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BOOKS

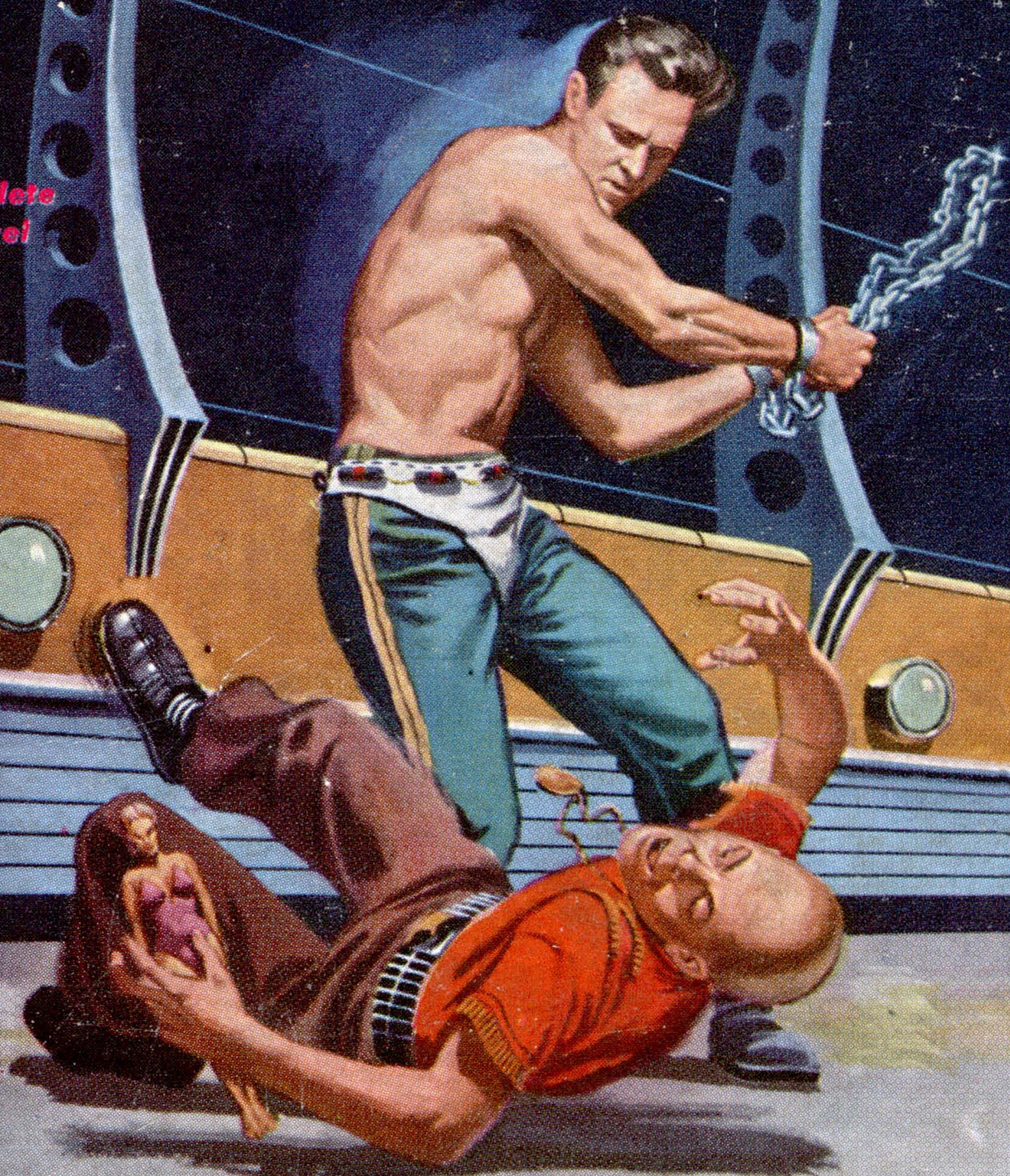
TWO COMPLETE NOVELS 35c

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HAD HE FOUND THE KEY TO MUTATION?

AGENT OF THE UNKNOWN

**Complete
Novel**



MARGARET ST. CLAIR

THE PUPPET THAT ROCKED THE UNIVERSE

Don Haig had been content to lie around and drink in the synthetic beauty of the pleasure planetoid Fyon, until a woman came into his life. A woman more beautiful and more perfect than any other female in the galaxy. A woman who brought about a curious change in Don.

For she was a pocket-size doll—a very strange and miraculous puppet who shed constant tears and held powers that Don never even dreamed of.

But what Don did know was that dangerous alien forces were swiftly focussing on him and his living puppet—and that he had to discover the doll's super-scientific secret before his own life was smashed to atoms.

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

CAST OF CHARACTERS

DON HAIG

He was bound by cosmic forces to the loveliest—and most dangerous—woman in all space.

KUNITZ

Don had to decide in a hurry whether this man was to be trusted implicitly or feared intensely.

FRANCINE

She handed out strange medicine for even stranger illnesses.

PHYLIS

Her kind of loving help was no help at all.

BENDEL

If he could not have Don's puppet, then he had to destroy it.

MULCIBER

His philosophy of government was that of a benevolent sadism.

AGENT

OF THE UNKNOWN

MARGARET ST. CLAIR

ACE BOOKS

A Division of A. A. Wyn, Inc.

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AGENT OF THE UNKNOWN

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THE WORLD JONES MADE

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1: *The Beach*

DON felt that time on Fyon was a tangible element. It seemed to drip down lazily from the dark fronds of the palm trees, to lie in languid pools against the pink and yellow petals of the frangipani. The trades blew steadily day after day on Fyon, warm and fresh and sweet-scented; and the palm trees, leaning their long slim trunks slantwise to the wind, seemed to be resisting time blowing past them. The pink sands of the beach were as smooth as velvet. The gentle waves wrote on them ceaselessly, like time writing, and left them covered with an elegant calligraphy of long, sinuous ripple marks.

The botanists who had installed Fyon's flora had spared no expense. Under the trees there were slender-podded vanilla orchids, hibiscus with long, poised stigmas and petals fantastically cut, double sampaguita flowers. There were ilangilang trees starred with drooping scented greenish blossoms, gardenias as high-centered as roses, champak, odorous kamuning. Sunset was brilliant under the palms, and so was morning, and each day was like the one before it, each round and unflawed and perfect as a pearl. It was no wonder that for weeks at a time Don was able to forget that Fyon was nothing but a synthetic pleasure planetoid.

Worse than that, it was an unsuccessful one. The designers of the planetoid, for all their pains, had somehow missed the taste of the public. There was, it seemed, too much water, too little diversion. Space liners touched there rarely. There were few visitors. The machines that kept Fyon going—the fall of rain, the motion of air, the waves rippling against the beach—ran only because keeping them going was cheaper than shutting them down would have been.

That morning Don Haig woke unwillingly. For a long

time, in his light slumber, he had been conscious of the arthritic pains in his ankles and elbows, of the itching of the sand against his shoulders, of the nausea spreading miserably through his diaphragm and chest. Day was a question he did not want to have to answer. He moaned and burrowed and tried to go back to sleep again. But he was cold and shivering; even with the warm sand against him he was cold. He roused himself at last.

He sat up in the sand, dodging, with the ease of much practice, the slantwise piece of corrugated iron that served him as roof. He yawned and shivered and yawned again. A drink would have helped his nausea, but it had been so long since he had had the luxury of a drink on first awaking that he hardly formed the wish for it. He blinked the gum from his aching, unfocused eyes until he could see a little. Then he crawled out.

The day was well advanced. From the angle of the palm trees' shadows, it must be on the nearer side of noon. From an oleander a bird squawked shrilly. Don licked his lips and shivered nervously. He would have liked a palm tree to hold on to. He began to undress.

He laid his clothing—a sleeveless undershirt and frayed white duck trousers—on the sand near his shelter. As always, he was a little ashamed of his ill cared-for, too-thin body. It was another unwanted, unmet responsibility. He waded out into the surf slowly, feeling the milk-smooth water float some of his misery away, and hoped that it wouldn't make the pain in his joints worse.

When he came back from his bath he felt a little better. He picked up his clothing and, still naked, walked along the squeaking sand until he came to a particular spot on the beach. Then he turned and walked inward for perhaps fifty meters until he came to a fresh-water spring, one of the countless loving refinements the engineers who had built Fyon had installed. The water flowed out clear and cool

under the trees, across a bed of spotted agate pebbles and sweet-scented ferns.

Don Haig drank copiously. He drank again. He scooped up handfuls of the sweet water and slapped it over himself, rinsing away the salt. He didn't want to get salt-water boils once more. He was still thirsty. Again he drank.

This time he vomited. He brought up nothing but clear fluid, but he was careful to move well away from the spring. When the spasm was over he was weak, but he really did feel better.

He walked toward the beach again. When the bland air had dried him, he dressed. He was surprised to find a tiny germ of hunger in himself. Food? Solid food? No, but perhaps coffee. And then, of course, a drink.

That wasn't going to be easy. He smoothed his rough brown hair back, frowning and trying to be intelligent. Fyon was outside the net of social services, and that meant that anything Don got on it had to be paid for with money. Who could he ask for money this morning? Kunitz?

Kunitz had yelled at him the last time he had asked, called him a damned drunken nuisance. Don look abstractedly at the lambda-shaped red birthmark on the inside of his left elbow, and laughed. It was accurate enough. Don was a nuisance even to himself.

After a moment he decided to walk along the beach and see if he could pick something up. It had worked twice, out of all the times he had tried it. Once he had found a beautiful pink shell, very unusual, and sold it to a tourist. The other time it had been an inexpensive watch somebody had dropped.

He set off, dragging his feet. He passed an unobtrusive robot gardener, busy weeding among the hibiscus, and thought for a moment of dismantling it and trying to sell the pieces. It was impractical: they'd only jail him, give him

more psychotherapy, tell him he was happy. And there wasn't any rum in jail.

He walked a kilometer and a half up the long curving beach before he decided to go back. Would it have to be Kunitz after all? Kunitz had liked him once. Don wished there was someone else to beg from besides him.

The long waves rolled in on the pink sands and were sucked back with a low roar. They broke with a prodigal display of foam, rich as pearls on the blue-green glinting of the water. Don watched for a second, divided between aesthetic appreciation and the categorically imperative need for a drink. Then he turned to take the path that led to Kunitz' house.

At the last moment he halted, frowning. Had he seen a speck, visible only between waves, at the water's edge? He sighed, and then went creakily down to see what it was. When he thought of that discovery afterward, he was always to remember that he had forgotten to roll up his trousers' legs and had, in consequence, got them wet.

He had to wait for the wave to go back before he saw the object. Then he stooped and scrabbled with his fingers. What he had seen was round and small, and part of it was buried. The digging made his knuckles hurt.

He pulled the object out of the sand with a sucking noise. He brushed wet sand from it with his shaky forefinger. It was—it was—

His knees were getting weak. He moved the few steps back to the beach and sat down suddenly. And yet, even before he had brushed all the sand from it, he had, somehow, known.

She was small, no higher than the length of his hand. She was made of some golden, faintly luminous material, the color of a Gloire de Dijon rose, and to his fingers she had the mingled coolness and warmth of living flesh. Don looked

at her with an exhausted, incredulous delight. She was the most beautiful thing he had seen in his life.

A woman, tiny, naked, perfect. Perfect with the perfection not of nature, but of art, for a woman's living body had no such harmony. No breathing woman ever had just that perfect slope of breast and cheekbone and hip. He held her in his hand, a marvel, a delight, no bigger than the palm that held her. Her face was sad and compassionate. And down her cheeks there were flowing tiny, tiny tears.

Don hesitated. After all, he had just fetched her out of the water. The tears might be from the spray. Very carefully he pulled a fold of his undershirt forward and blotted at the wonderful little face with it. And when he took the cloth away, there were more tears.

He wiped his fingers on his trousers. With vast delicacy he touched his index finger to her cheek. He tasted it. Yes, there was salt on his finger. Salt, like tears.

He stared at her. She was a phoenix, a miracle. "You . . . you. . . ." he said to the doll, and then fell silent. She was not something to be put into words.

Where had she come from? What was she? It didn't really matter. It seemed to Don Haig that until the moment he had plucked her out of the sand his life had been an unimportant dream, a boring fantasy. He had been cold, cold to the bone, dazed with cold, only half alive. Now he was warm.

He sat a little longer, holding her, marveling at her. Then he got to his feet. He would take her to Kunitz.

2. *The Lost Wings*

KUNITZ lived in a house. It had only one room, but that put him, of itself, at once in a higher social class than Don, who

merely lived in a shelter scooped indifferently out of the sand.

He was more respectable than Don, too, in other ways. He drank, but not constantly, and when he did drink he drank phlomis, not rum. He had a little money. He could read. Don had heard the bartender in Baade, the little settlement, speak respectfully more than once of that accomplishment of Kunitz'. (The bartender, like a good many other people, could only scan isotypes.) Don had told the bartender once that he himself could read, but by then he had been very much down on his luck, and the bartender hadn't believed him.

It must be nearly noon. The shadows of the duku trees were at their smallest extent. Kunitz would surely be up.

Don rapped on the door, lightly at first, and then harder. No answer. He knocked again. Silence. He began to bang.

At the fourth bang Kunitz stuck his head out of the paneless, bamboo-framed window. He looked irate. "What the hell . . . Oh, it's Don. I told you I wouldn't loan you any more money. Go away."

"I don't want any money," Don answered. The statement in itself was astonishing. "Look here, Kunitz. I want to talk to you. I've . . . got something you might like to see."

Kunitz looked at him speculatively. He rubbed the grayish stubble on his upper lip and bumbled. "All right," he said resignedly. "Mind, it won't work if it's a touch. I won't give you a loan."

"Shut up about the loan. I know."

Kunitz came to the door. He was wearing faded blue trousers, slippers, and no shirt. Ten or fifteen years older than Don, he had a vigorous, stocky body that was beginning to slip into fat. Now he looked sleepy and annoyed.

"Knock the sand off your pants, can't you?" he snapped at Don as the younger man started over the threshold. "I don't like sand all over my floor."

Obediently Don bent and cleaned himself. He was very careful to avoid putting any strain on the doll. He had slipped her into his pocket.

"Lumbago, Don?" Kunitz asked in a slightly more friendly tone. "Or is it souse's arthritis again?"

"Neither," Don answered, unresenting. "I . . ."

"Well, sit down." They had passed into the house's cool, shadowy interior. "What is it, anyway?"

Don seated himself in one of the high-backed rattan arm-chairs. It was hard for him to begin. A more than physical modesty restrained him. It seemed to him that he could feel the doll inside his pocket, and that she was slightly warm. He cleared his throat once, twice. Kunitz looked at him keenly.

"Go on," he said.

"I—well, I—"

"Oh, I'll get us a drink. Will phlomis be all right? That's all I have left. You drink phlomis, don't you, Don?"

"Sure. Anything."

Kunitz got the glasses and heavy, inlaid phlomis bottle from a bamboo-faced cabinet. His disordered bed was on the right. He sat down on it and raised his glass to Don. "Da skrie," he said loudly. It was an old Martian toast.

"Da skrie," Don answered. He sipped at his drink. It was, as phlomis always was, too sweet. He could feel it curdling and looping oilily in his empty stomach from his throat.

"What is it?" Kunitz demanded once more. He was growing angry again.

Don hesitated. It was now or never. Overcoming an intense reluctance, he pulled the doll out of his pocket. He set her down carefully on the table in front of Kunitz.

Kunitz' deep-set eyes widened. Don thought he turned a little pale. After a perceptible silence he said, "Don. Do you know what you've got?"

"I'm . . . I'm not quite sure."

"Do you know how valuable it is?"

"I suppose it would be."

"Where did you find it? You didn't steal it, I suppose."

"No. She was half buried in the sand down on the beach."

"Oh, on the beach!" Kunitz lifted his graying eyebrows. "In the sand! You found her, just like that? One of Vulcan's weeping dolls?"

"I found her. I wasn't sure she was one of the dolls. I used to hear about them when I was just a kid. I don't remember it very well. I thought it was just a story."

Kunitz grunted. "No. You can see that it's not. There's a doll like that—it could almost be a twin of the one you . . . found—in the museum in New York. They only put the thing on display every four or five years. Just often enough so that people can't say there's any censorship. They don't like to show the doll oftener because it unsettles people. 'Unsettles,' you know, covers almost anything these days."

"And the doll is valuable?" Don asked. It seemed to him that this point was the least important aspect of his discovery, but he was reluctant, with the same deep reluctance he had felt toward showing Kunitz the doll in the first place, to discuss what he felt did matter.

"Oh, God. Yes. The one in the New York museum is the only one—let's be conservative, we haven't got the deep space drive yet—the only one this side of Aldebaran. There probably aren't any more dolls anywhere. As far as that goes, no one had ever really supposed there might be two of them, for all the proverbs and the stories."

Don finished his phlois. He set the sticky glass down on the table. "What proverbs?" he asked.

"Oh, the Martians say, 'Crying as much as one of Vulcan's weeping dolls,' and 'As hard up for brains as Vulcan's weeping dolls are for dry cheeks.' And then there are the stories."

"Tell me one of the stories," Don asked. For some reason—

it couldn't be the phlomis—he felt a little light-headed. “Who is Vulcan, anyway?”

“Vulcan himself? He's a craftsman, an artificer. He lives on an artificial metal planetoid at the end of our galaxy. They say” —Kunitz smiled faintly—“that he's always attended by two brass hounds of his own making, two animals which have keener senses than any real ones ever had, and that the light in his workshop is furnished by beautiful figures of women who move about without being ordered to cast light where he needs it in his work. The illumination, you see, comes from the end of their translucent arms. Vulcan is immortal—”

“Is he a god?” Don interrupted.

“No-o-o-o, I don't think so.” Kunitz picked up the phlomis bottle and poured more liquid in the glasses. “He can do miraculous things, but except for his long life he's not miraculous himself. He spends his days making objects of incredible workmanship. Things, I mean, on the borderline between the animate and the inanimate, like the little lady you found in the sand. The Martians call him ‘Master of Life and Half-Life.’ Oh, Yes, and they have another proverb I forgot to mention: ‘When the dolls stop weeping, the world will change.’ ”

“Um. Do you think the stories are true, Kunitz?”

The older man shrugged. “How should I know? They certainly don't sound very . . . probable. On the other hand, I've seen things once or twice that I simply couldn't believe ordinary human hands created. Miracles. And then there's the testimony of what you found in the sand this morning, the weeping doll.”

Don had scarcely taken his eyes off the figure while they had been talking. Now he picked it up very carefully between thumb and forefinger and balanced it in the palm of his hand. “Kunitz, what do you think makes her weep?”

“You mean what mechanism—? Oh, I see. *Why* is she

weeping. Well, it's a silly idea"— Kunitz chuckled rather self-consciously—" but when I look at her I feel that she's weeping for all the miserable things, even the things that I've forgotten, that have ever happened to me. Pretty egotistical, I guess. She makes me feel troubled, and comforted, at the same time. I told you the doll in New York was said to have an 'unsettling' effect. Here, let me handle her."

Rather unwillingly, Don permitted Kunitz to take the doll from his palm. The older man examined the figure carefully. He said, "You know, I don't think she's complete."

"What do you mean? I never saw anything more perfect."

"Yes, of course, but look here, on the back of her shoulders." He pointed. "See those rough places? It looks as if something had been cut away there, or never added. The rough spots go clear down the shoulder blades to just above the loins. Do you see them, Don?"

"Yes." Haig gulped phloomis. "I think—"

"What? Go on."

"It's just an idea. But I think maybe she used to have wings."

"Wings!" Kunitz looked surprised, and then pleased. "Yes, I suppose that would fit the marks. H'um. I'd almost swear you were right."

There was a silence. Don Haig finished his drink. Kunitz looked up at the ceiling and down at the floor. He cleared his throat. He said, not very loudly, "I believe I used to have wings."

Don looked at him. The older man seemed quite serious, and almost perfectly sober. "Rudimentary wings, you know. They couldn't have been good for anything."

"That's interesting."

"Yes, I suppose so. Look here, Don, what are you going to do with the doll?"

"Sell her, I guess." This happened to be quite untrue. "She

ought to be worth a lot, from what you say. I could have all I wanted to drink for the rest of my life.”

“And you think that would make you happy?”

“As happy as anything would, I guess.”

Once more, a silence. Don was feeling a trifle nauseated. Phlomis, with its disgusting sweetness, never agreed with him. “It’s none of my business, Don,” Kunitz said, “but why don’t you have the synthetic childhood? It might . . . fix you up.”

“Oh, I’ve had it. Didn’t you know? It was a waste of time and energy. I just couldn’t believe in it. The psychotherapist kept hissing at me, ‘You are counter-suggesting to yourself!’ and then we’d get into an argument. It was all too unreal.”

“Um. Too synthetic. I’ve heard other people say that. Sometimes I think everything in our world is synthetic, even happiness. But did you have such a bad actual childhood, Don?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I can’t remember. That was one of the things the psychotherapist used to get annoyed with me for. He said I was deliberately erecting a mental block, and he’d lecture me by the hour about co-operation. But I honestly couldn’t remember. Believe it or not, my earliest clear memory doesn’t go back beyond the time I was fourteen. Before that, there’s something about being in a big room. But that’s just an impression, not a memory.”

Kunitz whistled. “That’s awfully unusual.”

“I know it is. Up to the time I was fourteen, I was in an institution. At least, that’s what the records show. You couldn’t prove it by me.”

“I’ve something of the same difficulty,” Kunitz said after a moment. “I can’t remember my childhood clearly either.”

“Was it so painful you’ve forgotten it?”

“Painful? No, not at all. But almost all my childhood, anyhow from the time I was three onward, was passed in the haze of the Martian pyrexia.”

"The—? H'um, yes, I've heard of it. It was a disease. But it was before my time."

"It would have been. But, Haig, you can't imagine what a time it was." Kunitz chuckled softly, as if he were remembering something disreputable and agreeable.

"The pyrexia was little like being a little drunk all the time. It was a disease, of course, but in its mild form it was so gently and agreeable that more than ninety per cent of the population of Terra contracted it before they realized they had contracted anything. Then some of the cases passed into the severe form, and people began dying. That wasn't so nice; in the serious form there's pain, delirium, and a most alarming red body flush. But even then nobody got much excited. The pyrexia blurred the edges and softened everything.

"Life was so relaxed in those days! Nobody worried. There were hardly any accidents, despite the gently alcoholic atmosphere, because people were too relaxed to hurry about anything. It was—it was a very strange time, especially in contrast with today.

"I'll give you an example of the kind of thing people did. Some jokester introduced a motion in the world council for what he called 'double daylight wasting time,' and it was passed to the accompaniment of delighted and hilarious laughter. For two blessed years the entire population of Terra rose and went to bed two hours late. It was wonderful."

Don laughed. "I'd have liked that."

