

# SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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NO. 1

★	<b>TWO POWERFUL NOVELS</b>	★
	<b>GATEWAY TO DARKNESS</b> ..... <i>Fredric Brown</i>	10
	Alone he waited, against the unyielding stars, for the final struggle in man's eternal dream of conquest—on a world grown too small to conquer—by Man grown too great to survive!	
★	<b>PARASITE PLANET</b> ..... <i>Neil R. Jones</i>	104
	"Give us back the secret that has been dust these thousands years—or, as living metal statues, adorn our halls through all eternity!"	
	<b>AN UNUSUAL NOVELETTE</b>	
★	<b>THIS STAR SHALL BE FREE</b> ..... <i>Murray Leinster</i>	48
	Tork was a simple man of the caves. How could he dream that the star box held the power to make his people gods—or only a lost memory in stone?	
	<b>SHORT STORIES</b>	
★	<b>THE TIMELESS MAN</b> ..... <i>Frank Belknap Long</i>	40
	It hardly mattered what miracle of time and space had given him life once more—for in either era, Holden was the Timeless Man!	
	<b>CHILD OF VOID</b> ..... <i>Margaret St. Clair</i>	62
	Tiny wizards waited at the threshold of the universe, ready to pour a deluge of madness over the Earth—if only young Eddie would let them!	
★	<b>IMPOSSIBLE</b> ..... <i>Ray Bradbury</i>	72
	Formless as wind or water, he took the form of any lost dream—and there was no holding back even when the shape of longing was impossible!	
★	<b>APPOINTMENT FOR TOMORROW</b> ..... <i>John D. MacDonald</i>	82
	Even as he prepared to fight the cold, errorless science of the doomsday men, Larkin knew that—for him—there was no escape in this world!	
	<b>THE SLEEPERS</b> ..... <i>John Wade Farrell</i>	96
	Only two men dared look beyond the dream that enthralled Mankind!	
★	<b>DEPARTMENTS AND FEATURES</b>	★
	<b>FANDOM'S CORNER</b> ..... <i>Conducted by James V. Taurasi</i>	6
	<b>LAWRENCE PORTFOLIO</b> .....	39
	<b>THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER</b> ..... <i>Conducted by Frederik Pohl</i>	80
★	<b>MISSIVES AND MISSILES</b> ..... <i>The Readers</i>	89

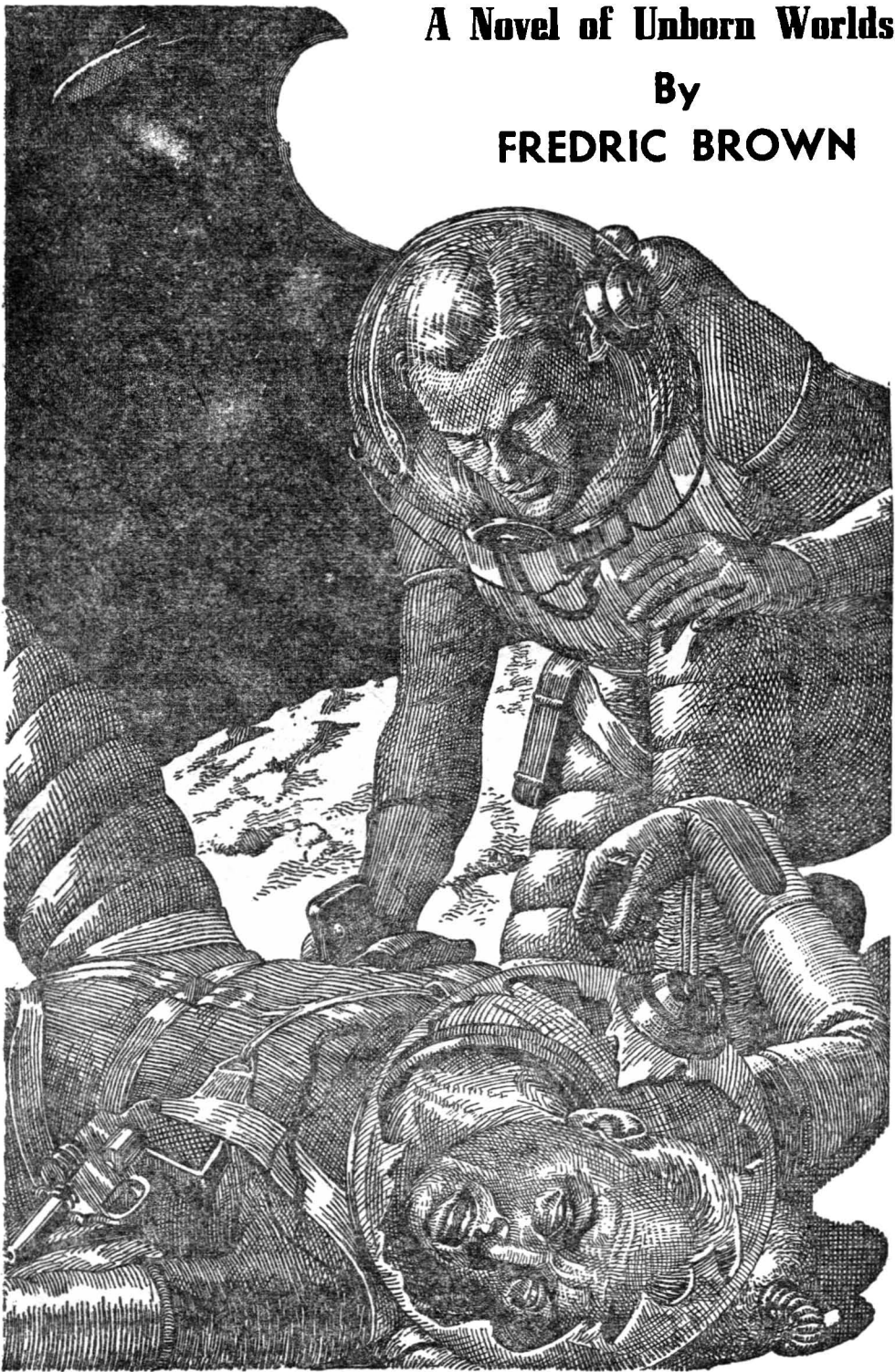
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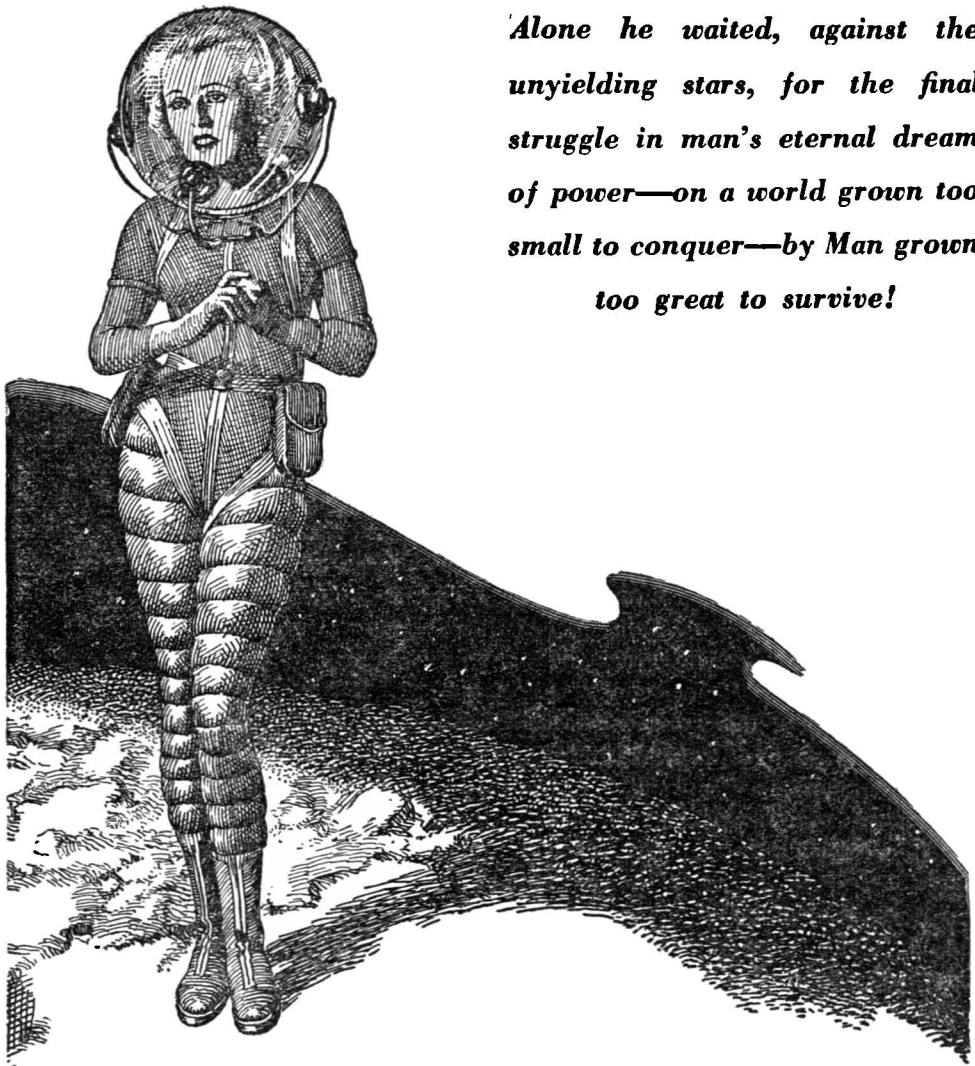
# A Novel of Unborn Worlds

By

FREDRIC BROWN



He kept between Evadne and Oliver, so she wouldn't have to see. . . .



*Alone he waited, against the  
unyielding stars, for the final  
struggle in man's eternal dream  
of power—on a world grown too  
small to conquer—by Man grown  
too great to survive!*

# GATEWAY TO DARKNESS

**T**HERE was this Crag, and he was a thief and a smuggler and a murderer. He'd been a spaceman once and he had a metal hand and a permanent squint to show for it. Those, and a taste for exotic liquors and a strong disinclina-

tion for work. Especially as he would have had to work a week to buy one small jigger of even the cheapest of the fluids that were the only things that made life worthwhile to him. At anything he was qualified to do, that is, except stealing,

smuggling and murder. These paid well.

