

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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Just Around the Corner . . . . . 4 <i>by William Scarff</i>
Miracle in the Moluccas . . . . . 30 <i>by F. B. Bryning</i>
Who? . . . . . 39 <i>by Algis Budrys</i>
The Quality of Mercy . . . . . 49 <i>by Robert F. Young</i>
Life, Incorporated . . . . . 59 <i>by Alice Eleanor Jones</i>
Witch Hunt . . . . . 75 <i>by Len Guttridge</i>
The Visitor from Space . . . . . 81 <i>by J. Harvey Haggard</i>
Bye Bye, Mindy . . . . . 89 <i>by Milton Lesser</i>
A Rite for Stalek . . . . . 99 <i>by Dorothy Madlé</i>
Arrival at Anxiety . . . . . 109 <i>by Jerome Bishop</i>
Thunderbolt . . . . . 114 <i>by John A. Sentry</i>
The Hollywood Habit . . . . . 119 <i>by William Morrison</i>
Devil Play . . . . . 125 <i>by Nathaniel Norsen Weinreb</i>

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# life, incorporated

by . . . Alice Eleanor Jones

As radiantly beautiful as a dream of paradise was Kryl, its citizens generous and trusting. But Baxter bore with him the serpent's sting.

"AND THIS," explained Ané the Kryllan, waving a graceful hand toward the soaring white building, "is the Office of Engraving."

Baxter looked at the towering edifice thoughtfully. "Print money there, do they?"

"Money?" Ané looked bewildered. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Some of your telepathic images are not quite . . . oh, *credits*, you mean. Yes, those, too. But credits are of no great importance. What is really vital is the manufacture of life tags."

Baxter frowned and shook his head. "I still don't understand," he said. "At the risk of trying your patience I'll have to ask you to explain it to me again."

Ané smiled. "I can see how it must be difficult for you. You have nothing like it on Earth, you say."

The Earthman laughed shortly. "On our planet, if a man knows exactly how long he's going to live, he's either afflicted with an incurable disease or he's in a death cell. You can be sure we don't envy him."

"You've lost me again," Ané

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*There are many likable scoundrels in imaginative fiction, and not a few in the darkest jungles of the here and now on Earth. Many of them are itinerant peddlers tramping green hills and valleys with an effrontery quite unmanageable. With high-fidelity realism Alice Jones, shining conspicuously amidst our bright galactic cluster of women writers, has here transplanted one such to an alien world, with an age-old curse upon him.*

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said, beginning to climb the shimmering steps of the Office of Engraving. "Incurable disease. Death cell! We have no such concepts here. Perhaps as you observe how the tags are made I can explain our way of life to you more clearly."

The Office of Engraving was a factory-planner's dream of perfection—airy, beautiful, and formidably efficient. The rooms hummed with industry, the machines sparkled with energy, and the workers all smiled. The Kryllans were a good-looking race—humanoid, with a physical development remarkably like man's, a not too surprising evolutionary parallel in view of the fact that Kryl was remarkably like Earth. There were dissimilarities, of course. The air of Kryl was a little thinner, the sky a little bluer—and the pattern of stars very different.

"Your people seem to like it here," Baxter remarked.

Ané raised his handsome eyebrows. "Naturally. No one works where he is not perfectly happy and well-adjusted. Is it not so on Earth?"

"Not exactly," said Baxter drily. "May I see one of those?" He pointed to the disc on which the worker directly in front of him was busily engraving an intricate pattern.

"Of course." Ané lifted the shining disc from the worker's hands, and passed it to Baxter. "You can't read our symbols, naturally. It says, roughly, 'Male. One

hundred. Krylla, the Giver of Life, be praised.' There is space below for the wearer's name and other pertinent information concerning him. This is the *new* tag section, you see. Corrections are made in the annexes."

Ané gravely returned the tag to the engraver and passed on, Baxter following with a look of startlement in his keen gray eyes.

"You mean these tags are for newborn infants?" the Earthman asked.

"Yes," Ané replied, nodding. "There will be a need for them very soon, for the next birth season is close at hand."

"You mean to say that every baby who comes into the world," Baxter exclaimed incredulously, "will live for exactly one hundred years?"

"Barring accidents, yes. How long did you say your people customarily live on Earth?"

"It's hard to tell," Baxter replied. "The average life span is about ninety years. By the way, didn't your mathematician say our year comes within a month of yours?"

Ané nodded.