"Yes, it was fun. If the disease hadn't always been liable to pass into its severe form, it would have been nice for us to keep on being feverish forever. But that's why I can't be sure I really had wings—there's that soft, pleasant haze."

"You think you dreamed it?" Don said. He looked at his empty glass rather wistfully. Phlomis was terrible, of course, but it was quite a bit better than nothing at all was.

"I may have. I'll tell you about it, Haig. (I haven't talked

about this in years—your little lady must be ‘unsettling’ me.)

“As far as I remember, my wings started to sprout when I was five. At first they were just big, flaccid lumps on my shoulder blades. Mother looked at them. She wasn’t worried, but finally she took me to a group doctor. I do honestly think I remember this.

“I don’t know what he said, if he said anything. I have a mental picture of being in the doctor’s waiting room, watching a puppet show, and then there’s a blank. He must have told mother that I was growing wings, though, because after that I knew what was happening to me.

“I have a hazy recollection of bragging to the other children about how I was going to have wings, real big wings, when I grew up. I don’t remember what they thought of it. Then a new little girl moved in next door.

“Her name was Loris; I’m almost certain I remember that. She was a pretty, rather prim little girl, half Martian, with the wonderful deep turquoise Martian eyes. I was very much taken with her.

“We played together all that winter. . . . You understand, Haig, this stuff isn’t continuous. I’ll have one or two vivid mental pictures, and then there’ll be a lot of haziness, or maybe even complete blanks. I think we played together all that winter. Happy Beavers, mainly, and free-flight swings, I think. Then one day it was getting to be really spring.

“Loris came out in a little gold sun tunic, and I was wearing G.S. breeks. She saw the lumps on my back. She must have asked about them, and I must have told her how they were going to be wings. Anyhow, I have an almost abnormally vivid picture of her saying, with her pretty little pink mouth all puckered up, ‘That’s just cha-drze. What foolishness! You won’t have real wings. It isn’t reasonable.’ You know how Martians always talk about reasonableness.”

“What does ‘cha-drze’ mean?” Haig interrupted.

"It's Martian for 'fairy stuff.' Anyhow, after that I had an operation on my wings."

"You mean an amputation? You mean you had the operation because she didn't believe you?"

"Yes, an amputation. Whether the reason was that Loris was so doubtful—" Kunitz shrugged. "I've always thought that was the reason: Her disbelief must have hurt my feelings deeply. If I went and asked my mother, and she told me that Loris was right, I wouldn't ever have wings that would work. . . . I'd certainly have wanted to get rid of the lumps. I'd have considered them a deformity. But of course my parents may have had the operation scheduled anyhow, to save me from something that was certainly abnormal. I don't know."

"As far as that goes, I can't be sure I ever had an operation. Maybe I never had lumps on my shoulders at all, maybe there never was a Loris. Perhaps the whole thing was only a vivid fantasy."

The room had been growing darker. Now rain began to drum down upon the roof. It was Fyon's regular early afternoon shower. Kunitz got up and closed the shutters on the windows.

"There must be some way of checking up," Don said, raising his voice to be heard over the sound of the rain. "I mean, if it's really important to you to know. The hospital records would show whether or not you had an operation, for one thing."

Kunitz groped his way back to his seat. With the shutters closed the room was almost dark. In the faint light the doll on the table seemed to have an unearthly shimmer, not so much as if she were self-luminous, but as if she caught the light in herself, like porcelain.

"I thought of that," Kunitz answered. "Unfortunately, there was a fire in the local hospital, and the records for those years were destroyed. I can't ask my parents; they both died

with the pyrexia. I haven't any scars on my shoulders, but I don't think that proves anything. With modern surgery . . ."

"Do you think you could have had a fantasy that vivid?" Don queried rather idly.

"That's the trouble. I think I could. One of the ways the pyrexia affected me was to make my fantasies extremely vivid. For instance, I could tell you a long, connected story about what happened when I was a dragon. I used to fly around over a valley—the wing motif again, you see; as a dragon I had big scaly wings—and pick up people and take them home to my castle. I never ate them. They were farmers. I think they would have been unpleasantly tough."

"Um. But that's obviously nothing but a fantasy."

"Yes, but I had domestic ones, too. Once I shot my father with a popgun. Killed him dead. There was blood all over him. I went in the house and told mother, 'I just killed daddy.' She said, 'Did you, dear? We'll get married when you grow up.'"

Don laughed. "Charming little Oedipus! How frank! But your wing fantasy does seem in a different category from that."

"'M, yes. All the same, I'd have dismissed it as just a fantasy, if it hadn't been for what happened when I grew up."

Kunitz cleared his throat; he was plainly preparing to embark on narration. Don shifted in his chair. Why was Kunitz telling him all this? Up until now, Kunitz had been definitely close-mouthed about himself. Was his present burst of communication nothing more than the result of the doll's unsettling effect? Or did Kunitz have some obscure ulterior motive? What?

"You've got to understand what it was like when we got over the pyrexia," Kunitz said. "The moral and intellectual climate changed. After we had the serum injections—"

“Didn’t the SSP have something to do with that?” Don interrupted.

“Yes, it did. Nowadays people have almost forgotten what SSP originally meant. The initials stand for Special Serum Purveyance; and the SSP did, almost single-handed, defeat the plague. Whatever you think about the organization today, you have to give it credit for that.

“They developed the serum—the handful of scientists who either didn’t get the plague or managed to keep on working in spite of it—and then they administered it to the rest of us, despite our indifference and dislike. Maybe, considering how things have turned out, it would have been better for us to keep on being sick. I don’t know.

“But as I was saying, there was a remarkable change in the intellectual climate. After the *laissez-faire* years, there came an era of intense respectability. People’s backbones seemed to stiffen, and not only in a moral sense. That, by the way, is how the SSP managed to grow so powerful—by taking advantage of the new hunger for the rigid and the orthodox.

“I was put in an institution and then adopted. My father and mother seemed far away, lost in the soft pyrexia haze. Even my grief for them was unreal. I tried to adapt myself to the new world.

“When I was twenty-two, I married. Her name was Thecla—I used to call her Ted—and she looked a little like Loris. We both worked in the Chlorella sun-energy plant.

“I told her about my wing fantasy before we were married. She said it was just a fantasy; she didn’t pay any attention to it. Thecla was intelligent, but she had little imagination. The strongest trait in her character was her longing to be respectable, to be perfectly, entirely, orthodox.

“We had a child in our second year of marriage. It was a little girl, a beauty. We were both crazy about her.”

The rain was coming down more slowly now. In half an

hour it would be over. Kunitz poured the last of the phlois into the glasses and chucked the empty bottle into the corner. It landed with a thump.

"We named the baby Bettina, but we always called her Bets. For two years Thecla and I were happy. Then Bets started to grow wings.

"They weren't like mine had been, mere lumps. As soon as they started to appear, it was clear they were going to be usable. And they grew fast. It was just unbelievable how fast. We didn't have time to be alarmed over Bets' getting some kind of growth before we were confronted with a new fact, a child of ours who had wings.

"Ted was bowled over. It was something she just couldn't adjust to. Looking back on it, I can see she was having a serious and painful emotional conflict. At the time I didn't appreciate it. But Thecla was torn between one of the precepts of orthodoxy—that a mother always loves her child—and the very unorthodox fact that she was the mother of a sort of freak, a child who could fly.

"She wanted to have the wings amputated. She pointed out that they'd make Bets' emotional and social development difficult. The other children would make fun of her. It was abnormal. And so on.

"I wouldn't consent to the operation. Of course I was wrong, but how was I to know? The wings were pretty, pretty as could be. And then—after my own wings were cut off and I was in the institution—I'd had such vivid dreams of flying. Bets had a wonderful gift, an extraordinary power. Why should she be deprived of it?

"For a while Thecla and I quarreled about it almost constantly. Then my wife seemed to work the situation out for herself. *She* said it was because she was using one of those little 'communion with the infinite mirrors' which were just coming into popularity then. But I think it was because Thecla had decided that the situation with Bets came under

the heading, 'A mother will make any sacrifice for her child.' That's a thoroughly orthodox idea.

"But Theclia insisted that we keep the wings a secret. Bets had to keep them strapped down under her dress, and she wasn't allowed to fly except when we were out between the green strips, in the country. Even then Ted was always nervous. It wasn't too bad, though. We got along.

"Then the SSP started its mutation study program—you know, Program X. All this time the SSP had been growing more powerful. There'd been a good deal of talk. But it wasn't until Program X was announced that we realized we had a new government.

"Mutants were ordered to register. Then what seemed like a random sampling of the registrants was picked up and taken into custody. Only a few at first, and then wider and wider 'samples.' We were told a date—it kept being advanced into the future—when the mutants would be released again. But none of them ever was.

"Ted and I were getting scared. Something might have leaked about Bets; and even if nothing had, her wings made a perceptible hump under her dress. There were plenty of informers, and there was always a chance somebody would suspect Bets was a mutant and turn us in.

"We kept talking about it to each other, trying to persuade ourselves that we didn't need to be scared. Then two SSP men in their dark-blue uniforms came into the Chlorella plant where we were working. They picked up one of the men in the drying section—his name was Thorsen—and took him away with them. His mutation was that he had six fingers on one hand.

"His arrest brought it home to us, somehow. We decided it was time we ran."

"I—was it very bad?" Don asked. He had heard stories like this before, but they had not seemed so real and close

as Kunitz' did. The rain was almost over. His leg had gone to sleep.

"Not—not so bad then as later," Kunitz answered. "Bad enough. The next two years were running and hiding. We couldn't stay in one place long enough to work steadily, and we didn't dare apply for any of the specialized social services. We were always poor. And we missed our regular work.

"Our hopes centered on getting a visa for Mars. The SSP hadn't much strength there. We thought that if we could only leave Terra we'd be safe. We waited for the visa for months, hoping—we got sick of hoping. Finally it came through. And then the day before we were jetting, we learned that the SSP was checking everybody for 'mutationism' at the exit ports.

"That pricked the Martian bubble. I remember how Thecla and I stood staring at each other while some idiot was giving the direct suggestion cast over the tri-di. He kept blathering away about happiness—we were happy, he was happy, it was expected that everybody would be happy. Thecla said, 'He isn't the parent of a mutant child.'"

Kunitz rose and opened the shutters. The rain-fresh, fragrant air of Fyon came in. Don blinked in the sudden light.

"What happened finally?" he asked.

"What could happen?" Kunitz answered bitterly. "They got her. They started checking the poorer residential areas block by block. Thecla got an anti-grav from somewhere and put Bets in a trunk. She hoped the anti-grav would make the trunk so light no one would suspect there was a child in it. But she gave the wrong answer to a robot. They opened the case and took Bets. They didn't do anything to us, for some reason. I suppose Program X was all they could handle.

"Thecla's slip with the robot was unintentional. I know it was. But she kept accusing herself and crying. Once when

she was crying hardest she said it was my fault, because I hadn't permitted the wings to be amputated. I guess that was true, but perhaps it wasn't. The hospital records would have shown that Bets had been a mutant. They might have picked her up anyway.

"They gave us a receipt for her, but she never came back. I used to stand outside the stockade where they kept the mutants, hoping. They had guards with blasters all around it. I couldn't have saved her. But I wish I'd tried it, anyway."

Kunitz cleared his throat. "I wonder what she'd have looked like," he said painfully. "If they'd let her grow up, I mean. I think she'd have been beautiful. Her wings were a deep rich gold, you know—I didn't mean light brown, I mean deep gold. Her skin was a shade lighter, and she had brown eyes with green-gold flecks. Grown up and flying—she'd have looked like some great golden bird.

"Well." Once more Kunitz cleared his throat. "Let's get back to your discovery, Don. You've found one of Vulcan's weeping dolls. What are you going to do with it?"

"I haven't decided. I don't know."

"Get rid of it, Don. She's dangerous."

"What makes you say that? She's so beautiful."

"Yes, but she's dangerous. Too valuable, too strange—and maybe too unsettling—for an ordinary person to keep. She's like having wings. You ought to get rid of her."

Don made no answer. After a moment Kunitz laughed. It was an odd sound. "Don't be stubborn, Don. There's a strain of—shall I call it—weak stubbornness in you. It comes out in the way you drink. But get rid of the doll."

Don's lips compressed. He picked up the doll and looked at her. Tiny, marvelous tears were still flowing down her cheeks. Sell her? What business was it of Kunitz? He'd be damned if he would.

"Have you got something, an empty bottle, I could put

her in?" he asked. "She's so tiny and frail looking. I'm afraid she'll get hurt."

"I could find a bottle," Kunitz answered, "But really, Don, you needn't worry about her in that way. I know she looks fragile, but Vulcan's creations are remarkably durable. I doubt there's anything you or anyone else could think of to do to her that would possibly damage her."

"Thank you," Haig answered. He put the doll in his pocket carefully. He started toward the door, Kunitz following him.

"Are you going to sell her, Don?" Kunitz asked with a touch of anxiety as they passed the threshold.

Don looked about him. Every blade of grass, every colored flower petal was sparkling with round drops of rain. The air was clear as crystal, smelling of damp earth. A bird was beginning to sing somewhere to the right, three trembling throaty notes and then a pause. And though the rain was so recently over, the path was dry.

Sell the doll? He would almost rather have parted with his eyes. But how could he make that clear to Kunitz?

"Oh, I don't know," he said carelessly. "I guess I'll keep her for a while."

He heard Kunitz draw his breath in sharply. For a moment the older man stood motionless. Then he went back into the house and closed the door. Don had a quite irrational impression that there was a smile on his face.

3. *The Tie*

AFTER Don left Kunitz on that first day, he went down to the beach. He sat for hours in the pink sand, and the thoughts moved slowly within his mind like clouds drifting over the sky. It was enough just to look at her.

On the second day he woke earlier, and was hungry. He wanted something solid, not just coffee. He ran over ex-

pedients mentally. Then he went to a little restaurant in Baade that specialized in fried dakdak pods, and offered to pit and stem the pods in return for two meals daily. The proprietor was skeptical—Don had a certain local notoriety—but he had no robot, and preparing the pods to be fried was a nasty, splintery job. He chewed his lips. He made an agreement with Don.

On the third day the restaurant owner offered Don a drink—rum and coconut milk—and Don refused it.

He refused it. It was not until he was on his way back to his shelter that night that the significance of his refusal penetrated to him. He had had a chance at a free drink, a drink he liked; and he had turned it down. What was the matter with him?

He got the doll out and looked at it. Except for star-shine, the night was quite dark. An artificial moon had certainly been among the refinements intended by the designers of Fyon, but when it had become plain that the planetoid was not going to pay for itself the idea had been abandoned. Those white tropic nights had never materialized. None the less, the doll had a faint ethereal shimmer in the light from the stars. Don could see her well enough.

“Are you trying to reform me?” he said to her after a silence. “You beauty—you always crying little beauty—are you trying to change me? I won’t have it, though you’re so lovely. Leave Don alone, my darling. I resent it. I might have to get rid of you. Do you understand me, little weeping one?” His tone was only half humorous.

He did resent it. He was no good, a bum, disgusting even to himself; but he didn’t want to be changed. He wanted to be himself. It might be only coincidence that he had hunted for, and got, a job—his first job in how many years?—since he had found the doll, but he rather thought not. In her unique and peculiar way, she was “unsettling” him.

Of course he could get rid of the doll. She was valuable.

He hadn't needed Kunitz to tell him that. If he sold her . . . He could, there was no reason why he shouldn't. When the next space liner touched at Fyon—there was one due in a couple of days—he'd talk to the passengers. The passengers on system cruises were almost always wealthy people. He might be able to make a useful contact, anyhow.

Standing under the palm tree in the starlight, holding the doll in his hand, he began to prepare phrases to be used in his opening speech to likely-looking prospects. He'd do it. It was the sensible thing. Kunitz was right. He'd get rid of her.

As he drifted toward sleep that night in his sand shelter, he insisted to himself again and again on his determination—his unswervable determination—to get rid of the doll.

The space liner touched at Fyon about eleven o'clock in the morning, on the day that passed as Wednesday. Strictly speaking, the liner did not "touch": Fyon had no space port. Land space was somewhat limited on the planetoid, and besides, its designers had considered that a space port would break the mood the planetoid was meant to create. Ships therefore hovered outside Fyon's atmosphere, and passengers and supplies were ferried down in small craft and lighters to it.

The bar, in anticipation of the liner's arrival, had been decorated with fresh flowers, mainly hibiscus, ilangilang, and jasmine. (There were two bars in Baade, but only one had social standing enough to need to make special preparations for the space liner.) The girl at the curio counter in the bar building had brought out her choicest items. When Don stuck his nose in the door, about eleven-thirty, the bar was jammed with gabbling tourists downing rum-based "tropical" drinks, and the air was heavy with the bloodlike smell of jasmine.

The tourists were mainly terrestrials. They were of all colors and all backgrounds, but they had this in common,

that they nearly all belonged to a high economic level. Don ran his eyes over their ranks, trying to decide which ones looked possible and which would merely tell him to go away. His heart was beating rather fast.

He had taken especial pains to look presentable. His ducks were freshly washed, he had shaved, he had even combed his hair. Payne, the owner of the restaurant where he was working, had loaned him a shirt. But when he regarded the easy affluence of the room full of tourists, he became uneasily aware that he'd forgotten to borrow any shoes. Oh, well. They might think his being barefooted was picturesque.

The women, as usual, were spending more money than the men, but he didn't want to approach a woman. Don licked his lips speculatively and tried to assess the men in an impartial manner. He hoped that Henry, who ran the bar, wouldn't see him and throw him out.

Don settled at last on a group of three men at the left of the bar. All of them were conspicuously well dressed, and one of them, a shortish, pudgy man, was wearing a full set of miragems, including tie stay and wristlet. He was complaining about the poor service and the flavor of the drinks, which Don thought a good sign.

Don went outside to wait. He didn't want to tackle the men while they were drinking; Henry *would* throw him out if he tried that. He sat down on the ground near an ilang-ilang and waited, picking dakdak splinters out of his hands.

Women came out in twos and threes, waving curios at each other and laughing. Why were tourist women always so unattractive? Their figures were good, their faces well cared for, and yet it added up to soup. Some of the men were carrying the bulky, if weightless, paraphernalia of "re-creative" films; Don had been a rek-film fan once himself. There was no doubt that the passengers from the liner represented a good deal of wealth.

One of the men in Don's group of three came out of the bar building, and Don let him go. More women, two with green hair erected into high plates and dotted with miniature china beetles. It must be a new fashion. It was hideous. And then, alone, the man with the miragems, the pudgy man.

Seen close to, the man was not alarming. He was plump, not fat, in the same way that a child is plump, and he had a round, compliant-looking double chin. His hair and eyes were dark, and though his tunic and breeks were impeccably tailored, he did not seem smothered in them. He looked, in short, like a grown-up version of a rather spoiled, not un-amiable child.

Don got to his feet and went up to him, clearing his throat. He was horribly aware of the dust on his bare feet, of the uncouth length of his brown hair. He said, "Would you be interested in a rare art object, sir?" He had to push the "sir" out; it seemed to stick in his throat.

The man with the miragems looked at him testily. He waved his hand; the deep purple gems gave out a dazzle of apricot light. "Go away, go away," he said impatiently. "Do I seem like that sort of man?"

Don felt a gush of relief whose intensity surprised him. He'd tried it; now he was excused. He wouldn't have to sell her, his little beauty, his private miracle. He could keep the doll.

But the pudgy man was still talking. ". . . always pick on me. Do I look like an amateur of pornography? It's an insult. Try someone else."

Oh. Then he wasn't excused. Don said, "I'm sorry, sir. I'm not selling tactifilms, or anything like that. It's a real art object. Very . . . beautiful, sir."

The man looked at him severely, and then laughed. "Excuse me. Not tactifilms. We're a very moral people these days, but on some of the pleasure planetoids . . . I don't

mind so much when they tout for women, but boys . . . Well. So what you have isn't like that?" He was smiling.

"No, sir. I—it—the—the thing would only be suitable for a serious collector. It's extremely rare, and valuable. Only a really wealthy man could buy it."

"And *you're* selling it?" The tone was mocking.

Don flushed. The man was laughing at him. "Yes," he replied stuffily. "Or rather, I'm an agent for it. Are you an art collector, sir?"

"Oh, I'm not, I'm not." This with a wave of the hand, so that the miragems flashed wildly again. "But I have a friend who is. A great collector, putting it mildly. Perhaps he'd be interested."

"I—mm—"

"It isn't exactly art objects he collects, though," Don's interlocutor went on. He seemed to be enjoying himself; at any rate, he was smiling. "He goes in more for rare and valuable things, odd curiosities. His collection is almost complete. I doubt if . . . Well, what have you got? One of the eating eggs? I imagine that's about the only thing he hasn't got that he'd be interested in."

Don quivered. He felt as if he stepped abruptly into a deep, cold stream. He knew what the eating eggs were; he had seen one once. They were hair-thin objects which swelled, when soaked in water, into pinkish eggs. In the egg state, they ate matter omnivorously. But what the eggs did was not, at present, relevant; what mattered was their provenance. The eggs were one of the things which were popularly believed to come from Vulcan's workshop. Vulcan! Of course, it might be nothing but a coincidence.

"You look a bit startled," the pudgy men said solicitously. "I assure you his collection is valuable. And he's a wealthy man, yes, indeed. He's . . . of a somewhat elevated position in the Corona cult." The plump hands moved before the chest in an intricate sign.

Don said nothing. After a second, the plump man laughed. "It appears you're not an initiate, whatever else you are. Well, let me see your, h'm, art object. If I think he'd be interested, I'll tell him when I get back."

Don wanted to say, "I haven't got it with me." He refrained. If selling the doll had been a sort of game he was playing with himself, he could not stop merely because he might lose the game. And besides, there were all sorts of advantages to getting rid of her. Urgent reasons. If he could not recall, at this moment, precisely what they were, it was only because he was nervous and rushed.

"All right," he said to the tourist. He felt a sort of surprise at hearing himself speak. "I'll show you."

His hand moved to his pocket. His fingers fastened around the doll. The tourist was watching him interestedly.

"Go on," the man said after a second. "Why the delay? What are you waiting for?"

Don's fingers had fallen away from the doll. He blinked and shook his head. It seemed to him that he had walked with bound eyes to the very edge of a deadly cliff. Sell the doll? Oh, what could he have been thinking of?

To part with her was as base as selling a beloved mistress would have been. She was beautiful. She had come to him unsought, as if some wonderful golden bird had flown of its own accord into his negligent hand. She was a blessing, a wonder. Part with her? Betray her? He couldn't. Perhaps he never would be able to. He was ashamed that he had thought of it.

"I made a mistake," he said to the tourist. "I'm sorry. I haven't anything for sale."

He turned to go. . . . And if she was unsettling him, it was nothing but her prerogative.

The tourist's face grew red. "Oh, come now! You can't do this! After the build-up you've given me . . . Or are you merely playing coy? I want to see your art object, whatever

it is. If it's something valuable, I might buy it myself." He was pouting, but his eyes had an angry look.

