

**THE ORIGINAL
SCIENCE
FICTION
STORIES**

35¢

Volume 8

Number 3

November, 1957

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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, November, 1957, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyright 1957 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 35¢ per copy; yearly subscriptions \$2.10. Printed in the U. S. A.

DELAY - TEMPORARY

by Charles V. DeVet

illustrated by ORBAN

Albrecht would be stranded on overcrowded Earth if he didn't recover his passport. And his finding it largely depended on learning why it had been stolen.

DOLORES had dimples on her knees.

As he shaved, Ken Albrecht observed her in the mirror. She sat on the small table and swung her legs, smiling all the while at his reflection in the mirror. Once her glance traveled down to his bare upper torso. "You're a handsome brute," she said.

Albrecht ignored the remark. "What's your last name?"

"Pollnow."

She continued to swing her legs, and Albrecht watched the dimples wink on and off in the mirror as he went on shaving. "Just what does this hostess service of yours include?"

"The Port of St. Paul does

its best to see that visitors to Earth are properly entertained. I hope my assistance this far has been of some help."

Albrecht grunted.

With her head Dolores indicated a bundle at her side. "I bought you a suit of clothes, and a cloak for evening wear." She glanced at the trousers Albrecht wore, and at his shirt hanging on the back of a chair at his side. "These are a bit more colorful than what you're wearing, but they're the height of Earth fashion at the moment. How do you like your room?" she asked with another of her quick changes of conversational topic.

Albrecht paused in his shaving and glanced around

The girl was the only one who could have stolen Albrecht's passport.



at the room's cramped furnishings. A bed, wide enough to sleep two, but narrower than he was accustomed to; two straight chairs and an adjustable-back armchair; a wash basin, with a small medicine cabinet above, the table on which Dolores sat; and a curtained shower in one corner, were economically spaced in a room no larger than twelve by fifteen feet. There was no closet. Clothes had to be hung on hooks on one wall.

"It would seem you could have found something a little less crowded," he observed without complaint.

DOLORES' eyes widened in mild reproof. "Have you forgotten that this is Earth, the most densely-populated planet in the Federation of Human Worlds? A room like this is considered generously large." She continued swinging her legs.

Albrecht pulled the abrasion brush sharply away from his cheek and muttered under his breath. The dimples had taken his mind from the job at hand and the brush had worn a pink, smarting, spot on his right cheek.

Dolores laughed and Albrecht felt a slow flow of blood rising to his face. He tried to cover his embarrassment with a show of gruffness. "Any particular reason why you're still here? Didn't I pay as much as you expected?"

Dolores chose to ignore his lack of courtesy. "No pay was necessary. This is part of my job. Your tip was generous."

"Then why are you hanging around?" Albrecht quickly decided that the best way to get rid of her was to be unpleasant. He was tired and irritable from his space flight, and right now he wanted to relax more than he wanted feminine company.

Dolores looked hurt. "Don't you like me?"

"You're very charming. Perhaps tomorrow...or the day after..." Albrecht let the sentence hang with its unvoiced suggestion. Dolores continued to smile, seemingly unaware of the hint behind the words.

Albrecht tried again. "I'll have to change clothes. And as I see no way that I can do it in privacy, with you here..."

Dolores nodded agreeably. "Don't mind me."

Albrecht walked to where she sat and put his hands under her shoulders. Lifting her from the table he carried her to the room's entrance-way. He set her down beside the door, opened it, and gently but firmly propelled her out into the hall. "It's been nice," he said.

Dolores wrinkled her nose spitefully at him as he closed the door.

TEN MINUTES later, Ken Albrecht discovered that

his wallet was missing. He hadn't been carrying much money; he had taken the precaution of depositing most of it in the inter-world bank at the airport. But the wallet had contained his passport.

