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SECRET OF THE BLACK PLANET

by Milton Lesser

FIRST TIME IN PAPERBACK

The most beautiful
women and the
wisest men of seven
worlds sought to
solve the riddle
of the Strong Man.



I jabbed the point of the knife home, piercing the tip of the index finger on my right hand. A small globule of blood came to the surface, bright red, and I brushed it away. I washed my finger, studied it. No mark. No tiny hole. Nothing.

When you're bewildered, you can get angry. More than anything after that, I think I was angry. I used the edge of the knife, cutting an inch-long gash across the back of my forearm. It hurt, but only for a moment. It bled—for a moment. I smeared away the blood, then washed it off, scrubbing hard. No cut. Not even a scar.

AM I REALLY INDESTRUCTIBLE?

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SECRET OF THE BLACK PLANET

Milton Lesser

BELMONT BOOKS

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NEW YORK CITY

SECRET OF THE BLACK PLANET

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SECRET OF THE BLACK PLANET

1

MY NAME? Hell, I don't know. Any name will do, but you might call me John Hastings, for that was what the girl called me just before someone tried to kill me.

One thing for sure—don't go around saying I'm Bok-kura, Strong Man of Jupiter. Sure, I'm strong, damn strong, and I've got reflexes so fast they'd make your hair stand on end, like all the sideshow blurbs say. But don't call me Bok-kura, not unless you want to see that strength and those reflexes go to work on you!

I'd just about decided to give up this Strong Man stuff anyway. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror any more. You see, you lift weights, no phonies, but legitimate three-or four-hundred-pound barbells. You bend iron rods and watch all the girls in the audience gasp. You beat up a few of the local strong boys when the show is on the road. For that you get room and board and a couple of solars' spending money each week.

But one question keeps nagging at your brain. It's there every time you stop long enough to think. It's there before you go to sleep at night, your muscles stiff and aching. And it's there when you wake up in the morning, the Fat Man of Venezuela snoring contentedly on the next cot. Most of all, it's there all the while you're performing, the big mirrored walls throwing your reflection back at you and mocking you with it.

Who am I?

Not Bok-kura, not the Strong Man of Jupiter. Oh, they call me that, but it's a lot of hogwash. Don't ask me how I know. I *know*. One day about two or three years ago, they found me down at the spaceport knocking some sense into a couple of drunks who thought an off-duty spaceliner hostess was something you played with. They dragged me away so fast that the girl didn't even have time to thank me. I've been Bok-kura the Strong Man ever since.

What about before that day at the spaceport? Don't look at me like that— I can't remember a thing. Nothing. And so I'm Bok-kura.

The figment of an eager promotion man's interplanetary imagination, with about as much personal identity as a cubic mile of deep space. . . .

It was a weekday evening, with not much of a crowd out here in the Iowa sticks where space travel is still so much of a novelty that it brings the whole county out to watch every time an old battered circus cruiser comes snorting down on its faltering rockets. After that, most of them go home. They wanted to see the ship, not what was inside it.

When the girl came in, she stopped the show as far as I was concerned. Not for long, only for a moment or two, long enough to take a good look at her. The cheap and gaudy dames of the solar run, with their painted faces and wagging hips, they're all right for a night's entertainment when you feel you need it. So's a bottle of Venusian brandy sometimes, but it doesn't make you think of a little cattle ranch on one of the Jovian moons, with a soft-glowing dome and a picket fence and all the trimmings.

This girl did.

Only I hardly had time to think about it, for she took one look at me sweating with my barbells and her face got all chalky white. She gave a little yelp and she cried, "John Hastings! You're John Hastings!"

Not much, really. But it got a rise out of me. I've kept a little card in my pocket ever since I can remember. Grubby and tattered, it had a few words scrawled on it hastily: *Have caution, John Hastings, they may try to kill you.*

One plus one, together they equal two. And John Hastings plus John Hastings? I didn't know, but maybe the girl could help me find out.

I put the barbell down too fast, and a muscle twinged dangerously in my abdomen. Then I think I jumped off my platform, and the way I came at her must have frightened the girl, for she backed up a quick step or two. "I'm sorry if I startled you," she said, looking at my face. "But I thought—"

"What did you think?" Sometimes I wish I could modulate my voice and sound like a tenor. I was trying to be gentle, but when I'm ruffled my voice has a way of rumbling up from deep inside my throat, and I guess my attempt at gentleness didn't come off.

"All right," the girl told me curtly, regaining her compo-

sure, "you don't have to get angry. I just thought you looked like someone I used to know. It's impossible, of course—"

"Like John Hastings?"

"Yes, like John. That's what I said. You even sound like him, a little. Forget it, Mr. Strong Man. I'm imagining things." She turned on her heel and started to walk from the room.

Dufree came in then, and you don't play around on Dufree's time, not if you want to keep your job. I took one quick step after the girl, but Dufree nodded his suave good-looks toward my platform and I hopped back on it. Maybe I'd been taking orders for so long I'd got used to it, I don't know.

Dufree scowled. "Chase after the local gals like that, Bok-kura, and I'll have to let you go. If you think I'm joking, go ahead and try it."

I didn't. Instead, I had a better idea. Perez the Fat Man carried five hundred pounds around with him, but once he got started Perez could travel under a pretty good head of steam. And Perez wasn't slated to go on for another hour yet.

He lolled off in an alcove watching me perform and smoking a big cigar, the sweat rolling down his cheeks in little streams which came together at the rolls of fat under his chin. After Dufree left, I beckoned the Fat Man toward me, and he waddled ponderously forward.

I asked him, "Would you like to add my solars to yours next week?"

"That depends on what I've got to do. It's awful hot, Boky, and I'm awful big."

Bok-kura was bad enough. I kind of saw red when someone called me Boky. But this time I let it pass. "Did you see that girl who just left?"

He gave a long low whistle and wiped the sweat from his cheeks with a damp bandana. "Lord, it's hot out here in the summer. We shoulda been on Mars for the season, Boky. Yeah, I saw her. So what?"

"So this. Follow her and let me know where she goes, and you get my credits. Okay?"

Perez shrugged and the fat jiggled up and down under his chin. "It's awful hot—"

"Two weeks, damn it!"

"And I got a lot of weight to tote around—"

"Three! Get the hell out of here now."

Perez shuffled his feet inside the special shoes which

helped support his five-hundred pounds. "A month?" he asked me, yawning.

"A month! Okay, but you get nothing if you lose her."

Perez stopped his shuffling, leaned forward and dragged his feet. Inertia helped him and soon his bulk squeezed through the doorway and disappeared.

I felt like laughing. There was a fine quarter-ton shadow to put on someone....

Five minutes later, a man I'd never seen before tried to kill me.

It happened like this: three or four people stood around while I got ready to press a three-hundred-pound barbell. Try it with half that weight when you have the chance. It isn't easy, and it requires all the concentration you can muster. But thanks to the girl I felt in no mood to concentrate, and that probably saved my life.

Briefly, I let my eyes wander over the audience, brought the bar up half-way and then started to strain. A nondescript figure of a man stood right up front, reached inside his jumper and came up with what looked like a needle gun. I think it was a needle gun, although I'm not sure. Whatever it was, I had a pretty good hunch it could kill me.

The man pointed it at my chest, and no one saw him do it. They all watched me.

I lunged forward with the three-hundred-pound barbell still poised over my head. When I let it go, people started screaming, including the nondescript man who pointed his needle gun at my chest.

He threw up his hands involuntarily and when the bar struck there was a crunching sound. He started to fall and the weight fell with him, landing with the bar across his chest and the disks barely touching the ground on either side. He couldn't have been pinned better if someone had stuck a spike through his chest. He lay there moaning weakly and no one would have placed a bet regarding the state of his rib-case. His arms lay limp, the right one flopping about a little. The needle gun had clattered away on the floor somewhere, into Perez' alcove perhaps.

Someone screamed again, not the nondescript man. Dufree came in, very grim and very angry. He took the situation in at a glance, said: "Was that an accident?"

Maybe this had finally done it. Maybe now I could go around finding out the things I had to know. Or maybe it was only temporary, but I felt pretty cocky then. "Does it look like an accident?" I demanded.

"Don't get snooty, Bok-kura. I asked you a question."

"I heard you. Why don't you find out for yourself?"

"Why don't I—" He turned white, not as white as the girl, but white enough. "First," he said, "you're fired. Second, I'm going to call the police as soon as we can get your bar off this man. Come on, lift it up!"

"You lift it," I suggested. There was an old me somewhere deep inside, and at least for now it had come to the surface. Bok-kura performed his feats docily, like a well-trained animal. But someone else didn't.

John Hastings?

"You know I can't budge that," Dufree protested.

"Get someone to help you on the other side and you can roll it off him."

"Roll it! We'd break his ribs, if they aren't broken already. He could sue."

I muttered something about that being a shame, and then I began to walk out.

"Does someone have a gun!" Dufree cried. "I want to keep him here for the police. Doesn't anyone have a gun? Nothing?" And then he was grunting, and I assumed he had set about trying to move the barbell. For a moment I hoped quite cheerfully that he'd crush every rib in the man's chest, but then I found myself walking back inside.

I grabbed one of the disks and heaved up and over with the bar, placing it down gently on the floor. The man continued to groan as if I hadn't done a thing. At first I wanted to remain and question him, but it looked a lot like his answers would consist only of groaning, for a few hours at least. I turned to walk away again, flung Dufree off when he clung half-heartedly to my arm. Someone stood off in a corner with one of those new wrist phones, dialing the police probably.

The meant it was time for me to do like Perez—to scam, and fast. Perez!

Sometimes you can be fourteen different varieties of an idiot. How could I leave without hearing from Perez? The girl with her John Hastings had started this whole thing, and I wouldn't have been too surprised if Perez turned up with a connection between her and the nondescript man with the needle gun.

I ducked around the vacant lot and into the small bunk-room which I shared with the Fat Man, stripped out of my Strong Man getup and donned a jumper and a pair of leatheroid slacks. A moment later I ran out the back way

and caught a glimpse of Dufree and another man approaching the front entrance warily. I thought the other man carried a gun, but it could have been my imagination.

A ditch separated the lot from a good two-lane highway which cut out across the prairie straight as a plumb-line toward Cedar Rapids, thirty miles away. I stretched out full-length in the ditch and prepared to wait. It might be a long wait at that, for Perez wouldn't exactly fly back with his information—if he got any.

A few jetcars streaked by on the highway, zooming off in the direction of Cedar Rapids. The sun hung low on the Western horizon, and off to the South a big thunderhead was piled high, billowing mass atop billowing mass. The whole thing rumbled ominously as it reared its dark head over the flatlands, and an occasional flash of lightning knifed through the sky.

In big lazy drops at first, the rain started to come down. But then the wind kicked up a bit and the thunderhead soared still higher. The wind stopped abruptly, leaving everything on the prairie as still as the red wastelands of Mars between dust-storms.

Then the rains came, sheet after sheet of them. The dry prairie could sop them up so fast that the ground almost didn't get wet. But my ditch couldn't, and I almost thought I'd have to swim away before Perez returned.

By the time it got dark, a jetcar of police had arrived from Cedar Rapids, and soon I could see them probing through the rain with their searchbeams. Dimly, I heard Dufree telling them what had happened. It seemed his Strong Man of Jupiter wasn't of Jupiter at all. Just a bum he'd picked up one day at the New York Spaceport a couple of years ago, a bum he'd never trusted, but hell, business was business and anyway he was insured, so could they just issue an alarm and then clear off his lot and let business resume? What, the injured man? Dufree thought he was alive, but he couldn't be sure.

Four policemen had piled out of the jetcar, I remembered, and now with the midway lights overhead, only three returned to it. One would remain on with the circus, despite everything Dufree could say about that sort of thing being bad for business.

For once I agreed with Dufree. I didn't like the idea either, not while I had to wait for Perez.

He returned not ten minutes after the jetcar roared away. The rain had slowed to a trickle and the air had become hot

and sultry again, like it always does so soon after a Midwestern summer storm. I could see the headlights of Perez' obsolete automobile from far off, coming slowly up the highway. The Fat Man couldn't get inside a standard model jetcar, and a special job would be too expensive. He used a rebuilt fifty-year-old auto instead, with the front seat flung all the way back and the shaft of the steering wheel lengthened to extend up over his paunch.

I darted out of the ditch and trotted up the road, flagging Perez down a good three-hundred yards from the lot. The car clattered to a stop and Perez oozed out through the front door like one big mass of thick syrup.

"Well?" I said.

Perez mopped his soaking brow. "Why couldn't you meet me back at the lot? And where's my solars?"

"You'll get them each week. Think I have them saved up or something?" It was a lie, and I never liked telling lies, but if I told Perez I'd been fired, he might decide to forget about the whole thing. "Now, what did you find out?"

"Well, it wasn't easy. Look: she had one of them jets and I hada follow in this automobile. But Perez is smart, Boky, and don't you forget it. Know what I done?"

I said no, I didn't.

"I checked with the highway police outside of Cedar Rapids. They gotta register every vehicle entering a spaceport city. I described the gal and they remembered her. Hell, you don't forget a dish like that so easy.

"Anyway, you know where she went?" Perez took out the stub of a cigar and lit it, puffing furiously and making the sweat come to his cheeks again. "To the Port, that's where." An edge of finality had come to his voice, and he squeezed in again through the doorway of his automobile.

"That's all?" I wanted to know.

"Sure, Boky. That's what you're gonna pay me for, to find out where she went. I found out, so you'll pay."

"Do you know anything else?"

"I ain't saying. A bargain's a bargain." Perez rubbed his short, thick hands together, forgot to wipe away the sweat which was dribbling off his chin. "Lord, I'm hungry."

I reached into my jumper pocket, came up with all the loose change I had. "Here. Now, what else do you know?"

Perez' beady little eyes blinked in their folds of fat. "I told you old Perez was a smart cooky. You bet, Boky!"

"What else, damn it!"

"Relax. Just relax. A man's liable to get all hot and

bothered in this weather. I went to the Spaceport and found out the gal had a ticket on the Mars liner—"

"Mars!"

"Like I said, Mars."

"When does it blast off?" I asked the question automatically, but it might as well have been Pluto. You don't earn enough money to book passage on one of the big liners by working in a circus sideshow. Not in a whole year you don't.

"I dunno. But the liner was in its blasting pit, and the pit boys were busy carting their grease cans away from the runners. Pretty soon, I'd say."

I nudged Perez with my elbow until he got the idea and moved his bulk over to the other side of the seat. I climbed in beside him. "You're taking me to Cedar Rapids," I said.

"You're crazy, Boky! I'm overdue already."

"Okay, have it your way. But I got into a fight back at the midway, and I hurt a man. The police are after me, Perez. I hurt one man, and I guess another won't make much difference. Cedar Rapids, Perez?"

He looked at me for a long time, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking because his eyes were hidden in their bags of fat. He started the car and then I heard a scraping noise as he muttered something about those damned gears. He swung the car around in a wide turn and started back toward Cedar Rapids.

I found myself wondering how we'd get past the highway patrol outside Cedar Rapids. I didn't know how, but I felt we could do it. I wasn't Bok-kura any longer, timid for all his strength. I was John Hastings—whatever John Hastings was. . . .

I think Perez must have sensed it.

A sliver of a moon had peeped out from among the scattering clouds by the time we reached the highway patrol station. Ahead we could see the lights of Cedar Rapids, a small city suddenly grown big with the coming of space travel. And off to the left the spaceport itself was a pulsing glow on the horizon.

Perez hadn't uttered a word in the thirty miles of bumpy driving, but now he asked me, "Just how do you intend to pass them, Boky? Tell me that, eh?"

He'd slowed the car to a crawl and now I climbed over the seat and hunkered down behind it. "Listen," I hissed, "you'd better play along." I guess I sounded tough, I don't know. I'd never sounded tough about anything before, not as

far as I could recollect, and I think I must have found the new role to my liking.

"Yeah..." from the way he spoke, Perez must have been sneering... "and what if I don't?"

"Well, I didn't do anything that would keep me in jail forever, Perez. Just remember that. When you reach the patrol, you're alone in this contraption, understand?"

Perez muttered to himself, braked the auto to a stop when we neared the patrol gate.

A voice said: "Jeez, where'd you get this car, a museum or something?" Voices always sound more ominous in the darkness, and I was plenty worried. But then the voice took on a touch of laughter. "Oh, it's you, Skinny! You just passed through here."

"Smatter," Perez grumbled, "there a law against it?"

"Nope, just checking. That is the law."

"Well, I forgot something, so I'm going back."

"Umm-mm. Guess I don't have to check your credentials again."

"Suit yourself. I got nothing to hide, but I wish you'd lemme drive off the road and outa this damned heat!"

"Sure. Okay, go ahead. If you're back before midnight—my shift ends then—you can pass right through, Skinny. I'll recognize this thing you travel in. Hah-hah, that's good. Thing—"

"I really couldn't say," Perez admitted honestly enough. "I don't know when I'll be back, but I hope it's soon."

By then I'd begun to breathe easily, if quietly, but I was unduly optimistic. The officer hadn't finished yet.

"Say, I remember! You was from that there circus."

"Yeah. I play the skeleton man." Perez' laughter was louder than the officer's.

"What ya think of the guy who went nuts?"

"Who's that?"

"The Strong Man, whatzisname? Bok-kura."

"Search me." Perez shrugged mountainously. "I got back there after it happened. Well, can I go? I'd like to get me a nice cool gin an' tonic in town, officer."

"Guess so. Have a sip for me, willya? S'long, Skinny."

Perez scraped the gears into their low speed once more, and we were on our way. I was grinning when I climbed back over the front seat. "Perez," I chortled, "you were magnificent."

"Yeah? I got me a hunch old Dufree hates your guts after tonight. All right, I wouldn't mind squatting on Dufree and

crushing a couple his scrawny bones. Maybe that's why I'm helping you. Where to, Boky?"

I said the Spaceport and settled back, almost able to enjoy the bouncing ride of Perez' antiquated vehicle. A mile must have passed before I realized he'd called me Boky.

The girl at the information desk smiled professionally. "Yes, sir?"

"When's the next liner taking off for Mars?"

She consulted a chart. "In two months, sir. The fifteenth of September."

"Huh?" I turned to Perez. "I thought you said—"

"Yeah, that's what I said. She got a ticket to Mars. A one-way ticket."

I frowned. "Two months in advance—"

The girl smiled professionally again. "Too bad, if you wanted to get to Mars. You just missed the boat, you know."

I asked her what she meant. "The *Queen* blasted off forty-five minutes ago, sir."

"Oh, I see. Say, can I get a Mars boat someplace else?"

"Yes. Yes, you could do that." She consulted another chart. "White Sands, New Mexico, in five weeks. Or New York in six. Nothing sooner than that. Shall I call for a reservation?"

I shook my head. "No, don't bother."

We got as far as the door to the administration building, Perez beginning to puff and snort. We got no further.

Someone came in and pointed a finger at me. Thin, medium height, nondescript. The man who'd tried to kill me!

Two policemen closed in, their blasters ready. I guess I was struck dumb. I just stood there, my mouth hanging open foolishly. Sure, Dufree could have put two and two together. Perez was missing. I was missing. We roomed together. A cinch. They checked with the highway patrol, found Perez had come this way.

But that wasn't it. Last time I'd seen the nondescript man, he'd been stretched out on the floor, a three-hundred-pound weight across his chest. Probably a few ribs were broken. At the very least, both his arms had been shattered. Now he stood in the doorway with a cold smile on his lips, pointing an accusing finger at me. He didn't exactly look the healthy type, but I'd have bet he was never any healthier than at that moment. Despite enough broken bones to keep him in the hospital for a couple of months.

"...right, friend," one of the policemen was saying, "don't try anything. Just come with us."

The fat quivered on Perez' jowls as he shook his head from side to side. "Not me, officer. You don't mean me too. I ain't got nothing to do with this. I just want a big cool drink."

"It looks a lot like you helped him get away. Come along."

"Helped him!" Perez blubbered. "Not me, sir. Oh no, not me. Why, he forced me. Yes, he forced me. He said, 'Perez, if you—'"

"That's enough! You're coming too."

They came toward us slowly, and I did a lot of quick thinking. Apparently no one knew of the nondescript man's needle gun. No one knew he'd tried to kill me. But they all saw me go wild, all saw the way I'd lunged forward with a three-hundred-pound weight and hurled it at him.

Maybe I could get off with six months or something, I didn't know. But hell, the girl had gone to Mars, with a one-way ticket. And the girl knew me—from somewhere. Not much of a choice, not really. Prison—or Mars....

By the time the first policeman reached me, a curious crowd had swung in toward us on all sides, forming a tight little circle. When I move, I move quick. That's what they paid me for at the circus. I wrapped my fingers around the officer's wrist before he knew what had happened, and I wrenched. The blaster tumbled from his hand and he fell away, getting all tangled in the crowd.

His companion tried to do something about it, while everyone started to yell. I don't know if it was an accident or not, but Perez got in the way, and by the time the officer could circumnavigate his ponderous girth, Perez had given me my chance.

I darted into the crowd, pushed my way clear, and sprinted the few remaining feet to the door. It was an eerie feeling, for at any moment I expected to hear the roar of a blaster and then hear nothing else at all. Ever. Nothing happened. Probably fearing they'd hit someone else, the officers had refrained from shooting.

I didn't stop to think about it. Outside, I hustled onto the nearest pedestrian ramp and glided along smoothly with the third fastest level. They couldn't stop all pedestrian traffic on the moving ramps to look for me, that would disrupt the Spaceport's scurrying activity. Oh, they'd do some checking. Maybe they'd even halt ramp ten, the express ramp. But

what was so special about ramp eight if a man wanted to escape?

Amnesia is a funny thing. You can go for two or three years without remembering a solitary thing. But then something—like a girl crying a name which must be yours—something can trigger a lost mechanism in your mind. And then things start to move. Not fast, but they move.

Like the nondescript man who'd healed instantly. He'd helped trigger something too, if only I could find it. It gnawed at my consciousness now, an almost physical gnawing. I could feel it trying to break clear of whatever held it in check.

Instantaneous regeneration of injured tissues. Where had I encountered that before? Important? God, yes! Maybe more important than the beautiful girl who'd uttered the name John Hastings. Regeneration? An asteroid, damn it! Why an asteroid? Don't argue, let it push itself clear. An asteroid—one out of ten thousand... Regeneration, and something secret, so secret that the governments of three worlds would spend half their annual budgets to find out about it. Which mote of an asteroid...

Then I bumped my nose.

