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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

ONE AGAINST HERCULUM

a great new novel

by **JERRY
SOHL**

author of
The Altered Ego

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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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A. Boga



One Against Herculum

by JERRY SOHL

*The planet made him a killer—
then stole his victim from him!*

Illustrated by Richard Kluga

CHAPTER I

ALAN DEMUTH sat in the Testing Chief's outer office in quiet confidence, his eyes focussed beyond the half dozen file attendants and through the long window, seeing the flyabouts there. They looked like water bugs chasing each other, darting here and there. They might have looked like bees if the sky had been a blue

instead of the yellow-green of the dome.

He could imagine what was taking place in Jack Bohannen's office. That was why it was taking so long for Bohannen to call him in. Bohannen would be surprised to see the different score he'd rung up this year—quite a change from the lad who'd taken the tests fresh from Earth a year ago, not caring too much, filled with reckless abandon and certain he could pass with ease. He'd had a year to sober up in and he'd used it to make sure he'd not only pass but do so well he'd hit one of the higher echelon jobs.

The test hadn't been easy and the machine giving it had been merciless, but Demuth had met every challenge. Sure, he'd missed some—everyone does because everyone isn't perfect—but he'd got more than he'd dreamed he would. In a few minutes one of those clerks would be handed his tape to file away. It wouldn't make any difference which—Altairian, Aquarian, Vegan or Earthman would put it in its correct place. Perhaps the clerk's eyebrows would rise, seeing his score—except that Vegans and Altairians had no eyebrows.

The thin Aquarian, so fragile and anemic and human-

like, looked up from her desk, her pink eyes finding him on the bench. In her shrill voice she said, "You may go in now, Mr. Demuth."

"Thank you, honey," Demuth said, pleased to see the quickening of her life fluid beneath the translucent flesh of her cheeks. He gave her a smile as he walked by, but she had turned away and he only saw the pipestem bones of her neck and the hint of delicate muscles beneath the flesh at the back of her head. They looked so very brittle and weak, he thought. But he knew they were not. They were a race very much like people of Earth, and they, along with the Altairians and Vegans, had been emancipated from their galaxies.

Demuth entered Bohannen's office. The burly Earthman rose, extended his hand and said, "Glad to see you, Alan. Have a chair." From the look on Bohannen's face it seemed to Demuth that Bohannen had been considerably jarred by his score. Unless it was something else that gave him that look, and even as he thought it he became convinced this was so.

And so Demuth sat, uneasiness rising sickeningly from his stomach.

"About your test," Bohan-

nen began ominously, running a hand across his forehead as if to wipe away perspiration, oddly out of place in the perpetually temperate climate of Herculum. "I'm sorry to report you didn't do any better this year."

IF THE DOME itself had come falling in upon Demuth he could not have been more thunderstruck.

You didn't do any better.

Impossible! He had studied a whole year, had led an exemplary life, living out his year as a flyabout taximan in accordance with status rules and the results of the previous year's test.

Demuth found his hands gripping the sides of the chair hard, and slipping there because they were suddenly so wet with sweat and strain. He stammered, "I—I don't believe it!"

Bohannen wiped his forehead again where hair was beginning to recede. He managed to give a faint smile. "I'm sorry, Alan, but facts are facts. If it's any comfort to you, the results are even lower than last year. I don't know if I can convince Status you should be kept on as a taximan. You should be downgraded."

"There must be some mistake," Demuth said. "I tell you I can't believe it! I was so confident, so sure. . . ."

Bohannen shrugged. "Your I.Q., endocrine balance and emotional stability are all down ten points." He tapped the tape with his finger. "The machine is never wrong. You know that."

"The machine," Demuth said coldly, "is run by humans, and humans are sometimes wrong."

"Not in this office," Bohannen said stiffly. Then he narrowed his eyes. "Are you suggesting I upgrade you anyway?"

"All I want is the truth. I think it ought to be investigated. I had a good score at Flag. I can't understand it."

"The old school tie, eh?" Bohannen fixed him with a cold eye. "You can't expect me to do for you what I wouldn't do for anybody else, Alan, just because we went to the same training school on Earth."

"All I want is to take the test again. Only I want it monitored this time."

Bohannen got up quickly. "You're wasting your time. You're no different from anybody else. Nobody takes the test except once a year. And nobody can ask for a monitoring but me. What's the mat-

ter, don't you like being a taxi-man?"

Demuth gripped the sides of the chair even harder to keep from rising and hitting Bohannen square in the mouth. He held himself in, said only, "That's an ugly thing to say, Jack."

"Is it?" The eyes narrowed. "You never liked me, did you, Alan?"

"Since this is becoming a breast-baring session, no."

Bohannen laughed. "I can see why you don't, now. I came here two years ago, achieved such a fine score they gave me the job of Chief of Testing. Could that be the reason?"

"Don't be childish. I recall at Flagg you didn't do so well."

"I've improved," Bohannen said, giving him a sly look. "Weren't you in the class behind me?"

"You know damn well I was. I happened to beat you at the annual Classic, in case your brain has atrophied. It was bad luck that got me assigned to Herculium with you here."

"Yes, yes," Bohannen said, smiling, "you did manage to come out on top in that little fracas, didn't you? I'd forgotten."

Demuth leaned forward in his chair. "I know you

wouldn't forget a thing like that. Why don't you tell me what's behind all this cat and mouse play? I know I didn't do badly on the test—even on the first one, I'm thinking now—but I bided my time, waited out the year. You've had your fun, you've got even. Now what? Why should you engineer my low score the second time?"

A slow smile gathered strength in Bohannen's face until the man was beaming at him. "I'll give you credit, Alan. You are smart. Being so, you will know the answer to what I'm going to offer."

"What are you leading up to?"

Their eyes met and held for a moment. Then Bohannen said coldly, "I want ten per cent of your credits if I turn in your true score, which is high enough to get you any job you want. Ten per cent for as long as you hold the grade."

Demuth stared incredulously.

"If you refuse . . . Well, let's not talk about that. Let's talk about your accepting. But even if you accept, remember I can demand a re-run on you, Alan. Any time. And you'll be downgraded if I wish. And if you think you can report me to anyone for making this

offer to you, you'd better think twice. I could see to your transfer to some bleak outpost to hell and gone. Remember, you have no proof."

The uneasiness Demuth had felt at the beginning had long since turned to cold fury and then to biting, white-hot anger. Unable to contain it any longer, he rose. "I'll never pay you the first credit, Jack," he said in a quiet voice.

Bohannen sighed. "Then I'm sorry. Truly sorry, Alan, to have to downgrade you from flyabout taximan. But you understand my position. Don't worry about it. I'll tell the Status people to try to find *something* for you on Herculum." He chuckled, inspected the tape, shook his head. "You are difficult, Alan. Difficult and unreasonable. So many others have been so quick to agree to my little arrangement. What makes you so reluctant?"

"You admit you've done this to others?"

Bohannen said dryly, "Come now, let's not be naive, Alan. How else can a man accumulate a nest egg during his ten years on Herculum? I succeed a man who made a sizable fortune and I intend to do the same. It happens that the position of Testing Chief is an impregnable one."

Demuth, consumed with rage, turned and walked to the door lest he leap over the desk and throttle Bohannen.

"Sure you won't change your mind?" Bohannen called after him.

Demuth turned and faced him squarely. "It may interest you to know I'm applying for criminal status at once."

Bohannen snorted. "That's the hard way to try upgrading. Why be a pawn in a police exercise? Besides, the games seldom work. We have a good law enforcement department here on Herculum." He rose from behind the desk, walked to the door, and together they went into the outer office. "Why don't you think it over, Alan? I won't enter your downgrading for several days." He reached out a friendly arm for Demuth's shoulders, but Demuth moved away.

"I don't happen to play that way, Jack. I've done all the thinking I need."

"Well then," Bohannen said scornfully, "don't apply for anything trivial. It would hardly lift you up to taximan."

"I'm going to apply for the maximum," Demuth said between his teeth. "Murder."

"Really?" Bohannen tried to look bored. "I presume that I'm your chosen victim?"

"You've guessed it," Demuth said, turning on his heel and walking to the outer office door.

"I'll be waiting," Bohannen called after him. "But if you want to know, you'll never make it."

CHAPTER II

THE CLERK in the Status Office was an Altairian. He shuffled papers on his desk with his hairy seven-fingered hands, and when he looked up, Alan Demuth could see that his compound eyes had the greenish tinge they held when Altairians are tired—or bored. The clerk said, in his whistling voice, "Yes?"

Demuth looked back, unblinking. "I want to apply for a change in classification."

The clerk sighed. "So do I. Who doesn't? Has it been a year since your last test?" The hairy hand reached for a printed form.

"No," Demuth said evenly. "It hasn't even been half a day."

"Oh." The hairy hand dropped the form. "Well, you're not the first to take a test and be disappointed. But you should know the law here. No upgrading in such cases, and you wouldn't want to be downgraded, would you? The

machines are never wrong."