"I'm sorry," Don repeated helplessly. "It was a mistake."

"Oh, yes? You won't get any more out of me by resorting to this tactic, young man. I'm going to see it, whatever it is!" Before Don could realize what he meant to do, the pudgy hand darted toward Don's pocket.

The man with the miragems screamed. It was a high, short note. Heads turned toward him. People craned their necks to look.

The tourist was holding one hand at the wrist with the other and shaking it, while he cursed in a shrill voice. His face had gone white. Don stared at him in amazement. He could not imagine what the trouble was.

"You tried to disable me," the man with the miragems said, becoming articulate. Tears were running down his cheeks. In Don's dazed condition, it did not occur to him that they were tears of pain. "You almost burned my hand off! You *bdeleton!* You tricked me. I'll see that you pay for this!"

"I—I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Oh, don't you?" the plump tourist said dangerously. "There's a high-vi field around you, you grapster. And you deliberately led me to contact it."

Don looked around him. People were coming toward them, curious, excited, already a little angry.

The tourist's threat to cause trouble could, in one sense, be discounted. Under ordinary civil law, at least, the physical person was sacrosanct, and if the tourist had suffered through contacting a force field (force field? How could that possibly be? It was nonsense.) around Don, it was plainly the tourist's fault. But if there was any sort of investigation at all, the doll would certainly be discovered. And—

For an instant longer Don stood watching the crowd, the excited, gabbling crowd, hurrying toward him. Were

these well-dressed, slightly tipsy people capable of pursuing him? He didn't think they were. He took to his heels and ran.

4: *The Long-legged Bait*

"So you think there's a high-vi force field around you?" Kunitz said. His tone made it almost as much a statement as a question.

Don shrugged. The two men were sitting in Kunitz' living room; it was the day after Haig's encounter with the plump tourist. With a part of his mind, Don noticed that the room seemed slightly less disorderly than usual. It must be because Kunitz had pulled up the sheets on the bed and covered it with a length of one of the "exotic native fabrics" (there were no natives on Fyon, naturally) which the girl in the curio shop in the bar sold.

"I don't think anything about it," Haig replied, looking absently at the iridescent blue and pistachio flowers on the fabric. "How could there possibly be a field around me? A field requires some sort of projector. It's nonsense. I haven't got anything like that. But that's what the man with the miragems said."

"Um." Kunitz opened a box of prepared Betla chews and popped one of the cubes in his mouth. He offered the box to Don, who refused. "Well," he said, shoving his cud into his cheek with his tongue, "something must have happened. He didn't imagine it. It's true you haven't a conventional projector, but . . . I've got an idea. Give me the doll, Don."

Don reached into his pocket, took out the tiny weeping image, and handed her to Kunitz. The latter accepted her and set her down gently on the table top. "Nothing happened, you see," Kunitz said. "Put her back in your pocket, Don. This time I'm going to try to take her away from you."

Don obeyed. Rather gingerly the older man came toward him, slipped his hand into the pocket, and extracted the doll. "No fireworks that time, either," Kunitz remarked. He rubbed his nose thoughtfully. Don thought he looked rather surprised. "I wonder if . . . Um . . . Look here, Don, when the tourist reached for the doll, did you want him to have her?"

"Of course not. I told you I'd already decided not to sell her. I was trying to get away from him."

"That might make the difference. This time, when I try to take the doll, I want you to keep your mind fixed on not wanting me to have it. I'm the fat tourist with the miragems, and you resent everything about me. Concentrate!"

Don did as he was told. Kunitz came toward him once more, looking wary. He reached out for the doll. Don felt a fine tingle, like a network of slender electric shivers, run over his skin. And almost synchronously with the tingle, Kunitz gave a sharp cry.

"Pharoll!" he said. He was holding his hand and shaking it, just as the tourist had done. "Of all the damned—! Pharoll How it hurts!"

He was almost hopping with pain. He looked around the room wildly until he found a jug of water. He hurried to it and thrust his hand into the liquid. The pain seemed to subside.

"I'm sorry," Don said. He had been watching helplessly.

"Oh, that's all right," Kunitz said. His color was coming back. "It was my own idea, anyway. I thought I'd get some reaction. But I didn't think it would be so intense as this."

"What happened? Was it a force field?"

Kunitz shook his head. "Damned if I know. Something seemed to take hold of all the nerves in my hand and start scalding them. I don't think I'd have been surprised if steam had gone up when I put my hand in the water pot. I guess a force field could cause it. I'm not a physicist."

"But—where would a field be coming from?"

"From the doll, I suppose. Maybe it projects some sort of force. That might account for the doll's 'unsettling' effect. Perhaps that's what the force field does when it's not on strong."

"Um." Haig swished the phloemis around in his glass.

"Or the doll might focus mental force, in the way that a lens focuses light. You were concentrating on not wanting me to take the doll away from you. Let's see if it works when the doll isn't actually in contact with your body."

"How about your hand?"

"I'll use the other one," Kunitz said a trifle grimly. "Take the doll out of your pocket and put it on the table, so. Now, stand near it. A little closer, Don—oh, about a meter away. That's it." Kunitz cocked his head critically. "Yes, and remember this time too that I'm the plump tourist. You can't decide what it is about me that you hate the most, but you'd just about as soon kill me as that I should touch the doll. Concentrate! Now!"

Once more Don felt the slight tingle. This time Kunitz' exclamation of pain was softer. "Not quite so bad as before," he said, biting his lips. "Pharol, though, but it's hard to take. It seems to tickle up all the pain possibilities of my nerves."

"Yes. Look here, Kunitz, you take the doll and put it in *your* pocket. Concentrate on not wanting me to have it. And I'll try to take her away from you."

"All right. I'm warning you, though, you may get a bad jolt."

The tiny drama was performed. "No jolt at all," Don said, holding out the doll.

"And I really was doing my best at concentrating. You know what I think, Don? I think the doll is somehow, unh, atuned to you."

"To me personally?"

"That's what it looks like. (I wonder if your finding her was really accidental? If she's actually atuned to you personally, it can hardly have been.) But whether or not she was planted purposively for you to find, she apparently can't be taken from you without your consent.

"You see, the first time I tried to take the doll from you, you knew it wasn't serious. I'm a friend of yours, I'd give her back, and so on. The second time, you were concentrating on feelings of hostility. And there were fireworks that time.

"It would be interesting, if my hand would stand it, to try more experiments. I wonder, for instance, whether she could be taken from you while you were asleep. I don't think she could. . . . More phlomis?"

"No, thank you. I haven't finished this."

"You've hardly touched it, in fact," Kunitz said, smiling. He leaned forward. "You know, Don, it's less than a week since you found the doll. And yet you've changed, changed so much in some ways that I hardly know you. This must be the quickest 'cure' on record. Imagine Don Haig refusing a drink! Do you notice the change yourself?"

"Yes," Don answered shortly. He felt embarrassed and annoyed. No man likes to have been reformed in spite of himself.

"It's not only the drinking, it's—you seem more mature than you did. More responsible. Personally, I'm all in favor of the change." Kunitz laughed. "You look lots better physically, too, though there's still plenty of room for improvement. But are you sure you want to keep the doll? If she's responsible for the change in you? Yesterday you were pretty doubtful about it."

"I—yes." Don hesitated, moistening his lips. "That part's all right." He didn't want Kunitz to think he was growing hysterical and nervous. ". . . I think somebody is following me."

“What makes you think that?”

“Last night, when I was coming home from Payne’s, I kept hearing a rustling in the bushes. It stopped whenever I stopped.”

“Probably one of the robot gardeners. They do a lot of work at night.”

“Well, it didn’t sound like one. I went on home. I was just going to sleep when I heard a noise—it’s hard to describe—a sort of light tinkling.”

“You mean, like somebody walking around outside your shelter?”

“Not at all like that. This morning when I got up I looked around. The sand in my shelter and just outside it was full of tiny pits.”

Kunitz spat his Betla chew into the corner of the room and poured himself another glass of phlomis. “Might be sand fleas.”

“Oh, balch! There aren’t any sand fleas on Fyon. I ought to know. Besides, they weren’t that sort of pits. They were tiny and hard, as if the sand had been pressed down into them. They were the sort of pits, Kunitz, you get when somebody’s using an eye-beam that isn’t focused quite right.”

Kunitz got up and began to walk around the room. “An eye-beam. Yes, I suppose it could be. Yesterday you dropped a lot of hints about some valuable art object you had, and you gave a convincing demonstration that there was some sort of force field around you. That same evening you think you’re followed, and somebody uses an eye-beam on you. Pretty quick work. But it would be.”

“Who would be using an eye-beam?”

“Well, of course they’re illegal. But the law is broken pretty generally by those who have enough tug. Cult leaders use eye-beams pretty generally, I’ve been told. A few wealthy people have them. And of course the SSP.”

"I thought of that. It sounds more like them. But would the SSP be using one that was badly focused?"

"Um, yes, that's a point. Our miniature government is nothing if not efficient. And besides, art objects are not the sort of thing the SSP interests itself in. If you were a scientist, now. . ."

"I don't like being followed and spied upon."

"Who would?"

"It isn't amusing when it happens to you. I wish I had some way of drawing whoever's watching me out into the open."

"Whatever it is, it's obviously connected with the doll. I still think you ought to get rid of the thing. But I tell you, Don. Why don't you use the doll as bait?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it seems unlikely that the doll can be taken away from you. By force, anyhow. If you show the doll around—exhibit it—it ought to provoke your watcher into some sort of action. It might draw him out where you can get a look at him."

"Um." Haig got up to go. "Time for me to collect more dakdak splinters at the restaurant. Your idea about that doll doesn't seem bad. But I'd hate to endanger her."

"I don't think you would."

"I hope not. I—" Don stopped abruptly.

"What's the matter?" Kunitz asked, looking up.

"Nothing. I had an idea, that's all."

"What was it?"

"Nothing worth repeating. Foolishness. I'll be seeing you, Kunitz." He nodded to his host and started down the path.

The idea was, of course, foolishness. Kunitz an agent of the SSP! After the story Kunitz had told him, after what he knew of Kunitz himself! It was absurd. But he had had the idea. Why had he thought of it?

5: *The Circus*

"THERE's going to be a show in Baade tonight," Payne said. He was leaning against the door jamb of the restaurant kitchen, chewing leisurely on a square cud of Betla nut. "I don't know how they ever came to let a thing like that land on Fyon, when they're so careful about 'keeping up the atmosphere' that they won't even let us have tri-di sets. (Don't get me wrong—I like Fyon. It's right the way it is.)

"I hear it's a kind of a circus, with robots and some animals. Probably doesn't amount to much—only one live human performer, the owner. But anyhow . . . I'm going myself, and I'll let you off early if you want to go."

"Thanks," Don said. He wasn't at all sure he'd take in the circus, but it would be nice to get done with the dakdak pods a little ahead of time.

Payne lingered. "By the way, you still got that thing, that doll, you showed me?"

"Yes," Don answered without looking up. His hands were slippery with dakdak pulp, and his back was tired.

"You have any trouble with it?"

"No, none." The reply was perfectly accurate; since the talk with Kunitz, there had been no pitings in the sand outside Don's hut, or had he felt that he was being followed. Perhaps he had imagined it in the first place.

"Well, you be careful," Payne said, preparing to depart. "It's a beautiful thing, and I'd like to see it again some time. But it's bound to cause trouble. Or somebody might pick your pocket, and then where would you be? You ought to sell it—you'd be rich."

It was quite late that night when Don decided to take a look at the circus. He had passed the evening as he passed all his evenings now, in looking at the doll. The occupation

might have been passive and somnolent; but Don never took his eyes from the tiny image without feeling that he had been engaged in something richly adventurous, something as full of hazard as it was of pleasure. Perhaps it was this sense of possible danger that made him get up suddenly and start toward the square where the circus was. For tonight, at least, it seemed a refuge, an anchorage, a sort of antidote.

The circus, under its small pneumatent, was almost ready to close. Only a handful of spectators still lingered. The sides had been put up on the animal cages. One of the robot puppet shows, *Life Among the Insect Men*, was still jerking mechanically through its antics, but the others had been folded away, and the personnel of the mind-reading act, two sleekly intelligent hexapods, were already hopping into their baskets for the night. The lights were being put out. A robot gardener was clanking away at its nocturnal duties in the greenery on the edge of the square.

Don watched for a moment and then turned to go, his shoulders lifted in a shrug. The impulse that had brought him to the circus had already spent itself. "Excuse me," a voice behind him said, "but are you the man who has the weeping doll?"

Don faced the sound, a little startled. He had not known that anyone was near him, and besides, the voice had a muffled, padded quality that fell unpleasantly on the ear.

The person who addressed him was a big, hulking man who ought to have been even bigger than he was. His clothes hung loosely on him. His large-framed body seemed to have shrunk in on itself, and the flesh of his heavy face sagged away from craggy, jutting bones. He had extremely light eyes. He was dressed in white.

"I'm the owner of the show," the man said, as if in explanation. He coughed. "About the doll . . . What an attraction it would be!"

Don laughed. "You mean you want the doll for an exhibit in your show, Mr.—?"

"Bendel's the name," the man answered. "No, not that. Though, as I said, she'd be wonderful. The fact is, I'm suffering from a fatal disease."

Involuntarily Don moved a little away. "Oh, it's not contagious," Bendel said, with a touch of irritation. "It won't hurt anyone but me. . . . Could I see the doll?"

Don hesitated. In an attempt to follow Kunitz' advice, he had shown the doll to Payne at the restaurant, and to Henry at the bar. Payne had been deeply impressed and a little afraid; Henry had insisted with nervous vehemence that it must be a fake. But there was no real reason why Don should let a stranger see the doll.

There were eagerness and anxiety on the man's face. Behind him Don heard the hexapods snoring in their baskets; the noise, illogically, reassured him. He produced the doll.

Bendel drew a deep breath. He made no attempt to touch the little image. "It's not quite like the one in the museum," he said after a moment. "The expression is a little different . . . and the pose of the arms. . . . Could I have it for a couple of hours?"

Don's surprise must have shown in his face. Bendel shifted his eyes. "I—the fact is—I'd pay you well for it. I'm not a rich man, but anything I have—I mean . . . Come into my office, and I'll tell you about it."

He led Don into a cubicle at one end of the brown pneumatent. He opened a low cupboard and got out a bottle and tumblers of yellowish green glax. Don noticed the faint, hair like scars of Dumortine use on his wrists. "Rum," Bendel said, indicating the bottle, and then, when there was a sliding rustle from the bottom of the cupboard: "It's only a Saturnian lizard—he's sick. . . . Your health."

Don took the drink. He sipped at it. It tasted good, he enjoyed it. No more than that. He felt a sharp, irritated

nostalgia for the fun he had used to get out of drinking. It hadn't all been arthritis and hangovers, by any means. It was the doll who was responsible for the change.

Bendel put his glass down empty. "I want to hold the doll," he said simply. "I want to hold her in my hand for a couple of hours."

Don studied the surface of the liquor in his glass. "Why?" he asked with equal sympathy.

"Well, you see I have this disease. That's the reason why my voice sounds the way it does. (If I didn't think it would frighten you, I'd let you see me without cosmilac. That would convince you.) The doctors say it has something to do with the corpuscles in the blood. Hardly anybody has it."

Don gave a grunt intended to express sympathy. "But what's the connection with your wanting the doll?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Bendel said with a touch of stiffness. When I got the first symptoms, I went to the group doctors, and they told me I'd be dead within three years. That was not quite three years ago.

"What was I to do? They'd had consultation after consultation, and at the end they'd given me my death warrant. And by a nasty sort of death. I heard about a quack, a kind of faith-healer and astrologer, and I went to him, This was in Marsport, in the poor part of town."

The light in the little canvas cubicle was yellowish, not the usual clear artificial daylight tint. One of the animals in the cages to the left howled briefly, just at the limit of audibility. Don set down his drink. "What did your quack say?" he asked.

"He said my disease was caused by the sun's having reached a point, in its 200,000,000 years' journey around the galaxy, where there were all sorts of harmful radiations. Only a very few people were sensitive to them, but I was one of the people. That's what he said.

"I asked him if there was any cure, and he said there was. He had a lispng way of talking that made everything he said sound like he was making fun of you. Anyhow, he told me that the weeping doll in the museum on Terra, if I could be exposed to the emanation from it, would cure me.

"I don't know whether I believed him, exactly. But of course I decided to try it. I looked up the schedule, and the doll was just about due to go on display. I went to Terra and waited. She was on display for a week. The crowds were terrific. But I did manage, for three days out of the week, to get right in front of her case and stay there for—oh, maybe half an hour.

"Then I went back to the group doctors. I didn't tell them what I'd been doing. They made a lot of tests and kept me in bed for a week with some kind of meter strapped on my chest, and then they told me—they were very surprised—that the disease had been arrested. I would live at least a year more than they had said at first. I'm in that year now."

Don nodded. The story was adding up. His head was beginning to ache.

"The doll isn't due to go on exhibit for another four years," Bendel said: "I asked the museum authorities to let me see the doll in private, but of course they refused. They must get lots of requests like that.

"Your doll—you see, the fact is, she's very much like the one in the museum. Almost her twin. If you could let me hold her in my hand for a couple of hours, I think"—his voice sank almost into blurred inaudibility—"I think I'd live."

Don chewed his lower lip. He realized without surprise that it didn't make the slightest difference whether or not he believed Bendel. A decisive part of his mind, a part with which his consciousness had no concern, had resolved that

he wasn't going to part with the doll. Not even for a couple of hours? Not even, possibly, to save a life? He didn't know about that. But he wasn't going to let Bendel have the doll.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Its impossible."

A long moment passed before Bendel sighed. "People are selfish," he said, "*selfish!*" He rubbed a trembling finger over his lips. ". . . But I want to warn you anyway, for your own good.

"Have you noticed any changes in your personality, your character, since you've had the doll?"

Don gave him an involuntarily startled glance.

"Of course you have," Bendel said with satisfaction.

"You could have found that out from anyone in Baade," Don observed.

"Maybe. But I know what the real reason was that the museum authorities wouldn't let me have the doll. Their getting so many requests is only part of it. The dolls are dangerous."

Don made a contemptuous noise.

"Oh, it's true," Bendel said mournfully. "After they wouldn't let me see the doll in private, I made friends with one of the museum attendants. I had hopes that he might.

"He couldn't arrange it. Maybe he didn't want to. There is always that terrible human selfishness. But he used to go and stand in front of the doll himself, you know, for hours. He stole the keys. He said he felt as if he'd been cold all his life and only, when he saw the doll, did he feel warm."

It was a hit; Don's fingers tightened on the empty glass. He deliberately relaxed them. "Everyone knows the doll in the museum is unsettling," he observed.

"Oh, yes. But his personality changed, his character. At first it was an improvement. Perhaps you've noticed that. Then he began to lose weight and complain of pains in the bones.

"I heard the end of the story by accident. One day he was

missing. They looked all over the museum for him. It's a big place, you know, spread out over a couple of hectares. Finally they found a pool of slime in front of the storage case where the weeping doll was kept. His signet ring was in the middle of the pool."

Don managed a contemptuous laugh. "I'm too old to be frightened by slime deaths," he said. "Stories like that are more effective when the hearer is under twelve years of age."

"Oh, yes. But I'm not trying to frighten you. The fact is, there's a strange corrosive kind of life in the dolls. You won't let me hold your doll for a couple of hours, when it might cure me. Might save my life. Very well. That's between you and your communion with the infinite. But I want to urge you to get rid of the doll. Do anything with it—sell it, give it to somebody, throw it in the garbage reducer. Get rid of it! It's beautiful, and wonderful, and terribly dangerous."

Bendel was trembling. In the silence there was a sliding rustle from the cupboard where the Saturnian lizard was in hospital. Don pulled the weeping doll from his pocket and looked at it.

Bendel's shaking had stopped. He was watching Haig intently. Don licked his lips. He touched the doll's cheek with his forefinger, and it was wet. He put her back in his pocket slowly and deliberately.

Bendel threw back his head and laughed. He laughed like a hyena. Don saw that there was hair on his tongue.

6: *Francine*

"WHAT DO you think of this one?" Francine asked. She unwound a length of shimmering bluish greenish purplish cloth from the bolt and threw it in a long train across the

bed. The bed was already covered two or three deep with partly unwound rolls of cloth. "I had a tohu-bohu with the head loomster every day for a week before he got the colors right."

"Very handsome," Don said. He was sitting on the edge of the only arm chair in Francine's hotel room; for some reason, he couldn't make himself relax. "I never saw anything like it. But—excuse me, Fran—what are they for? Your fabrics are beautiful, but I can't imagine them being used for dresses or curtains or anything like that. They're so—unh—mortuary. Funereal."

His foster sister burst into delighted laughter. Her small, chic nose was all wrinkled up with merriment. "Don, you always were clever! Funereall! That's exactly it. But"—her face grew sober—"didn't you get my 'grams? Didn't you? I'm almost certain I sent you a 'gram when I got my new job."

Don licked his lips. He had a vague recollection of 'grams from Francine, 'grams which had come when he'd been drinking a good deal. He didn't have the slightest recollection of what had been in them. Maybe he'd thrown them away without opening them. "I don't believe they were delivered," he said dishonestly. "I was living in the sand all the time then. On the beach."

Francine frowned. "I'll have to complain to somebody," she observed. "A fine state of affairs, when first-class 'grams aren't delivered. Anyhow, Don, what I told you in them was that I had taken a position doing designing with the Solace and Assurance branch of Emotional Health. I like it. I feel I'm doing something useful, useful to society, now."

"What do you do?" Don asked. He wished Francine would sit down. He liked her, and was moderately glad she'd taken time to stop off at Fyon to see him, but she was always so restless. It irritated him.

"Well, these fabrics . . . You see, Don, one of the worst

emotional wounds a person can sustain is that of losing someone dear to him." Francine was speaking with her customary intensity, her small, bright head held slightly on one side. "It's always been a terribly traumatic experience. The psychologists in Emotional Health have been working on that problem—how to soften the blow of loss and death—for a long time.

"About a year ago they sent in a group of provisional recommendations to Emotional Health. One of the chief suggestions was that, instead of trying to repress and ignore the death experience, we should dramatize it more. Make more of it, so to speak." Francine paused as if she expected an answer.

"Yes, I see. But—"

"As the Egyptians did, Don. All Egyptian culture was colored by the feeling for the dead. Their finest buildings were tombs and mortuary structures. Instead of repressing their emotions about death, they dramatized them. They brought them out in the open where they could look at them.

"The dramatization was definitely conducive to mental health. The psychologists tell us that it is no accident that no other human culture has yet lasted as long as the Egyptian did." She nodded wisely at him.

"Um. But what has that got to do with your new job?"

"Oh, it's perfectly simple. Part of Solace and Assurance's campaign for dramatizing the death experience includes leaving the loved one with his deprived ones for a while. Not hustling him away underground, you see, as if there were something obscene in the very fact of death. That means a suitable setting for the loved one in his repose coffer. Of course, even with the best methods of preservation, there are bound to be some changes in coloring in six months or a year. My fabrics try to pick those changes up and harmonize with them."