"Ninety years then—as we measure time on Earth. But no one ever knows whether he'll live to reach ninety. Some live longer, of course."

Ané shook his head. "Amazing!" he marveled. "It must make for an extremely disorganized society."

"Tell me about the corrections,"

Baxter said. "That's the part I can't understand."

Ané motioned to an alcove at the end of the room. "Let's sit down while we talk," he said. "It will be more comfortable."

Several of the brightly-colored couches were already occupied by workers resting or taking refreshments. Baxter was struck once more by the wonderful quiet which pervaded the entire building. Except for the subdued hum of the machines there was no sound. Kryl was an entirely telepathic society, and yet, so perfect was the mental-plane communication that even after so little practice Baxter seemed to hear, deep in his mind, every nuance, every reflection of mood that passed between the seated men and women.

A smiling woman brought Baxter and Ané glasses of kando, an effervescent beverage which the Earthman had already learned to like. It possessed, he had discovered, the stimulating qualities of very strong coffee without any of the irritating effects of caffeine.

"I have already told you," Ané began, sipping his kando with enjoyment, "that life can be bought and sold here, exactly like any other commodity. What precisely bothers you about that?"

"I don't understand it," said Baxter. "I just don't see how you can do it."

"It's very simple. The Government runs what is called the *Life Bank*. The individual who wishes

to buy, and the one who is willing to sell go before the local banker—in this district, myself—and make known their intention. It is possible to have a private transaction, but most people prefer to let the bank handle everything. There is a short religious ceremony which amounts to a declaration of brotherhood, Baxter. The bond between two persons who have done this thing together is so strong, so close. . . . But I doubt if you could understand the emotional factors involved."

"It sounds like a simple business deal to me," said Baxter. "They both get something they want."

Ané smiled. "To be sure. But do you think that makes the bond less strong? How strange an Earthman's mind is! . . . Well, then, as the priest, I take the two life tags belonging to the seller and the buyer, and send them here to be corrected. The transaction would be valid even if I failed to record it, but it helps to keep the records straight. The number of years each person has to live is always kept scrupulously up to date. Even if no transaction is ever made, the life tags must be altered each year."

"You said 'banker,'" Baxter said, "and then you said 'priest.' Are you both of them?"

Ané looked surprised. "Yes, of course. Who else should rule Kryl but the priests of Krylla?"

"I can think of several other alternatives," Baxter said. "But tell me this. One of the first things

you told me when I landed here was that everything important on Kryll is done according to the divine will of Krylla. Now it seems to me that when you tamper with the number of years your god gave you to live you're not following his will at all . . . Did I say something wrong?"

Ané smiled again. "No. I didn't answer at once because I was thinking of a way to make that point clear to you. Picture a banquet table, Baxter, at which everyone is given an equal amount of food. Will the host be angry if some do not wish to eat all that has been set before them? Will he object if some are very hungry, and come to an amicable agreement to share their neighbors' portions? I think not. A certain amount of food is given; a certain amount of life is given. It can be divided in any way the people choose. Krylla does not care."

"And it works?"

"Yes, it works."

Baxter shook his head. "It still sounds utterly crazy to me. What's to prevent one Kryllan from holding up another and making him sign over a certain number of years to him by threats of violence?"

Ané frowned. "I said 'an amicable agreement,' Baxter. No one can be 'held up,' as you put it."

"But still—"

"On Earth, perhaps," said Ané disdainfully. "Not on Kryll."

"Or else," Baxter persisted, "somebody could sell more time

than he had. A man could get rich that way."

"Impossible. He would die."

"But there must be some way a man could make himself a little money—I mean a few extra credits. Tags could be juggled, or forged. I'll bet there's a black market in tags that you boys don't know anything about. Now I *know* I said something wrong."

To Baxter's surprise Ané laughed. "You have an amazing mind, Baxter. What would be the purpose of juggling or forging tags? If 'black market' means what I think it does, then you can be very sure there is none on Kryll. The idea is inconceivable to us, because the thing itself is impossible."

"Now, Ané, don't tell me *nobody* has ever tried anything tricky?"

Ané's eyes grew suddenly cold. "If anybody did," he said, "he was severely punished. If you plan to live here, Baxter, as you have expressed a desire to do, I advise you not to continue thinking along such lines. Do I make myself clear?"

Baxter nodded. "Very clear. Don't worry, Ané. I want to stay on Kryll. I like it here."