The pedestrian ramps swing around the spaceport like a huge belt, and when you make one complete revolution you're supposed to get off. The bump on the nose was not a gentle reminder, but a tall slender bank of machinery rises out of the ramp at the administration building, running the complicated ribbon of moving roads. That meant a lot of concentrated thinking, and a speeding ramp had carried me around the Spaceport completely, right back to where I started.

I hopped off the ramp quickly, walked around the bank of machinery and got on the other side. I let the ramp carry me half way around this time, out beyond the blasting pits with their gleaming, polished rails and beyond the anti-grav air-docks which housed spaceships.

At that point I left ramp eight for the seventh moving road, left that one for the sixth—working my way down until I reached the first ramp, which hardly moved at all. From there I alighted on the concrete apron which skirts the whole complicated system. And for now, that was it. I didn't doubt that I'd shaken off the police, for I could have left the ramp—and the Spaceport, too—at any one of fifty points.

But I still had to find the girl who knew John Hastings, and the girl was on her way to Mars.

There are three Spaceport cities in North America. New York for the East, Cedar Rapids for the Midwest, and White Sands for the Far West. There are also three Sargasso Cities.

You know the old legends about sailing ships disappearing in the Sargasso Sea. Well, as far as I know, there's no Sargasso Sea for spaceships, but there are three of them for spacemen.

New York. Cedar Rapids. White Sands. Cities within cities, a hundred taverns and a score of flop houses where ex-spacemen with the wistful look of deep space in their eyes can get a cheap drink and a cheap bed and watch the liners blasting off for Mars or Venus, for the asteroids or the Jovian moons.

Rumors circulate on the twisted, tortuous streets of Sargasso City as freely as Venusian street-walkers. You can take your pick of the street-walkers for a stiff shot of Venusian brandy, and the rumor-mongers are just as reasonable. Often, they knew more about a lot of secret things than did the government agents who ventured within Sargasso City to question them. Things like regeneration and asteroids. . . .

And thus it was that I entered Sargasso City with the firm conviction that a lot of talking and a lot more listening might lead to something. Also, in a strictly unofficial sense, Sargasso City was off-limits for the police, and brushing shoulders with murderers and smugglers and political exiles, I'd be able to thumb my nose at the law. Not that I wanted to for any indefinite length of time, but certain things seemed more important than a trumped-up warrant for my arrest.

Sargasso City doesn't merge gradually with Cedar Rapids. It stands off a little to one side, between the city proper and the Spaceport, and when you enter it you have the feeling that you're leaving behind you the mores of our twenty-first century civilization.

It was late, after two a.m., but the taverns of Sargasso City never close, except for a brief noon-time hour when the floors are wetted down and the debris disposed of. Someone far off in a dusky corner was strumming a ten-stringed Venusian lute as I pushed in through the swinging door of *Port O' No Return Cafe*. A dour little man stood behind the bar, with about as much Japanese blood in him as Venusian upland. The mixture came off olive-green, a little on the pale side.

"Brandy want?" he asked, grinning coarsely. "Or Venus miss? *Port O' No* has both, friend."

I grinned back. "I haven't any money."

The corners of his mouth straightened into a thin line. "Too bad. No money, no nothing. Come again, maybe?"

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe I'll stay." I took a ring off my finger, gave it to him. I don't know about that ring, I've had it ever since I can remember. I'm no expert, but it looked like Venusian fire-opal.

The uplander-Jap gulped, and his Adam's Apple became very prominent. He only looked at the stone for a moment, then said: "One hundred solars, please?"

"It's worth a thousand, and you know it!"

"Two hundred is all poor relation can afford. Two hundred?"

I nodded, waited while he counted out the dirty bills and put them in my hand. He asked, "Brandy now or Venus miss?"

I asked for brandy and got it, a good stiff shot—probably what the boys of the old Wild West days two hundred years ago would have called three fingers. Only they never heard of Venusian brandy and the kick it carries.

I sipped a little and put the glass down. "What do you know about regeneration?" It wasn't a foolish question, because if he didn't know, someone else here would. I had a distinct hunch this regeneration business carried a wallop as potent as the brandy he served. And Sargasso City wouldn't miss a trick.

"Sorry. Poor relation so idiot. Know nothing. Try professional?"

Sargasso City had professional everythings, from street-walkers to lute players to rumor-mongers. I said I'd be glad to.

"Good. Smart. This way, please."

He called over a mousey-looking girl who scurried behind the bar, picked up a dirty cloth and began to wipe glasses. They didn't look any cleaner when she finished.

"Professional busy-busy. You make appointment?"

I handed over five of the solars. "I'll see him now."

"Other appointment suddenly went cancel," my guide muttered, leading me past a dirty straw mat which hung across the entrance to an alcove. On the other side, there was a desk and two chairs. The breed sat down behind the desk, offered me the other seat. I remained standing, said: "Okay, where's your professional?"

He smiled. "Do not be surprised. I assure you that you are in his presence right now, but if one has to keep up appearances outside, you can forgive that, can you not?" Quite a

cultured accent, a bit of Oxford and something of Upland U., and I assure you that the Venus boys coming out of these are no dopes.

"Okay, you fooled me. You're the guy who's supposed—"

"I am a man gifted with something rare enough to make it expensive. Photographic memory, total recall. Please." He extended a hand, and I covered it with solars. "Now, what is it you wish to know about regeneration?"

"Anything you can tell me. A man is struck with a heavy weight, both his arms are broken. Probably some ribs too. A few minutes later he gets up and walks away, as good as new."

"Ahh! I understand. Shall I have your brandy brought in now, Mr. Hastings?"

2

I LEANED across the desk and grabbed his dirty white shirt front. "You'd better talk now," I said. "And fast. Where'd you hear that name?" A card in a pocket, not taken very seriously for a couple of years. Until a girl mentions that name, until someone tries to kill me, until a little uplander-Jap who happens to have a total-recall memory mentions the name too. John Hastings.

Me?

"Please, Mr. Hastings. Release me. I abhor violence. My ancestors here on Earth abhorred it too, except for one foolish, abortive mistake back in the last century. My ancestors on Venus likewise detest it, except for a few smaller mistakes, equally abortive. Now, you want to know about regeneration. . . ."

"I want to know about the name John Hastings!" I said, releasing him. "Talk!" I think I was a little frightened. I know he wasn't.

"What can I tell you about your own name that you don't already know?" Then the dour face creased into a frown. "Of course. John Hastings disappeared several years ago. Nothing was heard of him, he was assumed to be dead. Now he returns—a victim of amnesia?"

I shrugged hopelessly, said: "Who am I?"

"As I have said, John Hastings. By the gods of Karn, but this is interesting! I have seen pictures of you, but now, in the flesh, after they gave you up for dead. . . ."

"John Hastings was an archaeologist who specialized in

the asteroids. There is talk, you know, of an ancient civilization which flourished when the asteroids existed as a single unified planet, before they were rent asunder by we know not what."

I told him no, I did not know.

"John Hastings is also a product of Jupiter training. Two-and-a-half gravities to fight in childhood, he became a man of mighty strength, yet he devoted his young life to a strange discipline. Archaeology of the asteroids. Tell me, John Hastings—why?"

Well, they'd billed me as the Strong Man of Jupiter, and there'd been some truth to that, although probably Dufree and the others did not know it. "Better send for that brandy," I said, and the man rang a little bell. I went on, "I don't know a thing about that. Until today, I didn't even know my name was John Hastings. Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"No. You disappeared out among the asteroids, after passing along some hints concerning a startling discovery. A culture old when time was young, an eerie place of ill-remembered life. Ahh, here is the brandy!"

I swallowed it in one burning, stinging gulp, and the girl hustled out for some more. "It sure took an awful lot of luck to get me here to you on the first try," I admitted.

He shook his head deprecatingly. "Not at all. Anyone in Sargasso City knows of John Hastings and the mysteries of space which he almost—but not quite—unfolded. Every now and then an expedition searches the asteroids to look for him. Someone else could have told you the same story.

"But there it ends, for I pieced things together, bit by bit, until I developed a theory concerning you, John Hastings. Would it surprise you if I told you my hobby consists of John Hastings?"

"How's that?"

"You're a legend, a myth. I spend my spare time on that myth. I probably know as much about you as you would know were you not... ill. I hope you don't mind." He smiled politely. "Further, I believe that the disappearance of John Hastings and the mystery of instantaneous regeneration of tissue are directly related. Wait, don't jump like that! Remember, I'm only a hobbyist."

The mousey girl returned with another glass of brandy. "Maybe you'd better tell me all about your hobby," I suggested.

He leaned back, telescoping out one of those long plastic

reeds which pass for permanent Venusian cigarettes. He started to say something, I don't know what. Then, outside our little alcove, someone yelped. Other people must have liked the idea, because they took it up and soon the *Port O' No Return* was filled with one roaring din.

The uplander-Jap seemed alarmed. He got up from his chair and crossed rapidly to the straw mat, pulling it aside and peering out. From over his shoulder, I caught a quick glimpse of the chaos—chairs and tables overturned, men and women on the floor, tumbled grotesquely about like rag-dolls. At first there seemed no purpose to it all, but organization and planning sometimes has a way of losing itself in a bar-room brawl.

Presently a handful of men fought their way toward our alcove, and my companion thrust the hanging back into place, darted to the rear of the alcove, fumbled with a catch on the wall. He didn't make it.

Half a dozen men crowded into the alcove, and before I knew it I was in a fight, a wild, free-swinging affair. Don't ask me why, but there it was. They wanted the uplander-Jap, I stood in the way. And so we fought.

I sent two of them reeling back past the straw hanging, whirled to face a third. Another pair had the uplander-Jap on the floor, squirming and twisting furiously, yelling something in a Venusian dialect. Something—the sort of God-given impulse which can save a jungle animal from destruction—something made me turn around again. From the direction of the ceiling, a heavy chair-leg flashed down. I flung an arm up and felt it go numb as the bludgeon struck, bounced off, descended again. It exploded against the side of my head, threw me to my knees. I tottered that way for a while, saw dimly the uplander-Jap being carted away.

Then I pitched forward on my face, catching the straw hanging with one outstretched hand and bringing it down on top of me. I don't remember hitting the floor. . . .

The mousey girl was busy applying a cold compress to my temple when I awoke.

"How do you feel?"

"Lousy, thanks."

She was American, a plain sort of kid like the kind you might see working in any soda fountain. Well, you can find anything in Sargasso City.

"They took Togoshira Suuki, you know."

I told her I didn't know. I said, "Who the hell is Suuki?"

"You sat talking with him, so I guessed you were his friend. Suuki, our master."

"Oh, Suuki. Kid, I don't even know what happened."

She withdrew the compress from my temple, looked at me almost haughtily, for all her plainness. "In that case, maybe I'm wasting my time." And just like that she got up to go.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her back. "Hold on a minute. If they took Suuki, I want to get him back." That was the truth. The girl at the sideshow knew me. The girl went to Mars. Suuki knew me, and Suuki was abducted. I think right then I'd have fought my way quite cheerfully through the nine pits of Hell to rescue him.

"Yes," she agreed. "We all loved Suuki." Almost like part of a religious ritual.

"Kid, I'll be frank. I didn't love Suuki. I hardly knew him. But Suuki has something I want and he seemed willing to give it to me—"

"Suuki is benevolent."

"Yeah, sure. Benevolent. Who took him? Why?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"I mean I don't know, that's right. I don't know. I just got into Sargasso City tonight."

"Umm-mm. How can I explain it? You know your history? Remember the Tong wars of Chinatown, New York, a century ago?"

I said I remembered.

"This is much the same, only worse. Sargasso City is more like the old Casbah in Algiers than it is like Chinatown. Here the police do not enter. It is an unwritten law. But there are the same internal clashes for control. Togoshira Suuki rules Sargasso City. Togoshira Suuki represents the Venusian clans." She let it fall like that, stacatto, one brief sentence after another. "The Martian clans don't like Suuki. The Martians have taken him..." She held the back of one pudgy hand to her mouth, as if for the first time she realized the extent of the situation.

"Okay, cheer up. When can we start getting him back?"

"You don't understand. They took him where they can keep him safely. They took him to Mars. From there they can dictate terms to the three Sargasso Cities, with Suuki's life in the balance."

You hear a lot about the Sargasso Cities, how they control the destinies of more than their own squalid environs. It can be overdone, I guess. Government power doesn't rest in the hands of the Tri-World Council. It belongs to the men

who rule the Sargasso Cities by gun and knife and wile. Things like that.

I said, "How sure are you they took him to Mars?"

"Don't ask me how I know, you would only waste your breath. But they took him to Mars. Togoshira Suuki."

"Can we go?"

"We? You mean the good folk of Cedar Rapids Sargasso?" She snorted. "It isn't necessary. Our agents on Mars can do the job as well."

Sargasso City—with agents on another planet. My head started to swim a little. That, and a man who could pick himself off the floor with half a dozen broken bones and walk away as good as new a few minutes later. And a cockeyed story about something old and something ancient which held the asteroids together and then blew them apart. And a damned fool named John Hastings who didn't know what was going on and who only found trouble when he tried to find out.

All connected? Neatly, like the pieces of one of those tri-dimensional puzzles that everyone tinkers with these days? Maybe. I didn't know, but I intended to find out. Otherwise, someone else might point his needle gun at my chest some fine day, and that time I might not see.

I told the mousey kid she could forget about her compresses, I felt fine. Then I asked her if she knew of any way I could get to Mars.

"In a month or two, if you have the money."

"I don't want to wait a month and I haven't got the money."

Suddenly, I found her staring at my head queerly. As if she had seen it for the first time. Some gesture again, back of pudgy hand to mouth.

"That bad?" I grunted, fingering my temple. I felt nothing. No lump, no cut.

"I don't understand. I don't understand. A few minutes ago, you had an ugly gash on your head. Swollen, bleeding—ooo! Now there's nothing. Look, not even a scar."

From somewhere, she got an ornate mirror and held it up for me. Well, she'd exaggerated, because there was a scar. If you looked closely, you could see it, a thin white line. But nothing more. A scar which might have told of a wound several years old and fully healed. I felt fine, too, almost as if nothing had happened.

I scratched my head. "I don't get it, kid." I didn't want to

tell her I was thinking of a man who walked away from a three-hundred-pound hit-and-run act without a scratch.

"Togoshira Suuki would understand. The flesh that regenerates itself. . . ." She made that sound like part of a religious ritual too. "Listen! Will you promise to wait right here? Don't go away. Don't move an inch. I'll be back soon."

I nodded, more than a little confused, and she disappeared out through where the straw mat had hung. Some semblance of order had returned to the *Port O' No Return*, but it wasn't very crowded now.

She came back in about half an hour. She looked excited. "They will see you now."

"Who will see me?"

"Don't ask questions. We have no time. You said you wanted to go to Mars, didn't you? To rescue our Suuki?"

They sat in a big room down in the basement of an old dilapidated building across the street from *Port O' No*. Two Earthmen, one stocky, one rapier-thin, both middleaged. And two Venusians, older, bent and tired, long flowing beards almost flaxen against their deep olive skin.

The mousey girl whispered, "This is the Uplands Brotherhood."

"Uplands, eh? So why two Earthmen?"

"Must you always ask questions? The Brotherhood started out small, and grew. Suuki brought a new purpose to it, and new members. A quarter of a million, all over the Solar System. These four men, with Suuki, are the leaders."

The stocky Earthman grunted something to his companion, then turned to the girl. "This is the man?"

"Yes."

"You're sure about the regen—"

"I am sure."

One of the Venusians stood up, his wobbly legs sheathed in broad, over-sized pantaloons. "He looks like the pictures Suuki has with him! By the gods of Karn, and so he does—like that Earthman, that archaeologist, John Hastings."

More people knew me. . . .

The other Venusian said, "You will swear allegiance to the Brotherhood, naturally."

I shook my head. I didn't know what was going on, but I wasn't going to swear allegiance to anything or anybody, and I told them that.

"That complicates things," the thin Earthman admitted.

"I have my own personal business," I told him. "Your

man Suuki happens to be part of it. If you think I can help, I'll try to rescue him, but that's all."

"What is this business?"

Again I shook my head. "Uh-uh. I said personal."

One of the Venusians muttered, in English as good as Togoshira Suuki's: "Don't you understand, boy? If you don't take an oath to us, we can't trust you, not fully. Oh, I won't lie. After Anna's story, we decided you might help us. But it will be limited, for if you don't swear allegiance, we can't tell you everything that could relate to the situation—"

"Nevertheless, I take no oaths." You couldn't blame me. I'd found myself, found John Hastings, after a couple of years of life without any real personal identity. And life in bondage to an oath might turn out just as odious as the other extreme, life in a kind of vacuum. I wanted no part of it.

The stocky Earthman said, "I'm for forgetting the whole thing. He doesn't trust us, we can't trust him. For all we know, he's in with the Marties—"

The mousey girl, Anna, almost shouted. "Maybe he can bring back Suuki! If he can do that—"

"He'll go," the first Venusian said, "provided he wants to. What do you say, boy?"

"Sure. Sure I want to go. But with no strings attached."

"Fair enough. Are we agreed?" Three heads nodded, and Anna almost jumped up and down. The stocky Earthman sat there growling to himself.

His human companion smiled. "It might work. It just might work. The Marties know our agents, yes—but they don't know you, Hastings. Probably they know *of* you, but so what? Point is, they won't know you're working for us."

"Don't forget," I reminded him, "I'm not. Our plans happen to cross each other, that's all. I want Suuki, you want Suuki. It may not go any further than that. Okay?"

"Okay. But you'll be working pretty much in the dark because of it. Here, take this." The thin Earthman gave me a card, really half a card, yellowish, with nothing written on it.

I turned it over in my hand, scowled. "What's this for?"

"You'll notice it's torn haphazardly. A man on Mars has the other half. They fit, and you're identified."

"How do I get to him?"

"You'll find him in Lake of the Sun City. There's no lake there, and it isn't really a city. Just a dirty little desert town. But that's where you'll find him. He runs a curio shop."

One of the Venusians took it up from there. "Can you leave tomorrow?"

"Huh? Tomorrow? There's no ship out for several weeks!"

"Not out of America, there's not. But a small passenger vessel leaves Rio de Janeiro for the moon, day after tomorrow. A week later, there's a Moon-Mars liner. You'll be on it."

That left some twenty-four hours until I'd have to board the jet for Rio. I soon found that these men of the Brotherhood were not willing to let me out of their sight in that time. A room upstairs over the *Port O' No*, meals brought to me by Anna, who was a faithful lap-dog watch-dog combination, because she knew I might find her precious Suuki. . . .

Well, I had some time on my hands and I suppose morbid curiosity got the better of me. I had been struck on the head—hard. Maybe hard enough for a skull fracture. But I healed, almost in a matter of minutes.

Anna brought utensils with my first meal, and they included a small sharp knife. I waited until the girl left my little room. Waited till I heard her footsteps going down the stairs. Then I toyed with the knife for a few long moments, idly twisting the keen edge around in my fingers.

"What the hell!" I said aloud. "If you want to do it, do it."

I jabbed the point of the knife home, piercing the tip of the index finger on my right hand. A small globule of blood came to the surface, bright red, and I brushed it away. I washed my finger, studied it. No mark. No tiny hole. Nothing.

I tried again, with the same results.

When you're bewildered, you can get angry. More than anything after that, I think I was angry. I used the edge of the knife, cutting an inch-long gash across the back of my forearm.

It hurt, but only for a moment.

It bled—for a moment. I smeared away the blood, then washed it off, scrubbing hard. No cut. Not even a scar.

I had to check a wild impulse to slash the blade across my wrist, across the veins which bulged when I tightened my fist. Indestructible? I didn't know, but my heart thumped a furious jig inside my chest when I tried to get some sleep.

Four hours by jet express to Rio. Two days from there to the moon, almost a third of that time spent in the deep acceleration chairs. A checking of credentials at Tycho Sta-

tion, and that frightened me for a while, but the Brotherhood had given me some neatly forged documents.

Then the Mars rocket, ten days of thumb-twiddling. For company, a couple of professors bound for Syrtis Major College, two technicians who thought they could find tritium down near the South Polar cap, half a score of eager tourists, and some Martians, homeward bound. The Marties kept pretty much to themselves, as Marties generally do.

I didn't realize my mistake until we landed at Syrtis Major. The usual quarantine followed, while we were sprayed with antibiotics to ward off Martian diseases which otherwise would encroach upon virgin territory with a nasty insistence. I made my way from the lab to the men's locker room to pick up my gear, and something made me look through one of the aft ports. I don't know what, call it an impulse, call it a hunch—but I looked.

The Marties were leaving, five of them with their dry, parchment-like skin and stooped shoulders. They carried something, a large crate, depositing it on a waiting sand-sled. With it they whisked away across the rust desert.

Just like that, only I'd been an idiot to end all idiots!

Sure, the Brotherhood had spoken of Suuki being taken to Mars. They'd spoken in the past tense, as if it were already an accomplished fact. Except that the Moon-bound ship from Rio was the first vessel off Earth, and the Luna-Mars rocket the first one to reach the red planet....

Which meant Togoshira Suuki had been abducted right under my nose!

I'd brushed against the polite, aloof Marties a dozen times on shipboard. They'd had Suuki trussed up in the baggage room all that time. I sighed wearily as I got back into my clothing. I guess I wasn't cut out to be an undercover man.

Outside, the cold desert winds whipped in over the spaceport like howling demons, and when you haven't been on Mars for a while, your first breath of Martian air always makes you think you're going to strangle. You get used to it after a time, though, and if you keep exertion down to a minimum, you can get along well enough.

I asked the Martian female at the travel desk if she knew anything about the Marties who'd just left the ship. She was polite, but she was adamant.

"Earth sir, you know we are not permitted to divulge such information."

I frowned. "You haven't answered my question."

"Then, if I must, no."

"Well, where did they go?"

Borrowing a mannerism from the Earth tourists, she shrugged her bony shoulders. She was young, maybe ten Martian years—roughly twenty years old, Earth style—but she didn't look it. I think even Martian infants must look senile, although I've never seen a Martian infant. Mostly, it's the skin, dry and wrinkled and withered from birth. "Again, Earth sir, I don't know. They had a private sled waiting for them, as you may have observed. Now, can I arrange transportation for you?"

"Yes. I'd like to reach Lake of the Sun City as soon as possible."

"That is a long trip across the desert."

"I know Martian geography. When can I go?"

"There is a helicopter in five days—"

"Five days! I haven't the time."

"A sand-sled today, if you want it."