"Something went wrong."

The eyes became greener. "Sorry." The Altairian's hands returned to the work on his desk. "Better luck next year."

"No," Demuth said, taking a firm grip on the hard counter. "Better luck this year. I'm applying for criminal status."

The green flashed fire. "Criminal status?"

Demuth nodded. "That's what I said."

The hexagonal facets of the eyes glowed with a little orange. The hand went into a drawer, withdrew a red printed form. "Have you considered the degree? Simple thievery, robbery—maybe even assault, if you wanted to commit yourself that far."

"None of those," Demuth said. "I want the maximum."

"The maximum?" the clerk repeated, his eyes glowing like red coals. "Did you say the maximum?"

"Yes."

"But that's murder!"

"I know," Demuth said calmly. "Where do I sign?"

The eyes, all the thousands of facets, regarded him for a long moment. Then the Altairian said, "Wait just a moment," and disappeared through a door bearing the legend CHIEF OF STATUS. He was gone only briefly, and re-

turned to accompany Demuth through his workspace to the inner chamber.

The man behind the desk was an Earthman. He was a little older than the usual run of Herculum men and his blue eyes were even more tired than the Altairian's. He indicated a chair.

"I'm Jeff Branner," he said. His eyes roved over Demuth appraisingly. "Clerk Krenor tells me you want to apply for criminal status. The maximum."

"That's right." Demuth took the chair.

Branner nodded. "Usually people here on Station Herculum are satisfied to try to upgrade themselves by a successful act of petty thievery. I recall only a single case of application for murder and that ended tragically for the applicant. Suppose you tell me why you've chosen that category and whom you wish to murder."

Demuth took a deep breath. "When I applied for station life it wasn't to run a flyabout taxi. I trained four years for life here."

Smiling, Branner said, "Didn't we all? Competition is keen here, Mr. Demuth, and somebody has to fly the taxis."

"I was first in my class at Flagg, Mr. Branner."

"This isn't Flagg and this isn't Earth."

"When I first arrived exactly one year ago I took the test. I had an abysmally low score. I only missed being sent elsewhere by the smallest margin—according to the test."

Branner nodded. "It sometimes happens to young men in their first days on Herculum."

"Today I took the second test. It was lower than the first."

"Well, at least that doesn't sound right."

"It isn't. Neither result is correct."

"You think your score is really higher, don't you?" He smiled. "Mr. Demuth, you are no different from others. Everyone thinks he is better than his results indicate."

"I not only think so, Mr. Branner, I know so."

Branner's eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. "I suppose you're going to tell me someone altered your score."

"Yes. Jack Bohannen did."

"Jack Bohannen is Chief of Testing, Mr. Demuth."

"I know. I also know he takes a rake-off for upgrading personnel to their actual scores."

Branner's face hardened, the eyes grew cold. "That's a very

serious accusation, Mr. Demuth. It hits right at the heart of everything here on Herculum. Do you expect me to believe it?"

"Yes. I happen to know Jack Bohannen rather well. I was with him at Flagg for three years. As a matter of fact, it was a mystery to many of us how he managed to get through school at all."

Branner studied him coldly. "There is a lot of difference between school life and life in a dome on a planet like Herculum. I can hardly believe a man of Bohannen's caliber would risk being thrown off this station for a thing like that. Do you have any proof of your allegations?"

Demuth said dismally, "None except I know my score was higher than he says and that he offered me upgrading if I would turn over to him ten per cent of my earnings."

"Really, Mr. Demuth, I can hardly believe—"

"I don't care what you believe," Demuth said harshly, "I happen to be telling the truth."

"It sounds more like the maunderings of a psychopath, if you want a frank opinion."

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you."

Branner shook his head. "I'm sorry, if you really think

such a thing happened. You know action can't be initiated on a nebulous thing like that."

"I'm not asking you to initiate action. I came here to apply for criminal status."

"You would be laughed out of any office you'd try to convince that the Testing Chief is unscrupulous."

Demuth set his lips, then said, "So I will rid Herculum of him for you."

BRANNER SIGHED, rose, went to the windows, cleared them with a pass of his hand near the activator, looked out on the city. "I think you're making a mistake applying for criminal status, Demuth. Particularly murder. Even if it's true that Bohannen juggled your score—and I doubt it—you're taking a million to one chance in a category like that. Few people even get by with petty thievery, to say nothing of killing. The authorities will be watching your every move."

"They've got to let me get away at the beginning."

"Yes, but they'll find you." Branner was silent at the window, lost in thought.

Demuth looked at his broad back and, for the first time, thought what failure would mean. But he immediately forced his mind away from it.

Bohannen was the real criminal, and his downgrading of Demuth was a challenge Demuth could not disregard. When he stepped out to murder him he'd actually be doing Herculum a service. History would bear him out after the deed was done, after the facts were brought to light.

Branner at the window was saying, "I suppose it's a good thing, letting those who are dissatisfied resort to criminal status. God knows what the frustrations might bring if the status rules were so rigid under the dome a man didn't have that final recourse."

He turned from the window. "Look out on the city, Demuth. What do you see? Station number one hundred twenty-seven, known to us as Herculum. Two hundred odd thousand people—Altairians, Earthmen, Aquarians, and Vegans, a potpourri of the cosmos—all living together beneath a dome a mile high on a planet in the 95 Herculis double star system because it happens to be a point equidistant to a number of systems. It never really becomes home to any of them or to us. It is an intergalactic stop for spacers, probably always will be.

"I'll have been here ten years at the end of this year, Demuth. Then I'm retiring,

taking my family back home to Earth, to an Earth my son has never seen. When he comes of age he'll have to go through it just as I have, either here or at some other station, way station or outpost on some minor planet, before he earns the privilege of returning to Earth to live, even as others from other systems are on duty here to earn the right to return to their own planets." He smiled. "Living like this you know there's never any place like home."

Demuth had listened patiently. Now he said levelly, "Just what does all that mean, Mr. Branner?"

"It means ten years isn't so long even as a flyabout taximan."

Demuth shook his head. "I'm not going home that way."

"You're too ambitious."

"Call it that if you wish. I want to go home with something to be proud of. I know I'm no ignoramus."

"Nobody on Herculum is an ignoramus."

"I'm as good or better than Bohannen."

"Isn't that just common jealousy talking?"

"No. Something deeper than that. Suspicion, perhaps. I lived out the required year, took the test again. Now

I'm sure of it, especially since I've seen Bohannen."

Branner shrugged. "And you have thought about failure?"

"If I fail, I will be expelled from the dome." Then Demuth added tightly, "And nobody can live more than two hours out beneath those two suns."

The Status Chief sighed, pushed the red form across the desk. "You know the penalty for failure. There's nothing more I can do for you. Sign here."

As Demuth scrawled his name, Branner said, "You will report at police headquarters at five-thirty tomorrow morning."

On his way out, Demuth heard Branner say softly, "Good luck."

CHAPTER III

THE VEGAN strode to the platform, the overhead lights shining on his smooth feathers, his bald head and eagle-like nose. Demuth noted that his wings had been clipped close to his body in accordance with the Herculum rules and wondered how large his wing span would be if they had not been. If Vegans had been allowed to fly here they would have had an unfair ad-

vantage over all the others. *Equality*, he thought bitingly, *is the keyword of Herculum.*

"That's about the biggest Vegan I ever saw," a voice at Demuth's side said. "No wonder he's the chief of police."

Demuth turned to see an Earthman like himself staring with a half-open mouth at the figure that was now turning to them, a military figure full of authority.

The man at Demuth's side turned, grinned and said, "I'm sorry to go spouting off like that. Name's Pilson. Frank Pilson. Yours?"

"Demuth. Alan Demuth."

They shook hands gravely and at that moment the police chief started to speak in the rasping voice of the Vegans, a hint of a smile on the hard lips below his beak-like nose. "Only six here? Evidently there is more satisfaction in Station Herculum today. Yesterday there were nine." His round eyes examined the two Earthmen, three Altairians and single Aquarian who stood silently before him. The fragile Aquarian was shaking visibly. Aquarians were highly excitable, and shook at the slightest provocation. The Vegan went on: "I am glad to see there are no Vegans here this morning."

So much for racial pride,

Demuth thought, reflecting on the Vegan penchant for ruffling their feathers to display the brilliant colors of the under-layers. *Let's get on with it.*

The police chief picked up a paper from a table at his side. "You will be interested in yesterday's results. Five cases of thievery—that's worth ten points; two cases of robbery, worth twenty points because it involves another person; one case of assault, worth twenty-five points; and a single case of assault with a deadly weapon, worth thirty points." He looked at the criminal status candidates and added dryly, "Needless to say, none was successful."

He let this sink in, then went on, "During the past month there have been about two hundred contenders, some for the excitement of it, some for honest attempts to upgrade themselves. Of this number, three successfully completed their missions. The others took downgrading or penalties for their failures. The unsuccessful ones now realize the futility of believing the machines are wrong, know their ambitions exceed their abilities. Or perhaps it is simply that their fling at adventure is at an end. Today they are quietly resting in

their cells or are busy with penal work groups, depending upon the nature of their violation. Suffice it to say, they have time to think about things here on Herculum now."