He finished dressing, tucked a small flat pistol in his armpit, and hurried outside the huge apartment building. In a street flanked by double rows of almost identical buildings he hailed a cab and was driven back to the spaceport. At the information desk, he was informed that the director of spaceport personnel was a Mr. John Wrestler.

WRESTLER was a stout man in his late fifties, with a pinkly bald head and pink hair, and an incongruously black, pointed mustache. Beneath the mustache his lips formed two raised ridges—as though padded underneath—and dipped into the hollows of hairless cheeks. It was a totally humorless face.

"And you feel certain that it was the girl who took your wallet?" he asked Albrecht.

"I had it when we went into my room—I took a bill from it to deposit in the rent slot before I entered—and I didn't have it after she'd left."

"What did you say her name was?" Wrestler took a paper from the upper left hand drawer of his desk.

"Dolores Pollnow."

Wrestler went quickly down a list of names on the paper in his hand. "We don't have anyone by that name employed here; I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for you."

"Just a minute!" Albrecht's voice was angry. He had half risen from his chair. Now he checked himself and resumed his seat. "Do you realize how important this is to me? I intended to stay for only the three days between flights. But unless I get that passport back I'm stuck here—for good."

"I realize that." Wrestler's expression could not have shown less interest. "There has been such an illicit traffic in visas, and subsequent opportunity for criminals to escape punishment by fleeing to other worlds, that it became necessary to make the traveler solely responsible for the safekeeping of his passport. But of course that is something outside my province. Now if there is nothing more I can do for you..."

WRESTLER'S speech was cut off abruptly as Albrecht reached across the desk and dug the fingers of both hands into the neck front of his blouse. Albrecht set himself and jerked the ineffectually struggling official across the glass top of the desk.

His face was white with anger as he twisted Wrest-

ler around and shoved him backward into a chair at the side of the desk. "Perhaps this will help you be a little less casual about it," Albrecht gritted. He loosened his grip on Wrestler's blouse front.

"This is an outrage," Wrestler blurted. "The law..."

Albrecht cut off his protestations with another twist of the cloth in his hands. "I don't give a damn about the law. What worse trouble can I get into than I'm in right now? Come up with something that will help me get that passport back, or the next time I shut your wind off you won't breathe again."

He held his grip until Wrestler's eyes began to roll slowly back. Albrecht released him and waited.

Wrestler breathed deeply, the wind making a harsh noise in his windpipe as he sucked it in. "I'll do what I can," he said as soon as he was able to speak. "Tell me what you want."

Albrecht sat down on the desk above him. "I'll admit that the girl probably didn't give her right name," he said, "but she did have 'Dolores' stamped on her cap front. Do you have any girls working for you with that first name?"

"I'll see," Wrestler answered. He pulled himself to his feet and walked hesitantly around the desk. He made

an effort to straighten his rumpled clothing as we went.

Albrecht remained where he was sitting. "Don't try to press any buttons," he said, his voice flat and expressionless. "Anyone you call would get here too late to save you."

"I had no such intention." Wrestler was making an effort to regain his lost dignity. He picked the typed list from the floor where it had fallen. "I have a Dolores Gabriel, and a Dolores Lutschner," he said, going down the list. "What did the girl who took your passport look like?"

"A TALL BRUNET, with her hair cut short. She smiled a lot, and had very nice teeth. And dimples. Exceptionally beautiful." He paused. "That's about all, I guess."

"The description could fit about every tenth girl on Earth," Wrestler said sardonically.

"What do the two Doloreses you have look like?"

"I have their pictures here somewhere," Wrestler said. He dug in the drawer at his left again and brought up a large envelope and took out a handful of pictures. He glanced back at the list, murmured "24 and 85", and picked two pictures from the pile and handed them to Albrecht.

Dolores Gabriel was a red-

head. Dolores Lutscher was a short-haired brunet. But there all similarity to the girl in Albrecht's room ended "Give me the rest of those pictures," he said.

He went carefully through the pile Wrestler handed him. The girl he sought was not there.