Don squeezed an imbedded dakdak spine from his fore-

finger. He could not raise his head to look at her. He said, "Then you design—?"

"Fabrics for the lining of repose coffers. Yes, dear. Oh, and that reminds me." She was still moving about the room in her birdlike, restless way. "I've brought something for you, if I can find it. Do you remember Venable?"

"Certainly. I always liked him. What's he doing now?"

"Well, he—they sent you this." After some hunting, she produced a small object from the depths of her glossy almandine hand case and handed it to him. Don turned it over curiously.

It was about as long as the first joint of his thumb, black on three sides, with the fourth made of something like glass. "What is it?" he asked.

"Look through the top, dear," Francine said, bending over him. She was wearing some odd, flat perfume. "It's made so it will magnify."

Don obeyed her. He almost dropped the trinket in his surprise. Inside the little black container, on a bed of livid bluish fabric, lay Venable. His tiny feet were side by side, his hands were folded neatly on his breast. He was wearing the conventional dark-blue evening dress. He looked smug and self-satisfied and thoroughly dead.

Don put the thing down on the tabouret beside the bed. "What is it?" he asked.

"We call it a memento mori," Francine answered. "Though that's not really a good name—the suggestions in it aren't right. We'll have to think of something else, . . . It's a remembrance of the loved one for the deprived ones to keep. Venable's estate had them made up for his friends. They wanted you to have one."

"Venable's dead, then?"

"He's gone on ahead, yes."

"What did he die of? When I knew him, he was an athlete, in perfect health."

"Oh, he was killed in an accident," Francine replied with a touch of vagueness. "Although—" She halted, biting her lip.

"Go on," Don said.

"Well, I've heard—probably there's no truth in it—that there was something about the betrayal of cult secrets—that his death wasn't *entirely* an accident. But then, people always say things like that, when somebody dies suddenly."

Don was silent. He had liked Venable, though he had not seen him for years. Francine stopped her pacing. She pushed the bolts of dead-colored fabrics aside and sat down on the bed. "I want to talk to you, Don," she said, leaning toward him. "About yourself."

He had been expecting this. Francine probably felt it was her duty. "All right," he said.

"Look here, Don, why don't you stop your drinking and come back to Terra? What keeps you here? I don't see how you can bear to live like this."

"I told you, Fran, I have stopped drinking."

"You've told me you've stopped drinking before," Fran said with a touch of humor. "There was a time, four or five years ago, when you didn't touch anything stronger than low-proof soma for months."

"This time it's serious."

"Maybe. What's keeping you here on Fyon, anyway? a girl?"

"Women always think it's a woman," Haig returned rather wearily. "No. Fran, I like Fyon. That's all."

He got up and went over to the window. The sky was growing covered with darkly luminous clouds. It was almost time for Fyon's regular afternoon shower. In his hip pocket he could feel the faint warmth of Vulcan's weeping doll.

Francine came to stand beside him. "It's such a selfish

way to live," she said soberly. "Such a waste of yourself. You're not helping anyone."

"Oh, I don't know," Don replied perversely. "I pit and stem a lot of dakdak pods, which is certainly useful. And I'm not hurting anyone."

"I know, but—look here, Don, I could get you a good job on Terra. Designing the sort of thing Venable's estate sent you. You always had the most wonderful taste."

Haig made an involuntary gesture of repugnance.

"Or I could get you something else," Francine said quickly. "I know a lot of people. Let me try."

"I like Fyon."

"It's only an artificial planetoid."

"Sometimes I can forget that."

There was a pause. "Do you ever use your little communion mirror any more, Don?" Francine asked suddenly.

"My—? Oh. No. I don't."

"Perhaps that's it," Francine said sagaciously. "We do need something outside ourselves—call it religion—the psychologists are always telling us so. I think you ought to start using the mirror again, dear."

"The mirrors are a wonderful help. Of course"—her tone altered so oddly that Don, who had been looking absently out the window at the cloudscape, turned to stare at her—"of course, it's possible to go too far with them. These paschein harnesses, I mean. What if you can see wonderful, unbelievable things with them? It isn't normal, it can't be good for you, to do things like that to yourself. It's going too far." She sounded as if she were talking to herself.

"No, I don't believe in the harnesses, Don," Francine shook her head. "But the mirrors themselves—that's religion. It's wholesome, normal. I wish you'd begin using yours."

"I've never been able to see anything in one," Don answered. "Why don't you let me alone, France? It isn't any of your business. It's my life."

After a moment, his foster sister smiled up at him. "All right," she said. "I've always liked you, Don. I'm fonder of you than I am of my real brothers, I think." She laid her light, thin hand over his.

Before he could return the caress, there came a knock at the door. "I'll go," Haig said.

"No, let me. It's probably for me." Quickly she moved toward the port.

It was one of the robot bellhops, gay in its glossy green paint. It made a clucking, apologetic noise, and then held out one of its upper appendages toward Francine. She extended her hand.

Haig, at the window, did not know what warned him. He ran across the room, he caught Francine by the waist and threw her to the floor. The darts from the sliver gun in the robot's hand thudded harmlessly into the wall. Then the robot had turned and was gliding away on noiseless wheels down the hall.

Haig and the girl, sprawled on the deep soft floor covering, stared at each other. Francine, under the enamel smoothness of her maquillage, had turned a rather greenish white. "Are they—! Oh, dear!" Her voice was coming out in a high half crow. "Oh, dear. Don, somebody's trying to kill me. It's—why?"

"I don't think it was meant for you," Haig answered stiffly. "The robot was shooting at me, Fran. It was an accident that you answered the door."

Francine got to her feet. She was shaking with nervousness. She had to hold on to the bedpost to keep upright. "I—I didn't mean—" And then, blinking, "Oh, Don, what is it? What kind of a mess have you got into here on Fyon?"

Haig was already regretting that he had spoken. He tried to think of something to tell Fran, something that would quiet her. "It's not a mess," he said finally.

"Not a mess? When a robot shoots at you with a sliver gun?" Fran gave a shaky laugh. "Oh, Don, you've got to leave Fyon now. It isn't safe for you to stay here, after this."

Haig compressed his lips. "It wouldn't do any good." he said. "Believe me, Fran, I wouldn't be any safer away from Fyon than I am here." He thought, "as long as I keep the doll. . . ." He walked over to where the darts had fallen and examined them very cautiously.

"Be careful," Francine said, shivering. She sank down limply on the bed. "That's s-such a n-n-nasty way to get hurt. . . . You w-won't leave Fyon?"

"No." He was growing excited. "Look here, Fran, where the darts fell. Even if I hadn't thrown you down, I don't believe you'd have been struck. They were aimed wide of you."

"Why?" his foster sister asked dazedly.

"As a warning, I suppose. To frighten me."

"Oh." Francine's color was a little better than it had been, but she sounded as if she were on the edge of hysteria. She plucked at the folds of her stiff black skirt for a moment. "You've got to stop drinking, Don," she said suddenly.

"What?" Haig had chucked the darts into the disposer. Now he looked at her incredulously. "What are you talking about?"

"That's the cause of everything," she said. She licked her lips. "I'm sure of it, Don, absolutely sure of it. If you stopped drinking you could get out of this mess, leave Fyon. I'm sure of it. Don't argue with me."

"I'm *not* drinking. You've had a shock, Fran, of course, but you needn't be so unreasonable."

"I told you not to argue with me!" She sounded as if she were going to start screaming. Her eyes had an odd,

blank look. "Listen, Don. You've got to do this for me. I insist on it. Before I left earth . . ."

"Well?"

"Before I left earth," she resumed with what seemed to be a considerable effort, "I went to one of the best group doctors and told him about you. And he gave me these."

She opened her hand case with trembling fingers. She fumbled through several compartments and dumped a dozen glowing little glassite bottles on the bed cover before she found what she wanted. It was a small, russet-colored box.

"He gave me these," Francine said. She would stop trembling for a moment and then begin again. "He said they were something new for alcoholism, something wonderful. He said they'd be sure to cure you. Here." She held out the box on her shaking palm to him.

The rain had begun to beat against the window irises. The room darkened for a moment and then grew light again as the phosotat came on. Don looked at the box without accepting it.

"I don't need it, Fran," he said, raising his voice so she could hear him above the noise of the rain. "What's the matter with you?"

She began to beat against the gold-threaded coverlet with her free hand. "Take them, Don, take them," she said desperately. "Don't you see? I wouldn't dare leave Fyon after this if you didn't? How could I go back to my job if I knew you might be injured, killed? But if I know you've stopped your drinking . . ."

"Oh, I know you say you have. And you do look a little better. But at the same time, Don, you don't look like yourself. You look harder and thinner than you did. I'm worried about you. I'm afraid.

"Take the pills. They can't possibly hurt you. I asked him twice about that. He said they did something to the

temporal sense. But if you don't need them, they won't have any effect. Won't you, please?"

In sheer pity, Don nodded.

Francine kept looking at him. "Promise you'll take them," she said beseechingly. "You always keep your promises, Don. Promise you'll take them. The directions are in the box."

Haig made a harassed gesture. "All right. I promise. All right."

He took the box from her. He put it in his pocket, the opposite one from that which held the weeping doll.

Francine gave a deep sigh. For a moment she covered her face with her hands. Then she groped among the litter from her case until she found a slender emerald-green cylinder. She rubbed the stimulant it contained over her face and hands lavishly. Don watched her, a little puzzled. But of course the narrow escape had upset her. It would have upset anyone.

"I feel better," she said in a moment. "I should have used the stimulant before. About the pills, I'm so glad you promised. What time is it, Don?"

He told her. She jumped to her feet in alarm. "I've got to start packing. If I miss the lighter, I'll have to stay over until tomorrow, and that will teredo everything. Help me with my cases, won't you, dear?"

Don obeyed. Ordinarily, Fran would simply have clicked for the robot, but under the circumstances he could see she would hardly want to summon it. He pulled the case support out of the wall and began to move the cases on to it. Fran's room, as might be expected in a small provincial hotel, was none too well equipped.

The first two cases, small musetes, had normal weight. The third, a huge affair, had a partial anti-grav. The fourth, a small, scalloped thing, had true weight, like the first. Don picked up the fifth case, which was globular, expecting it,

too, to be full weight. In his surprise at its feather lightness, he swung it involuntarily high.

At the same time, quite by accident, his thumb twisted and came down hard on the latch. The case split open. Don looked into it.

There was a communion mirror, an unusually large one. And beside it, neatly coiled, was a bundle of metallic straps.

It was a paschein harness, no doubt of it. It must be Fran's own harness; they were fantastically expensive, since they had to be fitted with great exactness to the user's individual anatomy; she would hardly be carrying someone else's harness about with her. The harness had been used, used many times, Haig thought. The tips of its metal barbs were stained and rust-colored with dried blood.

He looked around the room, his heart thumping. Fran had stepped out on the balcony. She called something back to him in a gay voice. He was almost sure she hadn't seen the case come open.

He shut it again quietly. He was feeling a little sick. Agonizing self-torture, as an aid to spiritual insight—the idea revolted him. Had Fran spoken against the harnesses as a subterfuge, or was she really disgusted with herself for using one? Fran! He'd know her as far back as he could remember. He stood with his shoulders hunched, thinking. But perhaps it was all right. A lot of people used the harnesses. After all, they weren't illegal.

Fran came back from the balcony, smiling. She seemed almost like her normal self. "What's the matter, Don?" she asked as she moved toward the highboy. "You're looking pretty depressed. Are you sorry you promised me about the pills?"

"No." He hunted for an excuse. "I suppose it's a delayed nervous reaction to being shot at by the robot with the gun."

"Oh, you poor fellow! Yes, of course," She rubbed the stick stimulant in the emerald container lightly over his forehead. "That's better, isn't it? Now I'll have to pack my fabrics and coat my face."

She rolled up the bolts of strange, livid fabric expertly and put them in the big weightless case. With the cosmetics from the scalloped container she created a charming mask. "All done," she said finally. "Sure you can carry everything, Don?"

"Of course."

In the hotel lobby, she signed chits for her accommodation. The clerk, a human being, was polite; Haig felt he was gaining prestige in Baade by being seen with Francine.

They walked along the square to the lighter landing. The perfumes of Fyon floated gently around them in the still-moist air. Haig said little, but his foster sister chattered almost continually. She was amusing, she was inconsequential, she was gay. She seemed to have quite recovered from her recent fright.

The lighter was waiting for passengers. Francine kissed him on both cheeks. "Remember, dear," she said, "and be careful. I do hope you'll be all right. Good-by."

"Good-by, Fran." He gave her cases to a robot porter.

She stepped on to the anti-grav and moved slowly upward. At the top she halted and waved at him. "Good-by, dear," she called. The light fell full on her face. Her skin was dazzlingly white.

Bone white. Don sucked in his breath incredulously. For a second he saw a fleshless face and empty eye-sockets. Francine's slender neck was topped by a sphere of bleached bone. She was turning on him the grinning cordiality of a skull.

The hallucination, so painfully vivid, passed. He managed to wave at her. With a profound sense of relief, he turned away.

7: *The Cocks of Hades*

HAIG worried about Francine off and on all next day. The thing he had found in her luggage, the attack on him by the robot, her peculiarly nervous manner, even the hallucination he had had—all these blended into a large and unresolvable uneasiness. He did not sleep well.

Late the next day he got a 'gram from Francine. It was delivered to the restaurant by a robot, along with an isotype translation, in case the addressee wasn't literate. Don pulled the tape on the message rather apprehensively.

"So worried about you," it ran. "Are you taking your pills? You promised. Dearest love. Francine."

Don began to smile. The style of the missive, thoroughly characteristic of Fran as it was, heartened him. For the first time since she had left, he began to see things in what he thought was a normal perspective.

The harness couldn't possibly have belonged to Fran. That was the first point. She must have been taking care of it for someone, a friend of a lover, over whose use of the device she was deeply distressed. That would account for everything—her nervousness and lack of rationality, her attack of the use of the harnesses, even her insistence that Don take the pills she had brought. Perhaps to her in her nervous, overwrought state alcoholism had begun to seem as serious a danger as addiction to the paschein harness.

Now that he had thought of these things, he felt much better. Of course he still had the attack on him by the robot to worry about, but he was almost sure that the silver gun darts had been deliberately aimed wide. The attack had been meant to intimidate, not to kill. Presumably, the idea was that when an effort to get the doll away from him was made, the attack would have ren-

dered him disposed to be co-operative.

He folded Fran's message and shoved it into his pocket, smiling. His fingers touched the box she had given him. Oh, ugh, the pills. Well, he'd promised. He might as well start taking them.

He opened the box. They were quite ordinary-looking tablets, white and round, and there were about twenty of them. The directions in the box lid read, "One every four hours." The same message was given below in isotypes—a round pillule followed by four clock faces, each with the hour hand advanced by one hour.

Don filled a glass from a font and put a pill on his tongue. It had a slight soapy, saline taste. He swallowed it.

Payne came out in the kitchen while he was dosing himself. "Sick, Haig?" he asked curiously. He watched Don put the box away in his pocket.

"Not exactly."

"Oh." Payne inspected him critically. "You look O.K.," he said finally. "Lost a little weight, maybe, but nothing to worry about. . . . Say, unh, you know that doll you had? could you let me have another look at her?"

"Why?" Don asked after a second.

"Dunno, exactly," Payne answered. He rubbed his nose. He sounded as if he were a little surprised at himself. "I'd just like to look at her."

"I'm sorry." Don went over to the heap of dakdak pods piled on a salver and began to work on them. "I'd rather not."

"Why, you let me see her once before. You asked me to look at her." Payne sounded indignant.

"I know. I'm sorry." There was no use trying to explain to Payne the reluctance he felt toward showing the doll. Payne glared at him. He began throwing scraps and

used plates into the disposer clatteringly. He was cross all the rest of the day.

By fifteen that afternoon Don's hands were so sore from dakdak spines that he went out and bought a pair of siskin gloves. They helped a lot. He wondered why he had not thought of them before.

A little before the restaurant closed he took a second dose of Fran's medicine, and he swallowed a third pill before he went to sleep. The pills might as well have been chalk, he thought; they did not even nauseate him.

He woke early, just as the sun was coming up. Lying on his bed of sand—surprisingly comfortable, if one smoothed out its irregularities carefully before lying down on it—he watched the sky turn from translucent blue to pink, amber, apple green, scarlet and burning gold. Then the sun was up. The glory faded. He went back to sleep.

He woke for good about nine. He bathed in the milk-sweet surf—he would have liked to swim, but that would have meant either letting the doll out of his grasp or swimming in his trousers—and rinsed himself in the fresh water from the spring with the agate pebbles. He cupped water in his hand and gulped down another of Francine's pills. He decided to go see Kunitz. He hadn't seen him for nearly a week, since before Francine's visit.

He walked along the sun-dappled path, whistling. Long-tailed birds shot out across the path on both sides of him, disturbed by his passing. The air was full of their brilliant notes. Once Haig himself began to sing, in his uneven baritone, and a bird somewhere to the right of him took up the challenge, singing more and more loudly, until at last it burst into a valley of defeated squawks and shrieks. Don laughed.

He picked a blossom from a ginger plant and set it behind his ear. When he had gone on a few steps more, he got out the doll and looked at her.

As always, he was shaken by her beauty. When he was not looking at her, he forgot how beautiful she was. She stayed in his mind as a kind of wooing sweetness and richness, something which was, by a thousand tiny enchantments, leading him from his coldness and self-hatred back into the warmth of life. But when he looked at her he perceived that her beauty was armed; that, for all her nakedness and tears, she was clothed in power.

He put her away at last. It must be jealousy that made everyone advise him to part with her. His pleasure in her was too deep to let him smile.

A rustle in the thicket made him start, but it was only one of the robot gardeners. What had he been expecting, anyhow? Another attack, like the one in Fran's room? He wished he could dismiss the fear as foolishness. Perhaps it was. And then, one fear bringing up another, he thought, Am I losing weight? Both Fran and Payne had mentioned it. Bendel had spoken of loss of weight and pain in the bones.

He wouldn't think of it. Bendel's story had been, he was almost certain, a fabric of lies, designed to cause fright. He wished he were quite certain of it, but that couldn't be helped. He had the doll. She was his. He was going to keep her. Don walked on briskly toward Kunitz' house. But he was not whistling now.

The next bend in the path would bring him in sight of Kunitz' place. The leaves rustled crisply under foot. He wasn't on Fyon any more.

Without surprise, he saw that he stood in a grove of red and gold maple trees. Their leaves were yellow, amber, scarlet, crimson, and a deep, almost purple, red. The leaves which had fallen lay in drifts about his feet. Overhead the sky was a pale bright blue. The air was crisp and winey, like a bright autumn day on earth.

Ahead of him there was a group of tall, dark pines. The

shadows were black between their branches, and he thought he could smell the balsam of their needles from where he stood. On the topmost boughs of the pine trees, burnished and splendid, were three golden birds.

They seemed made of the pure metal, and yet they were living. After a second, he knew what they were. "The cocks of Hades," he thought. "Miracle, bird or handiwork? More miracle than bird or handiwork." They were the stars which had lit upon the golden boughs. Yes, it was perfectly clear.

He walked toward the pine trees, smiling with recognition. The trees rose straight up before him, like a rampart. Their green was darker than any black. There was a gray and green sphinx lying under them.

She was a small sphinx, with a sad, eroded, mossy face. The wisdom of humanity had made her sad. A rungless ladder stood beside her and reached up into the branches of the trees.

He stood looking up at them, thinking. The birds were silent. But he knew they had voices. When the cocks crowed, it would shake the heavens. It would be louder than trumpets, it would split the sky open. When they shook out their wings. . .

He must hear them. He would hear them. But there was a condition. Before they would crow, he must give them to eat from his own hands.

He turned to the sphinx. She was watching him steadily with her polished nephrite eyes. The eternal riddle hovered unvoiced in the air between.

He gathered up his forces to speak to the wise monster. "The answer is man," he said.

She nodded. She half rose on her gray haunches. With a motion like stone, she broke off her long hands.

They were grayish green, like her body. He snapped

them twice more, easily. Then he fitted them on the ladder to serve as rungs.

He mounted on it. Up he went, up and up and up. The sphinx and her wisdom had vanished. He could not see the bottom of the ladder. There was only a mist of fine silver below him. It was curdled a little, and looped like a stream. At the top of the ladder the golden birds waited for him.

What could he offer them that would be worthy? Their changeless metal could not accept common food. Humbleness made him dizzy. He had nothing. And yet it was useless to hope that they would utter the sky-splitting sound unfed.

He stood on the ladder musing. A cold, vaporous cloud floated close to him and drifted away again. There was something . . . He had something the birds would feed on, if he could remember what it was.

He made a great effort. Then he pulled Vulcan's weeping doll from his pocket and offered it to them.

The first two birds refused it with their gleaming emerald eyes. But the third—Don was giddy with rapture—put out his golden bill. He would accept the offering. He pecked at it.

At the last moment, Don jerked the doll back. He felt a dim surprise at himself. Now he would never hear the voices of the cocks of Hades. Never, never. The ladder wavered. With a cry, he fell backward into the mist.

The sphinx turned an astonished face to him as he went past.

When he came to himself, he was on Fyon once more. His mouth was dry, his tongue parched and thick. He felt empty and emotionless, alien to himself, as if he had been on a drug debauch.

What had happened? He looked about him vacantly. The shadows of the trees were long; it must be late afternoon.

What had happened to the day?

He was sitting under an ilangilang tree, on the path that led to Kunitz' place. Kunitz? Yes, he had been on the way to visit Kunitz when . . . when . . .

Sudden terror invaded him. The dream of the sphinx and the birds receded swirlingly, and he knew he had been duped, tricked, drugged. What if he had been robbed while he was beside himself, and she, his little miracle, she—?

Sick with anxiety, he fumbled in his pockets. The tablets Francine had given him were gone. But the doll—he had jerked the doll back in time from the threatening beak. She was still there.

8: *The Cave*

“ALL THE evidence points that way,” Kunitz said patiently. “Look at it objectively, Don, as far as you can. Your foster sister insists on your taking a drug which she says will cure alcoholism, even though you tell her repeatedly that you are no longer alcoholic. Even at the time, her insistence on this point impresses you as unmotivated and unreasonable. All clear so far?” He stopped and poured himself a drink.

“I guess so. Yes.” Haig made the admission slowly and reluctantly.

“She gives you a drug which, from your description of its taste and effects, was almost certainly alaphronein. Now, alaphronein is not only a very dangerous drug, it is also an extremely expensive one. More than that, its manufacture is virtually an SSP monopoly. One hears stories, probably true, about the semi-official uses members of that organization make of it. You contend that your sister got the drug ‘from some quack’ and gave it to you innocently. But what would a quack be doing passing out alaphronein?”

There was a moment's silence while Kunitz poured the phlomis down his throat. Don said defensively, "It may not have been alaphronein."