The police chief's eyes roved over the group. "Everyone knows life under the dome can be dull. We don't question your motive for choosing criminal status, and be assured we make no attempt to uncover it. But do be assured our department is ready to arrest you as quickly as possible."

The tall Vegan's wings wriggled a little, settled in place again. He went on: "The time is five forty-five. At six you will be released and have until six tomorrow morning to complete your missions. No attempt will be made to interfere with your activities for the first five minutes." He picked up another sheet, faced them rather sternly and said, "The roll call. Senbla Ksank."

"Assault. Proplap Y."

The Aquarian shuddered, moved forward. "Here."

"Robbery. Gadda Kruklik."

"Here."

"Assault. Trenor Karnak."

"Here."

"Thievery. Frank Pilson."

"Here."

"Robbery. Alan Demuth."

"Here."

The Vegan's eyes looked at him squarely. "Murder."

Demuth felt the others stiffen, heard them gasp.

The police chief managed to convey a thin smile. "Murder, gentlemen, is worth fifty points." After a moment he added, "There was one other case of murder three years ago. It was quite unsuccessful. The subject was apprehended within half an hour because he failed to put the department to any great test. The next day he died in the hot sand five miles from the dome. A half-track brought him back. I daresay he wasn't a pretty sight."

THE VEGAN now shuffled the papers on his desk, withdrew an envelope, held it out to Demuth. "I was instructed to give you this." Then his eyes snapped to the wall clock. "It is now three minutes to six. At the sound of the gong the doors behind you will open and you will have five minutes of freedom—or more, if you're lucky or show considerable aptitude." He strode rapidly from the platform, paused at a side door before going through it, to say, "Good luck, gentlemen."

Demuth tore off the end of the envelope, withdrew the paper and opened it. It read:

I will be in my office until 6 p.m. today for your convenience. Do drop by. I won't be in my office tomorrow after 6 a.m. because I have an appointment to see you through the dome locks to the burning sands outside.

Jack Bohannen

Demuth crumpled the paper and, rather than throwing it to the floor where it might be found, stuffed it in his pocket. Pilson had been watching him and said, "Bad news?"

"A challenge, that's all."

Pilson looked at the clock. "Two minutes yet. I wonder where I'll be twenty-four hours from now."

"I'm beginning to wonder where I'll be."

"Don't let them get you down."

They moved toward the door, Demuth's heart commencing a rapid beat as he realized in a few minutes he would be trying to elude the police. Pilson didn't seem much worried.

"What are you going to do when you go through that door?"

Demuth looked at him narrowly.

Pilson laughed a little. "Look, I'm in the same boat as you. I'm just wondering how far ahead you've thought. Me, I've got everything planned. I've even got a place to go."

"You'll never commit your robbery holed up somewhere."

"Ah," Pilson said with a mysterious smile, "that's only the beginning, this place I'm going to. They'll never arrest me when I leave it."

"Why?"

"Because," and Pilson drew closer and said guardedly, "I'm not going to be Frank Pilson any more. I'm going to change my face. Make-up. Can't tell it from the real thing. Got the apartment, got the girl who's going to let me use it. Want to come along? Connie might as well make two comfortable."

There was hardly time to think. Demuth had to grudgingly admit he had given little thought to what he was going to do, except go after Bohannen. Somewhere along the line he'd pick up a weapon, get to Bohannen's office and kill him. Of course it wouldn't be easy—he hadn't expected it to be—but he was bound and determined to carry it out. Pilson's idea sounded good, but he didn't like the idea of team-

ing up with anyone. He wanted to get it over with and then hide out for the remainder of the time. Still . . .

CHAPTER IV

THE GONG SOUNDED and its ring reverberated through the room as the doors slid up.

"Coming?" Pilson asked over his shoulder, already starting through the door.

"Coming," Demuth said, dashing to his side, wondering if he would regret his move.

The six ran out to the smooth street, the three Altairians running off to the left, the Aquarian streaking out of sight ahead of Demuth and Pilson on the right. People already in the street jumped aside and some, aware of what was going on, cried out with wishes for luck.

Demuth and Pilson took the first street to the left, then the next to the right, and then, with the next one to the left, slowed down to a walk. Pilson kept glancing at the sky, the barely visible dome far up on the haze, and Demuth asked him why he did this.

"They might have a flyabout up there," he replied.

"They're supposed to give us the first five minutes."

Pilson grinned. "Never

trust the police. That's my motto. Take nothing for granted."

"How far is this apartment of yours?"

"Oh, it's not my apartment. It belongs to a girl named Connie Craig. And it's not far. Come on, but keep a look out."

They quickened their pace down the wide street, just two among two hundred thousand people. Several flyabout taxis stopped nearby and Demuth turned away lest he be recognized. Pilson told the taximen they were walking and would continue to do so, thank you.

Once they rounded a corner, nearly ran into an Altairian in uniform who eyed them hostilely. Pilson said, "I beg your pardon," and proceeded on casually with Demuth at his side. Hearing a sudden stirring behind them, they turned and saw the Altairian coming up fast.

"Let's go," Demuth said, breaking into a run.

"Right with you," Pilson said between his teeth as he caught up.

They ran half a block. Demuth risked a look, saw the policeman was gaining, shouted, "In here," and ducked into a doorway, Pilson at his heels. Luckily, the riser was at street level. The two jumped

in, the door slammed shut, and Pilson instructed it to take them to the top floor. The riser shot up the shaft and came to a gentle stop at the top floor, the doors sliding open. They stepped out of a cupola to the roof.

"Here," Pilson said, pulling on Demuth's arm. They headed for a private two-seater. Pilson lifted the rear cover where the mechanism was housed, with flying fingers adjusted wires, came back to squeeze in with Demuth. "We've got wings. Take off."

Demuth activated the starter and gently the flyer purred from the room. He was beginning to have a healthy respect for Pilson. Any man who could rewire a flyer that fast to bypass the lock mechanism was a man worth knowing. He chanced a look back at the roof, and saw the policeman jump out of the cupola with his gun in his hand. It was useless at this distance; the gun's blast would reach the craft, but would be inaccurate at this range. He thought: *So far so good.*

"I know one thing," Pilson said. "They've got out descriptions of us. That Altairian cop will be letting them know we've hooked a flyabout."

Demuth nodded. "I'll set it

down. Which way is this apartment you mentioned?"

Pilson took his bearings. "A little to the left and straight ahead for a few blocks."

Demuth kicked in the accelerator. They shot ahead at full throttle, Demuth twisting the wheel to bear left. Suddenly he kicked in the brake. The flyabout stalled and fluttered to the ground, landing in a park area.

Both men jumped from the flyer, and ran through a heavy growth of bushes. On the other side they straightened up and started to walk again. Pilson's eyes went to the sky and he grinned, elbowed Demuth. "Look," he said.

Three police flyers arced overhead, stalled and dropped behind them in the park.

"One more block," Pilson said.

They walked, Demuth trying to do so as nonchalantly as possible, trying to be just anybody out for a walk with a friend, at the same time keeping a wary eye out for uniforms. He wished he could be as cool as Pilson seemed to be. But Pilson was out for assault and not for murder. That would make a difference.

"Turn here," Pilson said.

They rounded a corner and Pilson guided him to twin doors in a tall building De-

muth saw at once was an apartment house. Before a door on the fourth floor Pilson confidently activated the viewscreen and beamed at it. Almost at once it lost its opaqueness and a head became visible.

DEMUTH had been expecting a woman, but he hadn't been expecting to see anyone as pretty as this—and viewscreens were notable for what they lost in detail.

"It's me, honey," Pilson said.

The door opened to reveal a girl not as tall as Demuth, attired in a becoming house-dress that failed to hide the fullness of her figure. Her eyes were warm and welcoming, and she said in a soft voice, "I've been expecting you." For a moment Demuth thought he had seen her before, but then he could have seen her without remembering where.

"Come on in," Pilson said, and he closed the door after Demuth who suddenly found himself strangely ill at ease before this girl. Pilson said to her now, "Everything where I left it?"

"Yes, Mr. Pilson."

Pilson stepped back. "*Mr. Pilson?* Honey, it's me,

Frank." Then he grinned. "Oh, I know. It's because of him, eh? Well, there's nothing to worry about. He's all right. His name is Demuth. Alan Demuth. Alan, meet Connie. Connie Craig."

The touch of the hand she offered was cool and soft. Demuth felt the flush creep over his face and he thought: *I'm behaving like a schoolboy.*

Connie said, "You're one of them, too?"

Pilson said, "Of course he is," and moved toward an adjoining room. "Come on, Alan."

Demuth was puzzled by the odd glint in Connie's eyes. She seemed frankly bewildered and DeMuth wondered if Pilson had had good sense in inviting him along. He wasn't sure he'd have tendered the same invitation to Pilson.