While Albrecht looked at the pictures, Wrestler walked to a cabinet on the wall at his back and took out a bottle of bourbon and a small waterglass. He poured the glass half full and drank it, his face twisting into the look of agonized distress of a heavy drinker. He made no offer of any to Albrecht. "Find anything?" he asked as he put the bottle and glass back into the cabinet and returned to his desk.

Albrecht shook his head and slumped back where he sat. "I'm sorry about roughing you up," he said after a moment. "That temper is a very nasty fault of mine."

Wrestler dismissed the incident with a brushing motion of his hand. His earlier disinterest had returned. "If there's nothing else I can do for you..."

Albrecht rose. "I won't distress you with my troubles any longer," he said dryly.

"I'll try to bear your misfortune with equanimity," Wrestler answered in the same tone of voice. The bourbon had given him renewed courage.

Albrecht bowed with spurious courtesy and let himself out.

ON THE WAY back to his room, Ken Albrecht found himself walking behind a tall man with broad shoulders. He observed the man, and two pedestrians who walked toward him, without conscious attention. In the same way, he noted also that just ahead a gray-haired man poked with a stick at a pile of refuse in an alley entrance. And when it happened, Albrecht was too stunned to move until it was over.

The tall stranger ahead of him twisted suddenly sideward and clutched the old man about the shoulders. With his right arm he circled the scrawny, whiskered neck and forced the man's head back.

The oldster yelled once and kicked out frantically, spinning his attacker half around. As they faced him Albrecht saw the gray haired one's mouth open wide in the extremity of his pain, but no sound came from his straining lips. The tall man jerked back his right arm with sudden ruthless force, and Albrecht heard a dull snap.

He watched in shocked fascination as the old man's body went limp and slid slowly down the front of his slayer.

The tall man's face had held its same expression dur-

ing the entire brief encounter. There was no hate or anger there; nothing except a determined efficiency. Now he looked down for a minute at his victim before he walked on.

Albrecht came out of his stupor and looked about quickly for someone representing the law of the city. The only other persons in sight were the two men he had seen approaching earlier. They had watched the killing with little more than cursory interest, and soon they moved on down the street.

LOGIC CAUTIONED Albrecht to mind his own business—he couldn't risk any more trouble on this strange world than he already had—out his indignation pushed him forward. He drew the flat gun from his armpit and strode after the killer. Pushing the nose of his gun against the broad back ahead of him he gritted, "Keep walking!"

The other hesitated for only an instant before obeying. He turned his head and looked at Albrecht over his shoulder. "Do I know you, sir?"

"You don't," Albrecht answered curtly.

"May I ask where you are taking me?"

"To the nearest policeman," Albrecht replied.

The tall man hesitated

again, then shrugged and went on.

They found a green-clad policeman around the next corner. "This man has just committed a murder," Albrecht told him.

The green-clad raised his eyebrows slightly. He regarded the tall man and seemed to observe something about his dress. "A commissionaire?" he asked.

The man nodded. He drew a paper from his breast pocket and handed it to the officer. "My warrant. You will find a committment attached to it, signed by Peerre Delfac, the dead man's second son."

The officer handed back the paper. "I will have the body collected. You may go." He turned to Ken Albrecht. "I judge by your accent, sir, that you are a stranger to our world?"

"That's right."

"Allow me to assure you that this man's actions, which you have just witnessed, were perfectly legal," the officer said. While his words were polite, his attitude was one of impatient tolerance. And in his eyes was a look only partially concealed, a look of dislike for a foreigner.

"Is it legal to kill a defenseless old man?" Albrecht asked sarcastically.

The policeman shrugged with cynical indifference and moved on.

THE TALL man had not left as the policeman walked away. Now he said to Albrecht, "Our police are not sympathetic with what they regard as interference by outsiders. but I do not wish to appear as a monster to you. Will you grant me the pleasure of buying you a voyae?" He spoke with an odd formality that Albrecht recognized as his normal manner.