Kunitz shrugged. "The third point," he said, "is your own conviction, on waking from the drug trance, that there had been an attempt to rob you of the doll? That's what your first thought was, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes. But of course I wasn't myself."

Kunitz drew in his breath impatiently. "Blast it, but you're stubborn, Haig. All right, then. Take my final point—the nature of your fantasy. That certainly points to a suggestor, as the alaphronein addicts call it."

"What do you mean? I always heard the addicts imagined everything."

Kunitz shook his gray head. "Their fantasies are much more coherent and vivid when somebody is present to give them verbal suggestion on point after point. Now, your drug hallucination was, if I understood you correctly, based on an old poem of which you are fond. Isn't your fondness for that poem known to Francine?"

"She—oh, shut up."

Kunitz chuckled. "I must have touched on a tender spot."

"Never mind that. Look here, Kunitz. Why would Francine do such a thing?"

The older man shrugged. "Might be lots of reasons. Economic pressure, possibly. Blackmail, more likely. Suppose your sister has got mixed up in something discreditable. Or she might have become addicted to some cult practice or drug, and the SSP could lever on her by threatening to shut off her source of supply. . . . Did you say something?"

"No."

"Or just simple intimidation. The robot with the sliver gun, for instance. I don't believe the robot was trying

for you. Even a robot wouldn't mistake a woman for a man. Francine knew it was meant for her. That's why she was so upset."

". . . I don't believe it."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't. Francine—why, Francine and I went everywhere together when we were kids. My foster parents were just—people. They took me out of the institution because of the bonus. But Francine and I were friends. I used to take her to entertainments and chorics and diwans. She wouldn't do a thing like that. If Francine gave me alaphronein, it was by mistake. My drug hallucination must have been entirely subjective."

"Stubborn son, aren't you?" Kunitz scratched the hair on his chest. "How about trying to check up on it?"

"What do you mean? How could we check up on it?"

"Well, I'm positive your hallucination had some basis in reality. I think a suggestor was involved, and perhaps objects which, when you were in the drug state, could play the role of what you felt and saw. Suppose we go looking for them."

"All over Fyon?"

"Of course not. You were on your way to see me, weren't you, when the drug took effect? If we were to look about in the area where you were when that happened, we might find something."

"Oh, all right." Haig got to his feet. Kunitz latched the door behind them. They started down the path.

"It was about here," Haig said at last. He looked about him listlessly.

"Not much use looking for traces," Kunitz observed. "Not with rain regularly every afternoon. But I'll see what I can find." He began moving outward from the spot Don had indicated, in widening circles, with an intent and earnest face.

After a moment, Don sat down beside a champak tree. He crossed his legs and fiddled nervously with the strap of his sandal. He was still feeling the aftermath of the drugging in the form of a restlessness which was at once languid and irritable. A lizard, brilliant kingfisher blue, darted like a flash of blue fire past his feet. He hoped Kunitz would not find anything.

From somewhere up ahead Kunitz' voice came faintly. "Hey . . . Haig . . . come . . . here. . . . Found . . .", and then another long "Hey . . ." Don rose reluctantly.

When he found Kunitz, the older man was standing beside an opening in a low tree-grown hill. "We've found the locus of your hallucination," Kunitz said. He was looking pleased.

"Here?"

"No, inside the cave. (It's not really a cave—just a place where the robots can store gardening tools.) Come inside. There's light enough for you to see." He took Don by the arm.

The cave was a small place, not much larger than a niche, which seemed to have been scooped out of the rock. There were pruning tools on shelves in it, and on the rock floor a heap of grayish tarpaulins. At the right a rickety ladder was standing, its top resting against a stone ledge.

"Pretty obvious, isn't it?" Kunitz commented. "The sphinx was the tarpaulins, of course. Now climb up the ladder, Don, and take a look at what's at the top."

Haig obeyed. The ledge, he found, was about six inches wide and coated thickly with dust. Three flower pots of yellowish plastic stood at intervals along it. At the top of the ladder there was a broad smear in the layer of dust.

"The mark in the dust was where your suggestor sat, of course," Kunitz observed. "I've proved my point, haven't

I? Come on down, Haig. There's nothing else up there for you to see."

At the foot of the ladder the men confronted each other. "Don't you see what this means, Don?" Kunitz asked after a second. "You can't go on in the old way, living here on Fyon, working when you feel like it, and enjoying your own unique and personal little miracle, Vulcan's doll. They—the people who gave you the alaphronein—aren't going to let you go on in the old way.

"It was alaphronein. The most dangerous of all drugs, the only one which has a twenty-eighty chance, from the first dose, of raising inter-cranial pressure to the point where the brain tissue bursts. You're lucky, Don, if I may say so. You didn't lose the doll, and you're still sane.

"But you've got to get out of here. Alaphronein means the SSP. How are you going to resist a force like that? You can't. You must disappear.

"Now, listen. I know a space-ship captain. I did something for him once. I have reason to believe he won't refuse to do me a favor. With him helping, you can disappear.

"After a while, when it's safe, you can come out of hiding. You'll have a new identity, and if we can find a discreet surgeon, new eyes and a new face.

"It's the only thing for you to do, Don. Don't you see? We can't risk having any more Francines work on you." He laughed.

Until that moment, the issue had hung in doubt. Don had been very near consenting. But there was something in the shape of Kunitz' mouth when he said "Francines," a heaviness and smugness and self-assurance in his laugh, that turned Haig's frustration, doubt and fear into abrupt rage. "I won't," he said.

"What? Don't be foolish."

"No. I won't," Haig hunted for words. "Is everything a mask?" he asked almost desperately. "You say that Fran-

cine was lying to me, that she gave me a drug that might have killed me, so that the SSP could get the doll. Very well. Perhaps she was lying. What about you?

"How can I tell? How do I know you didn't arrange that proof you're speaking of?" He gestured around the cave at the ladder, the flower pots, the tarpaulin. "It wouldn't be difficult. If Francine was lying, if there're nothing but masks around me—how about you?"

He turned and walked away. His motions were wavering and unsteady. At the door of the cave he hesitated. Then he went on down the path.

Kunitz looked after him, frowning and scratching the hair on his chest. He spat the reddish saliva of Betla nut chewing on the floor. "They must capture him," he said.

9: *Weialala*

DON WENT back to the cave later that day. He was in a miserable state of confusion and doubt. Kunitz' face alternated in his mind with Francine's, and both were slyly mocking. Who was lying? Why? If he could only be sure!

He looked at the flower pots, the tarpaulins, the ladder. He closed his eyes, hoping for a flash of awareness, or something which would say, "No, that's not it." If he had been here before, when he was drugged, would he not remember it? For a second it seemed to him that he did remember . . . something . . . and then it was gone and Francine's gay light voice was echoing once more in his ears. He looked at the tarpaulins. They were only crumpled cloth, and he could not say whether they had ever been the wise sphinx.

He turned to go. There was no point in staying any longer. He halted. Someone was singing outside the cave.

It was a woman's voice, a rather low contralto, and the

melody it sang, Don thought, seemed to have in it the sound of water flowing and the lapping of waves. There were words he could not understand—he thought they were words of some old earth language—and then more of the flowing, rippling melody. It sounded old, and yet fresh, as if it might have come out of the childhood of a world.

Who could be singing? Few people sang nowadays, and when they did it was not music like that, but the glittering artificial trills that they heard over the tri-di.

The voice halted for a moment, almost as if the singer were waiting for an answer. Then it went on, in the archaic language, "*Frau Sonne . . . den Helden . . . das Gold . . . gabe . . .*" Haig could make out a word distinctly now and then. He had no idea what it meant, but he liked it. He had begun to smile.

He stepped outside, still smiling. There was no one. Or—wait, yes. There was a woman, standing beside a white and yellow frangipani. She was wearing a soft white dress.

She leaned forward quickly when she saw him. Her body was stiff with hope and doubt. She sang the slashing syllables again; they were a river in the sunlight. She looked at him and waited. Don gave a silly, nervous, apologetic cough.

Her face cleared. Her body lost at once its tension and its hopefulness. She said, "Why, it's the man who has Vulcan's doll!"

Haig was startled. He said, "How did you know that?"

"Why, I suppose everybody knows it," she said, laughing. "I was in the bar, you know, when you showed it to Henry. And after you left, he told all of us about it. I think he was impressed. Everybody on Fyon must know about your having the doll by now."

"Oh."

"Don't you know me?" she continued. "I'm the girl who sells curios at the counter in the bar."

For the first time, Haig really looked at her. She was small and slender, with very dark hair and a glowing brown skin. Her eyes were blue. Martian? he thought. No, the color of her eyes was not deep enough for that. There were gardenias in her hair.

"My name's Phyllis," she said. "And you're Haig."

It was certainly not a remarkable statement, but Don felt a glow of pleasure at the way she said it. "My first name's Don," he answered. "What was that you were singing when I came outside?"

"Oh, an old song. From a play with music." She did not look at him. "I like it, don't you?"

"Yes. I never heard anything like it. It sounded like water." He hesitated. "Do you know how to swim?"

They were walking along slowly as they talked, through the masses of flowering trees. Phyllis put up a hand to push a flower-heavy branch aside. "Yes. I've learned since I came to Fyon. I never could learn weightless natation, somehow. I don't care, though. It never seemed to be much fun."

"It's too easy," Don agreed. "Like a lot of things. I suppose that's one of the reasons why Fyon isn't more popular—there aren't any weightless installations here."

"Fyon's a fine place," she replied, nodding. "Simple. I like it more all the time. But it's not quite real." A gardening robot passed them with a faint clanking. "I mean—like that. It's robots and machines."

"You can forget them if you try."

"I know."

They had reached the beach. The pink sands, the green-glinting, opalescent water lay in front of them. If Fyon, Don thought, was an artificial thing, a purely human creation, it was certainly a beautiful one. He said, "How

would it be if we went swimming together? I don't know anyone else who swims."

Her small face lit up. "Oh, yes. I'd like that. As you say, hardly anybody does. But—excuse me—are you well enough? You looked so ill when I saw you with the man, the other day."

Don felt dizzy. He said, "What day was that?" His tongue felt like somebody else's tongue.

"The day before yesterday. It *was* you, wasn't it? It was on the path near the cave, and the man—I don't know who he was, I never saw him before—had his hand under your elbow helping you. You looked dreadfully white and sick."

Don walked a few steps toward the water and sank down on the sand. His knees would not sustain him. So Kunitz had been right!

The drugging had been deliberate. Francine had certainly been a party to it. There had been a deliberate attempt to get the doll away from him. And the SSP . . .

The girl had hurried after him. "Did I say something wrong?" she asked breathlessly. "Shall I call somebody? Is something wrong?"

Don shook his head. . . . He ought to start running. When the SSP was after you, you ran. You ran as long as you could, and in the end they caught you. There wasn't any time to lose. He ought to go find Kunitz.

Why didn't he? Was it because, even now, he didn't quite trust the older man? There was always something ambiguous about Kunitz, for all his friendliness. Was it a deep reluctance to begin the hateful, predetermined drama of running and pursuit? Or was it, more than any of these, the silly fact that he wanted—he very much wanted—to go swimming with this girl?

She was still bending above him anxiously, her hands

tight on his arm. "I'm so sorry," she said tensely. "Haven't you any medicine?"

"I'm all right." Don shook his head. "It's nothing, really." He felt a heady, half-drunken irresponsibility welling up in him. What did an hour or two matter? There was plenty of time to begin the desperate game of flight, fear, pursuit. He would decide what to do later. The SSP was powerful, but it shouldn't cheat him out of swimming with Phyllis. He had plenty of time.

He got to his feet. "It won't happen again," he said, smiling. "Really, it's all right. Do you have to get your suit before we can swim?"

She was looking at him with somewhat the expression she had worn when he first saw her—expectation confused with doubt. "But you—aren't you—why—" After a moment she frowned. "Could you let me see the doll? I was too far away, when you were in the bar. And I've heard a lot about the one in the museum. People who see it remember it."

Without a word he showed it to her. There was silence. Then Phyllis said flatly, "You didn't find her by accident."

"No. I suppose not."

"But why—aren't you—I don't understand. The doll hasn't anything . . . Put her away, Don. It's enough. She makes me feel as if I'd been looking at the sun. I don't mean with my eyes, but with my mind."

He obeyed. "And now," she said, jumping up and shaking herself, "let's swim."

She swam like a fish, like an otter. She darted away from him, laughing, through the buoyant foam. He shook water from his eyes and then shot after her. He overtook her, grabbed, and was left empty-handed. She dived, wheeled, glancing like an arrow through the bright water, and came up behind him in a flurry of froth. For a mo-

ment they hung side by side. Then she was gone again, her polished shoulders gleaming in the sun.

When they were tired, they sat on the beach in the sand and rested. They could be silent with each other. There was no restless need to keep talking. Once Phyllis said, "I'd hate to have *her* shut up in a museum," and he answered, "I know."

The sun began to sink. The sky boiled up in waves of burning color. They watched quietly. There was a faint tinkle of sound, loud in the silence. Pits began to appear in the sand.

Phyllis gave a little cry. "An eye-beam! An eye-beam. Don, somebody's using an eye-beam on us!"

He was suddenly sober and cold and awake. The intoxication that had sustained him vanished. He saw his delay for what it was—folly, recklessness, an egotistical stupidity. Do-nothing heroics! He felt the sting of self-contempt and guilt. Worst of all, he might have involved this girl.

He looked at her. Her face was white, but her mouth was faintly smiling. Even in his agitation, he was surprised at her.

He said, "You've got to go, Phyllis. You've got to get away from me." His voice came out low and harsh.

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Because I—it's not safe for you. There may be trouble. I'm sorry. That eye-beam—it means the SSP is after me."

Her face had grown radiant. "The SSP!" she cried. "I knew it! Then you *are* one of us!"

10: *The Holy Fish*

"WHY DIDN'T you answer my signal?" the girl went on. "I thought—and then I wasn't sure. I was waiting for you."

Don said, "I'm not—whatever you thought I was. It's just that the SSP wants the doll. They've tried twice before to get it away from me. That day you saw me on the path I'd been drugged with alaphronein. I suppose the man you saw with me was somebody from the SSP. I was taken to the cave and given suggestion to make me give up the doll voluntarily."

"But—why don't they simply take it away from you? The SSP isn't restrained by considerations of legality." Her head lowered, she was letting handfuls of sand trickle through her fingers. She would not look at him.

"There's a tie—a sort of force field—between me and it." He told her of the experiments Kunitz had made, and finished, "I suppose taking it from me by force would be dangerous. But I don't know what will happen now. That's why you've got to go away from here."

"What will you do, then, Don?" The glory of the sunset had faded into a still lavender twilight. He could smell the scent of the gardenia wreath she had replaced in her hair.

"Go to Kunitz, I guess. He said he'd help me."

"Kunitz? Do I know him?"

"You must. He's in the bar pretty often—buys phlomis in bottles. He's a stocky, heavy-set, middle-aged man."

"Oh, Yes, I know him. He reads a lot. Is he reliable, Don?"

"I suppose so. Look here, we mustn't stay here talking. It's dangerous. You've got to go."

She got to her knees obediently, and then sank back again. "You don't trust him, do you? There's something in your voice when you say his name . . ."

"It doesn't matter whether I trust him or not," Don answered harshly. "He's the only chance I've got. It's true, I'm none too sure about him. But he seems to be my friend."

"You mustn't go to him, then," Phyllis replied quickly.

“Don’t you see, all you have to rely on now is your intuition and your wits? We had so much trouble with people being betrayed. He might be an agent of—of theirs.”

There was a second’s silence. Phyllis was hugging her knees. He could not be sure in the poor light, but he thought she was shivering. A faint breeze had come up.

Don said abruptly, “Of course I could simply give them the doll.”

Phyllis drew in her breath. “No!” she cried. Then, more calmly, she went on, “You’re afraid I’ll get into trouble, aren’t you? Don’t worry about it, Don—I’m already on their list of suspicious persons. Not that that’s any distinction. I mean, half the people in the system must be by now.

“But you mustn’t give the doll up to them. Doing that wouldn’t help anyhow—they’d still send you to one of the concentration planetoids, just as a matter of principle. And they want the doll for some reason. You mustn’t give it up. It’s important, though I don’t know how.”

“I know it too,” Haig admitted. “I don’t suppose I could make myself let them have her. But what shall I do? Stay here until they try to get her again? And this time they wouldn’t fail.”

She let sand run through her fingers. It was almost dark. “Will you trust me?” she asked softly. “More than you trust Kunitz?”

“Yes.” He was to regret other things, to the time he had left, but never that he had said that.

“Then . . . I think I could hide you in the hemisphere. It’s out in the water, you know—an underwater sphere-shaped projected field that the technicians who made Fyon built. We used to meet there. I think it’s safe.

“There used to be a land connection with the sphere, but one of the technicians destroyed it because he thought it was dangerous. The only access is by water now. We’ll swim out when it’s quite dark.”

Don let out a long breath. Now that he had the prospect of a refuge, he realized under what a strain he had been. "But what about you?" he asked in the next second, worried again. "Won't that be dangerous for you?"

He thought she shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I hate the SSP so much—I'm under suspicion anyway because of my sister. They may even know that I was a member of the Holy Fish."

Don looked at the sky. There was still a little light. Phyllis was right; they must wait until night had come, in case the eye-beam was still focused on them. Waiting might be dangerous, but it couldn't be helped. They had to wait.

"What was the Holy Fish?" he asked. "A religious cult?"

"It was supposed to be a cult. Actually, it was an organization of scientists and technicians who were opposed to the SSP. It was started when they were building Fyon, and realized what they could build if they were free to do it. So many things aren't permitted to scientists now.

"My sister was a member. After the SSP got her, I joined, though I wasn't really qualified. I'm not a scientist, you see."

"That song you were singing outside the cave—was that a signal of theirs?"

"Yes. I'm the only member left on Fyon. All the others were picked up, or had accidents. There never were very many of us. About a month ago I got a message—it was only one line, but it had the identification—telling me to meet a Fish at the cave. The cave was our land meeting place. I thought you might be the one I was to meet."

"What happened to your sister?"

"She was sent to Phlegethon."

"The dream planet? Where they mine Dumortine?"

"They don't mine it," Phyllis answered. There was some-

thing very odd in her voice. "They hunt it with dogs. Don't you know about Dumortine?"

"Only that it's a drug which is supposed to induce rich and varied dreams in natural sleep. It's supposed to be harmless. It's taken through little cuts in the skin."

"It's not harmless," Phyllis answered. She gave a strangled little cough, as if what she felt was choking her. "People who use it get so they hate the day. But that's not what I meant. Do you know how they made Dumortine?"

"I thought they mined it."

"No. No. Phlegethon's radioactive—the soil, the air, everything. It's the headquarters of the SSP—well shielded, of course, from any radioactivity. And it's also a penal planetoid.

"When a prison ship lands on Phlegethon, the prisoners are turned loose. They can't get away; there's no need for guards. But in order to survive, they have to breathe the air, they have to eat the products of the radioactive soil."

"It—kills them?" Don asked softly.

"Nothing so kind as that. Oh, sometimes I think I can't bear it. Kyria—my sister—was so gentle and good. Gentle and brave and good!"

After a moment Phyllis controlled herself. "After the prisoners have been there for two or three years, the SSP hunts them. It's a regular part of the training of young officers. They do it with dogs.

"They always catch them. Sometimes it takes days, with the prisoner always running, but in the end they do. Then the prisoners are killed."

"But—the Dumortine?"

"It's found in crystals in their flesh. All through the musculature. It's formed as a result of the radioactivity. The running, with the dogs after them, helps the drug to crystallize."

Her voice was hard and detached. In the dimness, Don reached out for her hand. He pressed the fingers. For a moment she was quiet. Then she pulled her hand away. "If you touch me, I'll—I can't help crying," she said in explanation. "And crying doesn't help. I've already cried too much.

"But you see what I meant about the SSP. I don't know why they want the doll. It looks like a small thing, not very important. But if they want it, you mustn't give it to them."

"Yes. I see. Look here, Phyllis, what do you think the SSP is trying to do? Or are they trying to do anything?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well . . . Is there something behind all these things, some bigger plan? The repression of science, I mean, and the mutant study program, and the encouragement the SSP has given the various cults. Maybe even the fact that hardly anybody can read letters now, but only scan iso-types, would be an example of what I mean.

"Is there something behind these things? Or is it just expediency, with no bigger design at all, and the SSP acting only to retain and consolidate its own power?"

"I think there's a plan," Phyllis answered. "We used to discuss that point a lot in the Fish. One thing was very plain—not all scientists were equally harassed and annoyed. We had a physicist and an astronomer among our members—they'd joined because they hated the SSP repression of free scientific thought and exchange of information—but they were never bothered personally or their work interfered with.

"On the other hand, the biologists and zoologists were under constant attack. My sister was only an assistant in a lab. Her chief was doing some experiments on growth buds in salamander embryos, trying to see that organs he could make develop from the buds, when they picked him

up. Kyria tried to go on with his experiments, and a couple of month later they took her too.

"I do think there's a design. I mean, there's something in the life sciences, some possibility, perhaps, that the SSP doesn't want studied or understood."

It had grown quite dark. Phyllis got to her feet. "Stay close to me," she said. "I don't know how much an eye-beam can pick up, but try not to churn the water into froth when you swim, and don't show your teeth. They might be able to catch the beam of reflected light. When we get to the sphere, do exactly as I do. Follow me." She waded out into the surf.

11: *The Hemisphere*

THERE is always something ghostly and disembodied about swimming at night. Don felt that he and Phyllis were suspended in a gulf in which floated a few remote stars. The water, just at blood heat, seemed scarcely more tangible than the bland air. A little tremor of nervous expectation ran over him.

Phyllis, beside him, was swimming with smooth, slow strokes. When they had gone a considerable distance from the shore, she paused and seemed to orient herself. Then she turned to the right.

"About here," she said finally. She was speaking with her lips close to his ear. Don't swim any more—it disturbs the water. I have to look."

"What are you looking for?" Don queried in the same cautious tone.

"A ripple. It's very faint. I don't think one could find it even if he knew it was here, unless he'd seen it before."

She began to move back and forth very slowly, pausing often and waiting for the surface of the water to grow quiet.

Don floated and watched her. At last she turned and came back to him.

"Fill your lungs," she said softly. "Follow me." She hesitated. "Don't be startled. The sphere, at the end, was a funny place."

She dived. He followed her arrowy body downward. At the bottom—probably nowhere on Fyon was the depth of water over twenty feet—he saw her very, very faintly in the greenish light as she seemed to stoop and tug at something in the sand.

There was an augmented pressure on his eardrums. She caught his hand as he stood up waveringly beside her, and led him forward. The darkness became pitchy. At the same time he was aware that the pressure in his ears had lifted.

"Don't breathe yet," she said faintly. The sound did not seem to carry well. "This is an in-between place."