"Sure," I said. I didn't like the idea of a bumpy ride across the rust deserts by sand-sled, the jets kicking up a fine spray of sand which makes you half-suffocate. But I'd arrive in Lake of the Sun City in two days that way, and I was in a hurry. Suuki was one thing, but I hadn't forgotten the girl who'd called my name at the sideshow, triggering off everything with it. I kept a special place in my Martian itinerary for her. . . .

The Martian clerk jabbed a long finger at a bell on her desk, rang it. In a moment, a scrawny Martian appeared, removing his cowl and glancing quizzically at us.

"Yes?"

"This Earth sir would like you to take him to Lake of the Sun City—at once."

"At once," said the Martie. "Of course. One hundred solars."

The Brotherhood had stuffed my pockets with money, and I reached in for a hundred-solar note, gave it to him. He pocketed the bill greedily, motioned for me to follow him outside.

The jet sled is ten feet long, maybe twelve. You sit up front, the driver sits behind you at the controls. In that way he gets the brunt of the jet-spray, but the prow of the sled dips in and out of the red Martian sands with the thrust of half a dozen obsolete jets, and the ride is one choking, coughing torment.

But fast, for the Martian barrens present a surface more level than Earth's Daytona Beach or the salt flats of Utah. A

hundred miles an hour is average, one-fifty is not really exceptional, and on wide-open stretches some sand-sleds have been known to pass the two-century mark. Add that speed to the thin Martian air, and you have a problem. You simply can't breathe the tenuous air fast enough to stay alive.

The Martians have solved it like they solve everything else. Secretly. No one quite understands the mechanism, but you're given a sort of insulated leather pouch. Some say it holds a combination of liquid oxygen and inert gasses. I don't know. All I know is this: you hold the pouch down near your waist with a long plastic straw protruding from its top, and you sip through that straw, somehow sucking up air—no longer liquid, no longer cold—and breathing through your mouth. The pouch is fastened around your neck with a thong of leather, but you'd better hold it tightly, for you'd be an oxygen-starved wreck in a matter of minutes without it.

Anyway, I found myself zooming across the flat Martian tundra on a sand-sled. Behind me I could hear the wheezing sound which passed for breathing among the Martians. The desert sands roared up from the horizon and then swept away on both sides, and when some of the fierce Martian winds blew the wrong way I could get a quick whiff of the acrid jet fumes.

Late morning gave way to early afternoon, and we stopped to eat some dried beef from Earth, washing it down with precious Martian water. Then my Martie grumbled something, and we were on our way again.

A chill wind crept up in the late afternoon, and by sunset it grew cold. Well, in half an hour or so we'd reach one of the way stations and spend the night there, underground. Soon I could see it looming out of the darkness, a small opaque dome with a beacon light blinking on and off atop it.

The Martian did not stop.

I turned to stare at him, but he had his head tucked deep down inside his cowl. I tried to yell something above the roaring wind, gave it up as useless. The cold knifed in and I grew numb, felt the plastic straw slipping from my lips. I bit into it grimly, held it there with my teeth. The Martie could have been laughing. I thought I heard him, but probably the wind was playing tricks.

So numb...and stiff...

Hands probed at the back of my neck, suddenly. I tried to fight them off, found it difficult to move. Soon the leather thong dropped down over my shoulders. Something prodded

the leather pouch which had fallen to my lap. It teetered there for a moment, then fell away, slowly, end over end, as in a frozen dream. . . .

We sped on, and I began to choke—

I don't know for how long, but I did not lose consciousness, not entirely. And after a time the sled screeched to a stop. Soon I'd be able to breathe again, and when I got my hands on that damned Martie. . . .

I felt myself rolled over helplessly, off the sled. I lay there gazing up at the Martian moons, Deimos no more than a bright star, Phobos a tiny sliver of light off near the horizon.

The Martie was a dim bulk in the darkness, kneeling by my side and laughing. I reached up feebly, stiff with cold, weak with suffocation, and he thrust my hands away, leaned over my chest.

He held a knife, its polished blade barely visible by Phobos-light. Would it all end, then, so soon—under the pale moons of Mars, with the light of Phobos gleaming faintly off a long steel blade? A crazy thought, but it hammered over and over again at my brain; it wasn't fair. I knew so little of everything, of myself most of all.

I felt the knife slip in, slowly. He must have taken great pleasure from it. Grating against my ribs, sliding in between them, twisting. . . .

I think I screamed once, and that was all.

3

"HE'S WAKING."

"Impossible! He should have died two weeks ago. Frozen stiff out on the desert, a knife hilt-deep in his chest—"

"See for yourself."

"I see, but I—"

Voices in a swirling vortex of sound, fading and coming closer, fading again. I tried to sit up, but someone pushed me down.

"Take it easy, young man! You died once, you know, as far as I can tell. Why don't you live a bit more slowly this time?"

One minute. Two. I began to feel better. Three, four. Almost strong again. After five minutes, I sat up. I was hungry, and I told them.

Two white-garbed men stood there, one scratching his bald head, the other turning away, plainly frightened.

"How do you feel, son?"

"Fine. But hungry. Man, I'm hungry."

A nurse came in with some instruments. They took my blood pressure. They fluoroscoped me. They listened to my heart beat. They did five or six other things that doctors always do.

The bald man said, "He's well."

"He's *what*?"

"Well. Healed. All better. We could discharge him today—if we didn't want to study him."

"Wait a minute! I've been a doctor forty years. They find this man out on the desert a couple miles from one of the way-stations. He has no heart-beat. He's frozen solid, like a block of ice. They take him to the morgue here in Syrtis Major and he starts to warm up. His heart begins to beat, feebly. They pull the knife out. Next day the wound disappears, a thin white scar taking its place.

"Okay. Okay! That can't happen, but we saw it for ourselves. Estimate—two weeks on the desert. Warm days, sub-zero nights. No food. No water. Probably not even breathing in all that time. Somehow, his body forgets to decompose.

"We bring him here. And that was yesterday. Today, he opens his eyes for the first time. He sits up, says he's hungry. A few minutes pass, and he's fit as a fiddle. Elkins, I'm scared."

"Listen," I said, "my name is Hastings. John Hastings. Does that mean anything?"

The frightened old man in surgeon's gown shook his head, hardly listening. The other doctor, Elkins, was still scratching the bald spot atop his head. "Does it mean anything? Hastings? I'll say! Did you hear that? He said he's John Hastings!"

"Hastings? Hastings? *Hastings!*" The older doctor sat down on the foot of the bed, cupping his head in his hands. "John Hastings died three years ago out among the asteroids. They found his ship, a gutted ruin. Full of food and full of water. He could have taken none of it with him, and he disappeared. How do you live on the asteroids without food and water, not to mention air?"

Elkins smiled. "Hastings did a pretty good job of it on our Martian desert, don't you think?"

"I don't know what to think. I don't know. I almost wish they'd never found him. It isn't easy to throw forty years of learning out the window. Here's a man who should have

died twice, not probably, but definitely. Only he looks strong as an ox."

I didn't know what was going on, but I laughed. "And hungry," I reminded them.

Elkins sent the nurse out for some food, then turned to me: "Son, how would you like to stay on here for a few months?"

"You said I was well."

"And you are. But when medical science finds something like this, it wants to study! Also, maybe you can tell us what happened out among the asteroids. It's been quite a mystery, you know."

"Don't ask me. I don't remember a thing. I don't even remember being an archaeologist. About all I know right now is this: my name is John Hastings. When people find that out, they make a big fuss. But the answer to your question, doctor, is no."

"No? You can't refuse!"

"Sorry. I'm going to."

"Wait. When you said you remember nothing, does that mean you have amnesia? Loss of memory, is that what you mean?"

I nodded, dug into the food when it was brought.

"In that case, you've *got* to stay on! With the new hypnotic treatment we could probably restore your memory."

"Probably, eh? How long will it take?"

"Depends on you, Hastings. Six months is a good figure."

"Not for me it isn't! I haven't got six months to spend on it, doc. Maybe some day, if things work out the way I want them to, I'll tell you the whole story. That is, if I ever learn it myself."

I'd been thinking fast, and I came to the conclusion that the man who ran the curio shop in Lake of the Sun City, or enigmatic Suuki, or the girl who'd first spotted me—any of these might turn out a lot quicker than hypnotic treatment. "Where's my clothing, doc?"

"You mean you'll leave? We can't be responsible! You might have a relapse—"

"I doubt it."

"Frankly, so do I. As for your clothing, uh-uh. It was frozen solid. We had to peel it off you in strips. You'll have to get some new duds, I'm afraid."

I jumped out of bed. "Hey! Did you find anything?"

"In your clothing, you mean? Yes, we did. A thousand

solars, also ruined. We've turned them in to the government, and you'll be reimbursed."

"Nothing else?"

"Like what?"

"Like half of a little card?"

Elkins shook his head. "No. Nothing."

"Nuts," I grumbled. "There goes Lake of the Sun City and a guy who maybe could have helped me."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Hastings, but is there anything I can do?"

"No. No, thanks. Wait—hold on a minute! Just how much of a big-wig are you around these parts?"

Elkins smiled. "I'm chief surgeon here in Syrtis Major Hospital. That makes me the ranking medical man on Mars."

"Well, those thousand solars are yours if you can do something for me."

"I don't want your money, Hastings! But this whole thing does intrigue me. Submit to our treatment and I'll do what I can."

I said no at once. "That wouldn't work. The whole idea is for me to save time, and the treatment would delay me. How's this for a compromise? If I ever get this whole mess straightened out, I'll tell you. I'll let you know all about it—if I'm still alive."

Elkins chuckled softly. "I don't think you could die even if you wanted to! Okay, it's a deal. What can I do for you?"

"Just this. About a month ago, the *Martian Queen* left Cedar Rapids for Mars. Have you access to the passenger list?"

He told me he could get it.

"Good! Bring it to me, along with copies of the passport pictures. There's a girl—"

"Yes, sir!" Elkins grinned. "Yes, sir!"

I said something about not meaning to order him around, but he laughed. I think he was enjoying the whole thing.

I took a room in the *Red Sands Hotel*, and that night Elkins came to me with two things. First, he had a packet of money—one thousand solars which the Earth government office in Syrtis Major had passed along for me in return for the thousand ruined solars. Second, he had the passenger list, complete with pictures.

It took less than a minute. "That's her," I said, jabbing a finger at one of the photographs.

"Pretty little thing," Elkins mused. And I agreed. A tum-

bled mass of chestnut hair, a pert little nose, sparkling blue eyes, the suggestion of a dimple in one cheek.

"Here's the biog," Elkins said, handing me a sheet of paper. I read:

Crewson, Ellen. Age, 25. Height, 5' 5". Weight, 120. Color of Eyes, blue. Associate Professor of Archaeology, Syrtis Major College. Appointed June last. References, check President Matthew P. Ryder, S.M.C. Period of stay on Mars, indefinite.

Bright and early the next morning, I found myself walking along the campus lanes of Syrtis Major College. Most of the students I observed were Marties, but a fair sprinkling of Earth youth could be seen, and an occasional Venusian shivered inside his furs, struggling against the unfamiliar cold of the Martian desert.

At the registrar's office they told me where I might find Associate Professor Ellen Crewson. It seemed she would be eating breakfast at the Campus Coffee Shop, very much an Earth-sounding name for a Martian college.

I found her, too—or rather, she found me. As I pushed in through the door she jumped up at once from a nearby booth and gave a little squeal of joy. "John!" she cried. "It really is you, John Hastings!"

Just like that, she leaped into my arms. A good leap and a strong one, and it nearly carried me over backwards. Then her arms were about my neck and she was kissing me, sobbing all the while. I must have reacted clumsily, for soon she disengaged herself and began to blush. She still held on to my hand, leading me back to the booth and plunking down beside me.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "You don't remember, do you?"

I shook my head. "From the way you act, I think I'd like to remember."

That deepened the blush on her pretty face, but when she smiled, the dimple I'd seen in the picture seemed more pronounced. "Tell me, were you that—that Bok-kura in the sideshow?"

"Uh-huh, that was me."

"I knew you were on Mars. All the morning papers carried it; how they found you out on the desert, how they took you to the hospital, how—"

"All the papers?"

"You bet! Front page stuff, too. You're a pretty famous

guy, John. I don't know a professor here at the college who wouldn't give his right arm to talk to you."

"That's no good. The last thing I'd want is publicity. If all the newspapers feature it, my enemies will know, too."

"You sound so melodramatic. Your enemies? Who?"

I shrugged. "I wish I knew, Miss Crewson. I wish I knew."

She began to giggle, softly at first, and then she was laughing quite heartily.

"What the hell's so funny?"

"Miss Crewson, you said. Miss Crewson! Would you believe that a couple of years ago you were on the verge of proposing? Miss Crewson..." The giggling turned to sniffling.

I felt a lot like a would-be strong man trying to clean-and-jerk his first barbell. "I'm sorry," I said. "I remember... nothing. And say, Miss Crew—Ellen—that's why I'm on Mars. I want you to tell me what you know. Everything."

"I'm a dope," she told me. "A real first-rate dope. It looks like I've been carrying the torch for you all this time, and you don't even remember. What am I supposed to do now, just—"

"Hey! It's not that way at all. Didn't you read the papers? I haven't forgotten you alone of everything. I *forgot*. The works. The boys at the hospital call it amnesia."

"Don't mind me. I said I was a dope. Of course, I should have known."

"Ellen, how well did you know John Hastings? And don't mind if I speak in the third person that way. John Hastings still sounds like something out of a story book to me."

She pouted. "I knew him better than anyone else did. I knew him well enough for him to ask me—"

We were getting no place fast. Every time she thought of the past, she thought of her love for John Hastings. And while looking at her I could readily see why the vague and shadowy John Hastings could have returned that love, still, right now I had other things on my mind. I drove that point home, ruthlessly. I had to.

"Sorry," she said, sitting up very straight. "We'll forget all that, John. Now, what do you want to know?"

"Like I said: everything. Where was John Hastings going before he disappeared? What was he looking for? Did he find it? What happened to him? Did he let you know anything about regeneration of tissues or something like that? Did he—"

"Whoa! I see what you mean. Everything. You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think I'm going to cut my classes today and give the students a day off. There's a park I know down by one of the old canal beds. We can take a picnic lunch there and I'll keep on talking until you run out of questions. Fair enough?"

I told her that would be fine, said I'd meet her at the park by twelve-thirty. Then I strolled back leisurely across the campus and into Syrtis Major City. Picking up a couple of newspapers, I brought them up to my room and ordered a potful of coffee and some donuts, Earth-style. I began to read.

By the time the coffee had arrived, I was cursing Dr. Elkins volubly. Damn the man! In his enthusiasm to get everything across to all the people who wanted to hear the latest episode in the John Hastings mystery, he'd really spilled the works. The esoteric John Hastings had turned up on Mars. Dead, but then he came back to life. He didn't remember much, but he had a lead. Associate professor Ellen Crewson of S.M.C. The readers were advised to wait for startling developments, for Miss Crewson, it seemed, had been close to John Hastings years ago, before everything started to happen.

I thought I'd call Elkins and tell him what he could do with those newspapers. But I reconsidered. Looking back on it, I knew I hadn't told him to keep anything a secret. So it wasn't really his fault—but that didn't matter much. Point was, he'd probably opened the floodgates of trouble.

I put a call through to Ellen Crewson, waited. In five minutes the operator called back, told me Miss Crewson hadn't been seen by her Martian landlady all morning. Alarmed now, I got the address from the college, took one more mouthful of coffee and went downstairs.

All Martians look withered and old, but the landlady of Ellen Crewson's boarding house seemed old even for a Martie. Her wrinkled, folded skin could have passed for coarse burlap, her rheumy eyes squinted out from two cavernous holes above her cheek bones.

"Miss Crewson," I said. "I called a few minutes ago."

"Not here." Her voice was the shadow of a croak.

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"No message."

"I said, do you know where I can find her?"

"No."

"When did you see her last?"

"Don't remember."

I took out a fifty-solar note, gave it to her. "When did you see her last?"

"Forty, fifty minutes ago, she leave."

"Alone?"

"No."

It was like pulling wisdom teeth with your bare hands. "With who?"

"Man."

Fifty more solars changed hands. "Who was he?"

"Not of Earth."

"A Martian?"

"No."

"Damn it, then who?"

"Venus-man. She go out with big Venus-man. She look plenty scared, yes."

"Why the hell didn't you try to stop them? Why didn't you call the police?"

"No one tell me to. Big Earthman take her—"

"I thought you said Venusian!"

"Venus-man, yes. Sorry. He—"

I placed my hands on her shoulders, and it felt as if nothing but the tattered cloak covered her bones. I shook her and she made a rattling noise. "You got all the money you're going to get! Now, who was it?"

She cackled. "I fool you for a time, yes?"

"Who was it?"

"Martian man take her. Remove hands, please. Ahh—better!"

"Did you know the man? Wait. Before you answer, consider this: if I think you're not telling me the truth, I'm going to call the police. Now, did you know him?"

A pause, then: "Live down street. Three brudders. Oldest take her. Two brudders sleeping there now, work nights. You find." She mumbled the address. "Now go from here. Earth-fellow?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going. But I'll be back if you lied."

"No lie. Brudders hate Earth-fellow. Hate Venus-man too, but hate Earth-fellow better. They kill you in little slices. Goodbye."

I used her phone to call the police. I told them that Ellen Crewson was missing, but I did not mention the three brothers. The police would find that out for themselves in due

time, and meanwhile I wanted to call on the brothers—undisturbed.

The place stank. More a shack than a house, it squatted bare and ugly between two sandstone buildings. It smelled of liquor, the Martian rot-gut which can make Earth moonshine taste like tea. It smelled also of unbathed Martians, but I wasn't aware of that until I threw open the door and strode inside.

Two Martians sat up in their cots, blinking at me. When one spoke it surprised me, especially after the old hag's pidgeon-English.

"All right, wise guy, just who the hell do you think you are busting in here like that?" Thick and heavy-set for a Martian, he sounded like he'd be aggressive even in his sleep. The other one, the younger of the two, seemed more than willing to let his brother do all the talking.

I said, "I'm looking for the other one. There are three of you, aren't there?"

The thick-set Martian got up and lit an Earth cigarette. He gestured at the empty third cot. "He ain't here."

"I can see that. Where can I find him?"

"You with the police?"

Maybe the old hag could give me the run-around, but not these boys. I took a quick step toward the Martie and hit him, not really hard, but hard enough to jar him. He fell back with the blow and sat down on his cot, but his brother jumped up like an uncoiled spring.

I hit him, too. Harder. He fell down and he lay there on the floor, breathing hard. I was plenty sore, at myself as much as anyone else. I felt responsible for Ellen Crewson, and Ellen might be anywhere....

"Before I'm finished you'll wish I was the police," I said. "Where's your brother?"

"*Braaak!*" The chunky Martian stuck his tongue out and made a loud blubbering noise with his lips.

His brother came off the floor fast, with a knife. I've got fast reflexes—they paid me for that, as Bok-kura. I kicked out, caught his wrist with my foot, sent the knife clattering across the dirty floor. By the time it struck the wall, I had the Martian down on his face, my knee pressing against the small of his back. I forced his right arm up behind him until he began to yell. "Now talk!"

The other Martian was shouting. "Hold your horses, bud! He can't speak a word of English. Me, I worked fifteen years in the New York spaceport, but he don't know the lingo."

The Martie tensed, ready to spring for the doorway, but I had his brother on the floor just this side of the threshold, and he thought better of it.

"Okay, then you talk; or do you want me to break his arm?"

He hadn't give up yet. He looked furtively across the room at the knife. "Hold it," I said. "Make a move in that direction and your brother will be wearing a lot of plaster for a long time."

That stopped him. The Martians are notoriously clannish, and he'd have felt the broken arm as much as his younger brother.

"The third one," I repeated. "Where is he?"

"He ain't here."

I made his brother scream.

"All right, cut it out!" New York slang, sure enough, almost twentieth-century variety. It sounded strange from the thin lips of a Martian. "Our brother left for the desert this morning."

"It's a mighty big desert," I informed him.

"Lake of the Sun City, that's where he went."

"Not alone. Don't try to tell me he went alone."

"I didn't say nothing. He had a girl with him, an Earth girl. That's all I know, honest, Mr. Hastings."

His mistake was in using my name. If he knew me, then maybe he was in on the whole thing. In that case, he could warn the Marties at Lake of the Sun City in advance.

I let the other brother up and he scrambled off the floor, threw himself down on a cot and began to sob. The thick-set Martie brought him some wine in a dark leather pouch, and he gulped it greedily.

I said, "Have you got a sled?"

"Yeah, sure. That's our business. Sledding."

"We're going to use it, the three of us. Right now."

"Where we going?"

"I'm going to Lake of the Sun City. Okay, where's the sled?"

"Right out back. I guess we can start now, but I don't like it. I got a lotta business signed up for tonight, on acounta this is the only all-weather sled in the neighborhood. You can't just—"

"I can and I am, so don't waste your breath." The Marties didn't know it, of course, but I was angry enough to kill someone at that moment.

We went out together through the doorway, walked around behind the shack. I looked at the sand-sled and smiled. It seemed all set to go, complete with half a dozen breathing bags. Three big metal hoops trisected its length, too. Covered with stout leather, they could offer considerable protection against the night's cold. And that meant I could drive straight through to Lake of the Sun City without a stop. Well, just one stop. . . .

I had the Marties bring along plenty of dried meat and a canteen of water. I wouldn't be sitting with my back to any Martians on a sand-sled, not this time. I had them give me instructions concerning the controls, and we were all set to go.

Driving through the crooked streets of Syrtis Major, I got used to the jet sled. Actually, there wasn't much to it. One lever for starting and accelerating, one for braking, one for turning. By the time we left the city behind us, I had the sled zooming over the sands of Mars at a good clip.

We'd done better than a hundred fifty miles in the first hour, and then I stopped. "Climb out," I told the Martians.

"What do you mean?"

"You walk from here. You can walk back to Syrtis, you can walk seventy miles to the nearest way-station." I jabbed a finger at the parchment map and showed them our approximate location.

"I thought you was taking us along—"

I grunted something, watched them trudge away from the sled. They'd fare all right. A Martian can go a long while without food or drink. Meanwhile, I'd reach Lake of the Sun City long before they could give any warning.

As I remember it, I was feeling pretty sure of myself then. The older brother was taking Ellen to Lake of the Sun City. If mayhem had been on his mind, a jaunt across the desert would be meaningless. Togoshira Suuki's Brotherhood had mentioned Lake of the Sun City as a key point, too. Thus, it looked like I might be able to tie things together for the first time out at the ancient Martian town, which some say once was the capital of a mighty Martian empire.