Ané's eyes warmed a little. "You are welcome," he said. "We have always welcomed strangers—although we don't seek them out. We have had space travel for centuries, Baxter, but we never use it, except to go to one of our own moons. Two of them are pleasure

resorts, you may remember, and one is for—well, exiles. You have traveled a long way to get here."

"It took a space warp to accomplish it," confirmed Baxter, "and I know damned well I can't ever go back again."

"I have the impression," Ané said, looking hard at him, "that you don't want to go back."

Baxter flushed. "You're right about that. I had a little—trouble at home."

"I thought so," said Ané. "That doesn't matter here, if you obey our laws."

"Oh, I'll obey them!" Baxter said quickly, and smiled. "And if I do, will I live to reach my hundredth birthday?"

Ané looked at him gravely. "You were brought here by Krylla," he said. "Perhaps you have already been given Krylla's unpurchasable gift of life."

"You don't really believe that?"

Ané shrugged. "Who knows? If you prefer the scientific approach—there are cosmic rays here that never touched your body on Earth. Our tests have proved conclusively that you are constructed much like us. This radiation that has shaped our destiny may therefore make you as we are."

"There's one certain way to find out," Baxter said lightly. "I'm thirty-six by Earth time, thirty-nine by Kryllan. Wait around for sixty-one of our years—or sixty-four of yours."

"I regret," said Ané courteously,

"that I have but fifty years more to live."

"Perhaps I'll sell you some of mine," said Baxter. "Make me an offer."

Ané's green eyes blazed. "A foreigner does not say such things," he said in a furious voice. "You are making a mockery of sacred matters."

"All right," said Baxter hastily. "I spoke in jest."

Ané's eyes still smoldered. "Krylla is not mocked!"

"I said I was sorry," Baxter said sullenly.

"Yes . . ." Ané relented as suddenly as he had grown angry. "Let it be forgotten between us. Have you seen enough for today?"

"I've seen where I want to work," said Baxter. "I want to be an engraver. I've had experience . . ."

On Ané's recommendation and political authority as a priest of Krylla Baxter was enrolled in the Engravers' Guild, and such was his aptitude and perseverance that he was shortly advanced to the grade of Assistant, and then to Associate, and finally to Master.

Baxter was an expert workman, and so eager to learn new skills that he soon became the most accomplished worker in the entire Office of Engraving. He moved diligently through all the annexes, and learned how to print everything that needed to be printed on Kryll, including new tags, corrections, and credits. The acquisition and

mastery of all this knowledge took him three years.

During his progress through the Office he acquired, without bothering to mention the theft to anyone, inks, dies, plates, stamps and special tools—also a supply of heavy credit paper, and a hundred blank tags with accompanying chains. These he secreted in his clothes and was able without any difficulty to walk undetected with the purloined material down the shimmering steps and out the unguarded Office gates.

It took hardly any of his skill as a burglar to accomplish the theft, and Baxter hoped that when the time was ripe he would be equally successful in using his considerable talents as a forger.

He had by this time become accepted almost as a native by everyone in the town. The Kryllans took to calling him Bax, a name more like their own. They stopped by to exchange pleasantries with him on their way to the bath, the tavern or the temple, and even tried to find him a wife. But Baxter had no intention of marrying. He was not precisely sure what kind of progeny a mixture of Earth genes and Kryllan genes would produce, and he dared not ask a girl to forego the marvelous pageantry of the birth season. Besides, women were curious, and Baxter had things hidden in his house which no wife could be permitted to find.

Baxter waited one more year, and then he started his enterprises. He

was by this time in charge of a complete section of the Office. There were fifty men and women under him, and it was only natural that they should come to him with their troubles. Even in an idyllic society people had troubles, as Baxter, with his cynical turn of mind, was not at all surprised to learn.

There was Val, the pretty red-head at the tracing machine—Val who was in love with Moru, who in turn was in love with another girl, Sété. Val was wretchedly unhappy, and she thought that some new clothes might help. If they failed to attract Moru's attention they would at least make Sété furious with envy. Unfortunately, Val had used all her credits for the period—she was, in fact, living on the good-natured charity of her sister—and there was such a darling dress in the shop! If Bax could advance her just a little—

Baxter looked grave. Surely she knew that it was against the rules. Still, in the cause of romance, it could perhaps be arranged. "I am a very sentimental man," said Baxter.