He had no business in Albuquerque, but he got around. And that time they caught him. It was for something he hadn't done, but they had proof that he did it. Proof enough to send him to the penal colony of Callisto, which he wouldn't have minded too much, or to send him to the psycher, which he would have minded very much indeed.

He sat on the bed in his cell and worried about it, and about the fact that he needed a drink. The two worries went together, in a way. If they sent him to the psycher, he'd never want a drink again, and he wanted to want a drink.

The psycher was pretty bad. They used it only in extreme cases, partly because they hadn't perfected it yet. Sometimes—statistically about one time out of nine—it drove its subject crazy, stark raving crazy. The eight times out of nine that it worked, it was worse. It *adjusted* you; it made you normal. And in the process it killed your memories, the good ones as well as the bad ones, and you started from scratch.

You remembered how to talk and feed yourself and how to use a slipstick or play a flute—if, that is, you knew how to use a slipstick or play a flute before you went to the psycher. But you didn't remember your name unless they told you. And you didn't remember the time you were tortured for three days and two nights on Venus before the rest of the crew found you and took you away from the animated vegetables who didn't like meat in any form and especially in human form. You didn't remember the time you were space-mad, the time you went nine days without water, the time—well, you didn't remember anything that had ever happened to you.

Not even the good things.

You started from scratch a different person. And Crag thought he wouldn't mind dying, particularly, but he didn't

want his body to keep on walking around afterwards, animated by a well-adjusted stranger, who just wouldn't be *he*.

So he paced up and down his cell and made up his mind that he'd at least try to kill himself before he'd let them strap him into the psycher chair, if it came to that.

He hoped that he could do it. He had a lethal weapon with him, the only one he ever carried, but it would be difficult to use on himself. Oh, it could be done if he had the guts; but it takes plenty of guts to kill yourself with a bludgeon, even so efficient a one as his metal hand. Looking at that hand, though it was obviously of metal, no one ever guessed that it weighed twelve pounds instead of a few ounces. The outside layer was Alloy G, a fraction of the weight of magnesium, not much heavier, in fact, than balsa wood. And since you couldn't mistake the appearance of Alloy G, nobody ever suspected that under it was steel for strength and under the steel lead for weight. It wasn't a hand you'd want to be slapped in the face with. But long practice and the development of strength in his left arm enabled him to carry it as casually as though it weighed the three or four ounces you'd expect it to weigh.

He quit pacing and went to the window and stood looking down at the huge sprawling city of Albuquerque, capital of SW Sector of North America, third largest city in the world since it had become the number one spaceport of the Western Hemisphere.

The window wasn't barred but the transparent plastic of the pane was tough stuff. Still, he thought he could batter through it with one hand, if that hand were his left one. But he could only commit suicide that way. There was a sheer drop of thirty stories from this, the top floor of the SW Sector Capitol Building.

For a moment he considered it and then he remembered that it was only probable,

not certain, that they'd send him to the psyker. The Callisto penal colony—well, that wasn't so good, either, but there was always at least a remote chance of escape from Callisto. Enough of a chance that he wouldn't jump out of any thirtieth-story windows to avoid going there. Maybe not even to avoid staying there.

But if he had a chance, after being ordered to the psyker, it would be an easier way of killing himself than the one he'd thought of first.

A voice behind him said, "Your trial has been called for fourteen-ten. That is ten minutes from now. Be ready."

He turned around and looked at the grille in the wall from which the mechanical voice had come. He made a raspberry sound at the grille—not that it did any good, for it was strictly a one-way communicator—and turned back to the window.

He hated it, that sprawling corrupt city out there, scene of intrigue—as were all other cities—between the Guilds and the Gilded. Politics rampant upon a field of muck, and everybody, except the leaders, caught in the middle. He hated Earth; he wondered why he'd come back to it this time.

After a while the voice behind him said, "Your door is now unlocked. You will proceed to the end of the corridor outside it, where you will meet the guards who will escort you to the proper room."

He caught the distant silver flash of a spaceship coming in; he waited a few seconds until it was out of sight behind the buildings. He didn't wait any longer than that because he knew this was a test. He'd heard of it from others who'd been here. You could sit and wait for the guards to come and get you, or you could obey the command of the speaker and go to meet them. If you ignored the order and made them come to you, it showed you were not adjusted; it was a point against you when the time came for your sentence.

So he went out into the corridor and along it; there was only one way to go. A hundred yards along the corridor two uniformed guards were waiting near an automatic door. They were armed with holstered heaters.

He didn't speak to them nor they to him. He fell in between them and the door opened by itself as they approached it. He knew it wouldn't have opened for him alone. He knew, too, that he could easily take both of them before either could draw a heater. A backhand blow to the guard on his left and then a quick swing across to the other one.

But getting down those thirty stories to the street would be something else again. A chance in a million, with all the safeguards between here and there.

So he walked between them down the ramp to the floor below and to the door of one of the rooms on that floor. And through the door.

**H**E WAS the last arrival, if you didn't count the two guards who came in after him. The others were waiting. The six jurors in the box; of whom three would be Guilders and three Gilded. The two attorneys—one of whom had talked to him yesterday in his cell and had told him how hopeless things looked. The operator of the recording machine. And the judge.

He glanced at the judge and almost let an expression of surprise show on his face. The judge was Jon Olliver.

Crag quickly looked away. He wondered what the great Jon Olliver was doing here, judging an unimportant criminal case. Jon Olliver was a great man, one of the few statesmen, as against politicians, of the entire System. Six months ago Olliver had been the Guild candidate for Coordinator of North America. He'd lost the election, but surely he would have retained a more important niche for himself, in the party if not in the government,

than an ordinary criminal judge's job.

True, Olliver had started his political career as a judge; four years ago he'd been on the bench the one previous time Crag had been arrested and tried. The evidence had, that time, been insufficient and the jury had freed him. But he still remembered the blistering jeremiad Olliver had delivered to him afterward, in the private conversation between judge and accused that was customary whether the latter was convicted or acquitted.

Ever since, Crag had hated Jon Olliver as a man, and had admired him as a judge and as a statesman, after Olliver had gone into politics and had so nearly been elected Coördinator.

But Coördinator was the highest position to which any man could aspire. The only authority higher was the Council of Coördinators, made up of seven Coördinators of Earth and four from the planets, one from each major planet inhabited by the human race. The Council of Coördinators was the ultimate authority in the Solar System, which, since interstellar travel looked a long way off, meant the ultimate authority in the known-to-be-inhabited universe. So it seemed almost incredible to Crag that a man who'd almost been a Coördinator should now, in the six months since his candidacy, have dropped back down to the unimportant job he'd held five years ago. But that was politics for you, he thought, in this corrupt age; an honest man didn't have a chance.

No more of a chance than he was going to have against this frameup the police had rigged against him.

The trial started and he knew he'd been right. The evidence was there—on recording tapes; there were no witnesses—and it proved him completely guilty. It was false, but it sounded true. It took only ten minutes or so to run it off. The prosecuting attorney took no longer; he didn't have to. His own attorney made a weak and fumbling—but possibly sincere

—effort to disprove the apparently obvious.

And that was that. The jury went out and stayed all of a minute, and came back. The plaintiff was found guilty as charged.

Judge Jon Olliver said briefly, "Indeterminate sentence on Callisto."

The technician shut off the recording machine; the trial was over.

Crag let nothing show on his face, although there was relief in his mind that it had not been the psycher. Not too much relief; he'd have killed himself if it had been, and death wasn't much worse than life on Callisto. And he knew that indeterminate sentence on Callisto meant life sentence—unless he volunteered to be psyched. That was what an indeterminate sentence really meant; it gave the convicted his choice between a life sentence and the psycher.

A signal from the judge and the others began to leave. Crag did not move; he knew without being told that he was expected to wait for the customary private conversation with the judge. That always came after the sentencing and, in very rare cases, could make a change in the sentence. Sometimes, but not often, after private conversation with a prisoner a judge lessened or increased the sentence; he had power to do so up to twenty-four hours after his original pronouncement.

It was optional with the judge whether the guards remained; if he thought there was a possibility of the prisoner attempting physical violence, he could have them remain, with heaters ready, but back out of hearing range in a far corner of the room. That was what Olliver had done the last time Crag had appeared before him, after the acquittal. Undoubtedly it was because he had recognized the violence in Crag and had feared to provoke him by the things he was going to say.

But this time Olliver signaled to the guards to leave the room with the others.

Crag stepped forward. He thought, *I*

can reach across that bench and kill him easily. He was tempted, simply by how easy it would be, even though he knew that it would mean the psycher—or his own private alternative.

Olliver said, "Don't do it, Crag."

Crag didn't answer. He didn't intend to, unless he found himself provoked beyond endurance by what he was going to have to hear. But he knew the best way to handle one of these interviews was to keep it strictly a one-way conversation by refusing to talk back. Silence might annoy Olliver, but it would not annoy him sufficiently to make him increase the sentence. And nothing he could say would make Olliver lessen it.

"You'd be sorry if you did, Crag. Because I'm not going to ride you this time. In fact, I'm going to make you a proposition."

What kind of a proposition, Crag wondered, could a judge want to make to a man he'd just sentenced to life on Callisto? But he didn't ask; he waited.

Olliver smiled. His face was handsome when he smiled.

He leaned forward across the bench. He said softly, "Crag, how would you like your freedom, and a million credits?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Escape to Danger

**C**RAG said hoarsely, "You're kidding. And if you are—"

He must have swayed forward or, without knowing it, started to lift his hand, for Olliver jerked back and his face was a bit white as he said "Don't" again, this time sharply.

And he went on, fast: "I'm not—kidding, Crag. A million credits, enough to keep you drunk the rest of your life. Freedom. And a chance to help humanity, to pull the human race out of the bog into which it has sunk in this period of man-

kind's decadence. A rare chance, Crag."