They moved forward perhaps five steps in the absolute darkness. Don's lungs were hurting. Phyllis withdrew her hand from his. He thought she fumbled and then pressed a stud—an impression certainly not based on sight, since he could see nothing. She took his hand again, and they walked forward one more step. Despite her warning, he could not repress a start of surprise.

They were standing in a brightly lighted space filled with phantom images of themselves. Don and Phyllis, half a hundred times repeated, bowed, wavered, advanced, retreated, and slid forward again. Three-dimensional, apparently solid, they seemed to be everywhere, even overhead. The edges, the colors of the phantoms were perhaps not so sharp as in life, and each spurious Don or Phyllis was surrounded with a dim prismatic aura that moved as it moved.

Don raised his hand, and all the other Dons imitated

him. He turned to real-Phyllis, who was standing quietly beside him. "What is it?" he asked.

Phyllis shrugged. "I don't know," she said. Her voice, though perfectly distinct, seemed now near, now in the distance, and now, unexpectedly, inside his head. "It wasn't like this at first. When we first met here, it was just a space. Then it gradually filled up—got populated, so to speak. Each time we came here, there were a few more figures. It was uncanny. The technicians weren't able to account for it.

"The sphere lets in oxygen, from that dissolved in the water outside, and of course it's made to be absolutely invisible and not let out any light. One of the theories they had about it was that it somehow trapped mental force, the way glass does solar radiation, and transformed it into the images. The technicians thought it might have other properties they weren't aware of when they built it, but they never got to experiment with it, though they wanted to.

"It's an odd place, certainly. We used to notice how hungry we were after we'd been here a few hours. But the technicians swore it was harmless, Don, and I think you'll be safe here for a time. Keep away from the metal bar in the sand that projects the sphere."

She pointed, and Don saw, under the feet of the phantoms, a metal bar, perhaps a meter long, that glowed like liquid, sluggish gold. "Keep away from that," she continued. "I'll come out with food tablets for you tomorrow. I'm sure to hear from the Fish messenger soon. Don't worry. We'll get you out as soon as we can."

She turned. He saw, with a stab of dismay, that she was going. Ignoring the tapestry of meaningless motion around them, he caught her hand. "Phyllis . . . you can't run all these risks. Just to save my skin. It isn't fair."

She let him hold her fingers. "It isn't just for you—"

she answered slowly— “though I would anyway. It’s because the SSP mustn’t have the doll. How I wish I knew what they want her for! Don, could I see her before I go?”

He was pleased, almost flattered, and yet he had never wanted anyone else to see his little golden wonder. Always before he had felt an inner reluctance. Carefully he balanced Vulcan’s doll on the palm of his hand for her to see.

“Still weeping,” Phyllis murmured. She seemed to have forgotten where she was. “Oh, beautiful. One could worship her, except that, somehow, it would be worshipping ourselves,”

At last she raised her head from contemplation. “I’ve got to go,” she said vaguely. She looked around her, still abstracted and remote. Her tone grew sharp. “Don! Look at the other Dons! Isn’t she real? There’s no image. What have you got in your hand?”

He followed her gesture. Dons and Phyllises surrounded them. Each Don held out his hand toward a Phyllis. Each of them balanced on his palm a lens of burning light.

“I don’t understand,” Phyllis was saying puzzledly. “Isn’t she real? What is she made of that the images show her as a burning lens?”

Don was as puzzled as the girl. “She’s real, of course,” he answered at last. “But perhaps she’s only real in the sense that she’s energy. Or a focus for it. How can we tell?”

“Yes. She pressed his hand. “I’ll be back tomorrow with food, Don. Good night. Good luck.”

It was the middle of the afternoon when she came back. One moment Don was lying on the sand while his entourage of phantoms moved dimly about him, bleached to

inconsequence by the daylight; the next the sphere was filled with Phyllis' images. He got to his feet.

"Hello," she said nervously. "You must be starving. I'm sorry I couldn't get here before. I've brought food tablets for you." She handed them to him.

"No, I'm not hungry. I think I've been asleep. But I'm glad you've come."

"Aren't there fewer images than there were?" she asked, looking. "Perhaps you've been eating them, and that's why you're not hungry." She gave a trembling laugh.

She was wearing dark blue "petals," very handsome with her dark eyes and skin. Don said, "Has something upset you, dear?"

"Yes—no—I mean—" She did not seem to have noticed the little endearing word. "I'll have to tell you," she said slowly. "The messenger isn't going to come."

"Oh." Don realized how much he had been depending on the chance of escape represented by the messenger. "How can you be sure?"

"I went to the cave today and waited. He didn't show up, but I thought 'tomorrow.' When I got back to my room in the hotel, a parcel had come for me. It was one of those little memorial coffins, you know what I mean. It wasn't from anybody I ever heard of, and then I understood. We'd agreed to use that as a signal for trouble in the Fish. It means the messenger isn't coming. The lining of the coffin was black, and that means bad trouble. Perhaps the messenger is dead."

Don said, "Perhaps later—"

"I don't think so." Phyllis shivered. "So then I remembered, I'd heard of a man once who was supposed to be friendly to the Holy Fish, though he wasn't in it. An important man. I thought he might be able to help us. I tried to contact him.

"I gave the operator his name and his identity number.

She was gone a long time. When she came back, she said there was no such person. She said there never had been."

"But—how could that be?"

"I don't know. I heard once that sometimes they 'expunge' people, wipe out everything about them, just as if they had never lived. Maybe that's what happened to him.

"I didn't know what to do. Payne came in the bar at noon for a drink. He said two men had been in the restaurant asking questions about you. He seemed upset. He was afraid you were in trouble. He was sure the men were from the SSP.

"I didn't have any more Holy Fish contacts. I knew the SSP would find the sphere if once they started hunting you seriously. Don, I hope I did the right thing. As soon as I could get away from the bar, I went to see Kunitz."

Kunitz. So it had come to Kunitz at last, then, in spite of everything. What else could she have done? "What did he say?" Don asked.

"Kunitz? He seemed very—upset. I mean, I felt that I'd brought him more of a problem than just helping you get away. Finally he said you were to wait in the sphere until it was dark, and then swim to that island they call Struve. It's quite a way, but I think you can make it. I think—oh, I hope—Kunitz is reliable." Her eyes were anxious. "He said somebody would be waiting on the island to pick you up."

"And after that?"

"He's getting in touch with a friend who has a space needle. They're going to make connections with the captain of some bigger craft."

There was a silence. "I've helped you finely, haven't I, Don?" she said. She bit her lip. "I made you waste a day, here in the hemisphere, and had to go to Kunitz in

the end, when my plans failed. The Holy Fish! A talking shop, an organization with no members. Yes, I've been a lot of help."

"Don't talk like that," he said urgently. "I got to be with you longer, to hear about your sister. I was glad you told me about her. And the time in the sphere hasn't been wasted. I've learned something here."

"How? What?" She tried to smile.

"How? I think it's true that the sphere accumulates mental force. There's a matrix here—a pool—it's hard for me to express. It's something that has accumulated from a lot of minds. There are things in it they didn't, as separate individuals, know. And being in the sphere, I've been in that pool.

"I'm sure of this, Phyllis, anyhow. Something enormous is on the verge of happening. People everywhere—mankind, humanity, if you like the big words—are on the edge of a great change. The SSP doesn't want that change to occur."

Her eyes widened and grew dark. Slowly she nodded. "Oh. Yes. So that's it. You're right. And the doll—?"

"I don't know." Neither of them spoke. The phantom Dons and Phyllises continued to wheel, turn, retreat, advance.

At last she sighed deeply. "I've got to be getting back to the bar, Don. Good luck. I'll show you how to work the exit from the sphere before I go."

"Don't go," he pleaded, unaware that he was signing a certain kind of warrant with the words. "Stay here with me until it's time. Don't go."

"Kunitz said he wanted to speak to me . . . but it doesn't matter, Yes, Don, all right. I'll stay."

He took her in his arms. She received him sweetly. No one was watching to see how all the other Dons and Phyllises embraced.

As the light in the water outside faded, the bar in the sand shone with a brighter gold. Don's head was in Phyllis' lap, and she was laughing. They would be starting soon; the man who was to help Don would be waiting on Struve. Things were going to be all right. They must. Don felt an extraordinary, quiet happiness. Suddenly Phyllis screamed.

His heart pounding horribly, Don started to his feet. The metallic bar in the sand flared up in intense yellowness. The posturing phantoms wheeled slowly and then abruptly vanished, like a flame blown out. For a second Don saw the sphere in its original unpopulated emptiness. Then it broke with a long shaking flash of light, and water and the dark-shirted men of the SSP poured in.

Had he always foreknown this moment? The inrush of darkened water, hopelessness, and the armed, anonymous men? He thrust Phyllis behind him; they had stun guns and sliver guns and blasters. He could kill one of them, he thought, if he could get close enough. He had no weapons, nothing. Then a great surge of water caught his love and whirled her away from him.

He swam after her wildly. One of the SSP men was already taking aim at her with a blaster. The noise of the bolt was a staccato thunder over the water, as if a great mouth were saying quickly and heavily, "Death death death."

Phyllis' body seemed to halt and buckle in the middle. For a moment she floated. Then the water around her grew opaque with blood.

Don remembered little after that. He was wild with pain and despair and hate. He must have attacked the man with the blaster; he had a sharply etched picture of Phyllis' murderer sagging back in the water between his hands. He hoped he had killed him, but he never found out for sure. Then somebody shot Don from behind with

a stun gun turned to low power and paralyzed him. That was the end of that.

They put a harnesslike arrangement of straps on him and towed him efficiently through the water to their craft. Don was paralyzed, but he was not unconscious. He could still see and hear. One of the guards said, "Where are we taking this fellow?" and another answered, "You ought to know. To Phlegethon."

12: *All the Way Up*

AT FIRST it was not so bad on the ship. Don, as the paralysis from the stun gun bolt wore off, was in considerable physical distress. Bad as the pain was, he welcomed it, for it was a refuge from thinking about Phyllis—from his grief for her, his sense of failure, and the corroding knowledge that he was guilty of her death. Then, as the pain began to ebb away, treacherously deserting him, his mind tried to save itself in an intense, compulsive, hyperesthetic attentiveness. His perceptions grew abnormally acute. Everything around him was perceived in minute detail, in a focus so sharp that it was etched.

They had been chained side by side to stanchions in a hold in the ship, twenty or thirty—twenty-seven, Don found, counting automatically in the darkness—prisoners, all bound for Phlegethon. Two of them were women, but they were not treated any differently from the rest.

Though it was dark in the hold—except when a guard, coming in twice a day to feed them, admitted light—it was never quiet. One prisoner sang constantly, in an unvaried monotone, two or three had hour-long fits of talking, others would be taken with spasms of high-pitched, spitting blasphemy or hysterical giggling. For all that, most of them were quiet, sunk in apathy or hopelessness. They

slept standing, sagging against their fetters. After he had been in the darkness for an hour or so, Haig thought he could distinguish the beating of each individual heart.

The times when the guard opened the hold to feed the prisoners were times of great mental activity for Haig. He had to use the few moments of light to gather enough sense impressions, particularly visual ones, to last him through the next period of darkness. But this compulsive, passionate, spongelike absorptiveness was not without its dangers. Once Don saw his own chained arms outstretched to take the bowl of mucilaginous porridge the guard was holding out to him, and the sight filled him with a terrible confused rage. How could his body, how dared it, go on existing while Phyllis was dead. Yet his heart beat automatically, his breathing had its usual rhythm, he ate the food the guard brought, and relieved himself. Even the lambda-shaped birthmark on the inside of his elbow was unchanged.

It was after the guard had fed them for the fourth time that somebody shouted from the darkness behind him, "Haig! Is that you up front? Haig!"

Don felt gratitude. He had begun, in the darkness, to count the seconds mentally and add them up into minutes, and the minutes into hours. Sometimes he would lose count, and began to sweat with anxiety. This—anything—was better than that. He shouted, "Yes." He wanted to turn around to face the direction of the voice, but he was chained by a ring around his neck to the stanchion. He called, "Who are you?"

"Henry. From the bar in Baade."

Don's mouth came open in deliberate and exaggerated surprise. He wanted to be surprised; being surprised was a distraction from his thoughts. He shouted, "Why? What are you doing here?"

Just then the woman who laughed began to giggle.

The noise grew more and more loud. Other prisoners began to join in, singing, shouting, shaking chains, gabbling prayers. All Don heard of Henry's answer was the words, ". . . so it's your fault."

"How?"

The bedlam abated a little. The woman who had laughed was sobbing. Henry called, loud and bitter, "Because you found the doll. How was I to know it was that important? I reported it as soon as the tourist with the miragems came back in the bar and told us. It's unfair. How was I to know my eye-beam wasn't focused right?"

Henry, then, had been the local spy and agent for the SSP. An inefficient agent, one who, in punishment for inefficiency, had been picked up and was now on his way to Phlegethon.

Henry began to curse Haig. In a loud, unvarying voice he told all the things he would like to do to Haig himself, all the things he hoped would happen to him on Phlegethon. There was a pause. Then, in a slightly different voice, Henry said, "Have you still got the doll?"

Don could see no reason for not answering. "Yes."

"You won't have her long," Henry shouted spitefully. He laughed. After that he said no more to Haig.

But his words had wakened a great longing in Don. He wanted to see the doll, his doll. She was still in his pocket. He wanted to see her weep.

He couldn't weep for Phyllis himself. Too much had happened, and she had meant too much to him, for such an easy release. But if he could see the doll weeping, see the little tears flowing down the cheeks of his golden wonder, it would be as if Phyllis were being wept for. He would feel that someone, somewhere, knew about the light, bright life and its arbitrary ending, and was sorry. Marking the sparrow's fall? It was foolish. But—yes.

He strained against his chains and tried to reach his

pocket. It was impossible. He had been chained with his hands high in front of him, with just enough slack that he could reach his mouth to feed himself. Vulcan's doll was as much out of his reach as if she had been left behind on Fyon. But now that he was thinking of the doll again, he could feel her, faintly warm, in his pocket. There was a remote comfort in it.

The guard came into the stinking hold eight times with food before the ship began to decelerate. The deceleration was hard on the prisoners, who had no protection against it except that offered by their chains. By the time the ship finally landed on Phlegethon, they were all sick and besmeared with their own filth.

The hold was opened wide. One by one the prisoners were unchained, passed through a great jet of water, and led up into the light. At the top of the ramp a guard with a stun gun checked off names against an invoice in his hand.

He read the name and number, another guard checked him, and then the first guard would give the seemingly invariable verdict: Outside. "Outside" must mean out on to the radioactive surface of Phlegethon, Don thought.

Outside . . . outside . . . outside . . . outside. Then Don, dripping and blinking weakly in the unaccustomed light, was brought up. The guard consulted his list.

"Haig, Don. P 4390 Ter. Out—wait a minute. No, this fellow goes upstairs. All the way. To Mulciber."

"He certainly doesn't look it," the guard who was waiting with the prod belt said.

"I know, but that's what's on the list. Look here, you'd better put him in a cell and make him clean himself. He still stinks. And there's no telling how long Mulciber will wait before seeing him."

Don was led along a narrow angling corridor. He stumbled from weakness, and he still dripped. Behind him he

could hear the guard with the invoice saying monotonously, "Outside . . . outside."

They left the ship, went down a ramp, and entered a covered passage. Don caught a short glimpse of a clouded, smoky sky. Then they were in another corridor, one with rough concrete walls.

They stopped before a door with closely set bars. The guard unlocked it and fiddled with some sort of watch disk. The door swung open. The guard gave Don a push that sent him staggering into the cell.

"Wash yourself, fellow," he said through the bars. "Do a nice, thorough job. If you don't, we might have to correct you a bit."

Left alone, Don looked around him. The cell was tiny. with a bunk suspended from one side. A floor sink against the other wall must be where the guard had meant for him to wash himself.

Don undressed. He bathed thoroughly and rinsed out his filthy clothes. When he was quite clean, not before, he looked at Vulcan's doll.

She was still weeping. The little, perfect tears were still flowing down the little face. Was she weeping for Phyllis? No, not really. But for an instant, a second, it seemed to him that he saw a new tenderness in the little face.

The reality of the impression didn't matter. His heart that had been so overburdened and wild with grief was eased a little. Still naked, holding Vulcan's weeping doll in his hand, he lay down on the bunk and slept.

When he woke, something was different. He lay on the hard bunk and looked around the cell, trying to realize what it was. The cell had not changed; neither had the doll; and yet something was different. The difference, the change, was in himself.

He got up and put on his half-dry clothing. He sat down

on the bunk again. The change was in how he felt about Phyllis's death.

Phyllis was dead. For all his rebellion, his fury, his bitterness, and his desperate unbelief—that was the fact, and nothing could change it. Whatever happened to him, whether he lived or died, he had lost Phyllis. Phyllis was dead.

She was dead, and the SSP had killed her. (For a moment he thought, "If I hadn't asked her to stay with me . . ." and heard himself groan in anguish. The SSP had killed her indifferently, fortuitously, as they had killed others. But now that she was dead, her death had become a link in the chain.

It was a chain, he thought, that was still forging, and neither of its ends was visible. It went back into the past, it stretched onward into the future. One of its links was a struggle, and this struggle was still before him. Don Haig—he bit his lips—Don Haig must struggle with the SSP.

He waited in the cell for perhaps half a day. Nobody came to feed him, but he could get all the water he wanted from the tap in the cell. At last two guards, one with a prod-bolt, appeared. They opened the door of his cell.

"He's to have hand fetters," the senior officer said. He sniffed at Don. "He's cleaned himself, I see. These cerebrotonic types usually do. Still, we might . . . Where's he going?"

"Topside, I think," said the other. He consulted a memorandum. "Yes, all the way, Mulciber."

"Oh. Then of course we can't. Too bad. Put the cuffs of him, Bates." Don's wrists were chained together with a heavy chain. "Come along, you," the officer said to him.

They went out into the corridor. For half a city block they walked along it; then they entered a reversed-grav shaft and went floating up.

The guard with the prod-bolt landed them at the ninth level. Don saw, through a window iris which had been left open, that it had grown dark outside. The smoky sky had turned a charcoal black. At the horizon it was striped by ascending lines of lurid red. Phlegethon's land masses, Don had heard, were ringed with volcanos that smoked continually.

Twice more Don and his guards entered reversed-grav shafts and ascended. He thought, from the reduced pressure in his eardrums, that they must have gone quite high. Then they halted before a door which had sentinels on either side.

"Detention reporting to Administration," the guard with the prod-bolt said, saluting formally. "I am conveying a prisoner, Haig, Don, P 4390 Ter, to you for interrogation. Please sign." He held out a slip to the senior guard on the other side of the door.

"Administration taking possession of prisoner Haig, Don, P 4390 Ter," the administration man answered. He wrote his name on the requisition and added his thumb print. "Where's he for?"

"All the way up. M."

"Oh. Come along, Haig." A guard fell in on either side of Don. Once more they advanced along corridors.

His new custodians, Don saw, were men of a different stamp from those in Detention. The easy cruelty of the other men's faces had been replaced by a hawklike watchfulness. All emotion was under control, even sadism. These men would kill or punish only when reason or self-interest motivated them.

The corridors, the ascents seemed interminable. More than once Don stumbled with fatigue. The metal between his hands was oppressively heavy. They passed room after room filled with softly clicking tabulators. Once they went by a huge arched hall which contained nothing but cy-

bernatic installations. Administration personnel—always armed, conspicuous in their exactly tailored dark blue uniforms—seemed no larger than ants as they moved among the machines tending them.

The corridors began to grow more luxurious. The hard-floor surface was replaced by a thick, mossy texture which Don, in his fatigue, found walking on difficult. The hard overhead lighting gave way to wall brackets with a soft rosy glow. At last Don and his guards stopped before a perfectly plain door of dark, polished wood. There were two guards on either side of it.

“Presenting Haig, Don, P 4390 Ter,” one of Don’s custodians said, saluting respectfully. “He’s to see the chief.”

“Oh. Yes.” The polished door slid back. “Take him on in.”

Don, with an Administration man on either side of him, walked into a very large room. One whole side of the room, from floor to ceiling, was glass. A desk and two chairs were dwarfed in it.

A man came around the desk toward them. Don’s two guards saluted him reverentially. “The prisoner, sir,” one of them said in a subdued voice.

This was Mulciber, the dreaded, powerful head of the SSP. Don looked at him with curiosity, and then with wild unbelief. He had seen Mulciber before. He recognized him.

Mulciber was Bendel, the man who had come to Fyon with the robot circus. Don could not be mistaken in the sagging, large-framed body, the pitted face, the light eyes. Mulciber—Mulciber was the man with hair on his tongue.

13: *Mulciber*

THE GUARDS had withdrawn to a discreet distance. “How do you do, Mr. Haig?” Mulciber said in Bendel’s muffled

voice. Don perceived, almost with astonishment, how much charm the man had.

"I see you have recognized me. Yes, I am Bendel, whom you saw with the circus on Fyon. I do not usually mingle myself so personally in the affairs of our organization, but the fact is I had a great curiosity to see what sort of cat's-paw my old antagonist had selected. Perhaps you do not realize it, Mr. Haig, but in fact you have been nothing but a cat's-paw from the day you found the doll on the beach."

Don said nothing. Mulciber indicated one of the chairs. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Haig? We might as well discuss your coming to Phlegethon at our ease."

Don was faint from hunger, but it seemed to him that he could not afford to surrender the slight moral advantage standing up would give him. "No, thank you," he said.

"I'll have to put you in a foot lock, then." Mulciber pressed a switch on his desk. Don felt an invisible weight close on his ankles. "That will be enough, I think," Mulciber said.

The head of the SSP seated himself in one of the chairs. For a moment he looked at Don in silence. Then he said, "I have had you brought here so I might ask you to give me the doll."

Here it was again—the same simplicity Mulciber, in his role of Bendel, had displayed. "Why do you want her?" Don asked.

"Because she is dangerous, even without the wings I made for her."

"Dangerous?" Don managed a laugh. "Ever since I found her, someone has been telling me she is dangerous. How? Why?"

"She is dangerous because she is a focus for a certain kind of mental force." Mulciber coughed and cleared his throat.

“Do you remember the story I told you when we met on Fyon?” he asked slowly. “The fact is, much of that story was true. It is true, for example, that there is a corrosive kind of life in the doll; I wonder that you have been in contact with her without harm for so long. And it is also true that our solar system, in its 200,000,000-year circuit around the galaxy, has reached a point in space where injurious radiations abound. But these radiations are dangerous, not to one or two individuals, but to the future of all human life.

“They are emitted, apparently, by the same suns that send out radio impulses. They are radiations which have a profound effect on human germ cells in the meiotic stage. Twenty years ago, when we started Program X, we thought we were on the trail of something. Now we are sure of it. Program X had been much criticized, I know.” For a moment Mulciber’s face changed, and Don saw the eagle strength in it. “Sometimes we have had to behave arbitrarily and cruelly. But we have been acting, throughout, to save mankind from a great if unrecognized danger: the danger of uncontrolled evolutionary change.”