Of course there would have to be a slight charge for the inconvenience. Val was surprised but Baxter quickly convinced her of the reasonableness of the demand and she cheerfully agreed to pay him ten per cent on the loan. Baxter gave her some of the credits he had been carefully forging in the cellar of his house. She passed them without trouble—convincing

proof that he had not lost his touch.

Val spread the word about the advance, and soon there were others. Baxter was presently creditor to half the section, and ran a kind of pawnshop on the side. Between the interest on his investments and the counterfeit credits which he cautiously distributed from time to time, he began to accumulate a growing hoard of credits which he hid under a loose stone in his cellar. He was careful to keep only good money, which he acquired in exchange for the credits he made himself.

Next Baxter started the office pools. Naturally enough, the Kryllans were great gamblers, but nobody had yet thought of laying bets on the serial numbers of tags or credits, or the number of drinking cups that would be used in a week—Baxter bribed the janitor to count them—or any of a dozen other things which Baxter thought up. As manager of the pools and holder of the bets he took a percentage of everything that was paid in and everything that was paid out. Soon the hoard in the cellar required several stones to conceal it.

The Kryllans were perfectly satisfied. They were having a wonderful time, and when workers were transferred from Baxter's section, as occasionally happened, they were utterly miserable and begged to return.

"I am glad you are doing so well," Ané said. "I hear great

things of you." He had dropped in to visit Baxter, as he frequently did, and the two of them sat sipping kando on Baxter's little balcony, and watching the three moons riding low in the green evening sky.

Lyra, the largest, had always attracted Baxter's particular interest because Ané had told him it was the prison satellite—the place where the misfits and the malcontents were exiled. There were not very many, Ané said, but Baxter had never ceased to wonder about them. He had a fellow feeling for misfits and malcontents.

"I can't complain," he said cautiously.

"Your staff is very happy," Ané went on. "They have an exceptional spirit of loyalty and devotion to you."

"More kando?" asked Baxter politely.

"Thank you, no. I understand you have introduced certain—innoventions—into your section. They have become very popular, have they not?"

Baxter said nothing.

"I mean the games, of course," Ané continued tranquilly. "Most ingenious."

Baxter looked at him keenly. "Nobody objects, do they?"

"Why should anyone object?" Ané appeared surprised. "The workers are happy, and you are happy. I believe there is a handsome profit in those games, Bax."

Baxter flushed. "I take a small



percentage for my trouble. Wages, you might say."

Ané smiled. "You might. You are a clever rascal, Bax. You will soon be buying a villa in the country."

Baxter, who was contemplating doing just that, made a deprecating gesture.

Ané's smile faded. "There is just one thing, Bax. About the credits—"

Baxter froze. He hoped he did not look as pale as he felt.

"Don't you think," Ané continued, staring intently into his kando glass, "that a charge of ten credits for a loan of a hundred is just a little excessive?"

Baxter breathed again. "I—I hadn't thought so, Ané. It's the usual rate on Earth."

"But a little high for Kryl," said Ané decisively. "We have never had any charge at all, you know."

Baxter managed to smile. "Such generosity is unbusinesslike, if I may say so, Ané . . . Oh, by the way, have the priests decided on the new murals yet for the temple?"

"There is the question of expense, Bax," Ané said calmly, "as you very well know. And if you are attempting to suggest what I think you are, the answer is no. And I ought to have you punished for attempting to bribe a priest of Krylla."

Baxter widened his eyes. "Me? Would I do a thing like that?"

Ané looked at him, and smiled.

Baxter sighed. "How much interest can I charge, Ané?"

"Five per cent," said Ané firmly.

"Seven?" persisted Baxter hopefully.

"Five."

Baxter spread his hands. "All right . . . Now surely you'll have more kando, Ané?"

"Thank you, Bax, I believe I will . . ."

Baxter did not make any more counterfeit credits. He had had a bad scare. He did not waste time brooding, however, over his diminution of income. Something had happened which set him off in an entirely new direction. It was risky—but it was a beautiful scheme! He could not resist it.

Lué, a handsome dark girl who mended life tag chains, came to him one day in tears. She had been corresponding with a friend of a friend who lived in another district. Lué adored writing letters and had pen pals the length and breadth of Kryl, and now she had fallen in love with her handsomest correspondent, and he with her. He had asked her to visit his family, and she was wild to go.

"I know he'll ask me to marry him," she said between sobs, "and I w-want to."

"Well, then," asked Baxter reasonably, "what's the trouble?"