Crag said, "Save that for your speeches, Judge. The hell with humanity. But I'll settle for my freedom and a million. One thing, though. This trial was a frameup. I didn't do it. Was it *your* frameup?"

Olliver shook his head slowly. He said, "No, not mine. But I rather suspected it was framed. The evidence was too good. You don't leave evidence like that, do you, Crag?"

Crag didn't bother to answer that. He asked, "Who did it, then?"

"The police, I imagine. There's an election coming up—and the Commissioner's office is elective. A few convictions like yours will look good on the records. You're pretty well known, Crag, in spite of the fact that there's never been a conviction against you. The newscasts from the stations on the Gilded side are going to give Commissioner Green plenty of credit for getting you."

It sounded logical. Crag said, "I know what I'm going to do with part of my freedom, then."

Olliver's voice was sharp again. "Not until after, Crag. I don't care what you do—after the job I want you to do for me. You agree to that?"

Crag shrugged. "Okay. What's the job?" He didn't really care what it was, or even how risky it was. For the difference between life on Callisto and freedom and a million, he couldn't think of anything he wouldn't do. He'd try it even if there was one chance in a thousand of his pulling it off and staying alive.

Olliver said, "This isn't the time or place to tell you about it; we shouldn't talk too long. You'll be a free man when we talk. That much comes first. The million comes afterwards, if you succeed."

"And if I turn down the job after you've let me go?"

"I don't think you will. It's not an easy one, but I don't think you'll turn it down for a million, even if you're already

free. And there might be more for you in it than just money—but we won't talk about that unless you succeed. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. But—I want to be sure about this framing business. Do you mean to tell me it was just coincidence that you wanted me to do something for you and that I got framed and you sat on the case?"

Olliver smiled again. "It's a small world, Crag. And it's partly a coincidence, but not as much of a one as you think. First, you're not the only man in the system that could—do what I want done. You're one of several I had in mind. Possibly the best, I'll give you that. I was wondering how to contact one of you. And I saw your name on the docket and requested to sit on the case. You should know enough about law to know that a judge can ask to sit on a case if he has had previous experience with the accused."

Crag nodded. That was true, and it made sense.

Olliver said, "But to brass tacks; we shouldn't be talking much longer than this. I don't want any suspicion to attach to me when you escape."

"Escape?"

"Of course. You were judged guilty, Crag, and on strong evidence. I couldn't possibly free you legally; I couldn't even have given you a lighter sentence than I did. If I freed you now, I'd be impeached. But I—or perhaps I should say *we*—can arrange for you to escape. Today, shortly after you're returned to your cell to await transportation to Callisto."

"Who's *we*?" Crag asked.

"A new political party, Crag, that's going to bring this world—the whole System—out of the degradation into which it has sunk. It's going to end the bribery and corruption. It's going to take us back to old-fashioned democracy by ending the deadlock between the Guilds and the Syn-

dicates. It's going to be a middle-of-the-road party. We're going to bring honest government back and—" He stopped and grinned boyishly. "I didn't mean to start a lecture. In which I suppose you aren't interested anyway. We call ourselves the Cooperationists."

"You're working under cover?"

"For the present. Not much longer. In a few months we come into the open, in time to start gathering support—votes—for the next elections." He made a sudden impatient gesture. "But I'll tell you all this later, when we're at leisure. Right now the important thing is your escape."

"You'll be taken back to your cell when I give the signal that we're through talking. I'll put on the record that you were intransigent and unrepentant and that I am making no modification of your sentence. Within an hour from your return, arrangements for your escape will be made and you'll be told what to do."

"Told how?"

"By the speaker in your cell. They're on private, tap-proof circuits. A member of the party has access to them. Simply follow instructions and you'll be free by seventeen hours."

"And then? If I still want to earn the million?"

"Come to my house. It's listed; you can get the address when you need it. Be there at twenty-two."

"It's guarded?" Crag asked. He knew that houses of most important political figures were.

"Yes. And I'm not going to tell the guards to let you in. They're not party members. I think they're in the pay of the opposition, but that's all right with me. I use them to allay suspicion."

"How do I get past them, then?"

Olliver said, "If you can't do that, without help or advice from me, then you're not the man I think you are, Crag—and you're not the man I want. But don't kill unless you have to. I don't like violence,



unless it's absolutely necessary and in a good cause. I don't *like* it even then, but—"

He glanced at his wrist watch and then reached out and put his finger on a button on one side of the bench. He asked, "Agreed?" and as Crag nodded, he pushed the button.

The two guards came back in. Olliver said, "Return the prisoner to his cell."

One on each side of him, they led him back up the ramp to the floor above and escorted him all the way to his cell.

**T**HE DOOR clanged. Crag sat down on the bed and tried to puzzle things out. He wasn't modest enough about his particular talents to wonder why Olliver had chosen him if he had a dirty job to be done. But he was curious what dirty job a man like Olliver would have to offer. If there was an honest and fair man in politics, Olliver was that man. It must be something of overwhelming importance if Olliver was sacrificing his principles to expediency.

Well, he, Crag, certainly had nothing to lose, whether he trusted Olliver's motives or not. And he thought he trusted them.

He went back to the window and stood there looking down at the teeming city, thinking with wonder how greatly his fortunes had changed in the brief space of an hour and a half. That long ago he'd stood here like this and wondered whether to batter through the plastic pane and throw himself from the window. Now he was not only to be free but to have a chance at more money than he'd ever hoped to see in one sum.

When an hour was nearly up, he went over and stood by the speaker grille so he would not miss anything that came over it. One cannot ask questions over a one-way communicator, and he'd have to get every word the first time.

It was well that he did. The voice, when it came, was soft—and it was a woman's

voice. From the window he could have heard it, but might have missed part of the message. "I have just moved the switch that unlocks your cell door," the voice said. "Leave your cell and walk as you did on your way to the courtroom. I will meet you at the portal, at the place where two guards met you before."

The cell door was unlocked, all right. He went through it and along the corridor.

A woman waited for him. She was beautiful; not even the severe costume of a technician could completely conceal the soft, lush curves of her body; not even the fact that she wore horn-rimmed spectacles and was completely without make-up could detract from the beauty of her face. Her eyes, even through glass, were the darkest, deepest blue he had ever seen, and her hair—what showed of it beneath the technician's beret—was burnished copper.

He stared at her as he came near. And hated her, partly because she was a woman and partly because she was so beautiful. But mostly because her hair was exactly the same color as Lea's had been.

She held out a little metal bar. "Take this," she told him. "Put it in your pocket. It's radioactive; without it or without a guard with you who has one, every portal here is a death-trap."

"I know," he said shortly.

A paper, folded small, was next. "A diagram," she said, "showing you a way out along which, if you're lucky, you'll encounter no guards. In case you do—"

A pocket-size heater was the next offering, but he shook his head at that. "Don't want it," he told her. "Don't need it."

She put the gun back into her own pocket without protest, almost as though she had expected him to refuse it.

"One more thing," she said. "A visitor's badge. It won't help you on the upper three levels, but below that, it will keep anyone from asking you questions."

He took that, and put it on right away.

"Anything else?"

"Only this. Ten yards ahead, to your right, is a lavatory. Go in there and lock the door. Memorize this diagram thoroughly and then destroy it. And remember that if you're caught, it will do no good to tell the truth; your word won't mean a thing against—you know whose."

He smiled grimly. "I won't be caught," he assured her. "I might be killed, but I won't be caught."

Their eyes locked for a second, and then she turned quickly without speaking again and went through a door behind her.

He went on along the corridor, through the portal. In the lavatory he memorized the diagram quickly but thoroughly and then destroyed it. He had nothing to lose by following orders implicitly.

There was another portal before he came to the ramp. The radioactive bar she'd given him prevented whatever death-trap it concealed from operating.

He made the twenty-ninth level and the twenty-eighth without having met anyone. The next one, the twenty-seventh, would be the crucial one; the first of the three floors of cells and courtrooms. Despite that diagram, he didn't believe that there wouldn't be at least one guard between that floor and the one below, the top floor to which elevators went and the public—with visitor's permits—was allowed.

The ramp ended at the twenty-seventh floor. He had to go out into the corridor there, and to another ramp that led to the floor below. He felt sure there would be a guard at the door that led from the end of that ramp to freedom. And there was. He walked very quietly down the ramp. There was a sharp turn at the bottom of it and he peered around the turn cautiously. A guard was sitting there at the door, all right.

He smiled grimly. Either Olliver or the woman technician must have known the guard was there. It was only common sense that there'd be a guard at that cru-

cial point, in addition to any death-trap that might be in the door itself. Olliver didn't want him unless he was good enough to do at least part of his own jail-breaking.

And, of all things, to have offered him a heater-gun. That would really have been fatal. There, right over the guard's head, was a hemispherical blister on the wall that could only be a thermocouple, set to give off an alarm at any sharp increase in temperature. A heater ray, whether fired by or at a guard, would give an immediate alarm that would alert the whole building and stop the elevators in their shafts. A fat lot of good that heater would have done him, and the gorgeous technician who'd offered it to him must have known that.

Crag studied the guard. A big, brutish man, the kind who would fire first and ask questions afterward, despite the visitor's badge Crag wore. And there was a heater in the guard's hand, lying ready in his lap. With a different type of man, or even with a ready-to-shoot type with a holstered heater, Crag could have made the six paces. But, with this guard, he didn't dare risk it.

He stepped back and quickly unstrapped the twelve-pound hand from his wrist and held it in his right hand. He stepped into sight, pulling back his right arm as he did so.

The guard looked up—Crag hadn't even tried to be silent—and started to raise the heater. It was almost, but not quite, pointed at Crag when the heavy artificial hand struck him full in the face. He never pulled the trigger of the heater. He'd never pull a trigger again.

Crag walked to him and got his hand back, strapping it on again quickly. He picked up the guard's heater, deliberately handling it by the barrel to get his fingerprints on it. They'd know who killed the guard anyway—and he'd rather have them wonder how he'd taken the guard's own

weapon away from him and bashed his face in with it than have them guess how he *had* killed the guard. That method of killing was part of his stock in trade. A trade secret. Whenever he killed with it and there was time afterwards, he left evidence in the form of some other heavy blunt instrument that the police would think had been used.