"Why should I drink with you?"

"For no reason," the tall man answered, without resentment, "except, perhaps, to have your curiosity satisfied."

For some reason Albrecht found himself almost liking the man. And by now he realized that he had somehow made a fool of himself. The other was probably evidencing great tolerance in treating him so civilly; further, this man might be able to help him with his own problem. "All right," he agreed shortly, not quite able to match the other's courtesy.

"My name is Barry Effress," the tall man introduced himself, and bowed briefly as Albrecht gave his own name.

THEY WALKED until they came to a drinking place and entered. Against one wall they found an empty table and sat down. Albrecht said he'd have a brandy and Effress punched the brandy button in the automat-

ic dispenser twice. "What is your home world?"

"Mogden IV. It's in the Orion's Belt sector," Albrecht added as Effress' face showed no sign of recognition. "It was colonized by Earth about two thousand years ago."

"My geography is not too good," Effress apologized in his formal manner. "May I be allowed to explain now what happened out there?"

"I wish you would."

"On Earth, it is the duty of a son to kill his parents after they reach the age of sixty," Effress explained. "Most of the sons do not desire to perform the disagreeable task themselves. I am what is known as a commissionaire, we perform such unpleasant duties for others. I was committed by a man named Del-fac—the old one's second son—to kill him."

"But what is the purpose of such senseless slaughter?"

"Purpose?" Effress repeated. "I suppose it is population control. But it is not murder—as you seem to regard it. For there is recarn."

"Recarn?"

"The old person will live again in the son's next born."

"Is that belief universal with you?"

"It is the world religion." Effress was thoughtful for a moment. "Recently a semi-religious group headed by a man named Richard Vingers had been denying the truth of that belief. They have been

successful in convincing a large number of people that the killing of old persons is a cruel and ungodly practice. Whether they are right I cannot say, but most regard them as irresponsible fanatics. Last week, the government declared Vingers an enemy of the state, he will be put to death if he is found."

"I FIND I agree wholeheartedly with Vingers," Albrecht commented. "Such killing is bloodthirsty and barbarous."

"I might regard many of your customs in the same light, if I knew more about them," Effress replied without heat.

"That's true, of course," Albrecht agreed. He hesitated. "May I ask you a personal question—perhaps at the risk of offending you?"

"I will not be offended."

"Is your profession looked upon as...decent...by the others of Earth?"

Effress drew a thin cigar cube from a breast pocket and appeared thoroughly preoccupied with rolling it between his palms, and lighting it. Nothing in the steel-like courtesy of his manner seemed changed as he spoke, yet his tone was gentle and dead as he said, "My profession is regarded with envy by those without the courage to pursue it."

Albrecht realized instantly that he had made another mis-

take. "I'm sorry. I meant no offense."

Effress smiled wearily and relaxed in his chair. "I have never explained this to anyone before," he said. "Simply because I never found anyone who would listen, and understand. I think you might. Anyway, here it is—for whatever you make of it.

"Every man," Effress went on, "has within him that which he is. The coward buries it, that he might not have to face its obligations. Or he he expresses it only by surrender to the invigorating lunacy of herd action. The brave man follows this thing—though he may know he will die sooner for it. My work is dangerous: Few commissionaires ever reach the age where their sons must send them to recarn. Yet I do not claim to be brave; rather I have the desire—the inner need—to do those things which most other men would be afraid to do. I might state it otherwise by saying that I desire to live as if I were to die the next moment. That alone will satisfy me. By living my life so there is always danger I find alcoves now and then that give me flashes of the stimulation I must have. And I must admit I have the vanity to be pleased with the admiration I know I receive from those about me." He paused and laughed in semi-embarrassment. "Am I a fool?"

"You certainly are not," Albrecht stated emphatically. "While I may not agree with the way you follow your star, I can only admire your courage in doing it."