"I told him I'm eighteen because he's only twenty. But I'm really twenty-six—and when he finds out I've lied to him I'm afraid he won't

forgive me or want to marry me!"

"How can he find out if you don't tell him?" he asked, puzzled.

"By the life tag, of course—during the ceremony when we dip them in the ceremonial wine." She looked at him with mournful hope. "Help me, Bax. You're so clever. You have so many ideas."

Baxter returned her gaze thoughtfully. "Well . . . let's see. Come back tomorrow, Lué, and perhaps we can work something out."

What Baxter worked out was an exquisitely forged life tag engraved with the name of Lué, aged eighteen. When she saw it she gasped with mingled horror and delight. "Oh, Bax, where did you get it? It's beautiful!"

"Never mind where I got it," he replied. "Do you want it?"

"Of course I want it! Only—only I'm scared." She frowned. "It's wrong, Bax. Krylla wouldn't like it."

"Ah!" Baxter scoffed. "Do you think Krylla would begrudge you a little innocent vanity?"

Her brow cleared slightly. "I—I guess he wouldn't." Then abruptly her eyes filled with tears. "But it will all come out eventually—when I die."

Baxter gave a shout of laughter. "My dear girl, do you think anybody is going to care by then? Women on my planet lie about their ages every waking hour."

She looked at him wonderingly. "They do?"

"Sure they do, and nobody gives a hoot. Go on, take it," and he held the life tag out to her, swinging it enticingly on its chain.

Quickly and possessively her hand closed around it. "You don't think I'll get caught?"

"Why should you?" Baxter demanded impatiently. "Nobody will come around and check the records, will they?—jealous mother-in-law, or anybody like that?"

Lué was shocked. "A mother-in-law would *never* do such a thing!"

"Well, then."

She smiled with sudden excitement. "I'll take it, Bax! How much is it?"

He hesitated, quickly calculating the amount of her salary and how much of it she had probably saved. "One thousand credits," he said.

She gasped. "Oh, Bax, that's too much! Can't you make it five hundred?"

Baxter sighed. "I'm afraid I had all my trouble for nothing. Seven-fifty."

She let the tears come into her eyes again. "Bax, be reasonable! I have to buy my wedding clothes. Seven hundred is all I have."

"Seven-fifty," he said inexorably, and then, as she still hesitated, he reached for the tag. "All right—hand it over."

"Never mind," she said quickly. "I'll pay. Bax, you're a robber, but I love you!"

Though he had pledged her to secrecy Bax knew very well that Lué would find the secret too good

to keep from her twenty or thirty closest friends. Sure enough, he soon had other requests from women who wished, for one reason or another, to be thought younger than their years. Baxter's hoard began to grow rapidly.

He blessed the traits of courtesy and good taste which prohibited Kryllans from questioning the figures on a life tag. The tag was usually worn hidden, anyhow, unless the wearer had adorned it with jewels and wished to display it for purposes of vanity. And of course—except in the case of Lué, and Lué was safely gone—the true life tags were always used for official or ceremonial occasions.

It was on this traditionally unalterable fact that Baxter relied for his defense when the whole story should come out. For he knew that it would come out. He knew that he was doing something dangerous, as he had known from the beginning, and he was sure that he would be caught. But he could not seem to put a stop to his knavery.

"It's the way I am," he told himself philosophically. "I can no more help being what I am than Ané can, with his ridiculous worship of Krylla."

Although women of all countries, and presumably all planets, are supposed not to be able to keep a secret, the women of Kryl kept this one from their men for a surprisingly long time. The first leak became apparent when Sati came to Baxter's house one night,

looking as guilty as if he had just murdered his mother.

Sati was a retired engraver who had left the Office long before Baxter's arrival, but Baxter had made his acquaintance at the baths. He was well over a hundred years old, having made several life purchases at various times, but he looked by Earth standards scarcely fifty. According to Sati's tag he had but one more year to live, and he was desperately worried.

"I don't want to die," he explained with despairing bitterness. "I have had such a splendid life and I'm still hale and vigorous. Surely my body has another twenty years of life to give me. But I can't go to the Life Bank; I just don't have the credits. Oh, they've been very good about it. The last time the priests even found a donor for me who was willing to take a cut rate. Poor fellow, he was mad—going to commit suicide anyway."

Baxter was bewildered. "But nobody runs out of money on Kryl," he said. "At least, not for long."

Sati smiled sadly. "I'm a gambler, Bax. Gambling has been a consuming passion with me all my life. No matter how much money I had I would gamble it all away."