"In here," Pilson was saying, "we have an improvised make-up room. Wait till you see the stuff." They entered what must have been Miss Craig's bedroom. On the floor was a large parcel which Pilson now unzipped. Inside were vials of vari-colored liquids, putty-like substances, assorted powders and small boxes which now fell over the floor in profusion.

Pilson said, "Watch." He picked up a small can, set it

on a dresser, stripped down, then pressed the sides of the can. A cloud of dark vapor filled the space before him and he stepped into it, rubbing the particles into his pores, much as if he were lathering himself with soap. Before Demuth's eyes Pilson's complexion darkened considerably, as if Pilson had been under health lamps for weeks. When Pilson looked at him, Demuth was surprised to see how blanched the corners of his eyes were, how white his teeth had become.

Next Pilson picked up a piece of putty, added some dark powder and worked it into a mass the same color as his skin. This he applied deftly to his chin, his forehead and nose, watching himself in the mirror over the dresser. He wasn't Pilson any more. The substance blended into his features so well it was impossible to guess where the artificial material began.

"I think that ought to do it," he said, drawing on his clothes. "Now it's your turn." He eyed the make-up materials, frowning. "Perhaps we should lighten your skin, change your hair to black. I can change the pigment of your eyes with this dye. Just a drop in each eye. Instead of blue eyes, you'll have brown."



"No thanks," Demuth said. "It won't last but a day or two."

"Well . . ." It would be helpful, there was no doubt of that. He could walk right in on Bohannen and Bohannen would never know him. He could kill him. . . . He wondered if, when the opportunity came, he could actually do it. *No time to think about that*, he told himself. *I've committed myself but good*. "All right," he said.

"Hand me that lightener," Pilson said. "Yes, that's the one. Mmm." He looked at the can and then at Demuth. "I don't think it will be too light. Here goes." He squirted the vapor out before Demuth, but Demuth just stood there.

"Take them off," Pilson said, gesturing at him. "Your clothes."

He slid off his clothes and enveloped himself in the particles, rubbing them in the way he had seen Pilson do. When he looked at his arms afterward they looked like anything but his own, and when he looked at himself in the mirror he thought: *I'm so pale I look like I have one foot in the grave*.

"Your nose," Pilson said, slapping the gooey stuff on his nose and working it around.

He gave Demuth a wider, more flaring nose. Demuth thought he looked like a trapped animal. Pilson went on, "Now the eyes. Tilt your head back. Keep your eyes open."

It was difficult, but Demuth managed. The dark drops plunked in, first in the right and then the left, and a world of brown washed in front of him. Pilson gave him a cloth and Demuth dried his eyes. The next look he had in the mirror, he wondered who the man was sitting across from him. But of course it was the new Alan Demuth. He grinned. The effect was startling. It was odd, watching a man you didn't know doing the very same things you were doing.

"There'll be no policeman put a hand on you," Pilson said proudly, beaming at his handiwork. "You'll get to Bohannen easily now."

Demuth jerked around. "Bohannen? How did you know I was trying to get to Bohannen?"

Pilson shrugged. "You told me. Don't you remember?"

At that moment Connie walked in with two cups of coffee. "You'll need these," she said, putting the steaming cups on the dresser. "Are you about ready?"

"Just about," Pilson said,

taking a big healthy swallow.

Demuth took a sip, made a wry face because he'd burned his tongue. "Say, this stuff's hot."

"I'll say it is," Pilson said, drinking a little more and smiling at Connie.

"You'll need it, what you fellows are going to have to do," she said. "I don't know how—"

"Sure," Pilson said, suddenly in a hurry. "Come on, Alan. Drink her down. We've got to be moving."

CHAPTER V

OUTSIDE THE APARTMENT ON the street they commenced walking again and Pilson chuckled. "Nothing to fear now, Alan. Nobody's giving us a second look."

It was true, Demuth was forced to agree. They seemed to have become invisible. All the same, an uneasiness was gnawing at Demuth's mind and try as he might he could not for the life of him ferret out the cause of it.

"Come on," Pilson said, grabbing his arm and quickening his step. It was a cheerful move of a man who has nothing to fear. A confident man. Demuth's uneasiness increased. He wrenched his arm away.

"Wait," he said. "We're both out for different things. You've got your robbery and I have my murder. There's no sense in going together."

Pilson sighed. "You still don't understand. Alone, our senses are halved. Together we are more formidable and more alert. What's more, we can help each other. As far as the robbery is concerned, I can rob somebody at the Testing Center."

Demuth was adamant. "No. I prefer going alone. The way I see it, if we're together the job of the police is simplified. Apart, they must split up their forces, too."

A strange look came into Pilson's eyes, as if lenses were shifting somewhere deep inside, and in that instant Demuth knew what the fear was he'd been riding.

"You've made up your mind?" Pilson said tightly.

"Yes."

Pilson shrugged. "Very well. However, I'll walk part of the way with you."

Now Demuth shrugged in return and started down the street, keeping a wary eye on Pilson and on everything else, too. It had been too easy so far and now he knew the reason why. Pilson kept in step with him and for once had nothing to say.

They walked to an intersection where flyabouts were parked and where there were many people moving about, Altairians, Aquarians, Vegans and Earthmen, all rubbing shoulders. Music drifted over the area from some source deeply hidden, and it was interrupted by a voice which said the time was eight twenty-five. Two hours and twenty-five minutes. It hadn't seemed that long since six o'clock.

One moment they were walking together, silent and with determined step, brushing by others less bent on going somewhere, though it was the hour when people were going to their offices. The next moment Demuth slipped between two flyabout taxis and scurried across the street, threading his way among people bound for the intersection, going back the way he had come.

"Demuth!"

The shout came from behind him and Demuth hurried his step. He had to get away from Pilson if he were to survive. He quickened his step even more, finally broke into a run.

Rounding a corner, he ducked into the first doorway he saw, ran down its length to where it curved right, then took another passageway left,

still another left. This one went down. He stumbled down dark steps, and heard the hiss and whirr of machinery. His eyes became used to the dark and he could make out vague shapes of controls, pipes and masses of machinery for controlling the block.

Quietly he crossed the floor, climbed atop a pipe beneath a window, opened it noiselessly and squeezed through to the outside. He was in an open area, surrounded on all sides by buildings. Fine, he thought. Just fine. There's no escape here except through somebody else's basement window. He decided to rest a minute to catch his breath, but had sat still for only a few minutes before he heard a sound behind him in the room he had just left.

He could not look in the window to see if it was Pilson or not without risking detection, so he moved on tiptoe several windows down, found one that slid open at his touch, slipped inside into a room similar to the one he had left, and locked the window behind him.

"There," he said to himself. "Pilson doesn't know which window I went through, and won't be able to get through the closed and locked window . . . unless . . ." He didn't want

to think about what he feared about Pilson.

COLLECTING HIMSELF, Demuth brushed himself off, went up the stairs to the corridor, took a left, a right, and found himself out on the street again. He started once more in the direction he and Pilson had been pursuing and crossed the intersection to Herculum's large park area, which he would have to cross to get to Bohannen's office.

Here it was quieter, and there were fewer people. He made a beeline for the great mile-high shaft in the center of the park, for behind it on the opposite side of the park was the Testing Center. A look behind him showed him he had been successful in eluding Pilson, and he began to feel good.

As he walked across the park his eyes took in the great column at its center, the top of it lost in the ever-present mist at the top of the dome. Of course that was as it should be. It was the combination of the mist and the translucent dome that filtered the light from the twin suns and made the floor of the city livable. He had been impressed by the shaft when he had first arrived at Herculum, and

one of his first ventures in the flyabout taxi was to fly to the top of it and view the city from the light-bathed platform there. And once he had flown one of the technicians to the top of the column so the technician could take some sort of reading on the outside of the dome, which he had done by going through the lock there to the incredible brilliance beyond it.

The technician could have taken the riser, but said it was slow compared to a flyabout, and Demuth had riveted the technician to his seat the way he thrust upward. The recollection of it made him smile. He'd been a good flyabout taximan, had endured his year of it gracefully, but it wasn't anything he wanted to do for ten years in a row.

"Alan Demuth! Alan Demuth!"

It was a girl's voice and it made him stop on the grass a few hundred feet from the thick shaft. He looked up to see a private flyer hovering overhead, with Connie Craig's head appearing out of the cockpit as she sent the flyer fluttering down.

Demuth waited for nothing. He started to run, wishing he were anywhere but in the park. Was the girl in on it, too? She and Pilson together?

Was she built the way Pilson was? Might be. No wonder those who ventured into criminal status didn't have a chance with creatures like those allied against them.

Now he was on the firm pavement around the shaft. He started to run around it and came face to face with Frank Pilson.

Demuth stopped, uncertain which way to go.

Pilson was smiling, saying, "Well, Alan, it seems we meet again." It wasn't the friendly tone he'd used before.