He went through the door, using the key that had hung from the guard's belt, and whatever death-trap had been in the portal of it didn't operate. He could thank the girl technician for that much, anyway. She—or Olliver—had given him a fair break, knowing that without that radioactive bar, it would have been almost impossible for him to escape. Yes, they'd given him a fair chance.

Even if she hadn't told him to get rid of the bar here and now. It would have been bad if he hadn't known that, outside of the sacred precincts, those bars sometimes worked in reverse and set off alarms in elevators or at the street entrance. The guards never carried theirs below the twenty-sixth level. So he got rid of the bar in a waste receptacle by the elevator shafts before he rang for an elevator. The waste receptacle might conceivably have been booby-trapped for radioactive bars. But he took a chance because he didn't want to put it down in plain sight. No alarm went off.

A few minutes later he was safely on the street, lost in the crowd and reasonably safe from pursuit.

**A** CLOCK told him that it was now sixteen o'clock; he had six hours before his appointment with Olliver. But he wasn't going to wait until twenty-two; the police might expect him to go to Olliver's house—not for the real reason he was going there, but to avenge himself on the judge who had sentenced him. As soon as he was missed, that house would be watched more closely than

it was now. That was only common sense.

He looked up the address and took an atocab to within two blocks of it. He scouted on foot and spotted two guards, one at the front and one at the back. It would have been easy to kill either of them, but that would have defeated his purpose. It would definitely have focused the search for him on Olliver's house.

Getting into the house to hide would be equally dangerous; before they posted additional guards they'd search thoroughly.

The house next door was the answer; it was the same height and the roofs were only ten feet apart. And it wasn't guarded. But he'd better get in now. Later there might be a cordon around the whole block.

He took a tiny picklock out of the strap of his artificial hand: a bent wire as large as a small hairpin but as strong as a steel rod; and let himself in the door as casually as a returning householder would use his key. There were sounds at the back of the house, but he drew no attention as he went quietly up the stairs. He found the way out to the roof but didn't use it yet. Instead, he hid himself in the closet of what seemed to be an extra, unused bedroom.

He waited out five hours there, until it was almost twenty-two o'clock, and then let himself out on the roof. Being careful not to silhouette himself, he looked down and around. There were at least a dozen more vehicles parked on the street before Olliver's house and in the alley back of it than there should have been in a neighborhood like this one. The place was being watched, and closely.

The big danger was being seen during the jump from one roof to the next. But apparently no one saw him, and he landed lightly, as an acrobat lands. The sound he made might have been heard in the upstairs room immediately below him, but no farther. His picklock let him in the

door from the roof to the stairs and at the foot of them, the second floor, he waited for two or three minutes until utter silence convinced him there was no one on that floor.

He heard faint voices as he went down the next flight of steps to the first floor. One voice was Olliver's and the other that of a woman. He listened outside the door and when, after a while, he'd heard no other voices, he opened it and walked in.

Jon Olliver was seated behind a massive mahogany desk. For once, as he saw Crag, his poker face slipped. There was surprise in his eyes as well as in his voice as he said, "How in Heaven's name did you make it, Crag? I quit expecting you after I found the search was centering here. I thought you'd get in touch with me later, if at all."

Crag was looking at the woman. She was the technician who had given him his start toward freedom that afternoon. At least her features were the same. But she didn't wear the glasses now, and the technician's cap didn't hide the blazing glory of her hair. And, although the severe uniform she'd worn that afternoon hadn't hidden the voluptuousness of her figure, the gown she wore now accentuated every line of it. In the latest style, bare-midriffed, there was only a wisp of material above the waist. And the long skirt fitted her hips and thighs as a sheath fits a sword.

She was unbelievably beautiful.

She smiled at Crag, but spoke to Olliver. She said, "What does it matter *how* he got here, Jon? I told you he'd come."

Crag pulled his eyes away from her with an effort and looked at Olliver.

Olliver smiled too, now. He looked big and blond and handsome, like his campaign portraits.

He said, "I suppose that's right, Crag. It doesn't matter how you got here. And there's no use talking about the past. We'll get to brass tacks. But let's get one

more thing straight, first—an introduction."

He inclined his head toward the woman standing beside the desk. "Crag, Evadne. My wife."

## CHAPTER THREE

Evadne

C RAG almost laughed. It was the first time Olliver had been stupid. To think— Well, it didn't matter. He ignored it.

"Are we through horsing around now?" he asked.

Apparently Olliver either didn't recognize the archaic expression or didn't know what Crag meant by it. He raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean, Crag?"

"Making me take unnecessary risks just to show you how good I am."

"Oh, that. Yes, we're through horsing around. Pull up a chair, Crag. You sit down too, Evadne."

When they were comfortable, Olliver said, "First the background, Crag. You know the general political situation, but from the outside you probably don't know how bad it is."

"I know enough," Crag said.

"A two-party system, but both crooked. The only fortunate thing is the reasonably close balance of power between them. The Guilds—powerful organizations that evolved out of the workmen's unions of half a dozen centuries ago, pitted against the Syndicates—the Gilded—ruthless groups of capitalists and their reactionary satellites. The Guilds using intimidation as their weapon and the Gilded using bribery. Each group honeycombed with spies of the other—"

"I know all that."

"Of course. A third party, a middle-of-the-road one, is now being organized, under cover. We must get a certain amount of capital and of power before we can come out into the open." He smiled. "Or

they'll slap us down before we get really started."

"All I want to know," said Crag, "is what you want me to do. You can skip the build-up."

"All right. A certain man has a certain invention. He doesn't know it's valuable. I do. With that invention, our party could have unlimited funds. Billions. We've raised a war chest of several million among ourselves already. But it isn't enough. A party, these days, needs billions."

"Sounds simple," Crag said, "but have you offered the inventor the million you offered me?"

"He won't sell at any price. For one thing, he's immensely wealthy already, and a million wouldn't mean anything to him. For another, the thing is incidentally a weapon and it would be illegal for him to sell it."

"What do you mean, *incidentally* a

weapon?" Crag looked at him narrowly.

"That's its primary purpose, what it was made to be. But it's not a very efficient weapon; it kills, but it takes too long. It takes seconds, and whoever you killed with it could get you before he died. And the range is very limited.

"Its real importance, which he does not realize, lies in a by-product of its action."

Crag said, "All right, that part's none of my business. But tell me who and where the guy lives and what I'm looking for."

Olliver said, "When the times comes, you'll get the details. Something comes first—for your protection and mine. You won't be able to do this job right if you're wanted by the police, being hunted. For one thing, it's not on Earth. And you know—or should—how tough it is to get off Earth if the police are looking for you."

"Tough, but it can be done."

"Still, an unnecessary risk. And anyway, I promised you your freedom as part of this deal. I meant your full freedom, not as a hunted man."

"And how do you expect to swing *that*?" Crag asked.

"With Evadne's help. She's a psyker technician."

Crag turned and looked at her again. It didn't make him like her any better, but it did surprise him. To be a psyker technician you had to have a degree in psychiatry and another in electronics. To look at Evadne you wouldn't think of degrees, unless they were degrees of your own temperature.

Olliver said, "Now don't get excited, Crag, when I tell you that I'm going to send you—with your consent—to the psyker. It'll be a short-circuited one, with Evadne running it; it won't have any effect on you at all. But Evadne will certify you as adjusted."

Crag frowned. "How do I know the machine will be shorted?"

"Why would we cross you up on it, Crag? It would defeat our own purpose. If you *were* adjusted, you wouldn't do this job for me—or want to."

Crag glanced at the woman. She said, "You can trust me, Crag, that far."

It was a funny way of putting it and, possibly for that reason, he believed her. It seemed worth the gamble. If they thought he'd been through the psyker, he really would be free. Free to go anywhere, do anything. And otherwise he'd be hunted the rest of his life; if he was ever picked up for the slightest slip he'd be identified at once and sent to the psyker as an escaped convict. And without a psyker technician to render it useless.

Olliver was saying, "It's the only way, Crag. By tomorrow noon you'll be a free man and can return here openly. I'll hire you—presumably to drive my atocar and my space cruiser—and keep you here un-

til it's time to do the little job for me. Which will be in about a week."

Crag decided quickly. He said, "It's a deal. Do I go out and give myself up?"

Olliver opened a drawer of the big desk and took out a needle gun. He said, "There's a better way. Safer, that is. You killed a guard, you know, and they might shoot instead of capturing you if you went out of here. I'll bring them in instead, and I'll have you already captured. You came here to kill me, and I captured you. They won't dare to shoot you then."

Crag nodded, and backed up against the wall, his hands raised.

Olliver said, "Go and bring them in, my dear," to Evadne.

Crag's eyes followed her as she went to the door. Then they returned to Olliver's. Olliver had raised the needle gun and his eyes locked with Crag's. He said softly, "Remember, Crag, she's my wife."

Crag grinned insolently at him. He said, "You don't seem very sure of that."

For a moment he thought he'd gone too far, as Olliver's knuckles tightened on the handle of the gun. Then the men were coming in to get him, and they held the tableau and neither spoke again.

He was back in jail, in the same cell, within half an hour. One thing happened that he hadn't counted on—although he would have realized it was inevitable if he'd thought of it. They beat him into insensibility before they left him there. Common sense—or self-preservation—made him wise enough not to raise his hand, his left hand, against them. He might have killed two or even three of them, but there were six, and the others would have killed him if he'd killed even one.

He came back to consciousness about midnight, and pain kept him from sleeping the rest of the night. At ten in the morning, six guards came and took him back to the same room in which he had been tried the day before. This time there

was no jury and no attorneys. Just Crag, six guards, and Judge Olliver.

Sentence to the psycher was a formality.

Six guards took him back to his cell. And, because it was the last chance they'd have, they beat him again. Not so badly this time; he'd have to be able to walk to the psycher.

At twelve they brought him lunch, but he wasn't able to eat it. At fourteen, they came and escorted him to the psycher room. They strapped him in the chair, slapped his face a bit and one of them gave him a farewell blow in the stomach that made him glad he hadn't eaten, and then they left.