Baxter looked at him thoughtfully. "You always lose, hm?"

Sati nodded mournfully. "Always. And I have finally exhausted all of my resources."

"But why come to me? Do you

want me to lend you some money?"

"Oh, no, Bax. I could never pay you back."

Baxter had never ceased to marvel at the honesty of these people, and he marveled now. "Then why did you come?"

"Some of the women have life tags that are not—that make them appear younger than they are," Sati said with delicacy.

"Sure," said Baxter bluntly. "I make 'em. But you don't actually think I can make anybody younger, do you?"

"Oh, no," said Sati quickly. "I just thought that since you are so clever, and have thought of so many—well, unusual things—you might be able to think of a way to help me."

Baxter laughed. "You and Lué! I don't know, Sati, I really don't know. I'll tell you what. Come back tomorrow and perhaps I can do something. But don't count on it," he added hastily, as Sati's fine eyes filled with tears of gratitude. "I can't promise . . ."

"What it boils down to is this," Baxter said the next evening, as he and Sati sipped their kando on the little balcony. "I certainly can't find you another life seller if the priests can't. But I have an idea. How much money do you have, Sati?"

"Until the next period, seven hundred credits, and a house in the country that's too big to sell." Sati looked hopefully at Baxter. "Would you like to buy it, Bax?"

"I might. What's the value of the house?"

"Fifty thousand credits."

Baxter whistled. "You're sitting on a thing like that, and yet you can't get credits?"

"I tell you it's too big. Big houses have gone out of style."

"Couldn't you get a mortgage on it?"

"A what?"

Baxter sighed and explained to Sati exactly what a mortgage was.

Sati brightened. "Would you consider taking a mortgage, Bax?"

"I was thinking of that," Baxter replied slowly. "I want a house in the country, and I would prefer a big one. But I couldn't afford to let you have more than five thousand credits. At the Life Bank five thousand would buy five years."

"Five would help," Sati said, "but my heart was set on twenty."

"What about this," said Baxter abruptly. "You give me your house outright and I give you twenty years of my life—in a strictly private transaction."

Sati grew pale. "But you can't!" he whispered. "You're not a Kryllan. You don't even have a life tag."

"How do you know I can't?" demanded Baxter. "I've been living here for more than five years, haven't I? If that doesn't make me a Kryllan I don't know what does. In every country on Earth," he continued, inventing recklessly, "you automatically become a citizen after a single year's residence."

"You do?" Sati asked, amazed.

"Sure you do."

"But this isn't the same thing at all!" Sati said fearfully. "It's a question of genes, and radiation, and—and Krylla."

"I know," said Baxter eagerly. "But I've been exposed to all that for over five years now. Doesn't it seem likely to you that I've become—truly a Kryllan?"

"I don't know." Sati was still doubtful. "You might not have twenty years to give. It might not work at all."

"That's a chance you'll have to take. Think of it, Sati: five years surely—or twenty years in all probability. Where's your gambling spirit?"

Sati's cheeks blushed and his eyes began to sparkle. "Done! I'll take the twenty years! I have a feeling that this time I shall not lose."

Baxter beamed at him. He had wanted Sati's house very much.

The private transaction was brief. It consisted merely of a statement of intent by both parties, together with certain prayers to Krylla in which Sati scrupulously prompted Baxter, and the drinking of kando in lieu of ceremonial wine. After it was over Baxter gave Sati the forged life tag which he had prepared in advance, and Sati departed, ostensibly for a visit to a son who lived in another district. It was understood that he would not be coming back.

"I shall be sorry to leave my home," Sati said soberly to Baxter,

"but since I cannot turn in my life tag for correction, it is out of the question to continue living here. After all, I can draw my credits anywhere—and there will always be games to play!"

Somewhere on his journey Sati talked, and a small procession of people began to come to Baxter: old men and women who for some reason or another could not legitimately buy life from the Life Bank. In return for things which Baxter desired, he sold them his own spurious allotment, usually in small amounts, for they were timid and poor. The transactions went on for six months without incident.

And then Ané came to see him.

As soon as Baxter saw his face, he knew that the time of judgment had come. Ané looked pale and cold, and his eyes glittered. He carried a small jeweled box, which he handled delicately.

"Come in and sit down," Baxter said. "Will you have kando?"

"Nothing, thank you," said Ané with deadly courtesy. "And I will come in, but I will not sit down."