4

THE DOOR to the curio shop tinkled as I opened it, like any door on an Earth curio shop might tinkle. The proprietor was all smiles and politeness, a young Martian woman who

might have had some Earth blood in her veins. I couldn't be sure, but the mixture often comes off Mongoloid, and she almost could have been a daughter of one of Genghis Khan's Noyons.

"Yes, sir?" she said, in more than passable English. That's one thing about travel on Mars or Venus. If you stay on the well-beaten tourist trails, you won't have any language difficulties. I suppose the natives know on which side their bread is buttered. The girl continued, "Ours is the only curio shop in Lake of the Sun City. Here you will find items of last—"

"I know all that. Sorry, but I'm not interested."

The smile was a fixture on her face. "What then, Earth sir?"

"In Cedar Rapids Sargasso, I met a Venusian named Togoshira Suuki. He was abducted. His friends thought I might be able to find him, so they sent me here."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look. First, Suuki was abducted. I came to look for him, got an Earth girl named Ellen Crewson involved, and they took her too. I'm here to look for both of them, and I won't take no for an answer."

The smile still lingered on her lips. "I am Gurra dor Beta. I run a simple, honest business, and when I do business with someone, he calls me Beta. If you have business with me, you may call me that, but if you do not, I wish you would leave."

"They gave me half a card, but I lost it. Maybe you read the papers, I don't know. I'm John Hastings—"

For the first time, Gurra dor Beta looked doubtful. "Hastings! If I dared believe . . . Have you any proof?"

"No. But there's an old picture of me in the papers."

Wordless, she scurried through an archway, returned in a moment with the *Syrtis Major Chronicle*. Finally, she extended her hand. "It's not a very good likeness, John Hastings, but you're the man. What can I do to help?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "They merely told me to contact you. But this may be a lead. There are three brothers in Syrtis Major City; one of them speaks English like a man from the slums of New York. They run a jet-sled business—"

"I know them! The brothers Karnjud. What have they got to do with it?"

"The oldest brother took Miss Crewson from Syrtis Major and brought her here. I have a hunch he'd also know where to find Suuki."

"Perhaps. We've thought for a long time that Karnjud tor Ig— I guess you'd call him Ig Karnjud—we've thought that he worked with the Martian League."

"Let's get this straight. Upland Brotherhood on Venus, Martian League—and I suspect regeneration fits in there some place too. What's going on?"

"Don't you know?"

And, after I shook my head: "It's quite simple. Rumor had it that John Hastings discovered the secret of regeneration of tissues. The three planet governments have scoffed at it openly, but they've worked furiously in secret to either confirm or refute the rumor. Think about it: who controls regeneration controls the Solar System. What are injuries to an army? A man is hurt, he heals. He loses an arm, he'll grow a new one. He dies, and regeneration brings him back to life again.

"And that isn't all. Who is to say that a man whose tissues regenerate themselves is not gifted with eternal life? Tissues run down, fail to replace parts, become old and useless. Senility results. But what if those tissues continuously recreated themselves, remaining young and hardy—*always*?"

My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, but I managed the one word, "Immortality!" I healed like that. Me, John Hastings! I didn't know why, I didn't know how—but I'd seen it happen. *And did that mean I'd somehow been vouchsafed a veritable godhood?*

"... so, John Hastings, if you can tell me—"

"It's true," I said. "At least, I think it's true. Regeneration exists somehow, somewhere. Suuki thought that, didn't he?"

"Of course. The Brotherhood thinks so. Also the Martian League."

"Where do you fit in?" I wanted to know. "I mean, you're a Martian, yet you work with the Brotherhood."

"My grandmother was a woman of Earth. Her son, my father—lived his life on Venus. It is only natural—"

"You have a Martian name," I persisted.

"I wouldn't be an effective undercover agent without one, would I? Anyway, we stray from the subject. What can I do?"

"That's simple. Just tell me where I can find your friend Iggy."

"Who? Oh, Karnjud tor Ig! And he's no friend of mine! Well, the Martian League preys on the superstitions of the Martian people. Karnjud tor Ig is a sort of priest, and he

does a good job of it. They mix science with religion, satisfying the people but still getting out of it what they want. Probably he'll make a religious fiend of Suuki, and one of your Earth girl as well. He'll torture them, extract the information he desires—and the Martians will approve. The Martians will get Suuki and the girl after that. . . .”

“All right. When?”

“Tonight! The nearer moon goes through its phases rapidly, and the moon is now full. A night for the Elder Gods of Mars, John Hastings. A night for the cults to assemble in Lake of the Sun. A night for mystery and the ancient rites—and death.”

“You say Lake of the Sun like there really was a lake. I thought it dried up thousands of years ago and only the old name remained to tell of it.”

“Lake of the Sun never disappeared! Fed by underground streams, it once covered this entire desert basin, more an ocean than a lake. But the air of Mars grew thin and Mars was parched. The old Martians hollowed out the caverns whose streams fed Lake of the Sun, and you'll find the lake there. Underground. A lake not of the sun now, but of the nether regions into which the sun's rays never penetrate. It is funny. Lake of the Sun . . .”

“Not so funny for Suuki or Ellen Crewson,” I told her. “How do I get there?”

“You don't. They'd kill an Earthman on sight if they caught him during those rites. You're halfway around the planet from Syrtis Major, John Hastings, and Earth law doesn't reach this far. May I make a suggestion? Good! I said you cannot go, and that is true. But a Martian could.”

“You don't mean yourself?”

“Not alone, no. But I will join you. *You* will go, John Hastings, but you will be a Martian.”

She wasn't kidding. She led me through the archway, returned for a moment to the outside room, closing her shop for the day. Then she went to work, and she was an expert.

She injected a bubbling, frothy stuff high up on my right arm, piercing the veins near the armpit with her needle. I felt nothing more than a little giddiness, but when she let me look in a mirror, John Hastings didn't scowl back at me!

Parchment-like skin. Dry, withered, almost ready to flake off.

“My God!” I cried. “This isn't permanent, is it?”

“No, stop worrying. Twenty hours and you will be normal again. Meanwhile . . .”

Next, she applied a sort of flesh-like putty to my face, building the cheek-bones high and gaunt, developing the brow, making the chin protrude. A drop of liquid in each eye, and I found I had to squint like any sand-blown Martian.

Beta stood back with hands on hips, surveying her work. "You will pass," she said, almost proudly, very much the master artist. "Now, all we'll have to find for you is a smelly old cloak, a tattered cowl, a little information on the local customs. . . ."

I told her I hoped the boys at Lake of the Sun would fall for it too.

They did. After sundown, Beta and I entered an unimposing little cave and started down a long winding tunnel. I got the impression that the way led us deep into the bowels of Mars, for although the slope was gradual, it never leveled off.

High up in niches in the wall, flambeaux lighted our way, showing quite clearly the scores of Martians who plodded down the tunnel with us, cowls set low over their faces, shoulders hunched. Moisture dripped off the walls, made the rough stone floor slippery underfoot. Dank, subterranean moisture—on arid Mars!

Ahead, I became aware of a faint, faraway chanting, almost one with the dripping of water. Eagerly, Beta shuffled forward, and the uneven rock flooring gave way to a spongy carpet of moss. The flambeaux no longer lighted our way—but we could see, for a strange glow filled the air, dancing motes eddying around the unseen currents of wind.

Abruptly, the tunnel opened out into a huge cavern. The further wall was lost in dimness, the ceiling hid behind a veil of the dancing motes. Hordes of Martians streamed in from other passages, gathering together at the shore of an iridescent lake.

Lake of the Sun. . . .

The tiny glowing motes which had given light to our path streamed up from the surface of the lake! Lake of the Sun, indeed, with a million, million tiny suns gleaming up from its still depths!

The Martians clustered on the lake shore, chanting and beating their feet against the rock, rapt eyes intent upon the surface of the waters. We joined them, Beta and I, and my guide knew the chant, lending her own voice to it, stamping her feet in slow cadence. I think I felt more completely the intruder than any man who'd ever set foot on a far planet.

Something sparkled far out on the glowing lake, came closer. A barge, big and squat and riding low in the water. On it three figures.

Not until the barge drifted in some fifty yards away did I see them clearly. A Martian, tall for his race and strong, and I heard Beta whisper, "That's Ig Karnjud!" And two others, bound to a pole which rose up from the center of the barge.

Dour Togoshira Suuki. And Ellen Crewson.

Ig Karnjud raised his hands on high. The chanting faded away, and only the gentle lapping of water against the barge's hull broke the impossible silence.

Karnjud's voice boomed out across the cavern. I turned to Beta, said, "What's he saying?"

"Shh! He asks if anyone would speak before the ritual begins. And I would speak!" She cried out across the waters in Martian, her voice a plaintive wail. Cowled Marties stirred restlessly all about us.

I didn't understand a word of it, not the old Martian dialect. But wildly I realized my own name had been spoken. John Hastings, she called that out to the still figures in the barge!

Rough hands grabbed me, tore the cowl from my head, ripped the robes from my body. I stood there in jumper and leatheroid jacket, and Beta was laughing! "Fool!" she cried. "Fool, fool! Did you think for a moment that I would help? Did you in your vanity conclude that I—"

I wasn't listening. She'd tricked me, utterly. No longer wrinkled and withered and parchment-yellow—my skin was the skin of an Earthman! She'd gained my confidence, given me a disguise to quell my doubts completely—then led me to the slaughter. Suddenly the words of the members of the Brotherhood came back to me. A *man* would be waiting in Lake of the Sun City with the other half of my torn card. A man! Somehow, the Martians had put one of their own in his place.

I grabbed the cowl of the nearest Martian, tugged him close, lifted him overhead. He was screaming when I hurled him at his fellows, and for a moment they cowered back, licking their wounds. Beta still laughed.

They came for me slowly, creeping up on all sides, in no great hurry. They seemed to relish every moment of it. Or perhaps no one wanted to reach me first.

You always gain a momentary advantage if you do the unexpected. I didn't wait for them. Instead, I hurled myself

forward, came into contact with the vanguard of their ranks, flailed my way through. Panting, I stood on the edge of the lake, my back to its silent waters. I turned away and dove into the gleaming wetness, felt it close around me.

I broke surface, gasped a lungful of the moist air and set out in a crawl for the barge. The water hissed violently all about me, great jets of steam puffing off its surface. Some of the Marties had blasters!

I dived under, employing a frog-kick and breast-stroke. The water, gleaming with its endless tiny motes of light, offered almost no visibility, but far ahead a vague shadow led me on. The barge, I hoped. No Marties came swimming after me, and I soon realized that none would. Few are the desert nomads who can swim, and Mars is an arid wasteland of a planet.

My head spun, my chest burned for air, but I could imagine the Marties waiting patiently on shore with their blasters, and I did not come up for air. If I could swim around behind the barge, if only I could do that.

First, the Marties would have no target to shoot at, and that would suit me fine. Also, Ig Karnjud would wait for me on the shoreward side of the barge. Swimming around to its other side, I might gain its deck before he knew what had happened.

Somehow, I made it. I broke surface weak and panting, but the barge rocked up and down gently—several yards closer to shore. I paddled toward it, hardly using more than my hands, conserving strength, regaining my breath.

No more than four feet off the surface of the water, the deck waited invitingly. I reached the hull, found no handhold. Four feet . . .

I swam along the side of the barge, found halfway to the stern what might have been an anchor chain. Grasping it, I pulled myself out of the water, clambered up, stood dripping on the deck.

Ellen saw me first, whimpered a little, but Suuki—who stared at me a moment later—didn't make a sound. And as I had expected, Ig Karnjud stood at the other side of the craft, his back turned, peering out over the water. At that moment, the Martians on shore must have spotted me, for they commenced shouting and screaming. Too many of them tried to cry instructions at once, and I don't think Ig Karnjud understood until the very end.

He turned to face me and from somewhere a knife appeared in his hand. He lunged wildly, but I parried the blow

with my forearm, felt the knife rip through my jacket-sleeve. Then I hit him. Once and once only, but my right fist caught the point of his chin, threw him bolt upright. He stood there, waving his arms wildly, and then he fell over backwards, hitting the water with a splash.

He screamed, churning the lake into white froth with his arms and legs. Like most Martians, he could not swim—and perhaps that is why these ceremonies were conducted on a barge. Mighty impressive, preaching from the middle of a lake, on a planet where swimming was a rarity and water an awesome spectacle.

Karnjud went down once—and again. I guess I could have gone over the side and hauled him in, but some of the Martians on shore were firing their blasters dangerously close, and I could do nothing but watch the currents carry Ig Karnjud away—and under.

"Thank heaven you came, John!" Ellen cried. Reaction must have set in, for she began to whimper. She'd been very close to death, and she knew it.

Suuki smiled grimly. "We are still not out of this, you know. What do you suggest next, John Hastings?"

Wordlessly, I unbound them. Ellen came down from the pole limply, fell into my arms. We stood that way for a moment, and then I sat her down on the deck, rubbing her wrists and ankles to restore circulation. Dour Suuki had fared much better. He swung around the barge almost jauntily, none the worse for wear.

"There is an old trick," he explained. "You tense the muscles when they bind you, and when you relax the ropes are not particularly oppressive. But what now?"

"Hell," I told him, "just start this boat going, that's all. Right back to where it came from."

"Yes? How?"

"What he means," Ellen told me, "is that there doesn't seem to be any controls. Look for yourself."

I did. A flat barge and nothing more with apparently no way to get down inside.

"Well," I persisted, "how did Karnjud move it?"

Ellen shrugged. "Search me. It just—went."

"Do we stand here and wait for them?" Suuki wanted to know. "In time they will get another boat, you know."

I shook my head. "Can you swim, Suuki?"

He grinned. "You forget, John Hastings, that mine is a watery planet."

"Good. Ellen?"

"A little. No great shakes, John, but a little."

"Suuki, how far would you say this boat came?"

"Merely several hundred yards. There is a dock on the other side of the lake, guarded only by an old caretaker."

"Right. In that case, we'll swim for it."

"What good will that do?" Ellen demanded. "They can follow much faster around the shore—"

"No. You're wrong. They're standing on a little beach, but that's the only shore on this side of the lake. It dips away pretty fast, and sheer rock walls come down to the surface of the water. No one will follow us, Ellen. At least not for a good long while."

Suuki stood poised on the edge of the deck. "In that case, what are we waiting for? They say on my world that a man who delays is—but never mind! Not understanding the language, you'd miss a beautiful play on words. Shall we go?"

Not waiting for an answer, Togoshira Suuki dived overboard. Ellen looked more than a little frightened. Wordless, I took her hand and led her to the side. "Jump," I said. Still holding hands, we leaped.

The dock surprised us. It was an ancient quay jutting out into the lake, but beyond it an underground city loomed in the half-darkness, throwing sword-edged spires up through the phosphorescent murk. Some of the buildings must have been constructed from obsolete spaceship hulls, for they stood poised on their tailtubes now, seemingly ready to blast-off toward the high-vaulted ceiling of the cavern.

"Apparently religion is a big business with the Martian League," Suuki observed matter-of-factly.

"This kind of religion never did anyone any good," Ellen told him. After that, there wasn't much time for talking. A narrow stone roadway snaked around the edge of the city on a six-foot ledge of what looked like sandstone, and I let Ellen and Suuki use my back as a step-ladder to reach it. I caught on with my hands and clambered up after them. Where my hands groped in the gloom, I found a coil of thin but tough rope, and slung it across my arm on the hunch that it might come in handy later. Funny how such hunches can sometimes pay off.

Then, quite suddenly, it began to grow cold. A chill wind swept in off the lake, and that wasn't so bad in itself. But we still wore our drenched garments, and I could tell when I took Ellen's hand in mine that she was shivering.

"Strip," I said.

"What?" Ellen's voice was almost a shriek. I could hear Suuki's dry laughter as he complied.

"Strip," I told Ellen again. "You'll feel warmer if you do." And, when she just stood there: "That's an order."

I turned away and peeled off my own wet clothing, then faced them once more. Ellen's skin gleamed wetly in the half-light, and Suuki laughed his dry laugh once more when she tried—and failed—to cover herself with her arms. Suuki pounded his ancient, withered flanks with delight.

When the voice boomed up at us, it sounded like the crack of doom in the utter stillness. "Halt! What was that? *Skarda! Key simloi!*" The guard was bilingual, issuing his order in both English and Martian.

He came into view soon afterwards, a big, hulking half-breed in a fancy dress uniform which must have signified Martian League soldiery. They had quite an organization, all right. The guard carried a blasting rifle, stood with his feet planted wide right below our position on the ledge.

"Is anyone up there? *Slok kor tini mot?*"

He began to turn slowly as Suuki faded back silently into the shadows. I stood there with Ellen. Both of us naked, unarmed—and helpless. Unarmed? It was almost at the last instant that I remembered my coil of rope.

I eased it off my shoulder, looped it. I'd have one chance, no more. A blast from the rifle disemboweling me if I didn't cast straight.

I let the rope fly.

Ellen gave a little yelp as it landed on the big man's shoulders. Then I tugged, felt the rope tighten, saw it climb up his neck as I pulled, and fasten just below his chin. I twisted.

His face came half-around in the murk, and I could tell he was trying to scream. No sound escaped his lips. When I let the rope go, the guard slumped to the sandstone, his hands still clawing feebly at his neck.

Then we were running along the ledge without looking back. Finally, we came to a hoary staircase old as the sandstone itself—a twisting staircase which spiraled up dizzily until it disappeared above our heads. A little hut stood at its foot, and this I entered cautiously. Someone inside snored deeply and steadily, and I didn't disturb him. But I came out again with enough evil-smelling Martian clothing for the three of us.

The stairs seemed interminable. We took the garments with us and dressed on the first landing, where Ellen told me my

knees were knobby for a Jovian Strong Man. I began an objective discussion of various points of her anatomy, stopped when she threatened mayhem. She somehow extracted a promise from me not to mention our nakedness together again. Not unless . . . well, not unless I could remember some of the things John Hastings would have remembered. I nodded quick assent. I'd heard enough about this particular angle of John Hastings' past to want a change of subject—and fast.

From the top of the spiral stairway, a sloping passage led to the surface, and we soon found ourselves on the outskirts of Lake of the Sun City. A bitter night wind whipped in off the desert, bringing flurries of sand with it.

"Venus is such a pleasant place," Suuki muttered. "Even your Earth has its advantages. But this barren mess of a planet—bah!"

We could have remained in the caverns until the sun came up and warmed the desert, but the Martians would not have remained idle. When I told my companions that, Ellen said: "Granted. They'd have us surrounded by morning. Still, we won't get very far in this cold. *Brrr!*" She shivered as a particularly icy blast of wind hit us.

"We don't have to," I told her. "I parked a jet-sled outside the city, maybe a mile from here. I don't know if we can find it in the darkness. We can try. . . ."

And we stalked out into the desert.

Probably Suuki fared the worst. Accustomed to a tropical jungle with tepid waters and steaming swamps, he found himself out on the sub-zero barrens with nothing but a cloak and a cowl to keep out the frigid winds. And the abrupt change in temperature from day to night whipped up a series of never-diminishing sand-storms, driving tiny pellets against us with almost hurricane force.

After a time, it became a blinding, stinging nightmare. It was an effort even to pick up your feet and push them forward for the next step. I grew numb all over, not slowly, but within moments after we had set out. The winds howled, the sands whirled high in furious little eddies which blotted out the stars.

We trudged on half a mile, maybe three-quarters—and then Suuki collapsed. I could barely make out Ellen's face in the darkness, but I could see that she looked down at him helplessly.

"We can't leave him," she said. "He'll die. But we can't stay on here. John—Johnny, I'm frightened."

Suuki gasped, "Go—ahead. Foolish—to stay. A shame... John Hastings... for there—is so... much we could have—told each—other!"

I smiled "Will you still feel like talking if we can get back to Syrtis?"

He grunted an answer, but it was lost in the shrilling winds. I lifted him off the sands, slung him over my shoulder. Here on Mars with its lighter gravity he didn't carry much more than half his real weight, and I plodded on, letting Strong Man Bok-kura do the rest.

Ellen grasped my free hand with her own stiff fingers, and walking that way we reached the jet-sled—parked near a monument which proclaimed Lake of the Sun City to be a peaceful old settlement which reminded one of the old days of Mars, with boats floating serenely down the canals, men and maids carousing in the warm sunshine, and nothing more than an occasional gust of balmy wind to stir the tranquil scene...

5

"How do you do?" Dr. Elkins said. "So you're Togoshira Suuki, the famous Venusian asteroidologist."

Suuki smiled. "I'd be nothing at all if Hastings hadn't carried me off the desert two nights ago. I think I am very glad the man was my hobby."

I laughed. "Be gladder still that I played a Jovian Strong Man for a couple of years. You don't weigh as much as those barbells, Suuki."

"So *that's* where you disappeared! How did it come about?"

"I don't remember—remember?"

"He's stubborn," Dr. Elkins said. "If he'd submit to treatment, we might have his memory back inside of six months."

"I'd like that," Ellen admitted. I held her hand and, warm now, her fingers were pleasant to touch.

"The answer is still no, doc. I got what I came to Mars for—Suuki here. There's a lot he can tell me, so if you think he's well enough—"

"Certainly he's well. The cold sapped his strength, but the man's heart is as strong as a machine. Don't worry about that." And Dr. Elkins put away his stethoscope confidently.

Suuki sat up in bed, smoothing the covers over his scrawny chest. "About three years ago," the uplander-Jap began,

"the whole solar system waited breathlessly for word from you. You'd discovered an asteroid which allegedly contained artifacts of a culture which existed before a planet between Mars and Jupiter exploded.

"Your last message to North American University was optimistic. You'd uncovered the artifacts, all right. Now, all you had to do was interpret them. But you were never heard from again!

"Months later, they found your ship, a derelict, floating free outside the asteroid swarm. No John Hastings. No written records. Nothing. But plenty of food, air, and water. You met with an accident, it was assumed. And obviously, you'd met death out there on some uncharted asteroid. Expeditions set out to find you, came back empty-handed. John Hastings was forgotten.

"But the mystery of the asteroids wasn't. The old Martian civilization somehow connects its myths of the asteroids with a doctrine of eternal life. And rumors spread. You'd found that, John Hastings—the secret of regeneration, of eternal life—and you'd perished with it. Is it any wonder that people sought you?