Pilson didn't seem to want to stop him as Demuth moved to run away, but he said, "It's useless, Alan. There's no escape. Now that you know, there's no sense in carrying the game on any farther. The police will be here in a moment." He glanced to the edge of the park and Demuth followed his gaze. From several directions police flyers, their red lights blinking, were coming slowly.

Demuth turned to Pilson, his mind working furiously, trying to think of some way out of it.

"That little device on your nose keeps sending out those signals," Pilson said, amused. "You could never have escaped. Did you think we were fools?"

"That's not you talking," Demuth said. "Who are you?"

Pilson sighed. "Actually, I'm a Vegan. A sub-lieutenant at the moment. With your capture I might make lieutenant, if they will overlook your discovery. But then, this is only the second time. It was fun while it lasted, as long as I was with you, but of course we couldn't allow you to get near Mr. Bohannen."

"Where are you?"

"At police headquarters. Would you say mine was a rather convincing portrayal?"

Pride, Demuth thought, *goeth before a fall*, and he rushed Pilson in such a frenzy of action that Pilson barely had time to get his hands up to ward off the feet Demuth brought up heavily on his chest. Demuth fell to the pavement but was not hurt, but Pilson smashed up against the gleaming metal of the shaft and his head hit an outcropping of it a resounding blow.

Beneath Pilson's torn scalp Demuth could see metal.

As I thought, he told himself. *A high order robot. I should have known.*

Pilson came up in a flurry of action, intent on getting Demuth into those arms of his. Demuth, hoping his human responses were as good as

those of the Vegan who was operating Pilson from headquarters, jumped aside and, seeing the great number of flyabouts converging on the site, ran for the entrance to the shaft.

Just inside was the riser with its doors open, for which he was thankful—nobody at the top. He jumped in and activated it. As it rose and the doors wooshed shut, Pilson shot through, struggled to get all of him squeezed in beyond the jaws that were the doors. Pilson's leg didn't quite make it. With a shriek of twisting metal, the leg was severed just above the knee.

CHAPTER VI

PILSON SAT on the floor of the cage, the snagged leg useless, trailing battered pieces of metal and wires. But Pilson appeared unconcerned. He grinned at Demuth. "Think you will escape now, Alan?"

Demuth glared. "Why didn't you arrest me five minutes after we left the instructions room? Why all this?"

Pilson didn't lose his grin. "You miss the point of the criminal game. Besides, it's not often we get a chance to capture a murderer—or should I say a would-be murderer?

We wanted to let you go as far as we thought safe."

"That's just this far, isn't it?"

"Yes. No farther."

The riser went up gently, with hardly a sound to mark its passage.

Finally Pilson said, "What tipped you off, Alan? I swear I wasn't expecting you to duck away from me like that."

"Your remark about Bohannen. That was a start."

Pilson nodded soberly. "That was a slip, wasn't it?"

"Then there was the coffee. You drank it down when it was too hot for a human being to stand. I burned my tongue on it. Thanks to Connie Craig for serving it that way."

Pilson was thoughtful. "I should have known. I will have to remember that."

"Is she one of you?"

"What?"

"Is Connie Craig one of you?"

"There are many of us," Pilson said with an inscrutable smile.

Demuth forced his thoughts away from Pilson and things that might be (it was difficult, though, trying to wrench his mind away from Connie Craig), and gave himself up to thinking about what he'd do when the riser reached the top of the shaft. He heard the

barely perceptible sough of air as the cage rose, and wondered how far upward they had already come.

"The police will be waiting at the top," Pilson said, "if that's what you're thinking. Some of them are there already."

Demuth said nothing, but he understood why Pilson did not try to hold him physically. What use would it be when the flyabouts would be at the top of the platform, just waiting to haul him in? He glanced at the controls, and Pilson's grin broadened.

"Up or down," Pilson said. "It really makes no difference. You're caught in a cage. It makes my work easier. And don't try stalling the cage. If you do you will regret it."

There was no denying it; Pilson would be the victor in any test of strength. Human muscle was no match for the strength of metal.

The gentle purr of the cage tapered off to complete silence and the riser's doors hissed open. Demuth had expected to see the top platform of the shaft, but the doors opened to a corridor.

"After you," Pilson said, getting up on his one leg and leaning against the cage's wall, taking little jumps toward the door.

Demuth walked out into the bright corridor. It curved to the left and he followed it into ever-increasing whiteness around to the opposite side, where it opened out to a level place that blinded him at first after the subdued light of the car. A dozen feet away it stopped. Beyond that there was nothing—nothing, that is, except hovering police flyers a few yards away from the iridescence of the dome itself. It hurt his eyes to look that way, but he forced himself to, squinting, and saw the flyers start to head in toward the platform.

Something else caught Demuth's eyes. Beyond the flyers he saw Connie's craft, and he wondered what she was still doing there. No doubt watching to make sure he was finally taken into custody.

Well, you couldn't always win, and those suns out there beyond the dome were going to be awfully hot. For a short time, anyway. After that he wouldn't feel the heat any more.

HE TOOK a step toward the outside platform, glanced to his left to see Pilson hopping on his one foot, wires and metal dangling from the other, a grotesque figure of a

man. And beyond Pilson he saw something he hadn't seen before. The corridor continued around that side and there was a door.

A door to where?

Pilson now hopped a little in front of him, and Demuth, keeping his senses, sauntered reluctantly behind, watching the flyers moving within feet of the platform. He could see the smirking faces of Altairians, Vegans, a few Earthmen and one Aquarian, all uniformed, and all waiting to take him back.

"The whole police department mobilized to capture one man," Demuth said bitterly.

Pilson poised on his one foot. "As I've said, we don't get a chance to do this every day."

"You must be very proud," Demuth said tightly.

Pilson managed a shrug. "You were committed to the act. We were committed to your capture."

"And if I'd done it and managed to escape until tomorrow, I'd have been congratulated. It's ironic."

"No. You'd have proved your point and you would have had your reward, those fifty points upgrading for your superiority." A ghost of a smile flickered on his face. "A superiority, I might add,

which existed only in your mind." He sighed. "That's the trouble with you fellows who hope to show us a thing or two."

"Do you always send so many men after one man?"

Pilson hobbled closer to the edge. "It depends upon the nature of the crime contemplated."

In that instant, with Pilson so confident, Demuth summoned up his reserve strength, rushed savagely at Pilson, and hit him hard with his shoulder. Though the blow was softened by his own shoulder muscles, the jar of contact was a shattering one and he winced with the pain of it.

Pilson fell, rolled toward the edge of the platform, trying to scramble to a sitting position, putting out his one good foot to stop himself, his hands spread-eagled. He slid farther, nearly stopped, tottered, then disappeared over the edge.

Demuth did not wait to see what would happen next but ducked back into the corridor the way they had come. He ran around to the riser, hardly able to see in the softer light, and went in. He wrenched off the artificial nose Pilson had attached, felt smarting flesh where it had held so well, and felt too the

hard object within it, the signaling device that told the authorities where he was at all times. He threw it to the floor and nimbly leaped from the car just as it started its descent, nearly catching his foot in the doors as they swished closed.

He turned right this time and ran around to where he had spied the door. It opened easily, and he went through it and closed it gently behind him. Before him was a narrow, dimly lighted corridor that curved downward. He grinned. At least he'd hold them off a while this way.

CHAPTER VII

HE HURRIED down the corridor, knowing the flyers would be at the platform now and police officers would be jumping out and running around to the riser. They'd find it in use and would assume he'd taken it to the ground. Then they'd rush out, get in their flyers and go down to wait for him to emerge at ground level. Unless somebody thought to open the door to the corridor going down. In which case he'd better be quiet in his descent.

He took off his shoes and ran down the corridor in his

stockinged feet, hearing only the whistle of the stale air by his ears. If somebody opened the door at the top, he wouldn't know it. He stopped for a few moments to listen, but heard nothing.

No, nobody would be opening that door, nobody would be thinking he went down this way. Why should they when the signal device was in the riser?

After a few minutes he slowed to a walk. There was no sense in rushing to the ground. As soon as they saw he wasn't on the riser they'd start up the sloping floor for him, perhaps send somebody up to the top to start down. *No*, he told himself, *my troubles aren't over yet, even though I'm sure Pilson must be dead—or as dead as a robot can get. And that Vegan at police headquarters will be out of a job for a while.*

He maintained his slow progress down the slope, noting now that the curve was not nearly so extreme as it had been. The shaft was getting larger. He wondered how far down the shaft he actually was, wished there were windows or doors so that he could look out.

Ultimately he came to a level place where a door opened to the inner wall. He

opened it, looked down the dark shaft, saw nothing. Probably an opening used for an emergency exit or repairs. On the other side was a door to the outer wall, and his heart jumped at the sight of it. If he could get outside he might evade searchers on the way up—or down. Except, of course, that they would open the door just as he had done and there he'd be.

Or would he?

He opened it to see a ledge only a few feet wide, the air behind him rushing by to get out. He stepped out on the ledge and looked at the ground from a dizzying height. There were specks that looked like flyers down there but he couldn't be sure at this height.

