanent. Once it was family love. But that died long ago in most people as our modern world encouraged love of self. So now it is lust. The White Eyes are tangible lust creatures. When one is born, the men flock to the womb to give him flesh in re-turn for his realistic dreams.”

He coughed more blood. He closed his eyes and breathed easily for a while. The Jumbo was still shelling the walls. “The boy clothes itself in their desires. But the form is always—always the same.”

Tohm looked up to the others. Mayna was crying. Corgi may have been: the yellow was a very different shade from what Tohm had ever seen in the radar patches. It may have constituted tears.

“Too bad . . . about . . . Tarnilee,” Hunk said. “Too bad, Tohm.” And then he was gone: *no less a man in death than ever took a breath*. Tohm recognized that as a line from some poem he had picked out of the books in Triggy Gop's bowels. He removed his hand from the blood-covered chin and stood.

“We had better go,” Corgi said suddenly, turning away from the remains of Hunk. “They'll be calling in heavy artillery.”

Tohm ordered the Jumbo to follow.

They trudged across the desert, suddenly very weary in all their well-shaped and mis-shapen bones.

“He's here,” Corgi said at last, brightening a bit.

"The Old Man," Babe whispered reverently in explanation.

Tohm could see, among the black shadows of the trees, a greater shadow of what seemed to be a ship. A portal hummed open. They stepped through. "Welcome," the Old Man said.

Tohm gasped. "Good God, Triggy Gop!"

XV

"Who else?" the voice drifted from the walls.

"I'll be damned!"

"I doubt that. The others?"

"Dead," Corgi said flatly and as quickly as he could. He did not seem to want to dwell upon it.

There was a moment of silence before Triggy spoke. "It happens. It has happened to others of us and will happen again. We must remember, however, the cause. In fact, we may all have a chance to die for the cause. The Romaghins have discovered, through their intelligence network, that a great number of Muties are entering Federation worlds via unknown means. They have not discovered that I am that unknown transport. But their suspicions are aroused. They have their eyes on Columbiad, where we have our greatest forces concentrated. Any moment, they may attack in an attempt to wipe out as many of us as they can before we can make our move."

"What do we do?" Corgi asked. "I foresee a ninety percent chance that they will attack."

Everyone frowned. "That isn't good," Triggy sighed.

Corgi continued: "However, and this is odd, there seems to be only a thirty-five percent chance of their succeeding."

"You're sure?" Triggy asked.

"Positive."

Everyone had flopped onto couches. There were also ten normals, the Mutie sympathizers from the capital—ten out of three million who would actually do something about the injustice they saw.

"We are making the transfer in four hours," Triggy announced.

There were gasps and murmurs of excitement.

"But are we ready?" Mayna asked.

"Yes, sweet child. You are the last colony to be evacuated. You will, because of your idea for total universe transfer, which was offered by your Hunk, be my staff for the operation."

There were smiles.

"Now, please strap in. Tohm, you come to the main room and strap in the hypno-teacher. In your absence, I prepared a set of toto-experience tapes, working from the ground up. They bypass vocabulary and appeal to all senses. They should explain all of this to you."

He stood. "I hope so."

"They will. I'm sure of it. Perfect pieces of work—even if I say so myself."

While the others strapped in, Tohm left and found the hypno-teacher. He was belted down before the blast came.

The tapes were very good.

He walked above the universes, looking down at each. He did not question where his vantage point may have been, but watched that which was shown with a singleness of purpose that could only have been hypno-suggestion. He understood that each universe (and there were countless trillions of them) was an all-encompassing and endless thing, yet each universe was separated from the others by a wall, a very definite barrier dubbed the Fringe. One layer of molecules separated each universe from its neighbors. In fact, that layer was *one molecule* stretching in all directions until eternity, though never bisecting another shell molecule.

He saw that the Muties were able to distinguish this area, to view it naturally in much the same way he was seeing it now. They could locate their own universe in this endless procession. The Mutie mind could distort the shell molecule, stretch it thin and rent it, making a portal into the neighboring universe. They could encompass their own universe with the fields of their minds, wrench it from its niche, and start it moving through the rent. If they studiously concentrated on not encompassing the Romaghin and Setessin worlds, those areas would be left behind.

The Muties' universe would not, however, collide with the neighboring universe on the other side of the rent molecule when it pushed through, for that neighboring universe would push against the shell molecule on its opposite end and force itself through into a *third* uni-versal plane. The third would push into a fourth almost simultaneously; the fourth into a fifth, fifth into sixth. An endless chain would be started. The process of natural transfer of universes would never end. There would be no negative repercussions, for the process was not a circle that would eventually close itself.