"Earth-government scoffed at the whole idea, but the navy maintains a carefully guarded operation, Project H. H—for Hastings! Venus and Mars have their underground agents at work, too, and the Sargasso Cities hold the spotlight, because government men can work outside the law there, without the necessity of reporting back officially. Venus wants the secret—hence the upland Brotherhood, with some Earth members too, since some of your planetees feel that the Brotherhood can put the secret to better use. Mars wants it—hence the League. And Earth is determined to get it."

"When I came to Mars," I said, "someone tried to kill me. How can you explain that?"

Suuki shrugged eloquently enough. "Sargasso City. Intrigue and counter intrigue. News of your arrival came to Mars before you did."

"And one of your agents in Lake of the Sun City—a woman named Beta something—turned out to be in cahoots with the League."

"The same. It's difficult to maintain vigil over an underground organization which covers three planets and the Jovian moons as well."

"All right, answer this one. Before I knew what was

going on, a man on Earth tried to kill me. He was injured—severely. And walked away a few minutes later.”

“Regeneration,” Suuki mused. “How else can I explain it? Does it mean the rumors are true?”

“It does,” Dr. Elkins said. He told Suuki how they’d found me out on the desert.

I shook my head. “That isn’t what I’m getting at. A man tried to kill me, almost succeeded. But where did he fit into the picture? How did he know me back there at the side-show, when no one else did? Remember, Suuki, at the time you didn’t know I was alive. We can assume the same for the Martian League. But some other force knew, found me—and wanted me dead. But why? The Martians tried to kill me so I couldn’t reach you. I guess they were afraid of what we could do about this regeneration stuff if we ever got together. But otherwise, the Marties would have wanted me alive. The same goes for your Brotherhood. What I want to know is this: why did that someone else want me dead?”

“What you’re asking,” Dr. Elkins said, “is something like this: one particular party, and one only, did not want you alive. A dead John Hastings couldn’t return to the asteroids, let alone lead a new scientific expedition out there. Thus, someone wished to put a stop to the whole thing.” He frowned. “I can’t make anything out of that part of it either.”

Ellen spoke for the first time. “Maybe I can,” she said. “We’d been in radio contact almost to the end, Johnny. Every day you got more excited, I remember it almost like it was yesterday. But you couldn’t tell me anything concrete, not really concrete, because you feared someone else might cut in on the frequency, and what you’d found was dynamite. Also,” she blushed a little, “you were kept much too busy telling me how much you loved me!”

I felt like a damned fool, for I remembered nothing. It isn’t easy, people telling you what you did, what you said—and everything is an absolute blank to you. I cleared my throat self-consciously, told Ellen to continue.

“Well, you spoke about that old Martian myth, regeneration of tissues. I think, above all, that you wanted to impress upon me the fact that it wasn’t so far-fetched. ‘Look,’ you said, ‘a man gets a cut, it heals. An abrasion too, but sometimes there’s a scar. A broken bone will knit. But that’s only half the story. Plants regenerate their tissues all the time.

Did you know that a plant doesn't really stop growing until it ceases to live? Or take some of the more primitive animals. On Earth, cut an arm off a starfish and it will grow a new one. Same for a lobster and its claws and, to a lesser extent, for the insects. Same on Mars, and it holds true to an even greater extent among the primitive life-forms of Venus. There's nothing odd about it, nothing smacking of the supernatural. It's nature's way of protecting some of its species, and there's no reason to believe that advanced science couldn't extend regeneration to man as well.

"I'll be able to prove that soon," you said. "And don't be surprised if I bring the proof back in a mighty shocking form. Tell me, kid, would you be willing to marry a superman?" Ellen crimsoned slightly. "Oh, maybe those weren't the exact words, but you said something like that. I never heard from you again."

Suuki smiled grimly. "It all points to one thing. John, you must find that asteroid again!"

"Sure," I said, "just like that. One asteroid out of ten thousand, only I can't remember which one."

"It is not impossible. First, you must return to the asteroid belt—and then let's see if your memory can't pick up the lost threads. I believe—"

"By George!" Dr. Elkins cried. "What a glorious challenge. The power to change mankind at your fingertips, if only you could remember. I will go along."

I told Suuki: "All I want to know is this: how are we going to get there?"

"My friend, the Brotherhood is not without its power, even here in Syrtis. We can raise the money; with it we can buy a ship; and then we'll see."

Dr. Elkins grabbed his hand impulsively. "Suuki, if this works out, science will remember you as a great man."

The uplander-Jap chuckled dryly. "I'm far more interested in the Brotherhood."

"I only want Johnny to regain his memory," Ellen said.

And that seemed to be that. Each of them had his reason for wanting to reach the asteroids with me in tow. Well, I had my reasons too, but somehow—as Suuki began to make preparations—a cold chill crept over me. Between Mars and Jupiter, a broad sector of space which, according to the famous law of Bode, should have been the orbit for a great planet. Instead, the thousands of asteroids spun out there in their cold dead vault, mute remains of a planet which existed—how many millions of years ago? And something out

there had taken my memory from me, had given in its place something nameless, something which branded me for all the worlds to see: "*This man is more than human!*"

Was that something still lurking out in the cold bleak marches of space?

Mars faded behind us, a swollen ochre and crimson globe. Ahead, the tiny motes which were asteroids caught the sunlight, held it, threw it back at us—a thousand thousand points of light. The rockets of Suuki's battered, second-hand cruiser throbbed dully from somewhere deep in the bowels of the ship. Elkins was asleep now, and Suuki. I stood with Ellen in the control chamber, plotting an aimless course.

"Where will we go?" she wanted to know.

"Search me. Suuki thinks it ought to be haphazard at first. Maybe something will strike a familiar chord for me."

"I hope so, Johnny. I hope so."

Mars-light flooded in through the huge quartzite windows, suffusing everything with a delicate saffron glow. Deep space encroached on all sides trying, it almost seemed, to force its way in through the windows, through the observation dome overhead, through the ports with their translucent coverings. But there was something of comfort within the ship, of security, of that unnamed thing which through the ages has permitted mankind to thumb its nose at the perils of a hostile environment.

I didn't know what at first. I suppose it's different for every man, for each his own private, inviolate sanctuary. And mine?

Ellen came to me slowly, the saffron highlights gleaming in her hair. Her eyes were big and wide and pleading. They said, *remember, Johnny! Oh, can't you please remember?*

She brushed against my chest, the faintest suggestion of a touch, and then I'd folded my arms around her, pulled her in close, felt the arch of her back grow stiff for a moment, then relax. I touched her hair with my lips, her brow, her eyes, the smooth supple curve of her neck. . . .

A small voice, almost that of a child: "Johnny, Johnny—you remember!"

I kissed the words from her lips, softly at first. I held it a long time, that kiss, not softly any longer. Toward the end it must have hurt her.

For Ellen, a ghost from the past, phantom no more. For me, the first sweet-brutal kiss of new love. "Johnny, you *do* remember!"

"Do you mind terribly if I don't?"

"I—I don't understand you."

"I remember nothing, not now, not yet. I only know that suddenly I had to do that. Not to remember anything, Ellen, but just for now, for today—and—"

"And what, Johnny?"

"And for tomorrow, too. Ellen—you hear it so much, you read it in books, but then when you try to say it yourself, it doesn't sound right. It sounds corny. It—hell, I don't care! Ellen, I—I think I'm falling in love with you. No, wait. Not the old John Hastings who everyone wants to remember. But me, right now, today. *I love you, Ellen. I love you!*"

"Johnny—"

It couldn't last. Something had to break the spell. An instant later I plummeted from the heights to the depths—and it looked as if I'd stay there for a long time. Maybe permanently.

The two remaining brothers Karnjud stood in the doorway, blasters in their hands.

"Sit right there," the English-speaking brother said. "Don't move. Don't make a sound. I'm warning you."

Ellen whispered, "I know them! Their brother took me, that Ig Karnjud. . . ."

They stalked into the control room, grim as pallbearers. Maybe they'd heard of their brother's death, maybe they'd somehow got wind of our expedition, hidden themselves aboard the ship. I didn't know, not then.

They ignored Ellen, marching forward grimly until they stood right in front of me.

"You rotten, stinking bastard!" the older brother cried. "You killed Ig—"

He slashed down with the blaster, bringing the tube end down across my cheek, opening it to the bone. I stumbled back, swung wildly with my right hand, but Karnjud sidestepped easily. "Don't try that again, Hastings. My brother will kill you."

He meant it, and all I could do was stand there and take a beating.

He swung the blaster down again, handling it gracefully, more like a whip than a gun. It crashed against the bridge of my nose, cut further and ripped my lips. I heard Ellen whimper from far off, dimly saw her throw herself against the Martian. He muttered an oath, hurled her off into a corner. She got up again, yelling like a banshee, but the other

Karnjud clipped her jaw with his fist and she tumbled over backwards, falling in a heap on the floor.

"Damn it, leave her out of this! Yeah, I killed your brother, but she had nothing to do with it!"

"Ain't that lovely. He wants to protect her!"

The blaster slammed down once more, crashing against my temple, stunning me. I stumbled, slumped half-forward, felt something explode against the back of my neck. It sent me all the way down to the floor, and I hit hard.

I had time to roll over on my back, to hunch up and tense my muscles. By then, the older Karnjud had forgotten all about his blaster. I saw him leering down at me through a bloody haze, saw his brother's blaster, unwavering, pointing at me.

A foot lashed out and I tried to ride with it, but it caught me down near the kidneys, I think, and a wave of agony washed over me. Again, higher up this time, digging into the ribs. Still higher, numbing my shoulder. When the heavy boot started for my face, I was drifting away on a sea of crimson fog. The boot seemed to hang suspended in that fog, but it stalked me. . . .

Far away, Suuki's voice: "What's the meaning of—"

Then the boot struck.

"Get up!" Something prodded my face, urgently.

"On your feet, Hastings. Come on. The way your body can regenerate injured tissue, you're not hurt."

As a matter of fact, I wasn't. I hadn't been unconscious for long, but it had been sufficient time for me to heal. Wipe the blood away, and I'd look like new. I felt it, too. Almost chipper. Hell, let them do what they want, they couldn't hurt me, not really.

Them!

The first voice belonged to Karnjud. The second was Dr. Elkin's!

I stood up fast, the Karnjuds waving me off into a corner with their blasters. Mars had faded behind us and the ship's pale blue spacelights cast harsh shadows across Dr. Elkins' mild face. He smiled coldly. "I suppose you are surprised, Hastings."

"You're damned right I'm surprised!"

"You needn't be. The Martie who attempted to take your life out on the desert was a member of an extremist group. I am not an extremist although, frankly, I was hard put to keep the Karnjuds off you after what happened to their brother. I merely work, through the Martian League, in the

interests of science—as *I* can apply it. What is science, Hastings, unless one can apply it, twist it for his own purposes, mold it to make a better world for himself?

"We want you alive! We want you to find that asteroid for us. Unfortunately, your friend Togoshira Suuki desires the same thing, but the Brotherhood claims an altruistic motive. I put it up to you, Hastings: altruistic, bah! In science one learns that there is no such thing. Each creature, each species, functions only in terms of its own survival. If something has survival value, it is good. If it does not, it is evil. Do I make myself clear?"

"Damned clear," I said. Mild-mannered Dr. Elkins, an egocentric creature who hid his self-importance behind a garb of modest scientific endeavor. But I knew he could be the most dangerous sort of antagonist, for he believed in his own warped creed.

"Where's Suuki?" I asked him. I think I was a little afraid to ask about Ellen.

"He's well, don't worry. And the girl, too. Suuki has knowledge which may aid us, and the girl might possibly help you remember. For now, Hastings, they have survival value. Don't misunderstand me: I hold no hatred for you. I believe I said I was intrigued once, and I meant that. But you have survival value as well: and so I need you. And don't you forget it."

It didn't help much to think about it now, but I'd been an idiot. Seemingly on a whim, Elkins had given up his Syrtis Major medical practice to come with us on this jaunt through the asteroids. He'd planned it that way all along, which also could explain his original desire to help me regain my memory. Scientific interest, sure—but directed toward his own ends.

"You've got the deck stacked all the way," I told him. "How's it going to be dealt, Doc?"

"You'll see in a few hours, Hastings. We're nearing the asteroid belt now, and there is an advanced base which our organization holds in readiness. According to the Karnjud boys, our leader will be there. Can you believe that I've never met our leader? Strange, for I am the prime cog in our not-very-small machine. Perhaps our leader has other ideas. Perhaps . . . We'll see.

"Meanwhile, I leave you with the brothers Karnjud. As a word of advice, try nothing foolish. I believe I have impressed upon them the necessity of keeping you alive, but they remember their brother and the Martians are a peculiar

people, placing vendetta over survival value. Well, good day." And he walked from the room, still a mild-looking little man.

The place, I realized, was a storeroom, deep within the ship. You had to speak loudly over the insistent *throb-throb-throb* of the rockets. The older Karnjud locked and bolted the heavy metal door, spoke for a time with his brother, in Martian. Then he turned to face me.

"Luka thinks I ain't treating him right. He says I knocked hell outa you before, he didn't. He wants to do it now. You know what, Hastings? I think I'm gonna let him. No, stay back! Just get off in that corner, that's right. I'm standing right here, see, and don't you forget it. My brother Luka is gonna wade into you till he gets tired. If you so much as raise a finger, I'll kill you."

Grinning inanely, Luka shuffled forward, somewhat on the tall side and incredibly thin, even for a Martian. I don't think he weighed a hundred pounds, but I had a hunch he'd know how to wield the butt of a blaster.

I didn't wait to find out.

His brother wasn't kidding he'd gun me down if I tried anything. Only what he did not realize was this—Luka stood between us.

Luka raised the blaster in his thin fingers, brought it down. I moved in quick, caught his wrist and turned it. He howled once, then fell in toward me. I spun him around, got one hand on the back of his belt, one on the collar of his shirt. He came up off the floor easily, and I hurled him at his brother.

Karnjud fired his blaster instinctively, its beam searing Luka. His howl became a gurgle which bubbled from his throat. His chest and stomach scorched to a blackened ruin, Luka was dead before he hit the floor.

Karnjud knew it without bothering to look. He whimpered frightfully, an animal sound. He fired again, but by then I'd ducked behind a packing crate which the beam kindled to quick flame. I got away fast, but Karnjud hardly seemed aware of the fire licking up at us. "Luka," he mumbled over and over again. "Luka, Luka, Luka..."

He hardly saw me. He criss-crossed the room with raw energy, bringing angry flames wherever the beam touched. Smoke made it difficult to breathe—and to see. Karnjud stood at the bolted door, firing his blaster and screaming, firing and screaming.

Somehow, I got to him, took the blaster from his fingers, pushed him aside. I turned my attention to the door, reach-

ing out for the bolt and then drawing my hands away. The door was red-hot!

Gibbering now, Karnjud sat down near his dead brother, near the brother he'd killed with his own hand. "Luka, Luka! Say you're not dead! Luka, speak to me. Luka—"

I tried to drag him away, but he kicked out at me, scurried like some midnight rodent to the other side of Luka's corpse and stayed there. He sat that way, a ring of flame closing around him, and I couldn't argue, not unless I wanted to become a part of it.

I ripped a strip of cloth from my sleeve, bound it around my right hand. With this I tackled the scorching bolt and soon I'd thrown it back, opening the door. I looked once more into the storeroom, now a roaring, raging inferno. Of the dead Luka and his brother I could see nothing.

Outside, I shut the door, gulped in great lungfuls of fresh air. Then I ran forward.

Suuki and Ellen sat in the control room, bound to two of the pilot seats. Dr. Elkins was busy at the controls.

"Close off aft!" I cried. "Fire!"

"Fire?" Elkins snorted.

"Damn it, that's what I said."

"This ship is fireproof," he told me blandly.

"The storerooms aren't. Karnjud is back there with his brother, dead. The whole place is one roaring mess of flames!"

Smoke drifted into the control room, and Elkins jumped to his feet. "What section?"

"Four," I told him.

"Well, we'll shut it off. This ship is compartmented, no harm will be done. The fire will burn itself out, leave a hole in the hull. But we have nothing to worry about."

"That's what you think. Section four lies adjacent to the engine room. The heat's liable to fuse the softer metals down there and turn us into a derelict."

For the first time, Elkins appeared alarmed. "Wh—what do you want me to do?"

"Like you said, shut off section four. Then we'll have to high-tail it for the nearest asteroid. I hope we make it!"

Elkins pressed a stud, and from somewhere back in the rear of the ship, great metal doors clanged shut. "The nearest asteroid is our advanced base, Hastings. But will we make it? My God, will we make it?"

"Survival value doesn't look so hot now, huh, Doc? I don't know, how long will it take?"

"Umm-mm. Another hour at top speed. I don't know if we can stand the acceleration."

I told him we'd have to, but when he made no move to throw the rocket levers all the way home, I thrust him away from the control board and sat down there myself.

He'd forgotten all about the blaster in his hand. "I don't want to die," he said. "Not burning up like this in space. I have so much to do."

Full-rockets jarred me, squeezed me back in my chair. I heard Ellen whimper, saw Suuki's acceleration-distorted face. Elkins had fainted at the first new thrust.

The pressure was bad enough, but with it came heat, burning, blinding heat. I stuck grimly with the controls, but I began to feel we'd never make it. Then I heard Ellen trying to say something.

"Sil-ly. Don't shut... off section... four! Open it to—space... instead. No oxygen... to burn—with!"

Of course! Neither Elkins nor I had thought of that, but it was the obvious thing to do. Open a port-hole in section four, let all the air *woosh* out, and you'd have no more fire.

I pushed the rocket-lever back to the right, felt acceleration ease off gradually. Then I stood up, crossed to the repair cabinet, took out a spacesuit. Made to withstand all extremes of temperature, it could take me safely through the roaring flames of section four.

The rest was easy. Wearing the spacesuit, I ran back through the companionway, worked the manual levers on the compartment doors, entered the cauldron of fire which was section four. Once and once only I struck out at one of the ports with a gauntleted fist, watched the quartzite shatter and fly out into the vacuum of space. Air rushed out after it, sucked from an area of pressure to one which lacked it altogether. When I looked again into the storeroom, the fire had vanished. Utterly, as if it had never been. Smoke had rushed with the air through the port, flames had subsided instantly with no oxygen left to support combustion.

Charred, blackened horrors where the Karnjud brothers had lain....

I got out of my spacesuit in the companionway, marched up to the control room with it slung over my arm. Elkins was waiting for me, and this time he did not forget his blaster. He held it firmly and it pointed at my chest and he

said: "Come in and sit down. I can be wrong about survival value, Hastings. Don't try me."

Maybe he'd counted on the brothers Karnjud for some support when he met the unknown leader. I could sense something there, something which might help us later. Without knowing him, Dr. Elkins hated this man who presided over intrigue on three worlds, who held the whip-hand in a game which Elkins wanted completely for his own.

Wearily, I sat near Ellen, smiled into her eyes. She looked tired, but she mislaid back.

Suuki was sound asleep.

I asked Elkins' permission to release Ellen from her bonds. He granted it readily enough, but refused to offer the same freedom to the sleeping Suuki.

Ellen whispered, "It all happened so fast before, you didn't have time to finish what you were saying, did you?"

"No," I told her. "You're wrong. I said all I wanted to say. No strings attached, kid. I love you."

"Then you must remember! Surely you must remember something."

"I only wish I did. But no, it isn't like that at all. I fell in love with you, and it's still as if the old John Hastings never existed. Hell, I don't know. Maybe a part of my mind which can't understand remembered. But only you, Ellen, and how I feel about you. Everything else is a complete blank."

She pouted. "What I don't understand is this: your body can regenerate itself, right?"

And, after I'd nodded: "Well, how about your mind, your memory? Why can't that do the same thing?"

"Don't look at me. I haven't got the slightest idea how this thing works. So—since I don't remember—I guess it doesn't include that."

We rambled on and on, about everything, about nothing. We lost all track of time. It came pretty much as a surprise when I heard Elkins talking excitedly into the radio.

"Yes, that's what I said. We're with the League. I have Togoshira Suuki on board, a prisoner. Right. I suppose that does take the sting out of the Upland Brotherhood. And I have another surprise for you. John Hastings is on this ship, also a prisoner. I am Dr. Ronald Elkins—ah, you know of me! Unfortunately, I can't say the same concerning you. What? Yes, I suppose I will see you in a few minutes. Will I know you? Umm, you don't think so, eh? Well, I can't help being curious."

Through the observation dome, I could see a great slab of rock tumbling along through the void. That's one thing you can't get used to about the asteroids. All of them aren't round. Oh, there are mathematical laws which insist that the larger ones, like Ceres and Vesta, assume spherical form, but some of the smaller baby planets can come in the damndest shapes. Twisting end over and several miles in space, headquarters for the Martian League looked a lot like a pock-marked coffin.

"I suppose you don't know your astronomy," Elkins commented smugly. "That planetoid is Eros, twenty miles or so in diameter. And look, look there! See that shining thing? The league built a pressure dome there! It will be just like home under it, unless the leader happens to be a Martian. Then it will be just like Mars."

"Did he sound like a Martian?" I asked.

"No. No, he didn't. Earthman, I'd say. But I've never heard his voice before, that's a certainty. I wonder who he is."

Well, I was wondering the same thing, too. And I had an odd hunch that I'd know the man. Nothing I could put my finger on, but it kept insisting, that hunch—and it said, plainly enough, *you'll be in for a surprise.*

We landed some three or four hundred yards from the huge quartzite dome, and Eros was a weird place. Pock-marked and scarred like the surface of the moon, covered with a powdery, virgin-white pumice, it stretched out unevenly in all directions. Off to the left, the horizon jutted up in a wild profusion of rocky crags not more than a hundred yards away. Twenty miles long, Eros was no more than two or three miles wide, and we stood near one edge of its rectangular surface. Straight ahead, however, we could see for miles, except where the quartzite rose out of the pumice and obstructed our view.

Elkins watching us carefully, we climbed into our spacesuits, set our gravity equalizers, stepped out on the surface of Eros. In a matter of minutes we reached the dome, shuffled forward into an airlock, waited till a red light blinked on and off telling us that pressure and atmosphere had been built up within the lock. We took off our spacesuits, hung them along with many others on the pegs which lined one wall. Then we walked through the inner door and inside the dome.

Very pleasant. Earth temperature, perhaps sixty-five degrees. And a delicious fragrance of growing green things

which was like heaven after the parched air of Mars and the canned air of a spaceship.