A FEW minutes later, Evadne came in. Again she was dressed as she had been when he'd first seen her. But this time her beauty showed through even more for, after having seen her dressed as she'd been the evening before, he knew almost every curve that the tailored uniform tried to hide. She wore the horn-rimmed glasses when she came in, but took them off as soon as she had locked the door from inside. Probably, Crag thought, they were only protective coloration.

She stood in front of him, looking down at his face, a slight smile on her lips.

She said, "Quit looking so worried, Crag. I'm not going to psych you—and even your suspicious, unadjusted nature will admit I'd have no reason for lying about it now, if I intended to. I've got you where I'd want you, if I wanted you."

He said nothing.

Her smile faded. "You know, Crag, I'd hate to adjust you, even if this was a straight deal. You're a magnificent brute. I think I like you better the way you are, than if you were a mild-mannered clerk or elevator operator. That's what you'd be if I turned that thing on, you know."

"Why not unstrap me?"

"With the door locked, and with us

alone? Oh, I'm not being femininely modest, Crag. I know you hate women. I also know your temper, and I know how you've probably been treated since last night. I'd have to watch every word I said to keep you from slapping me down—left-handed."

"You know about that?"

"Olliver—Jon—knows a lot about you."

"Then he must know I wouldn't hit a woman—unless she got in my way."

"But I might." She laughed. "And you'd have to let me strap you in again anyway. And that reminds me. You're supposed to be unconscious when I leave this room. You'll have to fake that. The guards come in and unstrap you. They take you to a hospital room until you come around."

"Helping me do so with rubber hose?"

"No, that's all over with. You'll be a new man—not the man who killed a guard yesterday. They won't have any resentment against you."

"How long am I supposed to be unconscious?"

"Half an hour to an hour. And you may leave as soon thereafter as you wish. Better stay an hour or two; most of them do. You're supposed to be a bit dazed when you come to, and to orient yourself gradually. And don't forget you're not supposed to remember your own name, or any crimes you've ever committed—or anything you've ever done, for that matter."

"Just like amnesia, huh?"

"Exactly like amnesia—and, besides that, all the causes of maladjustments are supposed to be removed. You're supposed to love everyone in particular and humanity in general."

Crag laughed. "And does a halo come with it?"

"I'm not joking, Crag. Take that idea seriously—at least until you're safely away from here. Don't act as though you

still have a chip on your shoulder or they may suspect that something went wrong with the psycher—and send you back for another try. And I'll be off duty by then."

"If I don't remember who I am—I mean, if I'm supposed not to remember—isn't it going to be funny for me to walk out without being curious? Do they just let psyched guys walk out without a name?"

"Oh, no. Each one has a sponsor, someone who volunteers to help orient them to a new life. Jon has volunteered to be your sponsor and to give you a job. You'll be told that and given his address and cab fare to get there. He's supposed to explain things to you when you see him, to orient you."

"What if a guy would lam instead of going to his sponsor?"

"After the psycher, they're adjusted. They wouldn't. Remember, Crag, you've got to play it to the hilt until you're safe at our house. If anyone steps on your toe, apologize."

Crag growled, and then laughed. It was the first time he'd laughed—with humor—in a long time. But the idea of him apologizing to anyone for anything was so ridiculous he couldn't help it.

Evadne reached across his shoulder and did something; he couldn't tell what because his head was strapped against the back of the chair.

"Disconnected a terminal," she said. "I'll have to run the machine for a while; someone might notice that it isn't drawing any current."

She went to one side of the room and threw a switch. A low humming sound filled the room, but nothing happened otherwise. Crag relaxed.

She was standing in front of him again. She said, "You know, Crag, I'm almost tempted to give you a partial psyching—just to find out what made you what you are."

"Don't start anything you don't finish,"

he said grimly. Both his hands clenched.

"Oh, I know that. I know perfectly well that if I got any information from you under compulsion—as I could if I reconnected that terminal—I'd have to finish the job and adjust you or blank you out. Your ego wouldn't let me stay alive if I knew things about you that you'd told me involuntarily."

"You're smarter than I thought," he said.

"That isn't being smart, for a psychiatrist. Even a layman could guess that. But, Crag, you've got to tell me a few things."

"Why?"

"So I can turn in a report. I don't have to turn in a detailed one, but I must at least write up a summary. I could fake it easily, but it just might be checked and fail to tally with some things about you that are already known. You can see that."

"Well—yes."

"For instance, the loss of your hand. That was back before you turned criminal, so the facts about it will be on record somewhere. And I'd be supposed to ask you about that because it may have been a factor in your turning against society."

"I guess it was," Crag said. "And, as you say, it's on record so there's no reason I shouldn't tell you. It happened on the *Vega III*, when I'd been a spaceman eight years. It was a pure accident—not my fault or anyone else's. Just one of those things that happen. Mechanical failure in a rocket tube set it off while I was cleaning it.

"But they sprang a technicality on me and kept me from getting the fifty thousand credits compensation I was entitled to. Not only that, but took my license and rating away from me, turned me from a spaceman into a one-handed bum."

"What was the technicality?"

"Test for alcohol. I'd had exactly one drink—a stirrup cup, one small glass of



wine—six hours before, which was two hours before we left Mars. Orders are no drinks eight hours before blast-off, and I hadn't drunk anything for longer than that, except that one drink. And it had nothing to do with the accident—nobody feels one glass of wine six hours after. But they used it to save themselves what I had coming."

"And after that?"

"After that I got kicked around a while until I started in to do my share of the kicking."

"That wouldn't have been very long," she said. It wasn't a question and he didn't answer it.

She said, "I know what crimes they know you committed—without having been able to prove it. I'll say you confessed to them."

Crag shrugged. "Tell them what you like."

"Why do you hate women so much?"

"Is that personal curiosity? Or does it have to go in your report?"

She smiled. "As a matter of fact, both."

"I was married at the time I lost my job and my hand and my license. To a girl with hair like yours. Married only a few months and mad about her. Do I have to draw a diagram of what she did to me?"

She said soberly, "I can guess."

"You should be able to. You're more beautiful than she. And more evil."

Her face flamed and for a moment he thought she was going to strike him. But training told, and in seconds she was smiling again.

She said, "Not evil, Crag. Just ruthless, like you. I try to get what I want. But we're not psyching me, and it's time to end this now. Close your eyes and pretend to be unconscious."

He did. He heard her walk to the wall and throw the switch that shut off the machine. She came back and reconnected the terminal behind his shoulder, and still he kept his eyes closed.

He'd half-expected it, but it jarred him when it came. It was a kiss that should have wakened a statue, but—out-

wardly—he took it with complete passiveness. He kept his own lips still.

And he hated her the more because the kiss brought to life in him things he'd thought were dead. And he knew that he'd hate her forever and probably kill her when he saw her again if, now, she laughed.

But she didn't laugh, or even speak. She left the room very quietly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### New Life

A FEW minutes later the guards came. Only two of them this time; they weren't afraid of him now. They unstrapped him from the chair and carried him somewhere on a stretcher and rolled him off onto a bed.

When he was pretty sure that at least half an hour had gone by, he opened his eyes and looked around as though dazed. But the acting had been unnecessary; he was alone in a room. A few minutes later a nurse looked in and found him sitting up.

She came on into the room. "How are you feeling, sir?"

Crag shook his head. He said, "I feel all right, but I can't seem to remember anything. Who I am, or how I got here—wherever here is."

She smiled at him and sat down on the chair beside the bed. "You've just had—the equivalent of an attack of amnesia. That's all I'm supposed to tell you. But as soon as you feel equal to it, we'll send you to a man who will explain everything to you, and help you. Meanwhile, there's nothing for you to worry about. When you feel able to leave, come to the desk in the hall and I'll give you the address and money to get there."

Crag swung his feet off the bed. "I can go now," he said. But he made his voice sound uncertain.

"Please lie down and rest a while first. There's no hurry."

She went out, and Crag lay back down, obediently. He let another half hour pass and then went out into the corridor and to the desk. The nurse looked up at him and handed him a card and a ten-credit note. She said, "Please go to that address before you do anything else. Judge Olliver has a job for you and he will explain about your amnesia and tell you as much as it is necessary for you to know about your past."

He thanked her and went out, alert to watch his temper if any incident were staged to test him. But none was, although he was, he felt sure, watched to see whether he headed immediately for the atocab stand just outside the building and gave the address he'd been handed on the card—an address he already knew but pretended to read off the card to the cabby.

Twenty minutes later he walked up to the guard at Olliver's front door and asked if he might see the Judge.

"Your name Crag?"

He almost said yes before he thought. "Sounds silly," he said, "but I don't know my name. I was sent here to find out."

The guard nodded and let him in. "He's waiting for you," he said. "Second door down the hall."

Crag entered the small room in which he'd talked to Olliver and Evadne the evening before. Only Olliver was there now, at the desk.

"Everything go all right?" he asked.

Crag threw himself into a chair. "Perfect," he said, "except for two beatings-up that weren't on the menu."

"You should feel it's worth that to be free, Crag. And now—you're still interested in earning that million?"

"Yes. But the price has gone up."

Olliver frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean besides that I want you to do a spot of research downtown and get

me twelve names, and addresses for each. The six guards who put me in a cell last night and the six—they were different ones—who put me back in the cell after the trial this morning.”

Olliver stared at him a moment and then laughed. He said, “All right, but not till after the job is over. Then if you’re fool enough to want to look them up, it’s your business, not mine.”

“Which gets us to the job. Where is it, what is it, how long will it take.”

“It’s on Mars. We’re going there in four days; I can’t get away any sooner than that. I told you what it is—a job of burglary, but not a simple one. How long it takes depends on you; I imagine you’ll need some preparation, but if you can’t do it in a few weeks, you can’t do it at all.”

“Fair enough,” Crag said. “But if I’ve got that long to wait, how about an advance?”

“Again on a condition, Crag. I don’t want you to get into any trouble before you’ve done the job. I want you to stay here. You can send out for anything you want.”

Crag’s short nod got him a thousand credits.

He needed sleep, having got none the night before because of pain from the first, and worst, beating. And every muscle in his body still ached.