The Muties wanted to encompass all of their own universe *except* the warlike worlds, thus pushing ninety-nine point nine percent through the rent. The gaps where the peaceful worlds had been would be (?) empty in the old universe, and the spots where the war-like worlds had been would be gaps in the new universe. It was quite like a cancer operation, cutting out the malignant growths—in this case, worlds—and leaving them behind. What happened to the Romaghins and Setessins in that great empty universe was not their worry. Cruel, perhaps, but wasn't it worth it to all those neutral peoples who had been caught up in an eight hundred year war?

All of this was shown him, not in words, but in mind pictures, in thought-image concepts that he could grasp with all senses.

At last, he understood.

"Well?" Trigg Gop said, when he came out of hypno-teach.

"It's clear now."

"Are you with us?"

He grinned at the walls where the cameras would be watching him. "Of course."

"I'm glad. I was intrigued by you that first time we met. When I learned you were with Corgi's group, I wasn't surprised. Not really. In fact, I was so intrigued with you that I began writing an opus about your exploits. I expect to get a full account from you so that I may work on the verse once we get through to the new universe and this great labor is over."

"An heroic epic?"

"Something like that."

"You know that my search never reached fruition."

"Well, we shall see."

"It didn't. A bust."

"Time heals all wounds. Meanwhile, stay strapped in. We're landing on Columbiad in a few minutes. I have to attend to that now."

Tohm leaned back in the chair. The entire concept was staggering. The Muties had been trying to transfer the capital of Basa II into another universe. But they had discovered that it was simpler to transfer every-thing *but* the Romaghins and Setessins! He still could not grasp it all. But it meant something now. He had seen how war and the war-makers had held back an entire people—the Muties—and had disrupted the entire lives of billions more. To end war was certainly a noble gesture. He wanted to be in on it. It was something to continue living for. *And the hissing in the bushes . . . The filling in of a blank face . . .*

The retro-rockets fired, jarring the library . . .

The time was coming swiftly . . .

“You sir over there,” Corgi said, pointing across the room full of Muties to an empty chair next to Mayna.

“Next to her?”

“Why not?”

“She hates my every cell.”

Corgi smiled sarcastically. “Sure.”

“She does. Please seat me elsewhere.”

“You really believe—”

“Listen, Corgi, she will claw me to pieces if I go near her.”

“You fool.”

“Look, don’t call me that. Everyone has had a turn now, so shut up.”

Corgi grabbed his arm. “No. You are a fool. You are a fool not to see when someone is in love with you. Surely, your Tarnilee never looked at you the way May-na does.”

Tohm wrinkled his brow in uncertainty. “I—”

“You’re a fool. I’ll say it again: you’re a fool.”

“No. Look, she said I didn’t understand—”

“And you didn’t. You didn’t understand that she had been taught to fight normals, to consider herself better, and she fell, instead, in love with one. All of her values and mores were upset. She fought you to bolster her-self, her own beliefs that were being shattered by your presence. She fell in love—well, on first sight. But all you could think of was finding Tarnilee. Did you ever tell Mayna you loved her?”

“No!”

“But you do, don’t you?”

He tried to deny it, but he could not find the words.

“She wanted to be sure that you understood us, for, if you really did, it would justify her love. Now go sit next to her. The time has come.”

He hesitated a moment, then struck off across the room. There were Muties in every chamber of Triggy Gop’s belly. Two thousand of them. The remainder of their numbers were hooked electronically to the Old Man. The moment had come. He slumped into the chair, looked at her. “Good luck,” he said at last.

“Thank you, Hero Tohm.”

“For God’s sake—”

But he was interrupted by Triggy. “Okay, let us pre-prepare ourselves. We may not have time, but we can try. And if we succeed today, let us not forget that it was Hunk, a brave and intelligent man, who died for us and gave us this plan. Now, first stage.”

Tohm looked about at the weird conglomeration, the two-headed men, the graceful nymphets with eyes that constantly changed colors, the winged people. They were a wonderful phantasmagoria. As a single entity, they slipped into a trance.

The last word Mayna spoke was this: “Tohm.”

He looked to her full lips as they closed into sleep. Perhaps Corgi had been right. Perhaps he was the great-est fool to come down the space lanes in a thousand years. He put a hand on her shoulder, though she could not feel it, and waited. “Stage two,” Triggy Gop said. There was no noticeable outward change in the Muties, but Tohm thought he sensed a spiritual drawing away.

“Tohm!” Triggy snapped through his wire mouth.

He sat erect. “What?”

“The Romaghins. Good heavens, ten of their Jumbos are closing in on Columbiad. They’ll find us before we can act.”

“I could lead them on a wild goose chase with Jumbo Ten.”

“Take her with you,” Triggy said.