Half a dozen Marties met us, uncomfortable in what was to them a thick, soupy atmosphere. Apparently Elkins knew the Martie in charge, for some civil words passed between them. They ushered us forward, past a row of hastily constructed barracks, down a wide, tree-shaded lane. Evidently this Earthman leader of the League liked his terrestrial comforts!

The big house at the end of the street did not show signs of hasty construction. It had been done carefully, painstakingly, a big sprawling structure of some nameless white stone. At the entrance, a Martian houseboy met us, told us to wait. He returned in a moment, said: "My masser see you now. Please to wipe feet if dirty."

How prissy could you get on a fly-speck of a frontier world!

The leader of the Martian League sat at his desk in a large study. His back was turned to us, a huge back, very wide and very fleshy. Sweat stained the back of his gray shirt a darker color, despite the pleasant temperature. I could just see the side of his jaw, and it worked up and down, up and down. He chewed noisily, his fat arm rising and falling into a bowl of fruit. I couldn't be sure, because we only saw his back from where we stood—but I'd have bet he weighed close to five hundred pounds.

He turned slowly, indolently—and faced us. I let out an audible gasp, and I suddenly felt weak. Dr. Elkins' place in the Martian League order of things had come as a distinct shock. This was worse.

Sweat streaming down his face as he swiveled around in his chair, fruit juices staining the corners of his blubbery lips, the leader of the Martian League chuckled softly. He was Lope Perez, the Fat Man of Venezuela!

6

"SURPRISED, Bok-kura? Or should I say John Hastings?" The same syrupy voice which I remembered so well. How long ago had it been? "No, I guess it will remain Bok-kura, eh, Boky? Well, say something! Don't just stand there like an idiot. Ahh, these synthetic nectarines are good!"

I mumbled a word or two about not understanding, and Perez snorted, "Bah! I can believe that. Give a man a sound

body and he'll forget all about his mind, permit it to atrophy. But make him too big or too small or malformed in some other way, and he'll have to use his brain. You're a fool, Boky!"

Dr. Elkins shook his head. "I don't agree," he said. "The mind and the body work together as one. The best combination offers the best possible survival value."

Perez snorted once more. "And just who the hell are you, my little popinjay?"

"Elkins. I radioed—"

"Ah, yes. Elkins. Will you be good enough to shut your mouth and let me talk?"

This wasn't the Perez I had known, not the weak, sniveling mountain of a man. Oh, the flesh was there, and the propensity for sweating, and the appetite. But Lope Perez had played a different role entirely in Dufree's sideshow, and I told him that.

He said, "Don't you think I'm aware of it? Don't you think I hated every moment of it? Parading around for the gawking hicks who came to watch, taking orders from everyone in the company, living in filth? Bah! Many times I thought I should have to quit, but I always saw you there, Boky, and so I remained.

"Perhaps you wonder why I helped you that last day, perhaps you wonder about that and a lot more. It was a long haul and a thankless one, but that day I knew you were on your way. You had to go free, don't you understand? If the police took you, if they allowed Dufree's trumped-up charge to stick, you might still be in prison. But you escaped, and things began falling neatly into place after that.

"I found you at the spaceport long ago. I found you, not Dufree. You hadn't forgotten everything yet, but your memory was fading fast. You told me many things. And then you lost consciousness. When you came to, you remembered nothing. But you'd said enough to whet my appetite, Boky. I had to find out the rest. I knew of John Hastings, almost everyone did. If you lived too public a life after that I knew the government would find you, and that would be the end for Perez.

"On the other hand, there would be nothing to trigger your memory if you lived in seclusion. Dufree's sideshow was the middle of the road. Someone might recognize you, yes—but I could act before official circles. And that is precisely what happened. You became the strong man, I the fat clown. No, I don't begrudge the fat part of it, Boky. If a man loves

food inordinately he will grow obese. It is the price he has to pay"—munching on another juicy piece of fruit—"and I say it is worth it. But I played the buffon. I, Perez, played the buffon, and that I did not like!"

"Want to keep talking?" I said. "I hope so, because I'm still all mixed up."

"Why not? If I expect you to help me I suppose you must learn at least part of the truth. You landed on Earth with another man, with a freight captain who'd found you out here in the asteroids. Evidently he shared in your secrets, for he too had the powers of regeneration. He tried to kill you that last day at Dufree's. Ah, you remember? The way I connect things, it happened like this: somehow, you lost your ship out here. You were stranded on an asteroid, and by a thousand-to-one chance that man found you, shared in your secret, took you back to Earth. Apparently he wanted to exploit what you'd found, you did not. A fight ensued, and somehow he won. Perhaps by trickery. At any rate, you received a nasty bang on the head, and amnesia resulted.

"The other man escaped. When he found you by chance that day at Dufree's, he did not know you had lost your memory. He was determined to kill you, to keep the secret for himself. How could he expect to kill you knowing that you shared with him the powers of regeneration? I don't know. Maybe he acted foolishly in spite of it. Although I rather suspect the power has its Achilles' Heel. Perhaps the needle gun he tried to use, perhaps something else. All I know for sure is this: that man is now dead, and he had this power of yours."

"Dead?"

"Yes. I went looking for him, figuring he could answer everything you could. I found him, and he ran. We had him trapped in a farmhouse, we fired the house to force his surrender. He got caught, couldn't extricate himself. When the fire burned itself out, he was dead—burned to a crisp—and there was nothing left to regenerate. So you see, Bokura, you are not invulnerable. I would suggest you remember that."

Suuki joined the conversation for the first time. "Then there yet remains one thing—"

"Umm-mm, you'd be this Brotherhood, Upland-hood, whatever it is—you'd be their leader, Togoshira Suuki. You realize, of course, Mr. Suuki, that the span of your life is limited precisely by what aid you can offer me. As the expression has it, we play on opposed teams."

Suuki chose to ignore the threat. "As I have said, one thing remains. We have not yet located the asteroid on which all this happened."

"No?" Perez smiled. "Perhaps your Brotherhood hasn't. We of the League have. Our archaeologists have been able to make nothing out of it, I am ashamed to admit. All they know is that they have found the seat of a very ancient civilization. Better minds than theirs are needed."

"Suuki," I said. "You'll need Suuki."

"Wrong. We'll need *you*. Your friend will have to prove his worth in some other way if he desires life instead of death."

"No, you're wrong. I forget all my technical training. I didn't even know I was an archaeologist until someone told me. You'll need Suuki, like I said."

"Don't dictate to me! I'll—well, we'll see. Further, what do you suppose I'm going to do with the girl?"

I took an angry stride toward the Fat Man, but Elkins waved me away with his blaster. Suuki said. "You will do absolutely nothing with Miss Crewson. Otherwise, we won't lift a finger to help you. You find your hands tied, do you not?"

"Forget it, Suuki," I said. "All we can do is wait for something to happen."

Suuki nodded slowly. "I suppose you are right, my friend. He can leave all of us on an airless little coffin of a world after we do his work for him."

I didn't say anything. Suuki was right, of course. But I knew that I'd kill Perez if he as much as touched Ellen.

"... so," Perez was saying, "that leaves absolutely nothing. After this ability to regenerate is in my hands, nothing will stop me! Do you realize what it will mean? The old will come to me, the crippled, the feeble. Everyone. They'll pay anything, they'll sign their lives away for a touch of it."

Dr. Elkins shouted, "No! No, that's all wrong! That's not the way I planned it."

"You? And who do you think you are? Do you think you count?"

"I have plans," Elkins persisted. "Selfish plans, yes—but I insist that we go about this more slowly, experimenting, determining just what this regeneration can do and what it cannot. Perhaps after ten years—"

"Ten years! You're insane. I'll control the Three Worlds inside of a year!"

"In that case, you'll do it without me."

There Elkins made his mistake. Somehow, he felt he was important, felt in some obscure way that the whole business could not proceed without him.

Perez began to laugh, the fat under his chin wagging from side to side, jiggling up and down. "You are quite sure, Dr. Elkins?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"You won't change your mind?"

Elkins had not seen it, but Perez' fat hand had crept to a button on his desk. Three Marties came into the room, soundlessly. They stood behind the bald doctor and they waited.

Perez said, "You will take this man outside the dome and kill him." He munched on another nectarine, smiling when Elkins began to lift his blaster. He never got it all the way up. Strong hands pinned his arms from behind, lifted him off the floor, bore him away. He didn't begin to scream until they had shut the door quietly behind them.

"Now then," Perez told us, "we will leave for your asteroid tomorrow, Boky. You, me, Suuki here, the girl. I suggest you all get a good night's sleep."

"What happens afterwards?"

"Boky! Boky, don't you trust me?"

"You know God-damned well I don't."

"It doesn't matter. What happens afterwards is my concern, entirely my concern. For now, will you come here, Boky?"

I walked to his desk, stood there. He reached into a drawer, came up with a knife which he probably used to pit his fruit. "I've always wanted to see how it works, Boky. Do you mind? There's a good fellow, put your arm on the desk, please."

Ellen began to sob, but I heard Suuki quieting her. I extended my arm, watched while Perez brought his knife close, placed its point just above the large veins on my wrist. With a quick motion, he slashed the knife across my forearm. He'd severed the veins, and blood began to pour out at once. Soon it slowed to a trickle, stopped altogether. Grunting his satisfaction, Perez wiped it away with a cloth, looked at my arm. A thin white scar—nothing more.

"Wonderful, Boky! Utterly wonderful. Do you realize that with your secret I shall be able to—well, no matter. I am tried and I wish to nap before eating. My men will show you out."

"He's a megalomaniac," Suuki whispered as we left the

room. "Did you see that? He knows he needs you, John, but his mind is so tightly wrapped around this regeneration process that he had to see it for himself. Had he underestimated its powers, you might have bled to death."

"I knew nothing would happen."

"Yes, I know! But that fat man—what's his name, Perez? Thank you. Perez did not know. He took a chance, a foolish one. We should keep that in mind. I think that if the opportunity presents itself, we may put that to use."

I nodded, but I wasn't listening. Tomorrow. Tomorrow we'd visit the source of the mystery. I'd found something there once, and I'd almost perished. Perez had been helpful, he'd explained a lot. But I wasn't entirely satisfied, and although I was eager, I also was afraid of what the morrow might bring.

Ellen must have sensed it. She took my hand and squeezed it, and sometimes the way she looked at me she could say "I love you" without uttering a sound.

Behind us, Eros tumbled along through the void, a great stone coffin spinning end over end. Perez sat at the controls, three of his Martians lolled about the control room. I paced back and forth and Suuki paced with me. He said, "I'd have liked to approach this asteroid differently, John. I'd have liked to approach it with the trained archaeologists of the Brotherhood. Now—now we're in the hands of some common thugs, and a madman who wants to use regeneration for his own ends."

I smiled. "Maybe it won't be as bad as all that, Suuki. Perez doesn't know archaeology; sure as hell none of his Marties do. So he needs us. When we get there, well—we'll see."

Perez called triumphantly from his seat: "We're coming! There it is, just ahead. Look if you'd care to, and remember it was, I, Perez, who discovered—"

"Rediscovered, you mean," Suuki told him. "John Hastings found the place originally, provided you have the right asteroid."

"Oh, it's the right one, don't you worry about that. See for yourself."

Interested, Suuki crossed to the port, and I saw Ellen get up and follow him. For a while I hung back. I felt all choked up inside, and when Ellen saw I wasn't going to watch with them, she came back for me.

"Hey, don't tell me the man responsible for all this doesn't want to be on hand when—"

"I don't know. Maybe it's not the right place. Maybe it is. Maybe I'm scared..." You couldn't blame me. Without knowing how or why, I'd been made something more than a man at this asteroid which now swam up rapidly in the port. And someone—or something—had left a message in my pocket. *Have caution, John Hastings, they may try to kill you.* Sure, men like Perez would cheerfully kill for the secret of regeneration, but that wasn't it. Who had left the message? And why?

Well, I'd come a long way to find out, and when Ellen walked back to the port I followed on her heels.

It hovered off in space, that asteroid, black as jet. It should have been entirely invisible, for it shed no light at all. But behind it the stars of deep space formed a speckled backdrop and it stood starkly silhouetted against them, darker than the night side of Pluto. At first I couldn't guess its size, but Perez had started deceleration—and that meant we were close. It also meant the asteroid had a maximum diameter of perhaps two or three miles. Utterly black and utterly round.

Artificial?

Perez was fat and he didn't look like much of an astroga-tor, but he knew how to bring that ship down. We landed with scarcely a bump. The three Marties stood off at one side of the control room, muttering among themselves.

Perez looked at them, snorted. "All right! Don't stand there all day. Get a move on."

"Masser," said one, "old story long before Earthman come talk of small black planet. Much mystery. Much death. No good."

"We're going outside. You're coming with us."

"Masser, Mars men have much fear. We stay." Then hopefully, "We stay?"

"The devil you'll stay! You're coming outside—now."

The Martians jabbered in a desert dialect, gesturing outside every now and then and shaking their heads nervously. But they shuffled forward in single file and headed for the air-lock.

Suuki, who'd sought the black asteroid with an eagerness to match Perez', needed no prompting. He said, "Where do you keep the spacesuits?"

"We don't have any," Perez chuckled.

"Don't have any? How are we going outside?"

"Why don't you just leave that to me? I told you I was here before. That black globe outside has gravity close to

Earth-norm, and it has a good, breathable atmosphere."

Suuki scowled. "You wouldn't want to march us out there to suffocate us, would you?"

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm going with you. I told you the place has air."

"That's impossible."

"Yes? So are the Marties, and you Venusians for that matter."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, consider. On Earth, the dominant life form is human. What would you say were the odds against that happening on Mars as well, and on Venus?"

Suuki scratched his head. "I never thought of it that way. Now that you mention it, it does sound almost an impossibility."

"All I'm trying to say," Perez continued, "is that the impossible can happen. And perhaps if we knew all the facts, it wouldn't be impossible at all. There are slight physical differences, but men of the three worlds are essentially the same. Could it be that long ago the seeds were planted on each world which would, in the natural course of events, evolve into something human? Could it also be that whoever—or whatever—planted those seeds also put this Asteroid here? Outside you'll see pictures of Earthmen, of Marties, of Venusians. But the asteroid is older than any of our races. Then I say that means they knew humanity was coming. If you set a tree shrew down on Earth sixty million years ago, you'd know that in the natural course of events its progeny would become human. Over a long path and with a lot of false starts, but once the pattern was set mankind became inevitable. The same holds for Mars and Venus."

"Don't ask me how, don't ask me why. But whoever did that planting also planted this asteroid."

"It does look artificial," Ellen agreed.

"Of course it is! I figure they made it just before their planet exploded. You know these asteroids all once were part of a planet out here, perhaps one the size of Mercury or Pluto. But this thing is different. They left it here and I say that they knew it would one day be found. It has—and it's mine."

You couldn't argue with Perez' logic, nor with the blaster he held in his hand.

Until we actually stepped outside, I think Suuki still doubted. But the air was warm and good, although it had a musty smell. And Suuki—who'd doubted until he saw for

himself—came up with the answer. Suuki was like that. "Naturally," he mused. "How could we have missed it? If the atoms of the upper atmosphere were somehow stripped of both protons and electrons, what you'd have left would be the inter-atomic forces which bind them together, or—"

"A perfect force-field for holding in the atmosphere!" Ellen finished for him.

It didn't mean much to the Martians. They clung close to the light fanning out from the nose of the ship, but this soon became a feeble glow lost behind us and the Martians cowered back toward it.

Perez bellowed: "Come on up here! Come on now! Snap to it."

They came, mumbling apologies. I looked at Suuki, Suuki looked at me. "I don't get it," I said. "They're scared stiff, but they obey Perez like he's a god."

Ellen laughed. "You don't know Martian custom. Look at it this way: the planet is one big rat race. There isn't enough water, there's even less food. Most Marties are scrawny bags of skin and bones. If one tribal chieftain becomes really powerful, he can eat well. He takes advantage of it. He gets fat, and because that clearly speaks of power, he becomes more powerful."

Suuki held his sides, roared with laughter. "That's rich!" he cried. "That's rich! I see what you mean. Perez is the fattest man the Marties ever saw. Obviously then, to them he's a mighty ruler, and thus they obey him."

"Shut up," Perez growled back over his shoulder. "I heard that. If you think it's so funny, maybe I'll have the Marties flay you alive. They'll do that too if I ask them, you know."

"Nice guy," Ellen said.

I shook my head. "Cut it out. Perez isn't joking."

That brought us back to the situation in a hurry. Perez could kill us—and would if we caused him any trouble. On the other hand, he needed us. He knew that and when the time came it might stay his hand, but megalomania carries with it feelings both of power and persecution, and Perez could be a mighty deadly captor.

Nothing gave underfoot as we walked. Nothing crunched. Instead, our boots click-clacked over a polished black surface, hard as marble. Perez snapped on a hand search beam and swaggered forward confidently. We came behind him, Suuki, Ellen and I—and in our rear were the Martians.

"We might jump him," Suuki hissed, bringing his head close to mine.

"We might, and it might not work. But that isn't the point. Perez looks like he knows where he's going. Okay, we'll follow."

Ahead of us, Perez had stopped. He probed about with the light for a time, grunted something unintelligible under his breath. He fastened the light to his belt, got down on hands and knees. In the glare of the search beam, an uneven splotch of paint gleamed dully.

Perez turned briefly and looked in my direction. "You don't remember, do you?"

"N-no."

"You made this, Boky, when you were here a couple of years ago. It marks a—ahh!"

Perez broke off in mid-sentence. His fat, clumsy fingers began to do a jig on the smooth black surface. Something clicked, faintly audible in the complete silence. Perez stood up and dusted off his hands.

The three Marties looked like they half-expected a fire-breathing dragon to push its way up from the rock. Ellen glanced at me for some signs of returning memory, but I shrugged and she turned her attention back to the surface of the asteroid. Suuki whistled.

A ten-foot section of polished black stone slid away!

7

A soft amber radiance pulsed up through the aperture, apparently set off by whatever opened the trap-door. A flight of stairs led down.

Perez called to the Martians. "All right. You first."

"No, masser. We stay."

Perez snorted angrily, then shrugged. This time, even his impressive bulk couldn't sway the Marties. I think he could have threatened them with death and their refusal to venture below would have remained unshaken.

He said: "You, first, Boky. Then the girl, then Suuki. I'll follow."

Slowly, I went down the stairs. Seven, eight, nine—I counted them. Nine steps. I heard Ellen start down behind me, but for a moment I forgot all about her, forgot Suuki and Perez and everything else.

Across a short hallway a mural had been painted on the

wall. Half a dozen people, naked. An Earthman and his mate. Two Marties, male and female. Two Venusians. Completely realistic, all of them. They stood near what was evidently a spaceship of some alien design.

Suuki had reached bottom. "This must have been done recently," he said. "How else can you explain—"

"Don't be ridiculous!" This was Perez. "Don't you understand? See? See, they are pictured without clothing. Sixty million years ago the seed was planted, it was known humanity would develop on each of the three planets. It certainly could not be known what sort of clothing they would affect."

Ellen nodded. "This is ancient, Suuki—impossibly ancient. Johnny told me that in one of his messages, before he vanished."

Impatiently, Perez motioned us ahead of him down the hallway. We passed the mural, walked further, came to a wide archway. Beyond it was a great vault of a room. Tier upon tier of machinery lined the walls, climbed to the high ceiling.

Everything waiting, in repose—for sixty million years?

The strange machinery did not clutter up the place. It stood back against the four walls, polished, shining. In the center of the room rested a cup of metal, as wide across as the height of a tall man, and to this Perez ran eagerly.

"Do you remember, Boky? Think man, you must remember something!"

I did. In a haze, like a dimly recalled dream, I remembered. "Yes," I mumbled, almost a part of that forgotten dream. "I stood here and I looked. I studied it, thought I understood. I remained down here—a long time. Somehow, I—I think my ship got loose from its moorings, floated off into space. Someone found me—"

"That's not what I mean!" Perez cried. "Do you remember anything about this place?"

"That—that's part of it, too. I remember the cup, the thing there in the center of the room. I sat in it. Yes, I sat there. I think you'll find a lever on the left side. I pulled it. I—that's it! I sat in the cup and I pulled the lever and then things started to happen..."

"It gave you this power of regeneration," Perez shouted triumphantly. He waddled toward the cup, peered at it for a moment, circled it, came back.

"I'm going to try it," he said at last.

I had a headache. Something was nagging at my brain, saying *remember, remember!* But it was there and then it was not, like the tides ebbing and flowing. "Don't," I said.

"Eh? Why not? I know—you're afraid someone else will get the power too!"

"N-no. I don't think so. I just know that you shouldn't, not before we understand this machine as I understood it once."

"Bah! You're lying." Perez lumbered back to the cup of metal, placed both hands on its rim, clambered up. He was panting when he finished, but he squatted within the cup.

"You're right, Boky. A lever on the left side. How I've waited for this."

He made a motion with his left hand, kept the blaster pointed at us with his right.

A richer amber glow filled the inside of the cup as the banks of machinery along the four walls whined and grumbled into action. Wheels grated against wheels. Sparks flashed. Perez' laughter boomed through the vault as the amber glow bathed him, caressed him.

Abruptly, it was over. The wheels stopped their turning, the glow faded. Perez came down from the cup and stalked ponderously across the room. "I feel wonderful," he said, still laughing half-hysterically. "I never felt better in my life. You don't believe me, eh? Then watch!"

With trembling fingers, Perez took a knife from his pocket, opened it, ran the blade across his wrist.

"He's insane!" Suuki cried.

"No." I shook my head. "Look now."

The blood began to flow, slowing to a trickle almost at once. When it stopped altogether, Perez wiped it off his fat arm with a handkerchief. Only the vaguest shadow of a scar remained. He held his arm up high so we could see it, waving his hand overhead almost like a victorious fighter. "See?" he demanded. "See—I'm a superman. You're a superman too, Boky—only you don't realize. There is so little that can destroy you, so little to keep you from owning the Three Worlds with the power that resides within this room."

"Yes?" demanded Suuki. "Then tell me how."

"Fool! I'll sell to the highest bidder. 'You too can become invulnerable,' I'll tell them. Provided they can pay. Oh, I'll make them pay. They'll beg the money, they'll steal it, they'll kill for it. But they'll pay."

It wasn't a pretty picture. Chaos would sweep the solar system, and I think Perez knew it. Here was a veritable immortality—if even only for a lifetime. Armies would fight for it. Brother would kill brother. And if Perez could somehow maintain control, he'd get his wish. He'd be lord and master of the entire Solar System.