"Alan!"

He nearly toppled from the ledge. He had been so busy looking down he did not see the flyer above him. He looked up now to see Connie Craig wave at him.

HE WAVED BACK. If she were with them, all was lost. But all seemed lost anyway, so what was the difference? If he could get in her flyer without the police's knowledge, he could take it away from her and escape. It depended on

Connie. He'd have to pretend to go along. He forced himself to smile as he saw the hovering flyer inch closer to the ledge.

"For a moment I thought it was you who went over the edge," Connie was saying, manipulating the controls to steady the craft in the winds around the shaft. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

He waited as she maneuvered the craft within two feet of the edge, surprised at the able way she handled the controls, then leaped to the flyer, which bobbed at this new weight. Connie kept busy trying to compensate for it.

When the craft was steady, he said, "All right, now let me have the controls."

"What?" she said, turning to him in genuine surprise. "Why?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her from the seat. She fought him with her fists, the flyer dipping and careening.

"You're a fool!" she cried.

But he said nothing as he edged himself into the seat. There was no sense in taking chances. She might guide the craft right into the arms of the law and that would be the end. It simply had to be done this way.

Once in the pilot's seat he

turned the craft so he could look down. The flyers at the base of the shaft seemed un-mindful of this solitary craft halfway to the dome. Good. He hadn't drawn attention. Next he eased the flyer carefully and slowly away from the shaft.

Connie's lips were shut tight and her eyes were hostile as she said, "A fine one you are. I should never have bothered."

"You were Frank Pilson's

girlfriend and Pilson was one of them." He shot her a look. "What does that make you?"

"That makes me hate you because you've jumped to such a conclusion. You must be quite stupid."

"That's easy to say."

"It's also easy to prove."

"How?"

"Yesterday I was asked if I wanted to participate in today's criminal hunt—on the side of the law."

"I thought so."



"Will you let me finish?"

He shrugged. "I suppose there's no way to stop you." Now that the urgency of the action at the shaft was over, he was becoming more conscious of her nearness.

"You're impossible," she said, turning her head away.

"All right. I promise to listen."

She turned back and smoothed her skirt thoughtfully before she said, "As I said, I was asked if I wanted

to take part in the game, help the authorities. I have a dull office job and I jumped at the chance for the day off. But before I did I asked what I'd have to do, and they told me all I'd have to do was provide a rendezvous for two police officers who would arrive shortly after six and don disguises. I was to help all I could, that's all. I knew one of the men would be Frank Pilson because he was the one who came to Mr. Bohannen's



office to ask me. I thought it was quite excit—"

"Bohannen's office!" Demuth interrupted. So that's where he'd seen her before! Of course. "You work in Bohannen's office!"

"Of course I do," she said stiffly. "Is there anything wrong in that?"

"Only that I must murder him, that's all. Didn't you know that?"

"Not then, I didn't. I've heard it since on the radio and the tridimensional. They've caught everybody but you, did you know that?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLYABOUT mingled with the others over the city, sank slowly to the lower levels and ultimately landed atop Connie's apartment house. As casually as two people would ordinarily move from a flyer, they emerged and moved to the riser, taking it to Connie's floor. Demuth waited for a moment in front of the door while Connie went in and came out, saying there was no one inside.

There was no alternative but to trust her. Demuth turned, entered, and found she was not lying.

He locked the door and sprawled wearily in a chair,

glad for a chance for respite.

"You need something to eat," she said, glancing at the wall clock. "It's after noon."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I can always eat. What I want to know is about Bohannen."

She took a chair nearby and gazed at him without expression. She said, "I'll do all I can to help, but must you kill him?"

"Yes. If I don't, I'll lose my life outside the dome."

"But why? Why have you set yourself on this course?"

"Because he's getting a percentage of I don't know how many people's weekly credits for upgrading them."

She stared, lips parted. Then she blinked her eyes, closed her mouth firmly and said, "I don't believe it."

He leaned forward. "You mean you work right there in his office and don't know this?"

"Of course. Mr. Bohannen has been nothing but fair to us all in the office. It doesn't make any difference whether we're Altarian, Aquarian, Vegan or of Earth."

Demuth grinned. "You're not only beautiful, you're naive."

A spot of red showed in her cheeks. "I may be naive," she said slowly.

"You saw me there yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Just after I came out of his office?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to know what he said to me just before I came out?"

She said nothing, so he went on. "I went to him because my record was so low—"

"Everybody," she interrupted, "thinks his score—"

"I'm not that stupid. If it was a little lower than what I know it should be, I wouldn't have become suspicious, but it was hardly half that. When I talked to him about it he said everybody has to make a living, he'd be here only ten years, and he had to make all he could during those years. He asked me for ten per cent of what I'd make each year; in return, he would upgrade me to the level I wanted."

She shook her head wonderingly. "It's incredible!"

"It's not only incredible," he said, "it's also dishonest."

"I know a lot of people come to see him, but . . ."

"A lot of people are paying him that ten per cent. He's getting rich." He darted her a look. "Are you sure you didn't know anything about this?"

"Of course I'm sure. After all, there are seven of us in the office. The machine handles the tests, and Mr. Bohannan reviews them, adjusts the final grade in each division and affixes the possible statuses. From our office the records go to the status office where the occupational specialties are affixed. Then these are duplicated and the originals returned."

"It could be," Demuth said. "You seven are just clerks."

"We file the records away, and that's no easy job. Filing information on two hundred thousand people is a full time job for just seven people."

"Can you see that it is possible, though?"

"Yes," she said soberly, "I can." She looked up and her eyes held a different kind of look. Demuth wanted to think it was a look of admiration. "Are you sure you won't have something to eat?"

"Yes, I'm sure. What I want to know now is why you got in your flyabout and followed us to the park."

Connie smiled. "So I'm still suspect?" Her teeth were remarkably white and straight. In fact, she was so perfect in every way Demuth had a sudden uneasiness, the same uneasiness he'd had about Pilson. On impulse he got up from

his chair, walked over to her, took her by the arm, lifted her from the chair and kissed her.

IT WAS a long kiss and Connie did not protest during it. Quite otherwise. She answered it warmly. Demuth could feel her quickening heart. Or was it his own?

"Satisfied?" she said, stepping away, her face flushed, her eyes mocking. "I'm not like Pilson at all."

He grinned, feeling foolish and pleased at the same time. "I guess not." Then he added, "How did you know about him?"

"Nobody drinks coffee like that. Not my coffee, anyway."

Demuth sank down in the chair again. "That's when I tumbled, too. I found out later he was being operated by a Vegan at headquarters. But you still haven't said—"

"About my flyer? That's easy. As soon as I saw you I knew you weren't a police officer because you'd only taken the test the day before and had words with Mr. Bohannen, though I didn't know you had applied for criminal status. Then here in this room, the way Pilson acted, the way he monopolized the conversation and handled things, made me suspicious.

And then it dawned on me that you didn't know."

She stopped and Demuth glanced at her to find her face turned away. "Then what?"

Her eyes came around, slid to his. "Then I decided to help you, decided to tell you my suspicion about him. I couldn't do it when you two were together, and when I saw you in the park alone I tried to contact you, but you only ran away."

He said levelly, "Why did you want to help me?" He was rewarded by the flush that came over her face.

She managed to say, "I thought you were being taken, that's all. I've always been for the underdog."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I said you were naive."

"I guess I was, if what you say about Mr. Bohannen is true."

"I knew him on Earth. He always managed to wriggle out of things, always had half a dozen schemes going."

She said thoughtfully, "He's taking an awful chance with the records. If there should be an investigation—"

"They'd find nothing. Don't you see? He gimmicks the score any way he wishes, waits for the gripe, then puts his proposition to the applicant. Sometimes he waits a

year, as he did in my case, knowing I wouldn't want another year of flying taxis. The applicant is always willing to pay for it—or nearly always, I'd guess. All Bohannen has to do in most cases is put down what should have been there in the first place."

"You didn't come across, as you say."

"No, and I suspect there are others who have refused. Possibly many, some of whom have taken to criminal status in an effort to win upgrading without benefit of Bohannen. But how would one go about discovering who these people are when there are two hundred thousand records to go through?"

"I could look at yours. I know how to interpret the tape. I could see if he's done it right."

"When?"

Connie frowned. "I see what you mean. I don't go back to work until tomorrow. By that time you could be dead on the sand."

CHAPTER IX

AT THAT MOMENT the annunciator sounded and they jumped at the sudden raucous sound. The face of the Vegan was at the door-viewer.

Recovering, Connie rose and went to the door, but motioned Demuth to one side beyond the range of the scanner before she activated it. "Yes?" she said calmly.

"Herculum police, Miss Craig," the high-pitched voice said. "Open up."

Getting just the right note of indignation in her voice, she said, "Am I under arrest?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then why must I open the door? What right have you to ask entry?"

The Vegan was patient. "Criminal Alan Demuth was traced to your apartment, Miss. If you don't open the door immediately, I'm afraid we'll have to come through it."