THE DRINKING place had become more crowded as they sat talking. Albrecht was surprised to notice that women mingled freely with the men. On Mogden, women would never think of entering such a place.

He was a bit disconcerted when two women came up to their table and stood waiting silently.

He glanced across at Effress. The tall man was watching him, smiling at his obvious uncertainty.

Albrecht looked back at the two women. One was small and blonde, with meager beauty. The other was built in heroic proportions, with a skin fair and untinted, and hair combed in black waves to the back of her head. Her breasts were only partly concealed by a stiff cloth cowl that hung over them. "Are you gentlemen expecting?"

Here, as on Mogden, Albrecht reflected musingly, young maidens hunted in pairs. "Thanks for asking," he said to the dark girl. "Perhaps later."

She lifted her shoulders in the universal Earth gesture, and the two girls walked away, swaying their hips as they went.

"Would you not enjoy being in jostling harness with the bounteous one?" Effress asked, only the slight quirk at the corner of his mouth betraying the amusement he felt.

"I hadn't considered it," Albrecht answered uncomfortably. He sought to change the topic of conversation. "Would you care for another drink?" Without waiting for an answer he punched the brandy button twice.

EFFRESS was enjoying Albrecht's loss of poise. "On Earth many believe that chastity is a dangerous abstinence. It makes a man vulnerable to certain illnesses." His smile returned. "Fortunately our women do their best to keep us in good health."

"How would your wife regard any philandering?" Albrecht asked, trying to shift his discomfort to Effress.

"My wife? If she objected, she would be wise to keep silent. A husband has the right of life or death over his wife."

Albrecht shook his head, but did not argue. "I need the help of a man like yourself," he said without preliminaries. "Are you available to work for me?"

After only a brief hesitation, Effress nodded.

Albrecht told him all that had happened since he landed on Earth.

"What do you wish me to do?" Effress asked.

"My best chance to get my passport back, as I see it, is to find the girl. Do you think you can do that?"

"I could try."

"I'd appreciate it." Ken Albrecht wrote his address on a slip of paper and received in return a card from Effress with his name, telephone number, and address printed on it. "Ring me as soon as you find anything. I don't have much time."

Effress nodded and they rose to leave.

EARLY IN the evening Albrecht received a telephone call. "I'm at the spaceport," Effress said. "Using the description you gave me, I questioned some of the other hostesses, and two of them remember your girl. But it seems she just came on the job this morning, and they haven't seen her since. I tried to speak with Wrestler, but couldn't get into his office. Do you have any other suggestions?"

"Only that you continue to make inquiries. You probably know how to handle the job better than any way I could suggest."

"I'll do what I can." Effress hung up.

Albrecht had a meal sent up to his room, ate, and lay down to rest. He fell asleep within a few minutes.

He awoke some time after midnight. At first he wasn't

certain what it was that had disturbed him. Just that one part of his mind, perhaps the portion that activated his intuition, was sounding an urgent warning of danger.

He sat up straight in bed. The light in the room went on. "It is now twenty-three minutes after twelve," the bedpost said. "You left a call for eight o'clock. Do you wish to cancel that call?"

Albrecht ignored the automaton. A small noise drew his attention to the doorknob. It was slowly moving, as though someone had turned it to see if it was locked, and was now cautiously letting it return to its resting position.

"Do you wish to cancel, your call?" the bedpost asked as Albrecht stepped quietly out of bed.

"Let it stand," Albrecht murmured impatiently. He stood in the middle of the room, thinking. Was this just a simple attempt at burglary? Or was there more to it?

He ran his fingers through his tousled hair and tried to think what he should do. First, he decided, he'd better be ready if they should succeed in getting in. He took the flat pistol from its place on the table and held it in his hand. Another thought came to him and he turned off the room's light and walked quietly to the window at the side of his bed and looked out. Across the street a man, faceless in the dark, stood

with his head turned toward Albrecht's window.