“But—”

"She wouldn't want you to go without her. She didn't have to save you back on Basa II. The others were leav-ing early. They would have been gone before you were tortured, before you could have spilled their location to the police."

His mouth fell open involuntarily. "Everyone knew but me."

"You were a particular fool. Now move."

He lifted the slight catgirl and carried her into the room with the waiting Jumbo. If this were death, and that seemed likely, it would not be lonely.

"Stage three," Triggy said behind.

They were drifting like deadly seeds above Colum-biad, scanning the planet below. Tohm brought J-10 up from the horizon and in behind them. They were too busy searching for the Mutie congregation on Colum-biad to scan space too. He opened his com-system to listen in on whatever they said. If they were not manned by Romaghins and were organic brain directed, he would not be as fast as they in battle. But he had the advantage of surprise. He joined their formation at the rear and armed all seven nuclear rockets. He would have to cut the odds swiftly.

"I HAVE THEM. MERICIVE CITY. I THINK ITS A FLOATING LIBRARY."

"FEDERATION CONSPIRACY!" another said.

"WE WILL CLOSE—"

There was no sense in waiting. Every second would bring them closer to Triggy, and that was just what he had to stop. He set each rocket to home in on a different point of the formation, snapped the All Go button, and rocked with the concussion. There was an intensely brilliant flash as the seven nuclears exploded. But it was gone just as quickly as it had appeared. Seven Jumbos had been pulverized by direct hits, and one more had been crushed when caught between two blasts. The other two were still stunned by the change of events.

"WHO'S LEFT! WHO'S LEFT!" the command Jumbo barked. "WHO ARE YOU TWO?"

"THIS IS SANGELITH," the second machine re-ported.

He could waste no time. He didn't know what name to report in under, so he blasted Sangelith with his laser cannon, boring a hole through the tough hide into the power area.

"RENEGADE. MY GOD, RENEGADE!" the com-mand machine was screaming.

A beam lanced out at Tohm, missed, wild as all Hell.

Mayna moaned in the seat next to him.

He pulled back on the dive stick, took the Jumbo down. But not fast enough. A beam caught the visor cameras, blew them out, blinding the ship. He would have to rely on radar alone. And, suddenly, that was going to be bad, for a dozen new blips appeared, mov-ing in from deep space. The lone Romaghin was getting aid. And if these newcomers had been watching the battle via radar, they knew the guilty party.

He put a hand out and stroked the silken hair of the beautiful creature next to him.

The distant blips were growing larger. He could not fight them with a laser cannon, not when they had seven missiles each. As he thought of the missiles, three smaller blips snapped into view on the screen, closing fast. There would now be only seconds.

He unsnapped her safety belt and drew her into his lap. He only wished she could be conscious now to tell him he had been a fool. He looked back to the screen just as the missiles and Jumbos disappeared com-pletely. . . .

Triggy gop's intestinal tract was filled with wild cheer-ing. He shut down most of his audio receptors so as not to get a brainache. The robo-snoops they had stationed in space were reporting back on the areas where the Romaghin and Setessin worlds had been. They were gone, left behind. But, unlike anyone had expected, some of those locations were filled with new worlds. Obviously, the gaps in their universe had been filled in by corresponding leftovers from the universe they had forced out of this plane. And if the robo-snoop films could be believed, these planets were not inhabited by normals, but by Muties. Natural, evolved Muties, not radiation-induced ones. One of the new globes was peopled by honest-to-god satyrs! Another by mermen and mermaids. He wished Fish had lived. They had come, freaks, into a world where freaks were the normal. They belonged here.

He tried once again to contact Jumbo Ten. This time there was an answer.

"Hello?"

"Tohm, why in God's name haven't you answered me? I've been calling for over two hours!"

"First," Tohm said, "what happened to those missiles and Jumbos?"

"I instructed the others not to encompass them when we made the transfer. They were left in the old uni-verse."

Silence. Except for a purring sound like an animal hissing in the bushes . . .

"Tohm!"

"Huh?"

"Are you both all right?"

"Sure. We're fine." There was a hissing and giggling sound in the background. A hissing very much like a cat. A giggling very much like a young girl.

"Look," Triggy said. "Are you going to marry her?"

Laughter at the other end.

Tohm spoke at length. "I am. But I fail to see where that is any of your business, Triggy."

"I'll be damned! It certainly *is* my business. She's my daughter!"

"Your daught—" the voice began to shout before Triggy Gop broke the connection. He giggled. He had had the last word, and that pleased him. He made grand preparations for the time when they would land. He prepared a fabulous party with cakes and wines and tiny assorted sandwiches.

But the cakes grew stale, the wines went flat, and the sandwiches spoiled, for they did not land for ten days.

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