But before he even tried to sleep he sent out for Martian *zot*, and drank himself into insensibility.

**H**E SLEPT, then, until late afternoon of the next day. When he woke, he drank the rest of the liquor and then went downstairs, not quite steady on his feet and with his eyes blood-shot and bleary. But under control, mentally.

And it was probably well that he was, for in the downstairs hallway, he encountered Evadne for the first time since

his return to Olliver’s. She glanced at him and took in his condition, then passed him without speaking and with a look of cold contempt that—well, if he *hadn’t* been under control mentally—

The next day he was sober, and stayed that way. He told himself he hated Evadne too much to let her see him otherwise. And after that he spent most of his time reading. He had breakfast and lunch alone, but ate dinner with Olliver and Evadne, and spent part of the evening with them.

He didn’t mention the job again; it was up to Olliver, he thought, to bring that up. And Olliver did, on the evening of the third day.

He said, “We’re going to Mars tomorrow, Crag. Forgot to ask you one thing. Can you pilot a Class AB space cruiser, or do I hire us a pilot?”

“I can handle one.”

“You’re sure? It’s space-warp drive, you know. As I understand it, the last ship you worked on was rocket.”

Crag said, “The last ship I flew legally was rocket. But how about a license, unless you want to land in a back alley on Mars?”

“You’re licensed. If a license is invalidated for any reason other than incompetency, it’s automatically renewed if you’ve been readjusted through the psycher. And today I picked up a stat of your license and a copy of the psycher certificate. After I got them, though, I remembered I didn’t know whether you could handle space-warp.”

Evadne said, “It doesn’t matter, Jon. I’m licensed; I can handle the cruiser.”

“I know, my dear. But I’ve told you; I do not think it safe to travel in space with only one person who is qualified to pilot the ship. Perhaps I’m ultra-conservative, but why take unnecessary risks?”

Crag asked, “Ready now to tell me about the job?”

"Yes. When we reach Mars, we'll separate. Evadne and I will stay in Marsport until you have—accomplished your mission."

"Which is to be done where?"

"You've heard of Kurt Eisen?"

"The one who helped develop space-warp?"

"That's the one. He has his laboratory and home just outside Marsport. He's fabulously wealthy; it's a tremendous estate. About eighty employes, thirty of them armed guards. The place is like a fortress. It'll almost have to be an inside job—another good reason why you couldn't have handled it without a psyker certificate."

Crag nodded. "At least it will be easier if I can get in. And just what am I looking for after I get there?"

"A device that looks like a flat pocket flashlight. Blued steel case. Lens in the center of one end, just like an atomic flashlight, but the lens is green and opaque—opaque to light, that is."

"You've seen it?"

"No. The party's source of information is a technician who used to work for Eisen. He's now a member of the party. He worked with Eisen in developing it, but can't make one by himself; he wasn't fully in Eisen's confidence—just allowed to help with details of design. Oh, and if you can get the plans, it'll help. We can duplicate the original, but it'll be easier from the plans. And one other thing. Don't try it out."

"All right," Crag said, "I won't try it out—on one condition. That you tell me what it is and what it does. Otherwise, my curiosity might get the better of me."

Olliver frowned, but he answered. "It's a disintegrator. It's designed to negate the—well, I'm not up on atomic theory, so I can't give it to you technically. But it negates the force that holds the electrons to the nucleus. In effect, it collapses matter into neutronium."

Crag whistled softly. "And you say it's an ineffective weapon?"

"Yes, because its range is so short. The size needed increases as the cube of the cube of the distance—or something astronomical like that. The one you're after works up to three feet. To make one that would work at a hundred feet it would have to be bigger than a house. And for a thousand feet—well, there aren't enough of the necessary raw materials in the Solar System to build one; it would have to be the size of a small planet. And besides, there's a time lag. The ray from the disintegrator sets up a chain reaction in any reasonably homogeneous object it's aimed at, but it takes seconds to get it started. So if you shoot at somebody—at a few feet distance—they're dead all right, but they've got time to kill you before they find it out." Olliver smiled. "Your left hand is much more effective, Crag, and has about the same range."

"Then why is it worth a million credits to you?"

"I told you, the by-product. Neutronium."

Crag had heard of neutronium; every spaceman knew that some of the stars were made of almost completely collapsed matter weighting a dozen tons to the cubic inch. Dwarf stars, the size of Earth and the weight of the sun. But no such collapsed matter existed in the Solar System. Not that there was any reason why it shouldn't—if a method had been found to make atoms pack themselves solidly together. Pure neutronium would be unbelievably heavy, heavier than the center of any known star.

"Neutronium," he said, thoughtfully. "But what would you use it for? How could you handle it? Wouldn't it sink through anything you tried to hold it in and come to rest at the center of the earth—or whatever planet you made it on?"

"You're smart, Crag. It would. You

couldn't use it for weighting chessmen. I know how to capitalize on it—but that's one thing I don't think you have to know. Although I may tell you later, after you've turned over the disintegrator."

Crag shrugged. It wasn't his business, after all. A million credits was enough for him, and let Olliver and his party capitalize on neutronium however they wished. He asked, "Did this technician who worked for Eisen give you a diagram of the place?"

Olliver opened a drawer of the desk and handed Crag an envelope.

Crag spent the rest of the evening studying its contents.

**T**HEY took off from Albuquerque spaceport the following afternoon and landed on Mars a few hours later. As soon as the cruiser was hangared, they separated, Crag presumably quitting his job with Olliver. He promised to report in not more than two weeks.

A man named Lane Knutson was his first objective. He had full details about Knutson and an excellent description of him; that had been an important part of the contents of the envelope he had studied the final evening on Earth. Knutson was the head guard at Eisen's place

and did the hiring of the other guards. According to Crag's information, he hung out, in his off hours, in spacemen's dives in the tough section of Marsport.

Crag hung out there, too, but spent his time circulating from place to place instead of settling down in any one. He found Knutson on the third day. He couldn't have missed him, from the description. Knutson was six feet six and weighed two hundred ninety. He had arms like an ape and the strength and disposition of a Venusian *draatr*.

Crag might have made friends with him in the normal manner, but he took a short cut by picking a quarrel. With Knutson's temper, the distance between a quarrel and a fight was about the same as the distance between adjacent grapes under pressure in a wine press.

Crag let himself get the worst of it for a minute or two, so Knutson wouldn't feel too bad about it, and then used his left hand twice, very lightly, pulling his punches. Once in the guts to bend the big man over, and then a light flick to the side of the jaw, careful not to break bone. Knutson was out cold for five minutes.

After that, they had a drink together and got chummy. Within half an hour Crag had admitted that he was looking

for a job—and was promptly offered one.

He reported for work the following day and, after Knutson had shown him around, he was glad he hadn't decided to try the outside. The place really was a fortress. A twenty-foot-high electronic barrier around the outside; inside that, worse things. But it didn't matter, since he was already inside. Even so, he had to undergo a strenuous physical and verbal examination and Olliver had been right about the psycher certificate; without it, he'd have been out on his ear within an hour.

He spent the next five days learning all the ropes. He knew where the big safe was—in the laboratory. But he wanted to learn the position of every guard and every alarm between the room in which he slept and the laboratory itself. Fortunately, he was given a day shift.

On the fifth night he made his way to the laboratory and found himself facing the blank sheet of durasteel that was the door of the safe. All his information about that safe was that the lock was magnetic and that there were two alarms.

He'd brought nothing with him—all employees were searched on their way in as well as on their way out—but all the materials he needed to make anything he wanted were there at hand in the laboratory. He made himself a detector and traced two pairs of wires through the walls from the safe into adjacent rooms and found the two alarms—both hidden inside air ducts—to which they were connected. He disconnected both alarms and then went back to the safe. On Eisen's desk near it, he'd noticed a little horseshoe magnet—a toy—that was apparently used as a paperweight. He got the hunch (which saved him much time) that, held in the proper position against that sheet of steel—six by six feet square—it would open the door.

And, unless it was exactly at one corner, there'd have to be a mark on the door to

show where the magnet was to be held. The durasteel door made it easy for him; there weren't any accidental marks or scratches on it to confuse him. Only an almost imperceptible fly-speck about a foot to the right of the center. But fly-specks scrape off and this mark didn't—besides, there are no flies on Mars.

He tried the magnet in various positions about the speck and when he tried holding it with both poles pointing upward and the speck exactly between them, the door swung open.

The safe—it was a vault, really, almost six feet square and ten or twelve feet deep—contained so many things that it was almost harder to find what he was looking for than it had been to open the safe. But he found it. Luckily, there was a tag attached to it with a key number which made it easy to find the plans for the disintegrator in the file drawers at the back of the safe.

He took both disintegrator and plans to the workbenches of the laboratory. Eisen couldn't possibly have provided better equipment for a burglar who wished to leave a possible duplicate of whatever object he wanted to steal. And he'd even provided a perfectly sound-proofed laboratory so even the noisier of the power-tools could be used safely. Within an hour, Crag had made what, outwardly, was a reasonably exact duplicate of the flashlight-sized object he was stealing. It didn't have any insides in it, and it wouldn't have disintegrated anything except the temper of a man who tried to use it, but it looked good. He put the tag from the real one on it and replaced it in the proper drawer in the safe.

He spent a little longer than that forging a duplicate of the plans. Not *quite* a duplicate; he purposely varied a few things so that no one except Eisen himself could make a successful disintegrator from them.

He spent another hour removing every

trace of his visit. He reconnected the alarms, removed every trace—except a minute shortage of stock—of his work in the laboratory, made sure that every tool was restored to place, and put back the toy magnet on the exact spot and at the exact angle on Eisen's desk that it had been before.

When he left the laboratory there was nothing to indicate that he had been there—unless Eisen should ever again decide to try out his disintegrator. And since he had tried it once and presumably discarded it as practically useless, that didn't seem likely.

There remained only the obstacle of getting it out of the grounds, and that was simple. One large upstairs room was a museum which held Eisen's collection of artifacts of the Martian aborigines. Crag had seen several primitive bows and quivers of arrows. He wrapped and fastened the plans around the shaft of a long, strong arrow and securely tied the disintegrator to its crude metal head. He went on up to the roof and shot the arrow high into the air over the electronic barrier and the strip of cleared ground outside it, into the thick jungle beyond.