This was more than burglary; the net was already tight around him. He needed help. Another minute, and he had the obvious answer. Effress.

EFFRESS answered Albrecht's first call. Evidently the man was a light sleeper. Albrecht explained the situation quickly.

"I'll be over immediately. Do you have any plan in mind?"

"My first problem is to get out of here. Do you have an automobile?"

"Yes."

"Good. How long will it take you to get here?"

"I can make it in fifteen minutes."

"I'll allow twenty minutes. I'll come out of my room then. You wait for me at the front door. If you're able, cover anyone waiting in the lobby. You'll also have to keep in mind the man out in the street. You have that clear?"

"Right. I'll look for you in twenty minutes—exactly."

Albrecht hung up and dressed quietly. He found the padded chair against a farther wall and let himself ease into it. After a minute he noted the rigidity of his stomach muscles, and forced himself to relax. He realized that he was afraid, but was glad to note that it was not

the fear of panic. He took the safety catch off his pistol and laid it on his lap, and waited. Patiently.

TWICE DURING the next twenty minutes Albrecht heard movement in the hall outside his door, and once someone tried the doorknob again. But they made no attempt to force their way in.

When his time was up, Albrecht rose and unlocked the door. He put his pistol in his pocket, but kept his hand around it. As he stepped out into the hall a man slid around a corner at the far end. So far so good.

Albrecht reached the head of the stair without being stopped; however, two men stood close together at the foot. He glanced across the lobby and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Effress leaning negligently against a doorframe. Both his hands were in his pockets.

Deliberately Albrecht paused and raised his free hand in greeting to Effress. The heads of both men at the foot of the stairs swiveled around—in time to see Effress nod casually back.

Albrecht started down the steps. When he reached a point one step from the waiting men he stopped. "Get the hell out of my way," he said very gently.

Involuntarily the two men moved apart. Albrecht strode

between them. As he walked toward the door he glanced at Effress and saw that he was facing them now. He walked past Effress and they went out through the door back to back.

ALBRECHT allowed himself to breathe freely again when they were in Effress' car. "Thanks. I saw the way those men looked at you. Apparently you have some reputation in affairs of this kind."

Effress shrugged the compliment aside. "They were merely hirelings, they will have to get further instructions before they know how to cope with the change in affairs. We should have you well hidden by then."

"I'm very grateful to you. Where do we go now?"

"I have a place where you'll be safe for a few days at least."

After a half-hour's drive, Effress parked his car in a public lot and they went ahead on foot. Albrecht noted that they were in the waterfront section of the city. Soon they reached a small wharf and walked across a plank to the roof of a run-down houseboat.

Effress led the way down a dark stairway and into a room without lights that smelled faintly of oil. He led Albrecht to a bunk. "Try to get some sleep. We'll talk again in the morning."

KEN ALBRECHT must have been more tired than he had known, for he was awakened by the noise of someone walking in the room, and saw by the watch on his wrist that it was after nine o'clock. He had to presume that it was morning, for no light came in from outside.

Concealed fluorescent tubes in the walls revealed that he was in the former engine room of the old houseboat. The engine had been removed from the center of the floor and the hole covered with a large patch of composition board. Plastic cloth was pasted over the portholes in the sides of the vessel. Two double-bunk cots were attached to each wall.

Effress had just let him sprawl back in a cot directly opposite Albrecht. In a makeshift chair that was actually a fishbox a third man sat regarding Albrecht from beneath bushy eyebrows that met above a red, thick, nose. The man had the face and figure of a bull, with large ears and great bony cheeks.

"Mr. Albrecht..Mr. Vingers." Effress nodded negligently at each man as he gave his name.

"How do you do?" This was the man Albrecht remembered, who had gotten into trouble with the Earth authorities by his opposition to their bloodletting practices. Apparently Effress was combining two jobs.