Baxter summoned courtesy to his aid. "You haven't been here as often as I could have wished," he said. "I'm glad to see you."

"This will be my last visit," said Ané, and stepped inside. He put the box on a table and transfixed Baxter with a freezing look. "Bax this time you've transgressed unforgivably."

Baxter could not meet those

large, accusing eyes. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Don't you?" Ané's mouth curled. "The games we tolerated, and the loans, and the forged credits—"

Baxter gasped. "You knew about those?"

Ané's smile was contemptuous. "We have removed all your counterfeits from our supply. It rather amused us that you should have valued the credits so much. We did not even stop you from making false life tags for so many silly women."

"Oh, no!" Baxter cried. "You never knew about those!"

Ané laughed. "Do you take us for fools? We let you alone, to see how far you would go. You had not yet done anything that really mattered, you see, and we—I, at least—hoped you would not. To my everlasting shame and regret, I liked you, Bax."

"And I liked you, Ané," Baxter said inadequately. "I—I wish you would sit down."

Ané said scornfully, "You may sit down, if your knees tremble. I shall stand . . . You have gone too far, Bax. You have desecrated something that you do not even understand. You have taken a sacred mystery and made a mockery of it." His face twisted. "You—you disgust me!"

"I can understand how you feel, Ané," Baxter said humbly. "But I swear to you I didn't desecrate anything."

"How can you dare to say that!" cried Ané passionately. "We know about Sati and the others."

Baxter gave a long sigh. "All right, so you know. I guess it wouldn't help to say I'm sorry."

"No," Ané said, "it would not help in the least."

"I was afraid it wouldn't. Maybe you'll let me explain though. You see, Ané, I'm a swindler. I've always been a swindler. Agile knavery is my profession. It's the way I think—the way I like to live. I ran away from Earth because the police were after me for forgery. They would have caught me, too, if I hadn't hit the space warp, or whatever it was. And then I met you people—you nice, friendly, trusting, innocent people. Are you listening, Ané?"

"I'm listening," said Ané.

"Well, it was a perfect situation for me. You just stood up and begged to be taken advantage of—and I'm a swindler. About Sati and the rest—poor Sati, he lost his last gamble!—I told them I had life to sell, but I knew I hadn't. All I did was *cheat* them, Ané. I didn't desecrate anything."

"I don't see the distinction," Ané said bitterly. "Krylla is the Giver of Life, and the transfer of His gift is a sacrament that—" He stopped abruptly, as if his voice had gone out of control. He was trembling.

Baxter looked at him wonderingly. "You really believe that, don't you?" he said softly. "And all the

time I thought you and the other priests were just—well, that it was a racket you had, to keep the people happy so they'd let you run things. I'm sorry, Ané, but that's the way my mind works."

"It doesn't matter," Ané said wearily. "Get out your books."

"My what?"

"Your ledgers, your records. You must have kept lists of the men and women you sold your life to. Get them out!"

Baxter looked at Ané's face and said no more. He went to the desk in the corner, unlocked it and brought out a large leather book. Silently he opened it to a page near the middle, and offered it to Ané.

"You sold fifty-two years," Ané announced after a moment.

"Did I? Is that what it adds up to?"

"Precisely. How old are you, Bax?"

"Why, you know how old I am," Baxter said in a bewildered voice. "I'm forty-one by Earth time, nearly forty-five by yours."

"I was just making sure," said Ané. "Bax, sell me ten years."

Baxter's mouth fell open. "What did you say?"

"I said sell me ten years."

Baxter looked bewildered. "But whichever way you count it that would make—"

"Yes," agreed Ané.

Baxter went white. "But Ané, suppose—"

Ané's smile was terrible. "You

said you didn't believe in Krylla's sacraments, Bax. You said you only swindled people."

Baxter could feel beads of sweat on his forehead. "Ané, what are you trying to do to me!"

"I am just making sure," Ané said bleakly. "We have to know, you see. And all those people you cheated: *they* have to know. They are being terribly punished, Bax. The uncertainty they must feel—the tormented wondering—is the most dreadful thing you could have done to them. Some of them came to us without waiting for us to seek them out. Our people are, as you said, innocent. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" Baxter asked in a strangled voice.

"For the sale, of course. I think we'll make it a private transaction. It will be quicker."

"You can't force me to do this!" Baxter cried suddenly. "You told me that yourself once."