It was almost dawn. He went back to his room and got two hours of needed sleep. The hard part was over. The little capsule he'd brought with him would take care of the rest of it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Glory Hunters

**H**E TOOK the capsule as soon as the alarm buzzer awakened him, half an hour before he was to report for duty. It was the one thing he'd smuggled in with him, perfectly hidden in a box of apparently identical capsules containing neobenzedrine, the standard preventive of Martian amoebic fever. All Earthmen on Mars took neobenzedrine.

One of the capsules in Crag's box, though, contained a powder of similar color but of almost opposite effect. It wouldn't give him amoebic fever, but it would produce perfectly counterfeited symptoms.

He could, of course, simply have quit, but that might just possibly have aroused suspicion; it might have led to a thorough check-up of the laboratory and the contents of the safe. And he couldn't suddenly become disobedient in order to get himself fired. Psyched men didn't act that way.

The capsule took care of it perfectly. He started to get sick at his stomach. Knutson came by and found Crag retching out a window. As soon as Crag pulled his head back in, Knutson took a look at Crag's eyes; the pupils were contracted almost to pinpoints. He touched Crag's forehead and found it hot. And Crag admitted, when asked, that he'd probably forgotten to take his neobenzedrine for a few days.

That was that. There's no known cure for Martin amoebic fever except to get away from Mars at the first opportunity. He neither quit nor was fired. Knutson took him to the office and got his pay for him and then asked him whether he could make it back to Marsport by himself or if he wanted help. Crag said he could make it.

The search of his person and effects was perfunctory; he could probably have smuggled the tiny gadget and the single piece of paper out in his luggage. But the arrow had been safer.

Outside, as soon as jungle screened him from view, he took another capsule, one that looked just like the first but that counteracted it. He waited until the worst of the nausea from the first capsule had passed and then hid his luggage while he hunted for the arrow and found it.

Olliver had told him not to try it, but he tried it anyway. It wasn't exactly that

he didn't trust Olliver—after all, if he got paid off, and he'd make sure of that, nothing else mattered—it was just that he was curious whether Olliver had told him the truth about the disintegrator's limitations.

He waited until he'd put a little more distance between himself and Eisen's place and then aimed the gadget at a bush and tripped the thumb catch. He held it about four feet from the bush the first time and nothing happened. He moved it to about two feet from the bush and tripped the catch again. He thought for a while that nothing was going to happen, but after a few seconds the bush took on a misty look, and then, quite abruptly, it wasn't there any more.

Olliver had told the truth, then. The thing had an effective range of only about three feet, and there was a definite time lag.

The rest of the way into Marsport—afoot as far as the edge of town and by atocab the rest of the way—he tried to figure out what Olliver's use for neutronium might be. He couldn't. In the first place he couldn't see how Olliver could *get* the collapsed matter, the tons-to-a-square-inch stuff, once he'd disintegrated objects into it. The bush he'd tried it on hadn't seemed to collapse inward on itself; it had simply disintegrated all at once and the dead atoms of it had probably fallen through the crust of Mars as easily as rain falls through air.

He still hadn't figured an answer when he reached the swanky Marsport hotel where Olliver and Evadne were staying.

He had himself announced from the desk and then went up to Olliver's suite. Olliver, his face both eager and tense, let him in. He didn't ask the question, but Crag nodded.

Evadne, he saw as he walked past Olliver, was there. She was sitting on the sofa looking at him, her eyes enigmatic. Crag tried not to look at her. It was dif-

ficult. She was dressed even more revealingly than she had been dressed the first night he had seen her at Olliver's house in Albuquerque, back on Earth. And she looked even more beautiful.

Crag decided he wanted to get away from there, quick. He took the disintegrator and the folded plans from his pocket and put them on the table.

Olliver picked them up with unconcealed eagerness.

Crag said, "One million credits. Then we're through."

Olliver put gadget and paper in one pocket and took out a wallet from another. He said drily, "I don't carry a million in ready change, Crag. The bulk of it is back on Earth; I'll have to give it to you there. But so you won't worry or think I'm stalling, I did bring two hundred thousand credits with me. Eight hundred thousand's waiting for you back home."

Crag nodded curtly, and took the offered money. He counted it roughly and put it in his pocket. It was more money than he'd ever had or hoped to have in one chunk. He was set for life, even if he never got the rest.

He asked, "At your home? Shall I look you up there?"

Olliver looked surprised. "Why not come back with us? We're leaving at once, now that I have this. As soon as we can get clearance. We're making one brief stopover—going one other place first, that is—but we'll be home within hours. You may have to wait days to get public transport, and you know all the red tape you'll have to go through."

It made sense, but Crag hesitated.

Olliver laughed. "Afraid of me, Crag? Afraid I'm going to disintegrate you en route? To get my money back?" He laughed harder; there was almost hysterical amusement in the laughter. Obviously the gadget Crag had stolen for him excited him immensely. "You needn't worry, Crag. With this—" He slapped his



pocket. "—a million credits is peanuts to me."

From the sofa, Evadne's voice said with languid amusement, "He isn't afraid of you, Jon. He's afraid of me."

Crag didn't look at her. He was watching Olliver's face and he saw amusement change to jealousy and anger.

Crag hadn't been afraid of Olliver. It had occurred to him only as a remote possibility that Olliver might try to kill him. Now, from the look on Olliver's face, his trying to kill Crag looked like a fair bet. Not, though, to get his money back.

Crag said, "All right, Olliver. I might as well go with you."

Deliberately he turned away from possible danger to lock glances with Evadne.

She was smiling at him.

**T**HEY got to the spaceport within an hour and through the formalities of clearance before noon.

Crag didn't ask, "Well, where?" until he was in the pilot's seat of the little cruiser.

"Asteroid belt," Olliver told him.

"Where in the belt? What asteroid?"

"Doesn't matter. Any one big enough to land on."

Crag had lifted the computation shelf, ready to calculate distance and direction. He folded the shelf back; a jump of a

hundred million miles, straight out from the sun, would put him in the middle of the belt. He set the controls, made the jump, and put the ship back on manual control. His detectors would show the presence of any of the asteroids within ten million miles. They showed the presence of several right now.

He turned to Olliver. He said, "We're near Ceres. Four hundred eighty mile diameter. That one do?"

"Too big, Crag. It'd take days. Pick the smallest one you can land on."

Crag nodded and studied the other asteroids showing on the detector and picked the smallest of them. It wasn't much bigger than a fair-sized house but he could land on it. He did. Rather, he killed the inertia of the spaceship after pulling alongside the tiny asteroid and matching his speed to its. Ship and asteroid bumped together, held by not much more than a pound of gravitational pull between them. Had the asteroid had an atmosphere, the ship would have floated in it, so slight was the attraction.

Olliver clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice work, Crag. Want to put on a spacesuit and come out to watch the fun?"

Crag locked the controls. "Why not?"

He saw now what Olliver intended to do—try out the disintegrator on the asteroid. And he saw now how Olliver could get neutronium. Disintegrating an asteroid was different from disintegrating

an object on the crust of a planet. Instead of falling through the crust, the asteroid would collapse within itself, into a tiny, compact ball of neutronium. Maybe the size of an apple or an orange. It could be loaded—

He stopped suddenly, half in and half out of the spacesuit he had started to pull on. He said, "Olliver, you can't take it back with you. Sure, we can put it in the spaceship, but when we get back to Earth we can't land with it. Near Earth, it's going to weigh ten times—maybe twenty times—as much as the ship itself. It'll either tear a hole through the hull or crash us, one or the other."

Olliver laughed. He was picking up a thermoglass helmet but hadn't put it on yet. He said, "This is just a tryout, Crag. We're not taking any neutronium back with us."

Crag finished putting on the spacesuit. Olliver had his helmet on, and Evadne was adjusting hers. He couldn't talk to either of them, now, until he had his own helmet on. Then the suit-radios would take care of communication.

He saw now how neutronium could be obtained, all right. There were rocks a lot smaller than this one whizzing around the belt, ones that weighed only a few tons, that a spaceship could handle easily and transport back to Earth after they'd been converted into collapsed matter.

He didn't see, as yet, what practical use neutronium could have that would make it as immensely valuable as Olliver seemed to think it would be. But that wasn't his business.

He got his helmet on, and nodded that he was ready. Evadne was standing by the air controls and she pulled a switch when he nodded. A space cruiser as small as Olliver's never had an airlock; it was simpler, if one wished to leave it in space or on an airless body, to exhaust the air from the entire ship and let the airmaker rebuild an atmosphere after one returned

to the ship—and before removing one's spacesuit.

Now, in the earphones of his helmet, he heard Olliver's voice say, "Come on. Hurry up." Olliver opened the door and the last of the air whished out. But then, before stepping out, Olliver went back past Crag to the controls. He turned the lock on them and put the small but quite complicated key into one of the capacious pockets of his spacesuit. The plans for the disintegrator, Crag knew, were in the innermost pocket of his jumper.

Crag wondered which one of them he distrusted, or if it was both. Not that it mattered.

Crag shrugged and stepped out onto the tiny asteroid. Evadne followed him, and then Olliver.

He heard Olliver take a deep breath and say, "Heré goes."

Olliver was pointing the little disintegrator down at the rocky surface of the asteroid, bending over so it was only a foot from the rock. Crag couldn't hear the click, but he saw Olliver's thumb move the catch.

Crag asked, "How long will it take?"

"For something this size? I'd guess half an hour to an hour. But we won't have to wait till it's completely collapsed. When it's gone down enough that I'm sure—"

Crag looked about him, at the spaceship behind them, bumping gently against the surface of the asteroid, right at the shadow line that divided night and day. Strange that a world only twenty or thirty yards in diameter should have night and day—and yet darkness on the night side would be even denser than the darkness on the night side of Earth.

*Time, Crag thought, and its relation to distance are strange on a world like this.* If he walked twenty paces ahead and put himself right under distant, tiny Sol, it would be high noon. Thirty or forty more steps—held down to the light asteroid only

by the gravplates on the shoes of the spacesuit—and he'd be in the middle of the night side; it would be midnight.