It was then that I knew he had to be destroyed. The thought did not come melodramatically. I felt nothing of the hero in me, nor of the noble urge to kill that others might live. The thought was just there, completely objective, and Perez had to die. Suuki nodded his head slowly, as if in some mysterious way the thought had passed between us.

But Perez had other ideas. "You will observe," he said slowly, "that I no longer have need for you. I thought you might in some way help me, but I was mistaken. It remains only to destroy you." He still held the blaster in his hands, toying with it, but he spoke as if to himself. "The girl I can kill and the breed, but what can I do with you, Boky? Eh, that is a good question! I can't be sure, but I think that if I sear you completely from head to foot . . . Yes!"

He was the megalomaniac completely now, talking to himself, strutting about on his thick legs. "I believe I will let you decide. Which one is to die first?"

Ellen took my hand in hers, squeezed it. "Johnny, he isn't fooling. Johnny! I'm afraid—"

Suuki said, "I am not one to wait around. I grow bored. If you like, you may kill me first." He walked off half a dozen paces, folded his arms across his chest, waited.

Perez chuckled, pivoted to face him, the blaster raised. For a moment, that took his eyes off me.

The slightest motion would attract his attention—and also death. He stood three yards away, sighting at Suuki's stomach, saying something about making it painless. I could do only one thing.

I left the floor completely and dove at him.

He whirled at the last instant, firing his blaster. Its beam seared air inches from my head, brought brief, burning pain with it. Then my shoulder jarred against his huge belly and we both tumbled to the floor.

I'm strong—but I got the shock of my life. You hear so much about people fighting like madmen, and you don't believe half of it. A cliché, that's all, with no more truth than—

But Perez *did* fight like a madman.

His fists were everywhere, pounding, pummelling, gouging. He used his feet, kicking with them and bringing his knee up at my groin. He butted with his head, jarring my teeth. He bit and clawed and scratched.

Dimly, I heard Ellen screaming. The blaster had clattered off somewhere across the floor, but she couldn't find it. And reaction had set in for Suuki. He had been near death and he knew it, and for the moment he couldn't stir a muscle.

My knuckles were bruised and bleeding. I struck his face, hard stinging blows, any one of which should have been enough to end it. I sat on his chest and beat at his head with both hands, but he turned and threw me off, jumped on me, held me down with his tremendous bulk. His hands sought my neck, found it, closed. His face swam in the amber light, back and forth, back and forth.

I reached out wildly, got the fleshy part of his jowls between my fingers. I tugged until I thought his face would come off in one piece. But I grew weaker every moment, a hollow, burning sensation flooding up from my starved lungs.

Perez laughed, howled, then laughed again. He screamed horribly and rolled over and away. I had time only for one deep breath, felt the wonderful cool air soothe my aching chest. Then I was on him again, hammering blows at his face and stomach while he kicked and bit and clawed and writhed. I hit him until my hands lost all sensation, I hit him with the two numb, swollen things attached to my wrists. He sighed, shut his eyes, lay back unconscious.

Long ago I'd bathed in the metal cup. Perez had followed me into it this day. In five minutes we both felt fine, and, and we looked it, too. Except for the blood.

We sat in the control room of Perez' ship. It hadn't been hard to round up the Marties with Perez' blaster. We'd trussed them up neatly and tucked them into a storeroom.

Suuki said, "I still think we ought to kill him. He can't be permitted to live, not with the power he's got, and the ideas."

I nodded, but Ellen shook her head for the hundredth time. "No. You can't do it, that's all. This is the twenty-first century; men don't go around killing one another. There are laws for that."

"He can't live," Suuki persisted. "Please."

Suuki had been too stunned to act back there in the vault. My hands had remained swollen for a few minutes. Thus, it had been Ellen who took the blaster from the floor and

rounded up the Marties. Now she held it and she said: "Everything both of you say is true. Except for one thing: he goes back and he gets a trial. I think it can be proved that he killed Dr. Elkins, anyway."

Suuki shrugged, relented. "Well, I suppose we can't argue with you. We might as well—"

Perez chuckled. "You won't be able to prove a thing about Elkins. I...uh...had the Marties who disposed of him destroyed immediately after that. And since Marties are always killing one another with their vendettas—well, you figure it out."

Sanity had returned to Perez. He spoke rationally, objectively, without passion. Unfortunately, he knew what he was talking about.

Ellen told him to sit still and behave himself, prodding the flesh of his arm with her blaster. I guess Perez wanted to keep in her good graces. He shut up.

"Now, Johnny," Ellen turned to face me, "do you think you can piece everything together? What was that place?"

"An asteroid," I said. "But an artificial one. Near as I can figure it, this is what happened. Millions of years ago, this Solar System of ours was visited—from outside. They came, whoever they were, and they lived on the fifth planet, which now is a mess of cosmic debris. Okay so far?"

"Okay."

"They got busy fast. They planted on Earth, Mars, and Venus certain strains of animal life which insured, in each case, the ultimate arrival of humanity by old Darwin's process of natural selection. Their evolutionary science was a great one, they could even tell what the future humans would be like—and they drew pictures to prove it. Maybe their job was to travel around the galaxy planting the human seed.

"Anyway, some time after that, something happened. War or some form of cosmic disaster. Their planet was destroyed, exploding completely, becoming the zone of asteroids that we know today. They left a record, that artificial globe. Don't you think it's significant that their picture showed the humans entering a spaceship? Somewhere in there is the secret not of interplanetary flight—but of interstellar flight. When we were ready, they figured, we could come out to the stars and visit them.

"Okay so far? Good. One of the secrets they left in that globe had to do with regeneration, with tissue that grew young again. Maybe it's tied in someplace with star travel, I

don't know. But the last time I made a mistake. I should have informed the government right away, and I didn't. This time we'll let the brains of the solar system figure it out.

"Finally, there was a card put in my pocket last time. That puzzled me at first, but I think I can figure it out. One of those machines in there could read my mind, decipher the language it used, give me a written message in it. Sure, people would try to kill me. I'd have to be careful because I'd uncovered a mighty potent secret. The builders of that asteroid had wisdom beyond ours, and they knew it. They . . ."

I must have liked the sound of my own voice. I kept on talking and talking. But suddenly Ellen screamed.

She was staring at Perez, and I looked too. I don't know how old Perez was—thirty-five, maybe forty. Sitting on the floor of the control room, he looked sixteen!

Still fat, but baby-faced. Now he said, "I don't understand. What's happening? God, what's happening to me?"

His voice was in the changing stage, squeaking on every third or fourth word.

Shuttered, the port windows make good mirrors. Perez staggered to one and we didn't stop him. He looked—saw the reflection of a fat boy of sixteen.

No—fourteen. Twelve.

As we watched, he grew smaller.

Smaller.

A child of seven, still extremely fat!

"Please!" he moaned in a high childish treble. "What's happening?"

He became too small for his clothing, stepped out of it. He was crying, big tears rolling down his pink cheeks.

"By the gods of Karn," muttered Suuki. "What on—"

"I remember!" I cried. "I remember!" No one paid me any heed. They were busy watching the small boy Perez grow smaller. And younger. "See?" I said. "I remember. I studied the machine that first time. A small dose meant regeneration. A larger dose meant *rejuvenation*. Same process, tissues rebuilding themselves instantly. Perez took too much. It will go on and on. . . ."

A tiny infant, naked and very pink of skin, lay crying on the floor. Its face looked intelligent, but it was a very fat infant. It looked like it wanted to say something, but all it could do was scream.

The ugly pink face grew smaller, the eyes clamped shut. The infant rolled over on its side, legs and arms curling up,

assuming the fetal position. Then the body grew smaller, but the head didn't. Something long and thin protruded from the abdomen, like a slender pink strip of rope.

Sobbing, Ellen threw herself into my arms, buried her face against my chest. "Oh Johnny, Johnny! How awful!"

I stroked her hair, took her to a chair and sat her down gently. When I returned, Suuki's face was very white. The infant had vanished.

"It got smaller," Suuki mumbled to himself. "And smaller. It didn't look human any longer. It shrunk to a tiny glob finally, amorphous, then small and round I think. It got smaller. It disappeared, I think—I think I shall be sick, John. I hope you do not mind. Perez was more than rejuvenated. Perez kept right on going. He became an infant. A fetus. Less than a fetus. He became—nothing. . . ."

We landed at New York Space Port, and I've never seen anything that looked quite as wonderful as the rolling hills of Westchester.

"The Government will send men out there," I told Ellen as I helped her down. "They can find a lot that's good or a lot that's evil on that asteroid. It depends upon their own point of view. But one thing I know."

"What's that?"

"Somehow, someway—there's the power to reach the stars on that little black globe. A whole new universe waits for man out there. And it won't be waiting long. Just a generation or so."

"You mean our children?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I hope you mean that literally. I mean, well—" She began to blush.

But Suuki was laughing. "By the gods of Karn, you'd better marry that girl! She won't give you a moment's rest until you do."

And so we've been married half a year already. Ellen's busy planning and knitting, but every day she stops to ask me if I know what Johnny, Jr. will be like. And we dream of what he'll possibly discover on the Black Planet.

SON OF THE BLACK CHALICE

1

High up on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains, so high that it is crisply cool even in summer, there is a city. It is a new city and a beautiful one, but people shun it—except every once in a while when the rabble come up from the valleys below to hurl their stones. Then the dwellers in the city retreat behind their bolted doors and wait with fear while the angry mobs start the long trek down and back to their valleys. The dwellers in the city have learned to live with fear, for they are Children of the Chalice.

There is on Venus also such a city, and one on Mars. There are hamlets for the Children of the Chalice on the Jovian Moons. But not all of the Children live in the recommended places....

"I see her, Mark. Oh, Mark, here comes Susan!"

The woman, whose name was Hannah Bentley, stood shivering near the window, squinting out into the gathering gloom. Night on Mars carries on its quick black wings a terrible cold, even in Syrtis Major City, the capital.

"Then come away from the window," Mark Bentley told his wife. "If you stay, Susan will know you were watching, and she'll know you were worried."

"Who's worried? Susan can take care of herself, Mark Bentley!"

"You're worried. Now come away from that window."

Hannah Bentley backed away from the thick glass, and then they could hear Susan inserting her key in the lock. A blast of frigid air swept in with Susan from the cold streets outside and the girl had to lean all her weight against the door to shut it.

"Hul-lo," she said, unzipping her furs.

"Her eye, Mark! Look at her eye! The poor thing—"

"I'm all right." Susan eluded her mother's embrace. "I just got into a fight, that's all."

"Your eye is blackened."

"Well, you should see them. Two of them, two boys. I won, Mama."

Mark Bentley nodded. "Of course you won. You're of the Chalice."

"But it isn't right, Mark. It isn't right that an eighteen-year-old girl should have to fight like a boy."

"She's of the Chalice." He always said it like that, Hannah Bentley knew, as if it were the answer to everything.

Susan blew on her hands to warm them. She had long and graceful hands, and they were like the rest of her. Tall and lithe, blossoming only recently into young womanhood. She was beautiful, and her mother had never been anything but plain. Her father was big and work-hardened, but homely. Perhaps the Chalice was responsible for that, too, for Susan Bentley's beauty.

"I don't care, Mark. Susan is a woman now and if that has to happen every time she goes off to visit a friend on the other side of town—"

"What can we do?"

"We can move out of Syrtis Major, that's what. To one of the Chalice Cities, where we belong."

"What? Segregated like that as if—as if we weren't human! Now you, Hannah, you're human. . . ."

"So are you, Mark! You and Susan. Probably, you're more than human. But people don't understand that."

"They hate us!" Susan cried. "They hate us because we're better than they are. We're stronger and we live longer and we don't get hurt much and, if we're second generation, we're beautiful. Well, I hate them too."

"You mustn't say that, child."

"I can say what I want, I'm not a child any more. I hate them!"

John Hastings knew that, twenty-five years before, his father had walked this same path. His father, the first John Hastings, had blasted down upon the Black Asteroid, had been amazed that the place had air and warmth and Earth-normal gravity. Nor had he known that the Chalice awaited him—awaited his coming for countless eons—deep within the bowels of the artificial world.

John Hastings, the son, knew what to expect. But even then, his journey had been a dangerous one. Half the Solar System's military might was clustered in space around the black globe but, miraculously, he'd slipped through the circle of steel and flame. His feet click-clacked briskly on the

smooth, hard surface, and he felt a wild triumph welling up within him.

The Black Asteroid! And the Chalice. . . .

He found the door, marked off in phosphorescent white; he fingered the stud of smooth rock and then he pressed it.

Silence for the space of two heartbeats. Then a vague grinding sound, as some hidden mechanism deep within the small world began to function. In a moment, the door slid back. John Hastings walked down the stairs slowly, almost reverently. This was the place. It was here that he had received his birthright, and although the people hated him and his kind, he knew he was more than human. In that knowledge was a certain comfort, for he realized that the first true man must have been shunned and hated like this by his gnarled, hairy fellows.

The utter silence of deep space entered the crypt with him. Nothing stirred. Nothing moved. But the wall glowed with an unknown source of light, and in the center of the room stood the Chalice.

It wasn't black, not really. Only the artificial world was black, and from that the Chalice had received its name. It did not matter. Not even the Chalice mattered. John Hastings sought what lay beyond the Chalice—if anything.

If anything—

There had to be something! He'd gambled his life on that, and ultimately he knew, the life of his kind might depend on what he found.

On the walls he could see the ancient murals which some said had been painted there before the coming of man. Yet the murals showed men and the men stood near a spaceship—and there were men of Venus and Mars as well as of the Earth. Then, long ago—before the fifth planet had burst asunder to form the asteroid belt—the murals had been painted, but by whom? By other men, or so the theories said, by other men who had come before us and planted the seed for us and then departed.

And surely they must have left something behind with which to reap the harvest!

John Hastings looked, and found—nothing. There was the Chalice and the bank upon bank of machinery which yielded power to it. There were the murals and there was the silence. But that was all. Nothing else. The murals were vivid. Over the ages their coloring somehow had not faded, and they were truly tri-dimensional, although when he ran his hand over them, he found the surface flat.

But nothing else. . . .

Wearily, he trudged back toward the stairway. His right foot was on the first step when something jarred the small world.

John Hastings stumbled, fell to hands and knees. When he got to his feet he knew that another spaceship had landed on the Black Asteroid, and he did not have to stretch his imagination to suspect that those within it were hostile.

He eased a blaster from its pouch, crept slowly up the stairs. There were nine of them, he knew. His father had said that nine steps led down to the Chalice. Footsteps struck sharply against the stone, the sound of many men running.

John Hastings peered out. Instantly, something streaked by his head and formed a trickle of melted rock behind him. He ducked quickly back into the crypt, heard a harsh voice:

"Come out of there! Come out of there or we'll come in after you!"

"What do you think you're doing, Susan?"

"You can see for yourself. I'm packing."

"Your father wants to stay here in Syrtis Major. He wants us to stay with him."

"We don't belong in Syrtis Major, Dad and me. You—"

"Oh, then you think I belong. I'm not one of you. Well, I'm not. But I love you, Susan, and I'm your mother."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. Dad can stay if he wants. You *should* stay, you wouldn't like it living among the Children. But I'm getting out."

"Susan."

"I'm a woman now. You said so yourself. I want to go where I can be happy. I can't be happy here."

Susan snapped her valise shut with finality. "They hate me," she said. "So I guess I've learned to hate them back. Tell Dad—I didn't want to say goodbye to him. You worry all the time on the outside, Mama. But he worries inside, and that's worse."

"I'll tell him."

"And I'll write to you, Mama—after I'm settled. I don't know where. Here on Mars maybe, or in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on Earth."

Hannah Bentley said nothing. She crossed the room and embraced her daughter. There was so much she wanted to say, so much that the long, aching years had piled up for her to say. But her tongue felt stiff and swollen and suddenly her mouth was very dry. She watched her daughter leave, then

ran to the window and stood there a long time until the furgarbed figure faded slowly from sight.

It was only then that Hannah Bentley began to cry.

John Hastings crouched at the bottom step. Once a head had appeared briefly above him, but he'd snapped off a quick beam with his blaster, and the head had ducked back out of sight. He couldn't remain in the crypt indefinitely, but he was in no hurry to have them sear him with their weapons. He knew he would take a lot of killing, for a Child of the Chalice did not die easily. But they could hurt him and that was the same thing. He'd be captured and Government would throw the book at him for invading the crypt.

He fired another beam from his blaster to let them know he was still there then he walked back into the crypt itself. Somewhere in there was a central lighting system for the artificial world, and if he could find that and damage it, he might have a chance to return to his ship in darkness. He knew it was hopeless, however. No one understood the machinery within the crypt, and he might as well be looking for a needle in a haystack on the dark side of Pluto.

After a time he gave it up. The banks of machinery were encased completely in smooth, gleaming metal. He could not make head or tail out of them, he was only wasting time. He shrugged, stalked back to the nine stairs.

"Hello out there!"

"We hear you."

"You the police?"

"Damned right. Come on out, wise guy."

"Listen, this crypt is important, isn't it?"

"What do you think?"

"I know it is. Government has decided not to use it any more, but they don't want it destroyed. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'm coming out. But I've set a baby atomic down here," John Hastings lied, "and if you lay a hand on me, I'm going to set it off by remote control. I'll blow this crypt to—"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I? Don't try me."

"We'll blast as soon as you poke your head out."

"All right. Go ahead, blast. But I'm one of the Children, and you know we don't die fast, if at all. I'll be able to set this baby atomic off first."

He didn't wait for an answer, climbing the steps slowly, one at a time. He reached the top step, and no one fired. He

could see them now in the dim light, a dozen men, all with their blasters trained on him.

The leader demanded: "How do we know you set that thing like you say?"

"You don't."

"Well, I think maybe we ought to take you—"

John Hastings shrugged, reached into a pocket of his jumper and kept his hand there. "All I have to do is press the button," he said.

He began walking.

They followed him, at a distance. He heard their feet clacking on the hard surface, almost felt their eyes boring into his back. And the blasters. If even one of them became trigger-happy, his ruse wouldn't be worth a damn. And once they started firing he wouldn't have a chance, for the barren sphere offered utterly no protection.

He walked. The asteroid was only half a mile in diameter, and he could see his ship on the ridiculously near horizon. He saw the other ship too, a much larger one, a big, bloated, snub-nosed police cruiser.

He walked.

He reached his ship, heard a voice yelling behind him: "Shoot! Go on, kill the dirty liar! I just went down there, and he didn't plant a thing. Kill him before he gets inside that ship—"

He was all thumbs working on the air-lock lever and the blasters were firing, ripping into the hull and turning it cherry-red where they struck. They'd have the range in a moment—

He stormed inside, slammed the lock shut behind him. He saw them running for their own ship as he blasted off, acceleration pinning him down in his chair. He laughed wildly. Their bodies could not take acceleration the way his could, so let them chase him! He'd blast clear of the ring of ships and show them a few fancy turns that would crush them into bloody, shapeless things.

Now, as the police ship came up after him, he executed one of those turns. The Government cruiser was faster than his over-age scout ship, but it could not match the turn. He watched it streak off at a tangent, and he knew it would be a long time before they could turn and find him again. The acceleration was painful, but harmless—at least to one of the Children.

He knew he could get back to Earth, to his father, to

Togoshira Suuki, the Japanese-Venusian half-breed who had taught him so much—and to the rest of his people.

But he had found nothing.

2

"HELLO, Suuki. How's the boy?"

"Johnny! You have returned so fast." Suuki was not a boy. He'd been middle-aged when, together with John Hastings, Sr., he'd reached the Black Asteroid. Now he was an old man with dry, parchment-like skin and big round eyes. "And is your news good?"

Johnny shook his head. "No. Nothing, Suuki—there was nothing there."

"Sometimes a man fails to see what was not meant to be obvious. . . ."

"I didn't miss anything. There was nothing to miss. Only the Chalice and that machinery, and the murals on the wall. Those damned murals. How did they know what we'd look like?"

"They planted a seed on the three planets, Johnny. If you place a tree-shrew on the ancient Earth, in the natural course of things a man would develop. A highly advanced biological science could do that."

"Where are they from, Suuki? Where?"

"Ahh—that we do not know! From the stars, Johnny, but there are many stars."

"And an age ago they left the crypt there so we could reach them. Some place there should be the secret of space-travel, interstellar travel. In the crypt, Suuki, only I didn't find it."

"I think you did well. Your examination was thorough, and it proves my point. There's nothing further to be found, nothing at all."

"I don't get it."

"We already have the secret of star-travel, if we could recognize it. That's all I will say, Johnny. Let me think."

"Okay. Hell, I'd better run up the street anyway and say hello to the folks. I'll bet they were worried."

"Worried? Aren't you the son of your father? What do they have to worry about? No, Johnny, they only worry about the future. We all worry about the future, since the Chalice. . . . but I said I want to think."

Smiling, Johnny left the porch of Togoshira Suuki's neat

little cottage and climbed the steep slope toward his folks' house. All the cottages were similar—neat and trim and inexpensive. Some seemed to hang precariously over high embankments, but the while city had been engineered well, for many of the Children spent their entire lives there. Of all the inhabitants—other than wives or husbands of the new breed—Suuki alone was not of the children. Yet it was Suuki who had planned the city, and Suuki, along with John Hastings, Sr., who governed the city.

Further up along the slope, Johnny saw a crew of laborers clearing away some debris. Glass sprinkled the rocky road for twenty yards, rocks and timber were strewn everywhere. Half a dozen panting men shoveled the ruined building material into waiting wheelbarrows, and one tall man, broad across the shoulders and thick through the chest, seemed to work harder than the rest.

"I'm back, Pop," Johnny said.

"Son! We didn't expect you for—how did it go?"

"Lousy."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Well, at least you returned safely, and a lot of us doubted you'd do that." John Hastings leaned for a moment on the handle of his shovel. A cool wind swept down from the higher slopes, but he was bare-chested and sweating. "They came up from the valley again last night," he said. "More of them than ever before, about a hundred. This time they had guns and a woman was wounded in the shoulder before we could drive them off."

Johnny frowned. "Why don't we fight back, Pop? I mean really fight back. Why don't we go down into the valleys and repay them in kind?"

"You figure it out. The police would love to get something on us, something big like that. The police are no exception—like everyone else, they hate us."

"Well, if the raids keep getting worse, we can't just sit here and take them."

"I don't see there's anything else we can do. The Children have to be careful, Johnny. You know that. We're too strong and we're too healthy—and, yes, we're too good-looking. If we competed, our men would be the finest athletes in the world, and even our women would hold their own with ordinary men. Our women would win all the prizes in all the beauty contests. We're never sick and we don't get tired

easily and when we're injured we heal in a matter of hours. So the world is envious.