Ané's eyes were green stones. "No, I can't force you. But I think you will do it, Bax, because you are not a coward."

Baxter tried to smile. "The hell I'm not! I'm so scared I can hardly stand up . . ." He moved restlessly about the little room, Ané did not speak. "All right," Baxter said at last. "I'll do it. You knew I would, didn't you? But will you tell me something first, Ané?"

Ané merely looked at him.

"I won't ask what will happen if I die, because I don't care. But if I live—"

For the first time Ané's face showed compassion. "You will be exiled, Bax. We shall send you to Lyra for the rest of your life. We cannot have you here. You are—corrupt."

Baxter's laugh was almost a sob. "A fine choice you give me! Well, let's get on with it."

Ané opened the jeweled box reverently and took out a flask and two goblets, beautifully carved. Into each goblet he poured a measure of wine from the flask and set them on a low table.

"Kneel!" he commanded Baxter, and they both knelt before the table.

"Repeat my words after me," Ané said. "It must be done exactly. Do you understand?"

Baxter nodded. "I've done it before."

"Krylla, Giver of Life," Ané began, and Baxter looked at him in surprise. His voice had utterly changed, had become deeper, softer, and vibrant with emotion. Just as Baxter thought this, Ané spoke to him fiercely, and his tone was momentarily sharp again. "Repeat after me!"

"Krylla, Giver of Life," Baxter said hastily. His own voice was faint.

"We kneel in Thy presence to share Thy most precious gift."

"We kneel in Thy presence to share Thy most precious gift."

"As Thou has commanded in the Holy Book."

"As Thou has commanded in the Holy Book."

"I, Ané, do lovingly receive— Say, 'I, Bax, do lovingly give'—"

"I, Bax, do lovingly give—"

"—ten years of Thy life, to Thine honor and glory."

"—ten years of Thy life, to Thine honor and glory."

Ané reached for the goblets and handed one to Baxter. His fingers moved over the golden carving with love. "Now say, 'I drink, my brother,'" he commanded softly, "and do it."

"I drink, my brother," said Baxter, and drank.

"I drink, my brother," said Ané, and drained the goblet.

Baxter's hands were shaking so badly that he nearly dropped the cup. As he replaced it on the table he stole a glance at the other's face. He drew in his breath sharply, for Ané's face was beautiful.

Ané turned to Baxter. "Now take my hands. Say, 'I believe. Krylla, I believe.'"

Ané's hands were warm and strong. Baxter found himself clinging to them. He could hardly speak. "I believe," he said. "Krylla—I—believe."

"I believe," said Ané in that deep, gentle voice. "Krylla—I believe!"

They remained kneeling for what seemed to Baxter like hours. At last Ané spoke. He sounded very tired. "That is all."

Baxter looked at him, dazed. "All?"



Ané got up from his knees. He looked exhausted. "It was all for nothing. You are no Kryllan."

Strength flowed back to Baxter's legs. "I told you, Ané."

Ané nodded slowly. He was putting the goblets delicately back into the box. "Yes, you told me." He held the box in his hands and moved toward the door. "Someone will come tomorrow to help you make arrangements to go to Lyra."

"Won't you come?" Baxter asked him.

Ané shook his head. "No, you will not see me again. Good-bye, Bax."

"Good-bye, Ané." Baxter felt strangely bereft. "I wish—never mind."

Ané looked at him with eyes dark with fatigue. "I wish it, too. Good-bye, my brother."

Baxter stood and watched him go.

After a moment he took a deep breath, and looked around his room. He thought of all the treasured belongings in his house. Some he would have to return, of course, but the rest—he wondered how much of the rest he would be allow-

ed to take with him to Lyra. With reviving interest he pondered expedients.

"I'll take my engraver's tools," he said aloud. "Not the ones I stole—they'll make me give all those back. But I'll take the ones I brought for my job. Of course I'll take the plates if I can, and the life tags I have left. Where can I hide them?"

He moved to the window and looked out at Lyra, riding low and serene in the green evening sky. "It won't be so bad," he said with quickening excitement. "A new place, new people—probably very interesting people, quite unlike the Kryllans here, more of a challenge. And if I don't like Lyra, there are ways, there must be ways—"

He lingered at the window. Far up the wide street he could still see Ané walking, tall and proud. Slowly Baxter turned away. In his mind was the problem of manufacturing, between now and morning, some kind of suitcase with a false bottom. But in his eyes was the sting of tears—he who had not cried since he was five years old.