Don made a gesture. “You guessed it?” Mulciber asked. Once more he was smiling. “But I do not think, Mr. Haig, you can have any idea how great the peril is.”

“Peril? No, I don’t suppose I do. I don’t see why change should be perilous.”

Mulciber sighed, and then smiled. “At least half of mankind,” he observed, “still makes an unconscious equation in its thinking, and assumes that change—any sort of change—is identical with progress. It is not so; and any student of the course of evolutionary history on Terra could tell you of change which has been regressive, change which has led to an ultimately fatal specialization, change which has been overadaptation to an ecological niche which no longer existed, or did not yet exist. It you could see

some of the mutants—the abortive wings, flaccid, tumorlike lumps—the tentacles growing out of the wrists, boneless and rubbery—or even the extra, misplaced eyes . . .

“Let me ask you one question, Mr. Haig. In your opinion, has mankind fully realized, as yet, the possibilities within its *present* stage of evolutionary development?”

Don thought of the baffled, baffling world in which he found himself. “No, I don’t think so,” he answered. “We don’t use all we have.”

Mulciber seemed pleased with the answer. “You are intelligent,” he said. “How could we have realized our possibilities? They have not been in existence long enough. We have not had time.

“Now, about the doll. Even if she had never been created, some mutation would undoubtedly take place. There would not be so much of it that it could not be controlled. But as long as the doll, even without her wings—”

“What did you mean by ‘the wings I made for her?’” Don interrupted him.

“What I said.” Mulciber was unruffled. “She was designed to have wings. I made the wings she was designed to wear.

“As long as the doll exists, there is the certainty that an enormous amount of reradiation from the generalized human stock will occur. Her mental force, added to the impingement of purely physical energies, will cause the most radical mutation to take place. Its speed will be catastrophic. Its final goal no man can foresee. Humanity will have gone forward into the dark.

“I don’t pretend that everything the SSP has done has been well done, but we have set ourselves against that. With all its imperfections and faults, mankind has achieved great things in the past. If there is time enough, its future will hold yet greater things. We want those achievements

to be made. We don't want mankind to plunge over the cliff into the dark."

He halted. He said, "Mr. Haig, will you give me the doll?"

Don could not speak. His whole mental orientation was gone. If Mulciber was telling the truth . . . if the SSP, for all its excesses, was basically benevolent . . . then . . . then . . . (A remnant of caution said, "What did you expect him to tell you—that he is the head of an organization of power addicts, sadists, murderers?")

And it could be true. Everything that had happened to him could be explained—couldn't it?—in Mulciber's terms. Once Mulciber's premise was granted—that the evolutionary changes waiting humanity were destructive and dangerous—everything fell into place. The SSP, on Mulciber's own account, had been arbitrary and cruel sometimes, but those excesses could be justified. Omelets necessarily involve the breaking of eggs.

Don tried to remember facts, to weigh, analyze, compare. The story Kunitz had told him—Francine—Phyllis—his own experience. It was no use. His mind was whirling. It was like trying to catch minnows barehanded. His world was upside down. Or was he standing on his head?

In the end, he gave up the attempt and stood silent. The thought of Phyllis came into his mind unbidden, of Phyllis as he had last seen her in the twilight, sinking down through the water that was red with her own blood. Phyllis had said, "They mustn't have the doll."

He understood suddenly that this was the struggle he had foreseen. This was the linking moment. Don said, "No. I won't give you the doll."

Mulciber was unperturbed. "Don't be hasty, Mr. Haig," he said. "This matter is much too important for you to decide quickly." He went over to the windowed side of the room and stood looking out at the sky, his hands clasped

behind him. Without turning, he said, "I may tell you, Mr. Haig, that I believe we can take the doll from you in the event of your refusal. I am not quite sure. In any case, I should prefer to have your consent. Well?"

He turned from the window. "I have one more argument, Mr. Haig," he said slowly. "It can be compressed into one word, a word which has grown unfamiliar. War."

"War?" Don echoed. The word had made no impression. "I don't understand."

"The word has almost dropped from our vocabularies," Mulciber observed. Once more he smiled. "For three hundred years there has been no war. And yet it was once one of the most dreaded words.

"It is the fashion among you intellectuals, you readers, to sneer at the direct suggestion broadcasts, the synthetic or arranged childhoods, all the paraphernalia of the new psychology. You overlook the role all this has played in freeing us from the scourge of scourges. For three hundred years, there has been no war.

"In those three hundred years of peace, mankind that once was divided into a dozen rivulets has flowed into a mighty torrent. In our unity, we have colonized the planets. We have sent an expedition to Proxima. We may soon have the deep space drive.

"Yet that work can be undone. It was hard enough for us to keep the peace when we knew that all men were brothers. Even in our biological unity, it was hard. What will become of us when *Homo alatus* wars with *Homo intelligens*, and *Homo thoraceus*, tough-armored, with stout, stubby legs, battles with both? There will be war then, the old scourge more horrible. There will be nothing but, never anything but, war.

"In the end, the great, torrential river of human unity will have vanished. There will be a hundred jarring cur-

rents. They will lose themselves in swamps, be swallowed in sand or in cracked, stinking mud.

"Mr. Haig. Once more I ask you. Give me the doll."

This time Don answered without hesitation, almost without thought. "You say you care for humanity. You're lying. There's nothing in you but hatred for it. You're full of hate and jealousy. No. I won't give you the doll."

Mulciber bowed his head in silence. Don thought his pitted skin had turned white. He went to his desk and said a few low words into a communication grill

"You don't need to look so apprehensive, Haig," he said when he had finished with the message. He looked at Don and smiled mockingly. His eyes were bright. "We shan't kill you to take the doll away from you. The fact is, the tie between you and it has grown so strong by now that I have no idea what the result of severing it forcibly would be. And we shan't coerce or correct you, either, at least at present. A consent obtained by force would not destroy the field or weaken the tie."

There was a wait. Mulciber, at his desk, was printing something with isotype blocks. Don stood with sagging shoulders, looking at the length of chain between his hands.

He would resist, of course. (For a moment he thought hysterically: Who is Don Haig? What is he? What has he got to resist with?) He would resist the attempt to take Vulcan's doll from him. What would happen if the resistance succeeded—or failed—no, he wasn't going to think about that.

A buzzer sounded. Mulciber, without raising his head, pressed a stud. The outer door of the office opened. Two men came in.

They were dressed in the gray smocks of laboratory technicians. Behind them they were pulling an apparatus—Don had no idea what its proper name might be—mounted on runners like a sled.

They came over the carpet noiselessly and stopped in front of Mulciber. Their faces were as rigid as masks, and as impersonal. Yet it seemed to Haig that a spark of something—independence, perhaps—lurked in them. It was a quality he had seen in no other SSP face.

Mulciber, hardly looking up, said in his muffled voice, "You know what you are supposed to do. I trust you will succeed in it."

"Yes, sir." The words seemed to come out with a slight jerk. The technician who was speaking hesitated. "Have you got a foot lock on him, sir." Again the words of deference had been spoken with a faint reluctance: Was it possible that the scientists within the SSP, for all their subservience to the organization's aims, had managed to retain some autonomy?

"Yes, he's in partial stasis," Mulciber answered.

"Please remove it. It would interfere with our meter readings."

Mulciber motioned to the blue-suited guards to come nearer. He touched a switch. Don felt the weight lift from around his feet.

One of the technicians stooped and adjusted a loop of wire around Don's right ankle. The other was busy putting a similar loop around his opposite upper arm, just above the red birthmark. They tightened clips and checked connections. Then they went back to their machine.

The taller technician said, "Seventy-six." He spoke in a low voice.

"Check. To three."

"And three."

The murmured responses continued. Don waited in anguished silence. His whole being was concentrated on the doll in his pocket. But he felt nothing at all.

At last the shorter technician frowned. "We're not getting it," he observed. He drew a note pad from the pocket and

consulted it. At last he said, "Let's try the upper sequence, what do you say?"

"Sure. You never can tell."

Once more there came the murmur of reading and response. Mulciber had deserted his paper work and was watching silently. Suddenly Don felt an almost unbearable wrench.

He did not know what had happened. It was as if a part of his body, hitherto invisible and unrecognized, was being violently subtracted from him. What was it? Had he an invisible arm, a hand he didn't know about? He felt a horrified astonishment.

At the same time, the attack was more than physical. Don—Don Haig—his memories, his feelings, his personality, all that he meant when he said "I"—was under assault. Something vital, something whose loss would be irreparable, was being taken from him.

He had not been able to repress a groan. Now the technicians looked at each other and nodded. "Getting it," the taller man said softly. "Let's run through those combinations again."

Don was panting. He had broken into a sweat. He licked his lips. Once more there came the wrench. It was very bad.

He was tempted for a moment to stop resisting. He wanted to co-operate with the technicians, to help them sever the agonizing, straining tie. But he wouldn't, couldn't, wouldn't. He wouldn't do it. He mustn't let them have the doll.

The taller man was bending over, reading a dial. "Sixty-eight," he said. He made a motion with his fingers. "Let's have a lot more power."

This time the wrench was quite unbearable. Don knew that he would begin to shriek in a moment. He had never thought he could resist so much.

"Start dissipating," the short man said. "Two plus."

"Two *minus*. Right."

There was a puff of light like a round rainbow from the machine. "Harmless," the short man said absently to Mulciber. "Doesn't mean anything. Now!"

There was a final, imperious wrench, a wrench that appeared to slide off into nothingness and light. Don felt a great wind of force beside him. It seemed to flatten him. He staggered back from it.

"Hold him up," Mulciber said in his muffled voice to one of the guards.

The tall technician turned a switch. The machine stopped its faint humming. The room was perfectly still.

The technician took a glove with a long cuff from his smock. He drew it on over his hand. He glanced at a dial. Then, with an air of residual caution, he approached Don.

The guards had moved in to hold Haig by either shoulder. The restraint was hardly necessary: Haig was almost unconscious. The technicians slipped his hand into Don's pocket. And nothing happened. Nothing at all.

Mulciber had risen from his desk and was standing erect. There was no expression on his face, but his eyes seemed to burn. The technician moved over the carpet toward him. He reached across the desk and presented the doll to Mulciber with a slight bow.

Mulciber accepted the little weeping image in silence. The other technician had been busy taking the wire loops from Don's ankle and arm. They left the room, pulling the machine on runners after them.

Mulciber was balancing the doll on the palm of his hand. At last he said, "The tie is severed, Mr. Haig." Dimly, Don perceived how much Mulciber hated him. "And the doll—the doll is mine."

14. *The Shadow on the Wall*

MULCIBER was talking to the doll. Don could hear his voice, a loving, muted murmur, remotely. It seemed to reach him through a whitish drizzle of semi-consciousness. Mulciber was saying, "Beautiful . . . beautiful . . ." over and over again.

Don made a great effort and turned his head. The big room was empty except for him and Mulciber. The guards were gone, though he had no recollection of Mulciber's dismissing them. He and Don were alone.

The chains between Don's wrists must have made a faint noise; Mulciber raised his head and looked at him. The unstable brilliance of his eyes grew fixed. "I see you've come back to yourself, Haig," he said. "I had them leave you here because . . . I wanted you to see. . . ."

His voice trailed away. He had forgotten Don even while he was addressing him. Now his eyes returned to the doll. Once more he began speaking to her in the intimate, tender lover's voice.

"Little beauty, little darling, little wonder. You're mine now. Beautiful, and mine. By the best of rights, I think. Haven't I earned you? Oh, yes."

"And I have another right to you. I helped make you. Have you forgotten? Don't be forgetful, little beauty. Part of your beauty you owe to these hands." He held out shaking fingers in front of him.

"Even then you were dangerous, weren't you? Dangerous even in the making." Mulciber laughed softly and indulgently. "I owe the stigmata that will always mark me to you. There's an eating, corrosive life in my darling. It's to you I owe my body, my tongue, my hands."

Don listened. There was nothing else he could do. His

feet had been placed back in partial stasis, and there were the chains on his hands. For the moment he felt not so much hate and bitterness as incredulity. The doll was his, not Mulciber's. Even after the violence of the severing of the tie between them, he could not believe that he was not still linked to her. And yet Mulciber stood there holding her. And nothing happened. She was Mulciber's. Don had failed. Phyllis was dead. Mulciber had the doll. Don had failed in everything.

"Little wonder, little darling, little beauty. If you knew how much you have cost me! Perhaps that's why you weep."

His tone roughened and grew more deep. "Oh, yes. Darling, I had to walk through blood to get you. Do you know how many people have died so that I could stand here on top of the Mountain, holding you between my fingers? Blood enough, blood enough. And now you, you little weeping wonder—why, you too have got to die."

How do you kill a doll? Don wondered. A doll alive with the strange half-life Vulcan was master of? But Mulciber no doubt could find a way, as he had found a way to sever the tie between Don and the doll.

"Oh, yes. You'll have to go," Mulciber continued. "The wings"—his hand moved toward his breast pocket—"I will keep. For that you must blame the vanity of the artificer. I'm proud of them. And I believe they're harmless. But you'll have to die."

His voice had lost the loverlike note and become almost casual. It seemed to hold a faint relish. He couldn't, Don thought, be greatly concerned for long about killing anything, even Vulcan's doll. As the head of the SSP, he had grown too used to disposing casually of life. That was how Phyllis had died. Casually.

So many others, too, but they didn't matter. It was Phyllis Don cared about. Phyllis. At the name, something blazed up in him.

All that had happened—his loss, his misery, his defeat—seemed to cohere, to focus into a deadly, uncontrollable hate. It burned through his body like fire, the stronger because he knew its impotence. He had never felt anything in his life like this surge of hatred. He was blinded by it.

And in that same moment Vulcan's doll flared up with a sudden, blinding, incandescent light.

Mulciber gave a cry. He dropped the doll. He staggered back from it, his hands over his eyes.

Before he acted, Don knew his own next action. It was something slaves and the helpless have always known. He raised his manacled hands high above him. With all his strength he brought the length of heavy, flexible metal down on Mulciber's head.

Mulciber fell without a cry. The chain had gone almost through his skull. He was dead before he had time to groan.

The room, now that he had stopped talking, was extremely quiet. Don could hear the beating of his own heart. He looked at the mess on the chain between his handcuffs, and at the greater mess on the floor. There were even pieces of hair in it. The sight made him feel a compulsive wish to laugh. He dared not yield to it. He knew that once he started he would never be able to stop.

Mulciber had dropped the doll close enough that Don, despite the foot lock, could reach her. He bent over and picked her up. She was unhurt.

She was still weeping, still beautiful. Don looked at her without emotion. He had experienced too much in the last minutes to have anything left for her. He put her carefully away in his pocket. He bent over again and began to search Mulciber's body for the wings.

They were not in the breast pocket where he had expected

to find them. He located them at last in a transparent packet glued flat with siskin tape to Mulciber's lean chest.

They were faintly pinkish, each tiny feather perfect and distinct. In the bright light from the ceiling they seemed to be stirring a little, moving with Vulcan's odd half-life. They were, Don supposed, almost as wonderful as the doll itself.

He put the wings in his other pocket. And now, what was there left for him to do? He had finished. There was no other possible task.

For the first time, though as from a distance, a realization of the hopelessness of his position came to him. He was alone, unarmed, helpless, in the very heart of the SSP's great hostile citadel. His hands were chained together. He could not even move his feet.

It didn't seem to matter. He was at the end of his strength; exhaustion had dazed him. When he turned his head, the room swam around him giddily. He could not grasp—he did not want to grasp—the measure of his helplessness. It was too much, too much.

He must have slept briefly, the quick sleep of profound exhaustion. What woke him was a noise outside the door.

The guards, he thought dimly, it must be the guards who are getting worried about Mulciber. They're beginning to wonder what's happened to him.

At the thought, his heart began to pound. He resented it. What was the good of fright now, at this point of utter helplessness? All they had to do was to open the door, come in, and take him. He wished he could have stayed buried in his exhausted sleep.

He looked around the room, shivering and blinking. Nothing had changed. The room was still brightly lighted from its glowing ceiling. Mulciber still lay sprawled where he had fallen after the blow. There was still the bloody mess on the floor.

And yet, wasn't there a difference? Something had been moved, was out of place. No, had been added, rather. Something . . . The noise at the door was repeated. Now Don saw what the difference was. There was a gigantic shadow on the floor.

It lay across his feet and extended halfway across the wall opposite, a jet-black, tremendous shadow. Where was it coming from? What objects in the room could be casting it?

He must be imagining it. No, it was too real for that. The blackness of the shadow seemed almost to have substance, to be tangible. And now, as he looked at it, feeling wonder mix with the first faint prickling of an emotion which he would not identify to himself, he saw what the shadow was. It was the shadow of a gigantic man with a blacksmith's hammer in his upraised hand.

There was a discreet knock at the door. The guards had decided to take a chance on angering Mulciber by knocking. They'd be coming in in a minute or so. . . . But the shadow. What could be casting it? In the empty room there was nothing which could . . . There was no such man. . . .

The knock was repeated, this time more loudly. Don scarcely noticed it. He was leaning forward, looking at the shadow anxiously. He knew now what the emotion was he had felt a moment before. It was hope.

The shadow was motionless. But Don felt that it was sinking into the floor, extending backward away from him, penetrating. And now it was extending out through the wall of the room into space. A breath seemed to touch him and withdraw. He knew what it had meant when the weight around his ankles lifted. Now he could move his feet.

The knocking at the door had grown furious. There were loud voices, shouting. The handle turned. A pause, and then a thud. A heavy impact, and another thud.

Don hesitated no longer. Vulcan's shadow on the wall before him was like an open gate. Wherever it led to, it meant escape. He walked into it.

15: *Back on the Beach*

DON SAT UP, blinking sleepily. He looked around him, and yawned. It was not long after dawn; the sky was still red, The sand was warm under him, but the air had a morning chill.

He must have been very drunk last night. He had a confused recollection of restless sleep and wild, restless, troubled dreams. What had he been drinking? Who on Fyon would have given him that much to drink? It was a wonder he wasn't sick.

He got to his feet and tried to stretch. Something was wrong; he couldn't move freely. His hands—how strange. There was a chain between his hands.

For a moment he stood quite still, a little hunched over, thinking. Yes, he remembered. His mind raced over all that had happened, from the time he had found the doll half buried in the pink sand of the beach to when he had killed Mulciber. That had been real, too, as real as anything; the blood and grayish clots on his chain bore eloquent witness to the death. And after that . . .

He had killed Mulciber; he had been alone and helpless in the heart of the SSP's citadel. He had walked into Vulcan's tremendous shadow. And now he was back on the beach at Fyon again.

What had happened in between? He shook his head, baffled. All that he had was an impression of swirling blackness. But in that blackness he felt that much time had passed.

He sat down on the sand again and got the doll from

his pocket. She was as beautiful as ever. He looked at her a little sadly. Yes, she was beautiful still, but his no longer, not his in the old way. He felt alienated from her. Mulciber's forcible severing of the tie between them had changed things—changed him, at least. She was Vulcan's doll now.

But there was one thing he must do for her. It was something no other person had ever done—could, perhaps, have been able to do. Was the service an honor, a privilege? He did not know. But it had been reserved for Don Haig.

He took the doll in his left hand. With his right—his movements were a little awkward, because of the chain between his hands—he got out the packet he had taken from Mulciber. He opened it.

For a moment he sat marveling at the workmanship of the wings. If Mulciber had told the truth when he said he made them, he must have been very nearly the equal in craftsmanship of the Vulcan who had made the doll. Then, moving carefully and delicately, Don picked up the wings. He held his breath so his hand might be steady. He fitted the wings on the roughened places on the back of the doll.

They adhered. Don, looking at her closely, could see no line of division, no sign that the wings had not always been there.

It was over. He had finished. The sky was the same, the water. Only the doll had changed. Or—now—but—

For a moment Don felt an oppressive and horrible sense of strain and tension. It was easier for him than for the others, because he was at the center. There were also other reasons why he should feel it less. Then like an earthquake shock the sense of some vast and present change began to spread outward. It was like ripples from a stone cast in a pool of molten glass.

It touched all Fyon, and Payne, who was in the kitchen ladling a mess of dakdak pods onto a platter, stopped in

mid-motion. He gulped and swallowed. He couldn't get any air; his heart felt funny. He had the wild impression that it had begun to beat on the other side.

It reached earth, and the woman who had been looking with rapt concentration into her little "communion" mirror shuddered and then began laughing. She couldn't help it—the idea of the mirror was so ludicrous. She picked up the mirror and tossed it into the disposer. Still laughing, she watched it as it grew thinner and dissolved into a silvery mist. She pressed her hands to her temples lightly. The mirror? She smiled. Oh, she could do better than that.

It reached Venus, and the girl who was at breakfast with her husband said to him casually, "It's going to be a girl." She had just become pregnant. "And—do you know, Hal?—she's going to be quite a lot different from either of us."

It impinged on Mars, and Chou-Ettadra told his lab assistant to prepare the experiment with the lizards again, varying the temperature a little. "For," he said thoughtfully, "I think that this time we shall get some highly interesting results."

The impulse spread on out, a flexible knife edge of change and shock, subtle and thin and quick. And everywhere human beings, each in his degree, some trivially, some profoundly, responded to it. The impulse spread on out.

At the center, the instant of impact had been a short one. Don, looking at the doll, saw, as he had known he would, that she had ceased to weep. The sadness and compassion had passed from her face like a withdrawing shadow, and now it wore a look of inexpressible triumph and delight.

For a moment she was quiet, poised on his fingers. For a moment he held Victory herself, helmed with power and radiant, on his fingers. Then she beat her wings together twice, as if in rapture at her completion. She seemed to laugh with delight. Don watched her breathlessly, expecting

he did not know what new miracle. Her outlines blurred and wavered. Then she disappeared.

She was gone, she had left him. He turned his head from side to side, unbelieving. The sands were vacant. Everything was empty. She was nowhere.

He wanted to wail aloud in his confusion and his misery. But when he looked down, he saw that the fetters had fallen from his hands.

16: *The Polar Force*

AFTER THAT, Don stayed on the beach. When he was thirsty, walked inland to the little spring with the agate pebbles and drank sweet water. He was not hungry; he felt no need for food all the time he was on the beach. Sometimes he would walk into the surf and clean himself.

He sat in the sand and watched the sun coming up and the sun setting. It went by before his eyes and meant nothing. He had lost much emotional blood.

He did not suffer; he was too remote from himself to be capable of suffering. But when the doll had finally left him, he had lost the effective motor force of his life. There was a hole where his will had been.

Early in his stay on the beach, he tried to rouse himself. The SSP, he felt certain, would make an attempt to recapture him, and Fyon would surely be the place where they would look first. But time passed and he did nothing. In the end, he made a hole in the sand and buried the fetters in it. The effort exhausted him, and after it he withdrew even more deeply from himself.

Nobody bothered him. Once a party of tourists, talking and laughing, came down to the beach. They looked at him obliquely and nervously, and rather soon they went away. In the end it was Payne, out of all the people in Baade who knew him, who came to talk to him.