"Very well," Connie said, stepping out of range and darting a what-do-we-do-now look at Demuth.

He nodded for her to open the door.

She did.

At once three persons entered—two Vegans and an Altarian—and as Connie stepped to one side, Demuth rushed toward them.

The three police officers lifted their guns, but the presence of Connie and the suddenness of Demuth's attack tipped the balance in his

favor. He collided with them and caromed out the door, managing to catch the edge of it in his hand and slam it after him.

He heard the door jerk open, heard the steps behind him as he raced down the hall. Then he felt the heat of the blast past his head, saw the hole it made in the wall toward which he was rushing. He turned abruptly just as another blast reached him, nicking his shoulder and spinning him to the floor.

He lunged to his feet in the doorway, still another blast slamming the corridor's end wall, sending debris into his neck. The odor of burnt wood filled the air. The feet were closer now.

Demuth raced up the stairs three at a time, and by the time he had gone up two flights he was so winded he didn't think he could make the last one. At the landing to the final flight he spied a large metal barrel. He did not stop to think what it contained or why it was there, but put his shoulder behind it and sent it crashing down the stairs. It bumped down, rolled around on the landing, started to roll down the next flight. He heard a high-pitched warning cry from the Vegan and a moment later a bone-shattering crunch

as the barrel smashed into one of them.

He did not wait to see and hear but opened the cupola door and ran across the roof to Connie's flyabout. Thankful she had not objected to his leaving the keys in it, he slid into the seat, kicked it into motion, and was just rising when he saw the figures burst out on the roof, their guns in their hands. He depressed the accelerator all the way, shoved the steering mechanism upward and to the right. Screaming into the air, the flyer shuddered under the demand for sudden power. Then he was weaving among the afternoon flyers, for the moment safe, but only for a moment. They'd be after him and the flyer before long. He'd have to get rid of it.

He had just had the thought when he saw the flashing red lights of approaching flyers. He dropped the craft like a plummet atop a building, got out and raced to the cupola, down the stairs and out to the street.

He walked with studied leisureliness. It was two o'clock. He wondered if he'd elude them until six the next morning. Not the way things were going. They were after him in earnest, probably had the whole force working on it.

"Alan Demuth," he heard from a radio in a shop he passed, "continues to remain at large. Residents of Herculum are urged to be on the lookout for a light-complexioned Earthman six feet tall, brown eyes, black hair cut short . . ." And he passed out of hearing.

What chance did a man have?

HE WALKED with unconcern toward the park and the great shaft so recently the scene of police action. There were few people on the greensward, and those who were paid him little notice. He kept to the outer edges so that he could dart across the streets and lose himself in the busier sections if he were spotted.

He was successful all the way across the park, which took him the better part of an hour, only to find a cluster of policemen before the entrance to the Testing Center. He also saw a number of other people—too many for this time of day—in various casual poses and activities nearby: a gardener, a man sweeping the street, flyabout taxis with nearly dozing drivers, several private flyers, saunterers and groups having conversations.

Well, Alan Demuth, he

told himself, there goes your chance to murder Bohannen. How could anyone expect to commit a crime of this nature when Herculum's finest were out en masse to circumvent it? There would have to be some other way. He lay in the dense foliage near the street looking at the building and the people there for a long time trying to figure it out.

There obviously could be no entry from the ground. The building, however, was only half a dozen stories tall. He could land on the roof. But how? And what if the roof was as well guarded? But that would have to be the chance he'd take. He'd simply have to go back, get Connie's flyer and fly it over the building, somehow drop from it, make them think he'd gone on in the flyabout. The machine would continue on until it crashed into the dome. That would give the ever-vigilant repair crews something to do, plugging the hole it would make.

He retraced his steps back across the park, hiding in bushes several times as pairs of policemen strolled by. If he could find a lone policeman he could waylay him and confiscate his uniform, but in pairs it wasn't worth the chance.

Ultimately he reached the building on top of which he had left the flyabout, and he made it to the roof without incident, torn with uncertainty because there might be somebody there guarding it and hoping he'd return. Then, too, they might have returned it to Connie or impounded it—any number of things might have happened. But he found it untended among several others parked on the rooftop, and clambered inside, resting there for a few minutes to regain his breath and review what he intended to do.

It had been nearly twelve hours ago that he had been instructed by the Vegan police chief in the gathering place at headquarters, twelve hours since he had so innocently accepted the comradeship of Frank Pilson. In those twelve hours his eagerness to have done with the job had all but evaporated. Now all he had left was dogged determination, and the only reason he was able to hang onto that was the thought of all the people Bohannen had made miserable by his demands for credits in exchange for upgrading. If it had been a simple matter of personal revenge, he doubted that he would have lasted this long, but the thought of the others made him grit his teeth

and vow to erase the testing chief.

"If I don't do it," he said to himself silently, "there will be a host of others after me who will be offered upgrading at a price, and they'll work out their years in bondage to him. I've got to succeed. For the good of Herculum, I must."

Thus counseled, Demuth activated the flyabout and rose slowly from the roof, took several deep breaths and turned the flyer toward Bohannen's office. He knew he would be sighted before he got very far, but this time he didn't care. This time it didn't matter. The unexpectedness of it, the boldness—he was counting on these to help him.

FOR A FULL MINUTE he glided along in the direction of Bohannen's headquarters without attracting any attention. Then he saw the flash of red a few blocks before him and knew it was about to begin. Looking behind him, he saw three police flyers moving up fast. He grinned. He hadn't been a flyabout taximan for nothing. The only question was whether or not Connie's flyabout would hold together for what he planned to do with it.

Now there were half a dozen flyers converging on him. Suddenly he jammed the flyer, full throttle, into a long sweep to the right, felt himself pressed hard against the seat as it moved in a sharp arc. Just as quickly he shifted his course to the left, aiming at the top of the shaft, not caring now who or how many were behind him.

He braked suddenly near the top of the dome. In the blinding haze there he turned to meet the many flyers now moving in from all directions. Carefully sighting where he thought the Testing Center would be below him, he aimed the craft a few blocks short of it, and at full power darted toward it. The wind rose from a dull woosh to a high whine before he came upon the rising flyers who now scattered before his charge. At the calculated distance before the Testing Center he leveled off, braked shudderingly, opened the door, and with his hands on the controls for the last maneuver, shoved them out of phase and jumped lightly from the craft as it went by the roof.

He sprawled there as the flyabout kept on going. He grinned as its receding shape gyrated wildly upward as if out of control. *Let them chase*

that for a while, he thought, noting with satisfaction the pack of police flyers in hot pursuit.

On the roof there was nothing—yet. Should there have been? As if in answer, the roof cupola door was opening, and Demuth just managed to sprint behind it before two Altairians in uniform came running out, their guns drawn.

He darted around the door and, hearing a scramble behind him as he entered the doorway, knew he had been sighted. The Altairians exchanged excited cries in their own tongue and came for him. Demuth stepped to one side of the doorway and let them come. The first one came through the door, gave a surprised shout when he saw no one upon the stairs, but had no opportunity for anything else because Demuth stepped from beside the door and sent him bumping down the steps to lie in a crumpled heap at the bottom.

The second Altairian did not come in, having seen what had happened to his companion. Demuth chanced a look through the door, saw him standing out on the roof, his gun coming up for a shot at him. Demuth ducked back behind the protection of the

jamb, looked down the stairs, and wondered if he'd make it.

Still, there was nothing to be gained standing where he was, letting the Altairian give an alarm. He darted out and down the stairs, hearing the scurry of footsteps behind him, expecting any moment to be shot in the back. He jumped over the prostrate Altairian, and made himself as small a target as possible as he lay on the next set of stairs and grasped the fallen Altairian's gun.

Sighting up the stairs, he pressed off a shot that sent his pursuer off his feet and crashing down the stairs to join the other police officer on the landing.

Demuth rose to a sitting position, his gun at the ready, waiting for whatever action this violence would trigger. But all was quiet; he saw nothing in the corridor at the bottom of the second set of stairs, heard nothing.

Cautiously holding his gun ever at the ready, he stepped lightly down the stairs, poked his head out into the corridor, and saw that it was deserted. But of course it would be, being so near six. Office hours ended at five, but Bohannen had promised to be in his office until six. However, Bohannen's office was on

the floor below. The numbers here were in the five hundreds; Bohannen's office was 401.

He gingerly made his way down the stair well to the floor below, uneasy because he saw no one and could not believe this should be his good fortune. His uneasiness grew as he made his way down the hall to Bohannen's office.

Here the door was open and Demuth knew this shouldn't be. It was too easy. He went out into the hall again, saw no one, heard nothing, so he went back in, filled with the wonder of it. Of all places, he expected the office to be overrun with police. Still, it could be that Bohannen had every confidence in the men stationed below and on the roof.

Feeling he was walking at the edge of a precipice, Demuth stepped softly to the inner office door and flung it open.