VINGERS made a reluctant rumble in his throat but gave no other reply.

"Mr. Vingers will be with us until the day after tomorrow," Effress explained. "He has a rendezvous with a plane that will fly him to our southern continent."

"That's a coincidence," Albrecht said. "I'll be leaving the same day, if I'm able to get my passport back." The third man did not seem to be in the mood to talk. "Are you still going to try to find that girl for me?" he asked Effress.

Effress nodded. "I intend to visit information central today. If I can give an accurate enough description of the girl I should be able to find out just who she is, and where she lives. Tell me every detail about her that might help."

"Wouldn't it be better if I went with you? You wouldn't recognize her even if you saw her."

"Later of course, I'll have to have you along," Effress answered. "But I'd better do the preliminary work alone. Also I thought I'd try to find the person or persons who threaten you. If I find them, we can decide what is best to do next: whether we should attempt negotiations, or move against them."

"The man who is trying to kill me is the same one who engineered the stealing of my passport. He probably learned that you were investigating

for me, and decided that he would be safer if he removed me."

"Very probably. But we have to find him first." Effress rolled up his sleeves, splashed water on his face from a sink set in the end wall and went out.

FOR SEVERAL hours after Effress had gone, Vingers did not speak, and Albrecht felt no inclination to begin a conversation. He tried to nap but Vingers' heavy-footed pacing of the room kept him from ever actually sleeping.

Finally Vingers stopped at his side and stood over him. "How can you lie there when we have to skulk down here like rats in a filthy hole?"

"What do you suggest we do?" Without defining the reason, Albrecht found himself disliking the man quite intensely.

Vingers lifted his shoulders irritably and continued his pacing. After another ten minutes passed he said, "Did it ever occur to you that we're both due to leave the same day; that I've got to get away from here or lose my life; that I could be a very logical suspect—the person who has your passport?"

"I'll keep it in mind." Albrecht had given the possibility some thought when he'd first found out who Vingers was. Only the fact that he'd

trusted Effress had made him decide against the possibility.

"Perhaps Effress actually works only for me." Vingers seemed to anticipate the trend of Albrecht's reasoning.

"That could be, but I'll have to take my chances that it isn't." Albrecht turned on his side, with his back to Vingers. He felt his temper rising, and knew that a few more words with Vingers would lead to a fight that would be foolhardy.

Vingers laughed.

EFFRESS returned during the early evening. "I couldn't find anyone fitting the description, exactly," he said. "See if you can remember more details tonight, and I'll try again tomorrow."

His total lack of success made Ken Albrecht suspect that perhaps Vingers had spoken the truth. But why should Vingers have mentioned it at all. Unless it was because of the very cantankerousness of his nature.

Yet it was evident by the surreptitious way Effress goaded the other man that he liked Vingers no more than did Albrecht.

Vingers became talkative as the night hours dragged on with their galling inactivity. "This is a sick world," he said, to neither of them in particular. "Suffering from a neurosis that compels it to draw the blood of innocent

victims. Men and women are killed while barely past their prime of life; husbands murder their wives, on the slightest pretext, or no pretext at all."

He turned his attention to Albrecht. "Did you know that every third child is automatically put to death at birth? That every child born on Wednesday suffers the same fate? Could anything be more absurd—more brutally, savagely, absurd?" He raised his hand in a clenched fist. "Those acts are violations of basic mortality. If there is a God, I say he must hate us for what we do."

HE WAS ABOUT to go on when Effress spoke. "We can barely feed the nearly thirty-five billion people we have on Earth now. If these were not killed, at least an equal number would starve. Do you have a better solution?"

"We could limit the population."

"That was tried, two hundred years ago." Reading between the words, Albrecht recognized that Effress was doing more than baiting the contentious Vingers: He was apologizing to Albrecht for Earth's savagery. "They were unable to control the growth of population. They squandered their natural resources to keep men fed and clothed, but nevertheless there was soon hunger, revolution, and

war. For a time there was no government, and men died in a wholesale, self-inflicted, extermination. If you want the present blood-letting stopped, you must give us a better alternative."