He came walking over the pink sand toward him, his heavy shoes squelching a little. He was wearing his white restaurant apron. "Hello, Don," he said. He sat down beside him and cleared his throat. "The tourists said there was a man on the beach. I thought it might be you."

Don made no answer. Payne went on, "We all thought the SSP had picked you up. That can't have been right, though, because you're still on Fyon. Where have you been, anyway? The SSP never lets anybody go."

Payne stopped talking and looked at Haig closely. He gave a nervous laugh. "See here, Don, what's the matter with you?"

". . . I'm tired."

"Yes, but . . . Hell, Don, you can't just stay here on the beach." His tone coaxed and argued. "There was some point in living like that when you were drinking all the time. I don't say I approved of it, of course. But it made a sort of sense. Now you're just sitting here in the sand and—hell, Haig, I know you're not drinking. What's the sense in it?"

Don hunched his shoulders. Payne said, "Did you know the SSP did pick up Henry? Came in the bar one day at noon and got him. And Phyllis, that girl that worked at the curio counter—she's disappeared. Everybody thinks there must have been some funny stuff going on in the bar."

Even that name meant nothing. Don felt no emotion. Payne was looking at him anxiously. "Why don't you come back to Baade and work for me?" he asked after a pause. "It wasn't much of a job, but you got by. Better than living in the sand by yourself. And I get mighty tired of pitting dakdak pods."

"No."

"Hell, don't just say 'no.' If you're sick, we'll send you to the hospital. You know, Don, Baade—Fyon—is changing. Somehow." Payne's face became shy and a little strange.

"Well, I guess we're all . . . changing. You ought to come back. Are you sick? What's the matter with you?"

Don made an exhausting effort. "I'm all right," he answered. "It's just that I'm . . . bankrupt. Please go away."

Payne got to his feet. He did not seem angry or even offended, only a little surprised. "I guess I know what you mean," he said. "I guess it could affect a person like that." He walked a few steps away and then turned.

"I'm sorry, Don," he said. "Maybe you'll get over it." Don was left alone on the beach.

Nobody came after that, not even tourists. Sometimes Don wondered whether he had not died. The fantasy might have pleased him, except that he did not really believe in it. He knew he was still alive.

Days went by, days in which time was as smooth as velvet, as smooth as cream, as smooth as glass. The wind blew softly against his face and he sat on the beach in the sand and was nobody. But it came to an end at last.

That morning he woke feeling a little less empty than he had been. He had dreamed a little in the night, he thought. He yawned and stretched, sniffing at the air. The action struck him as somehow ridiculous, and he laughed. It was the first emotion he had displayed since he had realized that the doll was really gone.

He was serious again in a moment. It was, as he realized immediately, no laughing matter. Something was waking up in him, and he didn't want it to waken. He didn't want to return to feeling again, to personal experience. He dreaded it as one dreads the painful return of circulation to a numbed limb. All day he sat on the beach and fought the new thing in him. But by nightfall he was aware of something pulling him.

It was not an emotion; he thought he could have resisted an emotion more easily. This was a pull, neither quite physical nor quite psychic, on something in his

head. It was a pull toward a particular point. He could look out across the sea, into the sky turning dark after the burning sunset, and almost name the point on the horizon he thought it was coming from.

It grew dark. He began to walk up and down the beach restlessly. The sand went sss sss sss against his feet. With every hour the longing grew more intense. When the night was half over he started into Baade to ask Payne to help him, but after a few steps he turned back. He knew it would be useless.

The stars moved slowly along the sky toward dawn. He could not sleep. He was glad when morning came at last.

As soon as it was light enough for him to see, he went along the beach to the left till he came to the little jetty that served Baade's pleasure craft. Four or five boats were tied up along it, bobbing up and down gently in the early morning swell.

He decided on the glossy red cabin cruiser the guests of the hotel had very occasionally used. There were patches of discoloration on its corrosion-resistant metal. For a moment he stood hesitating beside it. He didn't want to go. But he could no more resist the pull on him than a compass needle can refuse to turn to the north.

He untied the painter and dropped down into the boat. His joints felt creaky and disused. He looked at the fuel gauge and found it read three-quarters full. He kicked the motor over, wondering whether it would start. It made a lot of noise, and he hoped nobody in Baade would hear him. But it was still very early, and the little town was asleep.

He sent the cruiser away from the jetty in a long curving furrow of white foam. He headed it toward the point on the horizon from which the force was coming that drew him so irresistibly.

17: *Vulcan Calls Them Home*

DON SAILED for a day and a night before he came to the island. It was nearly on the other side of Fyon from Baade, the little town. During part of the night he slept; when he woke at dawn, shivering with cold, he saw the cruiser's white wake stretching out straight behind him, kilo after kilo, as far as he could see, in the level water. He had kept course undeviatingly while he slept.

The island itself was about half a kilo across, and as round as if it had been turned out on a drawing board with compasses. It had, in fact, served as a substation for the builders during the creation of Fyon, and nobody had troubled to disguise its essentially artificial nature with trees, bushes, or indented shore line. It was a disk, a tablet, of durastone, with a few sheds in the middle where some of the planetoid's permanent machinery was.

Don moored his craft at the service wharf and scrambled up on it. During the voyage his indifference and alienation had left him, and now that he was here he felt an almost trembling eagerness to understand—to understand at last, to solve, discover, know. He was sure that the answer was here. He hurried toward the sheds.

When he got up to them, he saw that they were arranged around a clear area that must have served for unloading. In the middle of the clear area, hardly seeming to rest against the durastone, was a strange small ship.

It looked, at first glance, very much like the space needles Don was familiar with. But its fins were different, and so were its retractors. Oddest of all, it was skinned, not with the universal beryllium alloy, but with some redly gleaming coppery stuff. Its entrance hatch was open wide.

As Don stood looking at it, Kunitz came around from behind the ship's nose and spoke to him.

"Hello, Don," he said. He smiled faintly. "I have been waiting for you."

He looked almost exactly as he had when Don had last seen him. He was still wearing the faded blue trousers and the sleeveless undershirt. He seemed a little taller than Don had remembered him, and his face was at once more careworn and more dignified. For the first time Don noticed the muscles of his arms and shoulders, and his small, neat, careful craftsman's hands.

"Waiting for me?" Don echoed after a moment. "What do you mean by that?"

Kunitz did not answer the question directly. "Come inside, Don," he said, "and sit down. I imagine there are things you'll want to discuss."

He led the way into the ship. Don followed him mutely. "Sit on the bunk, Don," Kunitz said when they were inside. "It's the most comfortable."

There were the bunk, a seat, a table. The interior of the ship was marvelously neat and compact. And on the table, shining a little in the subdued light, stood the doll.

Vulcan's doll, the doll Don had had for so long, the doll that had vanished on the beach. "What is she doing here?" Don asked when he could speak. "How did you get the doll?"

"I called her back to me," Kunitz answered gravely. "I'm going home, Don. She was mine."

Kunitz was going home. Going home with the doll that he had called to him because she was his. Don recalled his old doubts about him. "You—then you're Vulcan," Don said.

"Yes."

There was a long silence. Kunitz sat quietly, his hands resting half closed on his thigh. Once he coughed. At

last Don said, "Why did you lie to me? That story about your daughter—and all the other lies. You've told me so many lies."

Kunitz inclined his head. "I'm sorry, Don. It was necessary."

"But why?"

"The story about my daughter? The story itself was quite true, though it did not happen to me. I told it, primarily, to keep you in contact with the doll while you were listening to me. I knew that in an hour or so the tie between you and it would be formed, and after that you would be unwilling—or unable—to part with her. But before that I was afraid you might trade her for a drink, give her away for a whim—anything. I had to keep you quiet while the tie had time to form."

"You warned me over and over to get rid of her," Don said.

"I know," Kunitz replied, agreeing. "I wanted you to be warned. I could not let you run so many risks without having warned you. And then"—he smiled—"I was counting on your stubbornness."

Don had turned white. "It wasn't fair," he said, controlling himself.

"I'm sorry, Don," Kunitz said for the second time.

Don got up from the bunk and walked around the cabin before he answered. The morning sunlight, coming in through the open hatch, lay on a rectangle on the floor. Don said, "Was it true what Mulciber told me, that I've been nothing but a cat's-paw in this? Did you leave the doll for me to find on the beach?"

"Yes, I left the doll on the beach," Vulcan replied thoughtfully. "But a cat's-paw? No, the word is too strong. You had to be left free to think and choose and act; I could only try to direct your actions. You were, at most, a tool."

"Vulcan's tool," Don said, his face twitching. "Tell me.

Tell me, a tool for what? It isn't very pleasant to think that the whole time I was being manipulated. What was the struggle between you and Mulciber? I want to know the difference between the truth and the lies you told."

Vulcan's face darkened, but the expression of his eyes did not change. "Yes, you have a right to know," he said equitably.

"I suppose I had better start with the doll, and how she was made. A century or two ago—no, I am not immortal, Don, but I have lived a very long time—" Don saw the shadow of an inexpressible weariness for a moment on Vulcan's face—"a century or two ago Mulciber and I worked together on the doll. The first doll, the one in the museum, was my practice piece. It was in my workshop, the shop they say is situated at the end of the galaxy. The location will do, though it is not quite accurate.

"The plan for the doll, the design, were mine. Yet Mulciber had great skill. Though the wings had been assigned to him, and I had taken the body, as being more difficult, we worked together. We helped each other with the shaping. I mean by that that the doll was a joint work, one which even I alone could scarcely duplicate.

"From his contact with the corrosive life in the doll, Mulciber got his bodily stigmaté, for instance the abnormal growth of papillae on his tongue. He also got—did he tell you?—a life span augmented far beyond that common to human beings. I had told him how the contact with my doll could be used to that end. I do not think he was grateful to me.

"He had great skill, but he grew jealous. I did not realize how consumed he was with jealousy. He envied me because, with all his skill, he could never be anything but Mulciber, while I remained Vulcan." Vulcan's voice held the assurance of one who states a self-evident fact. "Vulcan,

the master of life and half-life. So, when he thought it was safe, he stole the wings and fled.

"I hunted him. For years, on a handful of planets, I hunted him. I am not without resources, but he was crafty. The years passed. They transformed the jealousy and hate he felt toward me into a hatred of all mankind, as you perceived. Then he disappeared. And when I found him again, he had used his jealousy and hate as crutches to climb to the top of the SSP.

"I knew where he was. He was too eminent to evade me. Yet, as head of a very powerful organization, he was well protected. I had to use my doll as bait to draw him into the open, to lead him to expose himself.

"Yes, I put the doll in the sand of the beach so you would find her. If not that morning, then on another. No one ever went to that stretch of beach but you. I knew that when you had the doll you would display her. And then Mulciber must reach out for her and expose himself."

"And you say I wasn't your cat's-paw?" Don said. He laughed. The patch of sunlight on the floor had moved.

"I think not," Vulcan answered evenly. "I ran many risks. There was always the danger that you would be persuaded or, before the tie had grown so strong, intimidated into parting with the doll. The great danger, you see, was that the doll, without you, would fall into Mulciber's hands. Then he could destroy her. Oh, I had bad moments. But in the end my plan was accomplished, and the SSP captured you. Mulciber introduced his own destruction into his citadel."

Don was looking at him incredulously. "It was your plan to have the SSP capture me? Like the great horse of Troy? Then your offers of help, your—" he choked. "Do you mean that you betrayed me to the SSP when I was in the hemisphere?"

Vulcan nodded. "Yes," he answered nakedly.

"Then Phyllis—"

"I am sorry. I am truly sorry about the girl. It was no part of my plan that she should suffer. I tried to make sure that she would not be in the hemisphere. I told her to come to talk to me that night as soon as she could. But she stayed."

"You killed her," Don said. Then, after a moment, "No. I did."

"You asked her to stay?" Vulcan nodded, as if to himself. "Yes. That was . . . fate."

"How could you know that I would kill Mulciber?"

"Why, what else could you do?" Vulcan answered, as if surprised. "All he was able to do was to sever the gross tie between you and the doll. A finer, subtler tie of psychic energy remained. If his death had not come in exactly that way, it would have come in another. I was watching you, you know. It was through my shadow that you escaped."

"But now it is over. When you joined the wings to the doll, the tie between you and it was finally severed. And now that she is complete, the changes will come. My doll has helped humanity to change."

The cabin was quiet. Outside, a sea bird gave a harsh, grating cry. Don saw it through the open hatch, twisting and turning against the wind. In a sudden access of bitterness, he said, "I don't know how you dare."

"Eh?" Vulcan sounded genuinely puzzled. "Dare? What do you mean?"

"Dare to manipulate us so casually." Don choked. He went on passionately, "How are you any better than Mulciber? He hated humanity—he envied us our future and wouldn't leave us free to change. He wanted to force us to stay as we were."

"You leave us no more free than he did. You have determined our destiny for us. We aren't choosers now. We will do what you have decided that we ought to do, like

puppets. You'll pull the strings, and we'll obey you. Is all humanity to be your living dolls?"

Vulcan smiled. He said, with extreme gentleness, "It is not like that.

"Humanity will shape its own future. I am not capable, even if I dared, of directing it as you think. My doll was, in the end, nothing but a focus for psychic force. Not one human being will change otherwise than he was capable of changing, in any case, because of her. She has only liberated and wakened a sleeping force.

"And she has helped whatever was already in their bodies as a potentiality to come to conscious will. The men and women of science will point out the way. And the force that rose from body to mind will act on the body again.

"I shall not shape humanity's future. I do not even imagine it. It is so rich in possibilities and potentialities that it is, strictly speaking, unimaginable.

"Perhaps human beings will want greater vital force, and a man of the future will be as much more 'alive' than a man of today is, as a present-day human being is more alive than a lizard. Perhaps they will want a greater life span or augmented intellectual and psychic powers.

"Perhaps they will decide to develop possibilities of which we nowadays are wholly ignorant. Perhaps there will be winged human beings who will inhabit the air as fish do the water. Perhaps there will be human beings who will be able to tolerate the cold one way or another, they will imagine wings for themselves.

"Don, when you came in the ship, you were so amazed at seeing my doll that you did not really observe her. Look at her carefully." He gestured toward the table.

Don obeyed. He went to the table and picked up the doll.

Her eyes were closed and her wings were folded. She weighed less than he had remembered, and she no longer felt faintly warm to the touch. She was still beautiful, but

Don saw that the miraculous life had gone out of her. She was Vulcan's doll no longer. She was a masterpiece of art, an extremely beautiful statuette.

"Don said, 'What's happened? She's dead.'"

"No," Vulcan corrected. "She is asleep. If there is need of her, an impasse, a time at which she could help, she will wake again. Until then, humanity will shape its future for itself."

Vulcan's assurance had carried conviction. Don replied thoughtfully, "Yes. But isn't there danger from another side? The changes of which you speak—will the SSP let us make them, after all?"

"The SSP is no longer a danger," Vulcan answered. "Mulciber was a man with a genius for organization, and a man of great personal force. He left no successor. The struggle for power among his lieutenants has already begun.

"The SSP will ruin itself in dynastic contests. In the end, its force will be completely dissipated. Did you know that three prisoners escaped from Phlegethon yesterday? When such a thing as that can happen, in the SSP's own inviolable citadel, the collapse has already begun."

Don put the statuette down on the table. "One thing more," he said. "Mulciber spoke of struggles between the new species of men. Is that true? Will there be—war?"

"I do not think so," Vulcan answered. His voice had taken on a profoundly weary note. "I think humanity has learned the lesson of its unity too deeply ever to forget it. There may be cross-currents for a time in the great river. But in the end it will again flow as one great stream.

"Perhaps the new differences will only emphasize the basic unity. Perhaps humanity has warred so bitterly with itself in the past because it was ripe for change and could not make the change. I believe—I hope—that mankind will be too occupied with its limitless new horizons to have room for hate.

“What is not yet born is always dangerous. The future is a challenge. But no society can refuse to face it and survive. You cannot go back to the day before yesterday, or put back the clock.

“You said that I thought of all humanity as my puppets. I hope I have shown you that that is not true. For the rest, I have sometimes wondered . . . if Vulcan himself, even Vulcan, might be no more than some mightier Vulcan’s doll.

“Well, I have won. Mulciber has been destroyed.” For a moment the artificer’s face wore an expression of triumph. “But winning has tired me. I have lived so long; my life is measured not by years, but by centuries. You don’t know how weary . . . Now I want to sleep.

“I am going back to my workshop, the workshop they say is at the end of the galaxy. There, with my dolls around me, I shall sleep. The years will go by, and the centuries, and I shall go on sleeping. I think I shall sleep for a thousand years.”

Vulcan held out his hand. “Come with me, Don,” he said. “You are tired, you have been wounded. But even the deepest wound will heal if one sleeps long enough. Come with me and sleep.”

Don fingered his lips. He went over to the hatch and looked out. From the position of the sun, it must be almost noon. The durastone of the island was one white glare. He came back and stood in front of the table, blinking as his eyes once more grew used to the subdued light.

“No,” he said. “I don’t know what the future has for me. As you say, I’ve been hurt. I don’t feel as if there really were a future. But I don’t want to sleep. I slept enough when I was on the beach, before you called me. I think your long sleep would be like that. Neither dead nor alive, half numb for centuries—how would that help me? I don’t want that.”

Vulcan got up from his chair and went over to where the younger man was standing. He laid one hand very gently on his arm. "Don," he said, "I hoped I could spare you." His voice was full of pity. "Don't you understand yet? Don—you are one of my dolls."

For a moment the words rang in Haig's ears and had no meaning. Then he turned a white face on the artificer. "No," he said.

"Yes," Vulcan answered gently. "One of my dolls."

"A robot?" Don Haig tried to laugh, but his lips were shaking pitifully. "It can't be true. Of course I'm a man.

"I eat, I drink, I go to the latrine. I've had women"—for a moment he thought of Phyllis—"and given them pleasure. How else can I prove I'm a man? You're lying. This is another of your lies."

"You are well made," Vulcan conceded. "Very far indeed from being a robot. But you spoke of women. Tell me, did you ever have a child?"

"No. But of course we never tried for that."

"It would have made no difference if you had," Vulcan said evenly. "My dolls are sterile, you see."

"I'm not—it isn't true."

"Oh, yes. I can prove it, Don."

There was a silence. Then Vulcan said, "Why do you think you cannot remember back beyond your fourteenth year? It is because you were that age, physically, when I made you, and I was unable to provide you with a synthetic memory.

"You spoke of a dim memory of a big room. That was my workshop, where you first saw the light. It covers half a planetoid.

"How do you think you were able to keep the doll so closely with you for so long? Ordinary human flesh would have been rotting in half the time. But your flesh is not

quite like that of mankind, and I had made you so that you could without damage keep the doll."

"You made me so I could get the doll for you?" Haig asked tonelessly.

"Yes. Perhaps you wouldn't consider the feelings of alienation and difference that have plagued you since you were made as any sort of proof. Human beings do suffer the same things, though not so painfully. Or that it would have been impossible for a tie to be formed between an ordinary human being and the doll, with her half-life, or that I couldn't have called an ordinary human being to my ship here on the island, as I did you. But there is one last item of proof. Look at your left arm."

Don half raised his elbow, and then dropped it. "It's a birthmark. It doesn't mean anything. I've always had it."

"It is not a birthmark," Vulcan contradicted gently. "It is my signature. It is Vulcan's sign.

"Don, now you know. Come back to my workshop, to the place where I made you. I and my creations—we shall both sleep." Vulcan's voice held soft persuasion. "Come with me and sleep until your wounds are healed and you forget."

Incredulity, and hope, had died in Don when Vulcan had mentioned the birthmark. He held his hands out in front of him and turned them over and over, looking at them impersonally, trying to see where their artificiality lay. . . . Oh, it was true. A V is nothing but a lambda upside down.

At last he raised his eyes to Vulcan's face. The craftsman had not moved. On his lips there was a faint, faint smile.

"'Old father, old artificier—'" Don said. His voice broke.

"You read that somewhere," Vulcan observed gently. "You were always fond of reading, weren't you, Don?"

Once more Don said, "old father . . ." and faltered. Then he continued in a stronger voice, "You offered me a

long sleep. But what is sleep to me? If I slept for a thousand years, I should still not be human. I have no future. I am one of your dolls.

"Give me what I would rather have."

"And that is—?"

"You know," Don answered almost casually. "Death."

Vulcan inclined his head for a moment. He let out his breath in a long sigh. He said, "Yes."

He went to a cupboard, opened it, and fumbled for an instant. Then he gave Don a flask. The liquid it contained was clear, but it had a deadly glitter. "Here," he said.

Don said politely and a little absently, "Thank you." He took the bottle in his left hand. It felt cold.

"You'll be going now, won't you?" Don continued. "Back to your workshop, which is not quite at the end of the galaxy, but near there. I'd better say good-by."

"Yes, I'll be going," Vulcan said soberly. He held out his hand to Don, and Don took it. The palm was smooth and strong and firm.

"Good-by, Don," Vulcan said. For a moment he laid his arm around Haig's shoulder in what was almost an embrace. Don saw that his eyes were very bright. "Good-by," he repeated. "My poor doll."

He went with Don to the hatch. Don, when he had descended, saw him standing in the opening for an instant, his hand raised in salute. Then the hatch closed.

The copper-colored ship lifted noiselessly from the white durastone of the loading area. There was no blast of rockets, no fuel explosions, only a noiseless lifting.

The ship hovered a meter or so above the rock. Then, while Don watched it, its outlines wavered and grew hazy. Momentarily it came into an extraordinarily sharp focus, as if it were seen through the wrong side of a lens. Then it disappeared.

Vulcan had gone. Don turned from the loading area and

began to walk down toward the service wharf. He carried the bottle carefully in both hands. It was more precious to him now than the doll had ever been.

He reached the landing and sat down on it beside the glossy red cabin cruiser, his legs dangling over the side. He uncorked the bottle and smelled the liquid in it. It was almost odorless, but it had a faint, dim smell like that of flowers.

Very far overhead he heard the pounding of a rocket. It must be a space needle, going down to Shapley, the other settlement on the artificial planetoid. He thought of the people in the needle briefly and with a touch of wonder. What would their future be like, that future that Vulcan could not even imagine? He thought, If I could hear their voices, they would have strange new notes.

It didn't matter, really. He did not envy them their future. He was impatient for his rest.

He raised the bottle and drank.

The liquid was bitter and a little spicy, so that it stung his lips and tongue with a not-unpleasant warmth.

When he had finished it, he sat waiting. In a little while a wonderful warm blackness began to move from his feet along his limbs. It crept higher, and it was a black swan's-down deliciousness, utter deliciousness, quiet, all-embracing, and tender. It moved toward his heart. It was like the warmth of the womb he had never known.

His body slid forward limply from the wharf into the water. His last thought before the black feathers covered him completely was a trivial curiosity whether the hotel would ever find the cabin cruiser, a trivial hope that his body would not be caught in the machinery that caused Fyon's tides.