No one was there. Like an eye looking at him was the empty chair behind the desk where Bohannen should have been.

"Don't move!"

Demuth froze where he was. That was not an Altairian's voice, nor an Aquarian's or a Vegan's. It was the voice of an Earthman.

Where had he been hiding?

CHAPTER X

"**B**EHIND YOU, Mr. Demuth," the voice went on, "are a number of police officers. They would enjoy it if you would make some sort of attempt to get out of here. Would you like to try?"

The voice belonged to Bohannen. Since he didn't have eyes in the back of his head, Demuth couldn't tell whether he was telling the truth or not, so he did nothing.

"You may turn around now—slowly."

Demuth turned and saw Bohannen to one side and six police officers—two Vegans, two Aquarians, an Earthman and an Altairian. They didn't look as if they appreciated what he had done up on the stairway to the roof.

"What took you so long?" Bohannen said, coming toward him. "We expected you long ago and I was getting impatient. It's after six, you know, and I was on the point of going home."

Demuth saw his grinning face as Bohannen put out his hand for the gun. He could have killed Bohannen right then and there, but he'd have been killed in the process and he couldn't bring himself to do it as long as there was a chance he might still win.

When Demuth hesitated to hand over the gun, Bohannen chided, "Now, now, Alan, you wouldn't want me to tell the boys to commence firing, would you?"

"You're rotten," Demuth said between his teeth. "I should kill you."

"You'd never press the trigger," Bohannen said.

Demuth sighed, let him take the gun. So this was the way it was going to be: Bohannen victorious, Demuth frying under a double sun in Herculum's dry as dust sand.

Other police officers were coming in now and the room was full of them.

"Sit down, Alan," Bohannen said, indicating a chair, "might as well be comfortable while we're waiting for the police chief. He wants to come over and congratulate you, did you know that? He asked me to let him know when you arrived. He thinks a lot of you, really he does. After all, he expected to capture you early this morning."

"Is he in on this, too? Is he as crooked as you are?"

Bohannen hoisted his rump to a desk and sat, one foot on the floor, the other dangling, saying, "Crooked, Alan? I don't understand you. Are you implying that I'm not honest?"

"You know damn well you're not honest. You're running a game here on Herculum to get all you can while you can."

Bohannen snorted. "Hear that, boys? I think Demuth's suddenly gone out of his head."

"How about all the rest of the guys who're paying you for the upgrading they're entitled to anyway? Are they out of their heads?"

"You're talking nonsense."

"I think an auditing of your records would show how right I am."

"Think so?" Bohannen was amused. "You forget that I'm the Testing Chief, Alan. Nothing can be done without my consent. It just so happens that you're like all the rest of the disgruntled people who feel they're entitled to upgrading simply because they exist. Only in your case it's gone to your brain and you had to apply for criminal status, which shows how far gone you are."

"Not according to what you told me in your office."

Bohannen laughed. "Jeff Branner got in touch with me, told me what you said in his office. Herculum is laughing at you, Alan, did you know that? Everyone knows the machines are never wrong,

that those who work in the Testing Center are above reproach."

"The machines may not be wrong but the human element is."

"My clerks are dependable."

"Even if you're not, is that it?"

Bohannen sighed wearily. "A charge of malfeasance is a serious one. Where you're going it won't be possible for you to make it, unfortunately for you. Not that it would have stood up had you been able to make it."

Demuth said levelly, "I'm not there yet."

"You will be, Alan," Bohannen said with quiet confidence. "You will be."

AT THAT MOMENT the Vegan chief of police walked through the office door, followed by several other important-looking officers.

"Glad to see you," Bohannen said, rising. "Here is your man."

The Vegan's wings shuddered a little, then shifted themselves to lie close to his back as he viewed Demuth with an unwinking eye.

"You gave us quite a time, Demuth."

"My only regret is that I wasn't successful."

The Vegan gave a very human-like shrug. "That's understandable." He seemed in no hurry to take Demuth. "You are aware of the consequences."

Demuth nodded, said dryly, "I'm afraid so. You explained it quite well this morning." For some reason he felt elated, as if this weren't the very end. Something about the Vegan's stance, the way he was looking at him. "When will I be going?"

"I'm not sure," the Vegan said. "But of this you can be sure: Those who break the laws of Herculum must be expelled. Our rigid economy does not permit the survival of those whose actions run counter to the best interests of the station colony."

Demuth's pulse quickened. Why was the Vegan saying this to him?

The police chief now turned to Bohannen. "Isn't that true, sir?"

Bohannen nodded, though his face was blanched. Then it darkened and he said, "I hardly think this is the time for speeches. Will you please take Demuth out of here? It is long past my regular hours."

The Vegan turned and called to someone in the hallway. "Please let Miss Craig in."

Connie came through the door, looking every bit as lovely as Demuth remembered her to be, and her eyes slid around the room until they lighted on Demuth. Her face broke into a smile and she came to him, saying, "Alan," and reaching for his hand.

"One moment, Miss Craig," the Vegan said. "You have the records?"

"Oh, yes." She handed a packet to him. Demuth hadn't noticed it before.

The police chief looked at the packet gravely. "We are very much indebted to Miss Craig," he said. "If she hadn't had the courage to come here this afternoon, things might have gone on the same as they have."

"What are you talking about?" Bohannen said sourly. But Demuth saw the sweat beginning to collect on his forehead.

"I shall be very glad to tell you," the Vegan went on. "In the beginning we asked Miss Craig to cooperate with us for a day because we needed a place for rendezvous for Frank Pilson, one of our puppet humanoid operatives, who was to befriend Mr. Demuth at the instruction session this morning. Everything worked out fine, except that Mr. Demuth proved to be much

smarter than his test record would indicate. He discovered that Mr. Pilson was being operated from headquarters. Miss Craig made the discovery about the same time.

"Demuth should have been captured and Miss Craig left with nothing to do for the rest of the day. But neither happened. Demuth outwitted Pilson and his control and Miss Craig sought out Demuth to try to help him. During this time Demuth told her his suspicions and she did a little detective work of her own. She had no difficulty getting in here, of course."

The Vegan patted the packet in his hand. "She found what she was looking for this afternoon," Bohannen, while you were so worried about Demuth. You didn't notice her. The record of Alan Demuth is right here, a record incorrectly graded and bearing the grader's initials—yours, Bohannen."

"There must be some mistake," Bohannen spluttered.

"There was a mistake, all right," the Vegan went on relentlessly. "It was yours for ever thinking up the nefarious practice you've been carrying on. You see, Miss Craig, satisfied that Demuth was telling the truth, also picked up the file of men and women who

are paying you for the upgrading they deserved in the first place."

"Now look here," Bohannen said, his face white, starting forward after the packet. "I'm the Testing Chief and those are my private records. You have no right to them."

The Vegan said coolly, "You were the Testing Chief. I have as of this moment relieved you of the office. As for these records, we have every right to confiscate them. Furthermore, if anyone's going through the lock to the fiery outside, it's you. I'm sure the judges in the Hall of Justice will concur in this decision. I'm certain, too, the Hall will find Herculum owes Demuth his life for what he has uncovered. I only wonder how many men and women have been forced to assume criminal status because you have refused to upgrade them without benefit of a share of their earnings."

Bohannen, very ugly, said, "That will have to be proved." Before anyone could stop him, he fired the gun he had taken from Demuth point-blank at the Vegan chief, then rushed for the hall.

DEMUTH sprinted to follow, narrowly escaping being hit

by some of the shots made by policemen who had moved far into the room. He reached the door, and saw Bohannen running down the corridor.

Putting everything he had in it, Demuth rushed after him, aided by the knowledge that he could quite lawfully take Bohannen now. He miraculously dodged the shots Bohannen sent back after him, and at last, before they reached the steps, made a flying tackle that crumpled Bohannen at the foot of the stairway. Demuth had crept down so carefully a half hour before.

Bohannen tried in vain to bring the gun to bear, but Demuth, in a final wrenching of Bohannen's arm, sent it flying in an arc over the bannister and clattering down the stairs.

They came and picked up Bohannen and led him away. The Vegan, who had suffered only a few singed feathers, came up with Connie and said, "Feel better now, Mr. Demuth?"

"Much better, thank you," Demuth said, still winded.

"Miss Craig has told me your real score," the Vegan said. "I should think it would entitle you to a good job—Bohannen's, perhaps. I will speak to Jeff Branner about it."

Demuth grinned and said, "Thanks." He turned to Connie, who had slipped her hand into his. "There's another responsibility I'm thinking of assuming," he said.

The Vegan smiled, as much as a Vegan can smile, and his wings fluttered ever so slightly.

"I'm sure that can be worked out, too, if both parties are willing. However, that is something you will have to find out for yourself."

"I intend to," Demuth said, taking her arm and walking down the corridor. "What do you say, Connie?"

"If you get Mr. Bohannen's job, you'll be in charge of provisional status." She smiled up at him. "I don't think there's much I can do about mine." Then she squeezed his arm, saying, "Not that I would have it otherwise."