"You missed my point," Vingers continued his same argument, and Albrecht realized then that the man was not exceptionally intelligent. He was merely a fanatic who had learned to use the speech and ideas of a pedagogue. "I am not advocating that we go back to old methods. I said we must use *intelligent* control. Then we will succeed."

"There is a beautiful and enlightening world of talk," Effress said, "in which everything makes sense. And there is another world—a more practical world—that is governed by the unintelligibility of necessity." His eyes closed and, as Vingers reiterated and expounded his argument, Effress' chest began a regular rise and fall. He had gone to sleep. Albrecht allowed himself to do the same.

THE NEXT day he had a brief talk with Effress. Their time was short, and they decided to concentrate on finding the girl, Dolores. They took the chance of visiting information center together.

They had no success. The description they gave was inadequate. Effress went on to

the spaceport, and Albrecht returned to the houseboat.

That night Effress was very discouraged. "I was still unable to get in to see Wrestler, and I turned up nothing new asking around."

Before he went to sleep, Albrecht momentarily had the feeling that he should know the answer to his problem. He felt that he had all the clues, but that he was not putting them together correctly.

In the morning he had the solution.

HE AROSE quietly, before the others awoke, and let himself out of the houseboat. A few blocks away he hailed a cab and had himself driven out to the spaceport.

He went on foot to the inter-world bank and withdrew all his money. Dividing it exactly in half he put one bundle into his pocket, and the other into an envelope he had gotten at the bank. He addressed the envelope to Effress and dropped it into a mail chute.

At a newsstand, he bought a morning paper and a magazine and brought them into a lunchroom and found a table in one corner. For over an hour he ate slowly and read as he killed time. When he consulted his watch and saw that his flight would begin loading in a half-hour, he rose and walked without

haste to the Personnel Bureau.

"I have an urgent appointment with Mr. Wrestler," he informed the girl in the outer office. "He's expecting me." As she opened her mouth to question him, Albrecht went on past her and into Wrestler's office.

Wrestler was standing at the front of his desk. A large handbag rested on the floor a few feet away.

Ken Albrecht pulled his gun from his armpit and showed it to Wrestler. "Were you going somewhere?"

Wrestler's eyes opened in shocked surprise. "What do you want here?" he asked indignantly.

"Put my passport on your desk, and step back."

"I don't have your passport." Wrestler's voice was a whine.

"It would almost give me pleasure to shoot you," Albrecht said in a conversational tone of voice.

WRESTLER'S shoulders slumped. The starch weemed to go out of his body. He drew a wallet from his breast pocket and pulled out a card—which Albrecht recognized as his passport—and laid it on the desk. "What mistake did I make?" he asked listlessly.

"None. But I nearly made the mistake of waiting too long to see the obvious."

"Tell me, how did you

know? I thought I'd covered perfectly."

Albrecht picked up the passport and put it into his pocket. "It was very simple—after I'd figured it out. First, your age. You must be near to sixty. We both know what happens to you when you reach it. You would probably give your fortune to get away from here. Then your lack of cooperation in helping me find the girl—for no apparent reason. And who would be in the best position to put her on the job, and assign her to someone from whom she could steal a passport?"

"And finally, why wouldn't you let Effress in to see you? When he came here investigating, you decided it would be best to put me out of the way. It all adds up."

Wrestler tried to smile. "Better luck next time."

"Perhaps." Albrecht brought his pistol down hard against the side of Wrestler's head. "Sorry to do that," he apologized to the unconscious man at his feet. "But I've got to be certain that you don't try any more tricks until I'm safely away from here."

He went out of the building and across a grassy court and into the waiting spaceship.

Twenty minutes later he was on his way home.