He chuckled at the fancy. "It's a small world," he said, remembering that Olliver had said that to him in the conversation between judge and prisoner at the end of the trial, the conversation that had led to all of this.

Olliver laughed excitedly, almost hysterically. "And it's getting smaller already—I think. Don't you, Crag, Evadne?"

Crag looked about him and tried to judge, but if there'd been any shrinkage as yet, he couldn't tell. He heard Evadne say, "I'm not sure yet, Jon."

Olliver said, "We can be sure in a few seconds. I've got a rule." He took a steel foot rule from one of the pockets of his spacesuit and laid it down on a flat expanse of rock. He picked up a loose bit of rock and made a scratch opposite each end of the rule.

Evadne walked over near Crag. Her eyes, through the plastic of the helmet, looked into his intensely, searchingly. He got the idea that she wanted to ask him a question and didn't dare—because Olliver would have heard it too—but was trying to find the answer by looking at him and reading his face. He met her gaze squarely, trying to guess what she was thinking or wondering. It hadn't anything to do, he felt sure just then, with the fact that he was a man and she a woman. It was something more important than that.

He heard Olliver's voice say, "*I think so. I think it's—Wait, let's be sure.*"

He turned away from Evadne and watched Olliver as Olliver watched the rule and the scratches on the rock. There was tension among them, but no one spoke. A minute or two went by, and then Olliver stood up and faced them.

His eyes were shining—almost as though with madness—but his voice was

calm now. He said, "It works." He looked from one to the other of them and then his eyes stopped on Crag. He said, "Crag, your million credits is waste paper. How would you like to be second in command of the Solar System?"

For the first time, Crag wondered if Olliver were mad.

The thought must have showed in his face, for Olliver shook his head. "I'm not crazy, Crag. Nor do I know any commercial use for neutronium. That was camouflage. Listen, Crag—*A few of these little gadgets set up in hidden places on each of the occupied planets, set up with radio controls so they can be triggered off from wherever I may be—that's all it will take.* If this works on an asteroid—and it has—it'll work on an object of any size. A chain reaction doesn't care whether it works in a peanut or a planet."

Crag said slowly, "You mean—"

"You might as well know all of it, Crag. There isn't any political party behind this. That was just talk. The only way peace can be kept in the system is by the rule of *one man*. But I'll need help, Crag, and you're the man I'd rather have, in spite of—" His voice changed. "Evadne, that's useless."

C RAG looked quickly toward the woman and saw that she'd pulled a heater from the pocket of her spacesuit and was aiming it at Olliver. Olliver laughed. He said, "I thought it was about time for you to show your colors, my dear. I expected that, really. I took the charge out of that heater."

Evadne pulled the trigger and nothing happened. Crag saw her face go pale—but it seemed anger rather than fear.

She said, "All right, you beat me on that one, Jon. But someone will stop you, somehow. Do you realize that you couldn't do what you plan without destroying a planet or two—billions of lives, Jon—and that Earth itself would have to be one of

the ones you destroyed? Because Earth is the—the fightingest one and wouldn't knuckle under to you, even on a threat like that? Jon, you'd kill off more than half of the human race, just to rule the ones who are left!"

She didn't drop the useless heater, but it hung at her side.

Olliver had one in his own hand now. He said, "Take it away from her, Crag."

Crag looked from one of them to the other. And he looked around him. The asteroid *was* shrinking. There was now a definite diminution in diameter, perhaps by a tenth.

Olliver spoke again and more sharply. "Take it away from her, Crag."

Olliver's blaster covered both of them. He could have killed Evadne where she stood; the command was meaningless, and Crag knew it was a test. Olliver was making him line up, one way or the other.

Crag thought of Earth, that he hated. And he thought of it as a dead little ball of heavy matter—and he didn't hate it that much. But to be second in command—not of a world, but of *worlds*—

Olliver said, "Your last chance, Crag. And listen—don't think I'm blind to you and Evadne. But I didn't care. She's been spying on me all along. I know the outfit she belongs to—a quixotic group that's trying to end system-wide corruption another way, a way that won't work. She's a spy, Crag, and I don't want her.

"Here are my final terms and you've got a few seconds to decide. Disarm her now, and I won't kill her. We'll take her back, and you can have her if you're silly enough to want her—out of billions of women who'll be yours for the taking."

Maybe that was all it took. Crag decided.

He reached for Evadne with his good hand, seeing the look of cold contempt in her eyes—and the puzzlement in her eyes as he swung her around instead of reach-

ing for the useless gun she held. He said quickly, "*Night side!*" He propelled her forward ahead of him and then ran after her. He hoped Olliver's reflexes would be slow. They *had* to be.

On a tiny and shrinking asteroid, the horizon isn't far. It was a few steps on this one, and they were over it in less than a second. He heard Olliver curse and felt a wave of heat go past him, just too late. And then they were in the darkness.

He found Evadne by running into her and grabbed her and held on because there wasn't going to be much time. In seconds, Olliver would realize that he didn't have to come after them, that all he had to do was to get into the ship and warp off—or even just close the door and sit it out until they were dead. Even though Olliver wasn't a qualified pilot he could, with the help of the manual of instructions inside the ship, have a fair chance of getting it back to Earth or Mars.

So Crag said quickly, "I can stop him. But it's curtains for both of us, too. Shall I?"

She caught her breath, but there wasn't any hesitation in her answer. "Hurry, Crag. Hurry."

He ran on around the night side—ten steps—to the ship. He braced his feet as he lifted it and then threw it out into space—the whole pound weight of it. It seemed to go slowly, but it kept going. It would keep going for a long time, from that throw. It might come back, eventually, but not for hours—and the air in spacesuits of this type was good for only half an hour or so without processing or renewal.

Olliver would never rule a system now, only the tiniest world.

But all three of them were dead. He heard Olliver scream madly with rage and saw him come running over the horizon for a shot at him. Crag laughed and ducked back into blackness. He ran into Evadne, who had followed him. He caught

her quickly as he crashed into her. He said, "Give me the heater, quick," and took it from her hand.

He could see Olliver standing there, heater in hand, just where the spaceship had been, peering into the darkness, trying to see where to shoot them. But he could see Olliver and Olliver, on the day side, couldn't see him.

He'd rather have had his metal hand to throw—he was used to using that and could hit a man's head at twenty or thirty feet. But the heater-gun would serve now; Olliver wasn't even ten feet away and he couldn't miss.

He didn't miss. The missile shattered Olliver's helmet.

Crag walked forward into the light, keeping between Evadne and Olliver so she wouldn't have to see. A man whose helmet has been shattered in space isn't a pleasant sight.

He reached down and got the disin-

tegrator out of Olliver's pocket. He used it.

Evadne came up and took his arm as he stood there, looking upward, seeing a distant gleam of sunlight on an object that was still moving away from them. He wished now he hadn't thrown the spaceship so hard; had he tossed it lightly it might conceivably have returned before the air in his and Evadne's spacesuits ran out. But he couldn't have been sure he could get Olliver before Olliver, who had a loaded heater, could get him. And when the asteroid got small enough, the night side would no longer have been a protection. You can hide on the night side of a world—but not when it gets as small as a basketball.

Evadne said, "Thanks, Crag. You were— Is *wonderful* too hackneyed a word?"

Crag grinned at her. He said, "It's a wonderful word."

He put his arms around her.

And then laughed. Here he was with two hundred thousand credits—a fortune—in his pocket and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. And her arms were around him too and—you can't even kiss a woman in a spacesuit! Any more than you can spend a fortune on an asteroid without even a single tavern on it.

An asteroid that was now less than ten yards in diameter.

Evadne laughed too, and he was glad, very glad of that. It *was* funny—if you saw it that way—and it made things easier in this last moment that she could see it that way too.

He saw she was breathing with difficulty. She said, "Crag—my dear—this suit must not have had its tank fully charged with oxygen. I'm afraid I can't—stay with you much longer."

He held her tighter. He couldn't think of anything to say.

She said, "But we stopped him, Crag. Someday humanity will get itself out of the mess it's in now. And when it does, there'll still—be an Earth—for it to live on."

"Was he right, Evadne? I mean, about your being a member of some secret organization?"

"No. He either made that up or imagined it. I was—just his wife, Crag. But I'd stopped loving him months ago. I knew, though, he planned to buy or steal that gadget of Eisen's—he'd have got it somehow, even if we hadn't helped him. And I suspected, but didn't know, that he was planning something—bad. I stayed with him so I'd have a chance to try to stop him if—I was right."

She was breathing harder. Her arms tightened around him. She said, "Crag, I want that—gadget. I'll use it on myself; I won't ask you to. But it will be sudden and painless, not—like this." She was fighting for every breath now, but she

laughed again. "Guess I'm lying, Crag. I'm not afraid to die either way. But I've—seen people who died—*this* way and they're—well—I don't want you to see me—like that. I'd—rather—"

He pressed it into her hand. He tightened his arms one last time and then stepped quickly back because he could hear and see how much pain she was in now, how every breath was becoming agony for her. He looked away, as he knew she wanted him to.

And when he looked back, after a little while, there was nothing there to see; nothing at all.

Except the disintegrator itself, lying there on a sphere now only six feet across. He picked it up. There was still one thing to do. Someone, sometime, might find this collapsed asteroid, attracted to it by the fact that his detector showed a mass greater than the bulk shown in a visiplat. If he found the gadget clinging there beside it—

He was tempted to use it instead, to take the quicker way instead of the slower, more painful one. But he took it apart, throwing each tiny piece as far out into space as he could. Maybe some of them would form orbits out there and maybe others would fall back. But no one would ever gather *all* the pieces and manage to put them together again.

He finished, and the world he lived on was less than a yard in diameter now and it was still shrinking. He disconnected his gravplates because there wasn't any use trying to stand on it. But it was as heavy as it had ever been; there was still enough gravitational pull to keep him bumping gently against it. Of course he could push himself away from it now and go sailing off into space. But he didn't. Somehow, it was companionship.

A small world, he thought, and getting smaller.

The size of an orange now. He laughed as he put it into his pocket.