"Sometimes it backfires. Did you know that no ordinary person wants his sons to be big and strong and handsome, his daughters to be pretty? If they are, they can be mistaken for the Children, and they're liable to be stoned or beaten or worse. Johnny—Johnny! I didn't know I was starting all this twenty-five years ago. I couldn't know. I thought it would do good!"

"It's not your fault, Pop. The government thought it would do good, too. They knew only a small fraction of the population could visit the Chalice every generation, so they started by giving out intelligence tests. The most intelligent people went to the Chalice. And since the mutation bred true, that would give the race increased intelligence for the next generation. Only it didn't work."

"No, it didn't work. The less intelligent members of the race thought they were being gyped out of something they should have had. I don't know, maybe they had a point there. Government next tried the sick people, the mental and physical cripples. But healthy folk hollered bloody murder; they thought they had a right to be more healthy. Pressure groups came next, and a whole series of minor revolutions. But you know all that. Final result: there are one million Children of the Chalice in the Solar System, hated, hunted, feared. . . ."

"If only they could construct more of the Chalices, pop!"

Hastings laughed without mirth. "How? We don't understand the machine at all. If you give a spaceship to a bunch of Venusian aborigines and tell them to duplicate it, they won't know how. It's completely beyond them, because they haven't had the training and the scientific know-how. This is the same thing, only all humanity is your Venusian aborigine."

"Well, I still don't think the government acted wisely, banning the Chalice, yet not destroying it. It's out there in the asteroid belt, and everyone knows it. Hundreds have been killed trying to reach it every year—"

"And there'll be hundreds more. But the government's hands are tied. Don't you see, they can't destroy the Chalice! There's always the hope they'll be able to duplicate it and turn the whole race into supermen. Meanwhile, there are only a million of us, and we're hated."

"Well—"

"Forget it, Johnny. You must be tired, and your mother

will want to see you. Why don't you go on to the house and I'll see you later."

Johnny nodded, climbed on up the road.

Ten thousand feet below him, in one of the fertile valleys that brushes the lowest slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains, an angry crowd gathered. There were farmers and there were townspeople, mostly men, but with enough women and older children to keep the mob excited.

"Look up! Go ahead, look up. You can see it shining there, the city they built. High and mighty, snooting down their noses at us."

"They'll get their some day. They'll get it!"

"Why wait for some day? Why not now, tonight? And why don't we give it to them?" The man who spoke brandished a club, and he looked like he knew how to use it.

"Yeah! Tonight—"

"Shh! Hold it. Here comes Bart Timmins; let's let him talk."

Timmins stalked arrogantly through the village square and people moved out of his way. Wrapped around his forehead was a dirty bandage, but he carried it like a badge of honor. His shoulders were massive, he had a barrel-chest, he wore knee-length walking shorts, and his legs below them were gnarled and muscular. His face might have been pleasant in a rough, rugged sort of way, except that he was prone to leer too much.

"Sure, tonight!" he cried, mounting the steps of the Municipal Building. "If we go up in force, we can clean that city out."

"What do you mean, clean it out?"

"I mean mess it up, but good. I mean tear down some houses and maybe hurt some people and take some of their best men prisoner."

"What will we do that for, Mr. Timmins?"

"You afraid, Peters?" Timmins smiled coldly.

"No-no. But what good will it do us?"

"Here's what. If we can hold some hostages, if we can hold enough of them, we can chase the rest of 'em out of our neck of the woods. That is, if they want their friends back alive."

"That ain't legal."

"Is that so? It isn't even nice, my friend, but it will work. Sure, it's not legal, but wake up to the facts of life. Whenever we do something to the Children—" Timmins spat the

word—"the police sort of turn their heads the other way. I say tonight, and I say we do all of that."

"You really hate them, don't you Mr. Timmins?"

"What's the matter, don't you?"

"Yeah, but with you it's different."

Timmins growled, told the man to forget it. Then he repeated. "I say tonight! We'll get them good tonight."

The crowd roared, and it was a long time before they quieted down. Then someone demanded: "How will we get there between now and tonight? It's ten thousand feet, almost straight up—"

"I've got a friend," said Timmins, "who owns an airport four, five miles from here. He has a dozen 'copters, enough room for a couple hundred of us. We'll get there, all right. We'll come down about midnight—and we'll be *above* the city." Timmins chuckled.

"Above?"

"That's what I said, above. They'll never expect that, they don't guard the upper regions. We'll have what we want before they know what hit them."

"I don't think that's such a hot idea," someone said.

It surprised Timmins. He scowled into the crowd, squinting against the strong sunlight. "Who said that?"

"I did." It was a girl. She was tall, as tall as Timmins himself, and quite beautiful. She came forward and the crowd parted for her. She mounted the stairs and stood directly in front of Timmins, hands on hips.

"And who the hell are you?"

"I'm a stranger, Mr. Timmins. Just got here today. But I think your idea stinks."

"Can you suggest a better one?"

"I'm not going to try. I think the whole business, in general, stinks."

"Is that so?" Timmins glared ominously.

"Yes."

There was a silence. Someone in the crowd coughed and someone else tittered when the girl leered right back at Timmins and did not come off second best. Finally, he said. "What's a pretty girl like you doing traveling by yourself?"

"Nothing. Just traveling."

"Yes? Well, you're pretty enough to be one of the—"

"I never said I wasn't."

Stirring in the crowd, nervous, angry. And Timmins: "Are you?"

"Why don't you figure that out for yourself?"

"Listen, Miss—uh—"

"Bentley. Susan Bentley."

"Okay, Miss Bentley. Okay, Susie! Stop beating around the bush like that, Susie. Are you one of them?"

"I could be, at that, couldn't I? Tell me, Mr. Timmins, do you think I'm pretty enough?"

"Hell, yes. Only you're still hedging."

"I told you to find out for yourself."

"How do you suggest I do that? There's no identifying mark on the Children, although I think there ought to be one. I knew a pretty girl around here who once got beat up good because someone figured she was one of the Children. Turned out she wasn't, but we didn't learn till later."

"There's a way you can find out."

"How?"

"Hit me."

"Huh?"

"I said, hit me. Go ahead, are you afraid? The Children are strong, you know that. One of their men could take care of five or six like you, and even one of their women should be more than a match for you."

"I don't hit ladies."

"You're afraid."

"Listen—"

"You're afraid. If you hit me, and if I hit you back, harder, you wouldn't be such a big hero in front of all these people. Go ahead, hit me."

"Beat it! Scram before I change my mind."

"You're afraid." *Careful, Susan, the girl thought. Don't goad him too far, or he's liable to do just that. You're always ornery, and you always have a chip on your shoulder. You shouldn't have come up here and talked like this in the first place, but now that you have, you'd better convince them you're not one of the Children. Or else you'll never be able to warn those people in the city. . . .*

Someone in the crowd snickered. Clearly, the girl was making a fool of Timmins. It never took him long to lose his temper, and now he swung his open palm and struck her across the face.

She stumbled and fell and when she got to her feet again, she was sniffing. "You—hit—me!" she wailed. "You hit me! I'm not one of them, I was only joking. . . ."

She stood there, sniffing.

"Christ, lady, I'm sorry. It's a fool joke for you to pull; how was I to know?"

"Well, I was just joking. I even thought your idea was a good one, but you hit me."

"Christ, lady." Timmins patted her shoulder awkwardly. It failed to stop her sniffing, and everyone was laughing.

"Did you really like my idea?"

"Y-yes. Yes, I did. . . ."

"Well, if you stop crying, and if you promise not to get in the way, we'll take you up to the mountains with us."

"Really?" She stopped her sniffing, stared at him wide-eyed.

"Sure. Sure, lady."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Timmins." No one was close enough to see that that Timmin's hand had cut the girl's lip badly. No one was close enough to see that, nor to see that the bleeding had stopped almost at once and that now the cut could not even be seen.

After coffee, John Hastings leaned back and tamped tobacco into his pipe, lighting it and blowing blue clouds of smoke up at the ceiling. He looked at his son and he saw himself, twenty-five years before. His wife, Ellen, must have seen that, too, for she looked at both of them and smiled.

Togoshira Suuki grinned crookedly. His long white hair was as fine as flax and he let it fall to his shoulders, Venusian Upland fashion. It was the only custom of his ancient people he affected. "We are right back where we started from, are we not?"

"Yeah," Johnny admitted. "I guess so."

Ellen shook her head. Even now, nearing her fiftieth birthday, she was a beautiful woman. Her hair was graying and there were little wrinkles around her eyes and her lips, but still her face was noble enough to belong to one of the Children, although she was a perfectly normal human woman and she had never been within the Chalice. "No, we've learned something. We've learned there's nothing else to be found."

"A lot of good that does us," Johnny told her.

But Suuki grinned again. "Do not be too certain of that. Your mother seems to agree with what I said before—there may be more in what we already know than meets the eye. I am beginning to understand something. . . . Tell me, Johnny, how did you get away from the police?"

"Why, I told them I had a baby atomic, and—"

"I don't mean that. I mean afterwards."

"I got into my ship and blasted off. I'm one of the

Children, so I can take acceleration they can't get near."
"Precisely."

"Precisely?" This was the elder John Hastings. "I don't see what you're driving at, Suuki."

"Nor am I sure that I do. But one of the Children can take a great deal of acceleration. Is that correct?"

"Certainly."

"And we want to go to the stars, is that correct?"

"You're damned right it is!" Johnny cried eagerly. "If we can do that, if we can get out of the solar system and reach the stars, maybe we'll be able to find the earlier race of humans who planted the Chalice here. And planted us, too. If they still exist, they've been living with the Chalice a long time, so maybe they'll know what to do about our trouble. *If* we could get to the stars."

"But we can't."

"No, we can't."

"Why not?" Suuki demanded.

"Oh, we can construct an inter-stellar drive, all right. We already have it in theory, because Einstein's light-speed maximum doesn't apply when you're dealing with subspace. But that's not the answer. No human being could survive the acceleration necessary to reach translight speed and, so far, no one can construct anything to ward off that acceleration."

Suuki nodded. "That, I believe, is beyond the powers of any science. It is something which cannot be done."

"Then it's hopeless?"

"I did not say that. The answer has been staring us in the face for so long that we missed it altogether. What's the old expression about not seeing the forest for the trees? Consider: the Children cannot be injured readily. When they are, they heal almost instantly. Have you ever heard of one of the Children being injured *at all* by acceleration?"

"No," Hastings said, and Johnny nodded.

"They aren't, that's why! There's somethin in the regenerative powers that the Chalice gives you that renders acceleration harmless. I'm sure of it. There is pain, yes, there is great pain, but any damage that forced acceleration does to the tissues of the Children is counteracted instantly. Probably, there is constant recreation of the damaged tissue, all the way down to the atomic level."

"Do you really think . . ." Johnny began, and his mother: "If that's the answer. . . ."

"It is the answer," said Suuki. "I am certain it is. We can construct a starship and the Children can withstand the

acceleration. It will merely be necessary, during the brief periods of acceleration and deceleration that bring you into and takes you out of sub-space, to induce slumber. That way pain will be avoided—but we can travel to the stars!”

“To the stars. . . .”

They were still talking about it, hours later, when someone pounded on their door. Johnny said he would get it, crossing to the door with long-legged strides. He opened it and saw a girl, sweating, dirty, disheveled. She might have been pretty, but under all that grime he couldn’t tell.

“I’m looking for John Hastings!”

“Which one? There are two, senior and junior.”

“I don’t care! Whoever runs this city.”

“That would be my father. Hey, Pop!”

“Coming, Johnny—”

“This girl wants to see you.”

“Mr. Hastings?” And, when he nodded, it all came out in one gushing torrent: “I was down in the village and a mob decided to attack you up here, only they’re going to do it from above you and not below, so I went with them and broke away quick to warn you before they strike.”

“Huh? What are you talking about, young lady? Attack from above instead of below? Who? What for? You mean one of those mobs of rioters? We meet up with that all the time.”

“More than that, Mr. Hastings! It’s big this time and they came up in ‘copters, and they plan on taking some of you hostages so they can tell the rest to clear out of their part of the country.”

“Who are you, young lady? This all sounds so wild and incredible, an organized attack like that—”

“Please! You haven’t time. Do you have soldiers?”

“Of course. But they’re guarding the passes leading up from below.”

“Turn them around, then. The men of the valley will be attacking above your city.”

“How do we know this isn’t a trick?” John Hastings had a point there, his son knew. The villagers had attempted every type of subterfuge in the past. They might—they just might—stoop this low, sending a girl with a message that would leave the passes unguarded.

Wordless, the girl reached into her pocket, withdrew a knife. She pressed the button, watched the blade snap out. Without pausing, she ran the knife across her forearm, winc-

ing as she did so. A trickle of blood started from the cut, then stopped flowing at once. The cut became a thin white line which, even as they looked, disappeared.

"I'm one of the Children," she said. "Susan Bentley. Maybe you knew my father—"

"Mark Bentley? Sure I knew him, years ago. She's legitimate, Johnny."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Johnny was already running outside, calling back over his shoulder: "Get the guard-posts on the phone. Bring them around to the upper slopes. I'm taking a run down there to see that they move fast."

Then he was charging quickly down the hill, without waiting for an answer. In five minutes he reached the first guard-post, not much more than an oversized lean-to set into a niche in the rock, half-hidden by the scrubby trees which clung to the face of the mountain hundreds of feet above the timber line.

"Did you get the call?"

"Sure did. On our way up now—"

And Johnny continued running down the hill.

By the time he reached the fourth and final guard-post, he heard the distant sounds of fighting up the slope behind him, the thud-thud-thud of pounding feet, the shout of men in battle, the sibilant hissing of blasters, the occasional flat, cracking sound of an ancient explosive rifle. Two guards were climbing out of their lean-to at the final post, and one of them nodded curtly but eloquently up the slope. "They mean business this time," he said.

Briefly, Johnny was aware that they followed him up the hill, and then he was pounding back the way he had come. As he ran, he saw the lights winking off in the trim little cottages on either side of him. Women and children would be huddling fearfully within their homes, but the men-folk were trotting up the hill in twos and threes, armed for the most part only with crude clubs. None of them spoke; talk was superfluous. Grimly, they climbed the hill.

Johnny unsheathed his blaster as he rounded the last bend in the steep path. He could see dense clouds of smoke rising under the light of the full moon. Three houses in a row had been fired, and the flames darted and licked angrily, fanned by the mountain wind.

One of the houses was his own!

The fighting centered about it, too. The defenders seemed a pitifully thin line, and they were being forced back, too.

Physically, man for man, the Children certainly had the edge, and they were not outnumbered. But none of the Children could receive permits for any weapons more potent than explosive rifles. Only a few, like Johnny, used unlicensed blasters. And the result was a tremendous deficit in fire-power.

The thin line of defenders crept back toward the three burning houses. There the line held for a moment, while blasting beams seared air all around them and sought them out. Then the line broke. It was inevitable, for the line could not retreat in an orderly fashion, not through the flaming ruins of the three cottages. Instead, the line broke and curled around the flames rapidly. By the time they reached the other side, they were running in confusion, and only an occasional quick volley of rifle fire answered back the steady hissing of the blasters.

Johnny plunged ahead, tried to fill the breach with his own weapon. Heat from the cottage—his own burning home—was intense, but he crouched down a dozen yards behind the stone chimney and fired blindly ahead of him. Once he heard someone scream, and he did not like the sound of a man dying in agony. Still the invaders had come to destroy their homes here in the mountain city. . . .

In the harsh light of the flames, Johnny saw some of the invaders snaking around the cottage and plunging down the hill to left and right of him. He fired once, and then his blaster jammed and he crouched there with it, helplessly. They streamed down the hill on both sides of him, they struck with clubs and threw stones and he could hear glass shattering and women screaming. Sobbing, Johnny stood up, silhouetted briefly against the flames. He drew fire, three beams which soared harmlessly over his head—and then he plunged into one group of the invaders.

He met them with flailing fists, sent four of them reeling with his first onslaught. Oddly, he noted that they no longer made their way down the hill. Instead, the two lines had turned back and in toward the burning houses and now swept up to the very crest of the hill. In his blind fury, Johnny did not realize they could have blasted him down with consummate ease; nor did he have time to ponder why they withdrew.

When the reason did occur to him, it was too late. They ringed him in completely, with his back to the raging flames—and only then did someone fire at him. The blaster caught him squarely in the chest and he tottered for a

moment before tumbling forward on his face. He was conscious long enough after that to realize that the beam had been of full intensity and would have destroyed an ordinary man.

But he was one of the Children, and he would survive. In hours, the mechanisms of regeneration within every cell of his body would begin to function and, before the sun rose, he would be good as new. Except that they were taking him with them....

Ten minutes later, the 'copters rose smoothly from their perches further up the mountain. They winged silently into the valley below.

3

"WE'LL BUILD again," John Hastings said wearily, running a hand through his graying hair.

"We'll always build again," someone told him.

"What can we do? Do you think I like it? Do you—they have my son. They have Johnny!"

Susan Bentley tapped his arm, and when he turned around she said: "It's my fault."

"What do you mean, it's your fault? Don't blame yourself, child. If you hadn't warned us there's no telling what would have happened. And afterwards you fought like a man—"

"I have always had to fight like a man. But it's my fault. I should have broken away to warn you sooner, but I couldn't."

"Then it's not your fault."

"I knew their raid was aimed at taking a hostage. Someone important. One of them must have recognized Johnny. They've been up here before, haven't they?"

"Of course. And Johnny would venture every now and then down into the valley, anyway. A lot of the Children are bitter, but Johnny's not. He even tried to make friends down in the valley, and there was a girl once—"

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure. He never spoke much about it. He dated her a few times, and a man named Timmins, I think, didn't like it. She was Timmins' girl friend and Johnny took her away from him. They had Johnny in jail on a trumped-up charge for six months. He wouldn't look at the girl after that, but she wouldn't look at this Timmins."

"Oh."

"'Oh', nothing. It still didn't make him bitter. But that's not the point. They can't keep Johnny like that, it's not legal. Anyway, what's their purpose?"

"They're going to issue an ultimatum. If you want your son back alive, you're going to have to leave this city."

"Why me?"

"No, not just you. You don't understand, Mr. Hastings. If you want to see Johnny again, the whole city will have to be evacuated. Permanently."

"What? That's fantastic! I know they don't like us, but what have they got against our city?"

"They're just envious, that's all. They hate us. They always have and they always will. Only now they have a weapon on their side."

"It isn't legal, Susan. They can't kidnap Johnny and—"

"Your son is how old—twenty-three—well, the government will hardly look on that as kidnapping. First, because even the government doesn't hold any love for the Children, and second because they'll probably shift the blame for the fight on your people."

"All right. We've got to get him back."

"How? By raiding the valley? Then you'll really be in hot water."

"Umm-mm. Well, I'll see the sheriff down in the valley. He isn't a part of it—"

"No, but if he's anything like the law-officers on Mars, he'll shut his eyes every time."

"Well, I've got to try."

"Good luck," Susan said. "You'll need it."

The sheriff lived in a small ranch house at the east end of the valley. He was a tall man and stout. He had a half-smoked cigar clamped between his yellowed teeth, and it looked like it might have been there for days.

"You're a stranger, ain't yuh?" he grunted.

"Yes."

"Where from?"

Hastings pointed up toward the distant mountains.

"One of the Children?"

"Yes."

Another grunt. "Wacha want?"

"My son. There was a raid on our city, and they kidnapped my son, name of John Hastings, same as mine."

"Don't know about that."

"Do you know about the raid?"

The sheriff yawned hugely. "There's always talk Mister. I don't know nothing."

"Weren't there some injured men in the valley today?"

"Sure. Always are. Tough breed, all the time fighting. So what?"

"We injured them. They were up in the mountains and—"

"Oh, then you admit it? You attacked the villagers, eh? I didn't get no complaints, mind you, Mister, I didn't get none. But if I do, I'll know where to go, because you admitted it."

Hastings shrugged. "If there was a raid, would you know who'd be in charge?"

"Beats me. The whole thing, I mean. I don't know of any raid, Mister. Maybe you better go climb your mountain and stay put up there."

"Thanks," John Hastings said. "You've been a great help."

The sheriff lit his cigar. "Don't mention it."

Timmins strutted about the room like a rooster. "We got 'em now, men! Oh, we got 'em good. They'll have to clear out if they know what's good for them."

"I hope so," a little man chuckled. "That'll be just fine. Say, did anyone see about that young feller?" He shook his head sadly. "Hurt bad."

"Him?" Timmins laughed. "Hurt bad? I guess you don't know the Children too well. Nothing like that can hurt 'em for long. They heal, Marty. They heal quick. They're inhuman, that's what. Well, okay, let's go take a look."

Timmins strode off into a hallway, reached a door, opened it. The man named Marty gasped. "He's sitting up!"

"Sure he is. How do you feel, Hastings?"

"I'm fine," Johnny said.

"We shot him clear through the chest. . . ." This was Marty.

"Sure," Timmins leered. "Only he healed. They always healed, every time I saw it happen. What's left of your wound, Hasting?"

"I don't know," Johnny told him. "A little white scar, I guess. I haven't looked."

Johnny smiled when the man named Marty unbuttoned his shirt and peered at his chest. "Christ, yeah," he said. "Just a little white scar!"

"See?" Timmins was laughing. Something about it struck him very funny, and he didn't stop laughing for a long time.

Abruptly, Johnny stood up. "I remember you, Timmins. We had a little trouble once—but that's not why you've taken me. What do you want me for?"

"You'll find out. We're going to bargain with your people. If they leave that city of theirs, we'll let you go. If they don't, in a certain amount of time—well, you figure it out."

"Do you think they'll sacrifice their whole city, just for me? Where would they go?"

"That isn't my problem. And to answer your first question, they better."

"You're insane!" Johnny took a quick step toward the thick-chested man, but Timmins pulled out a blaster and motioned him back. "Take it easy. You're liable to be here a long time, and we don't want to keep shooting you up and watching you heal again."

"It came," John Hastings said. Ellen peered over her husband's shoulder, and Susan was there too. Togoshira Suuki sat off at the far end of the room—the living room of his own cottage, where the Hastings had come to live since the burning.

Hastings read: "As you know, we have John Hastings, Jr., a prisoner. If you agree to evacuate your city, permanently, we won't harm him. If you don't, we can't be responsible. You have two weeks to decide, and we want your answer not in words, but in action."

It wasn't signed.

"Could you go to the police with that?" Ellen demanded. "It proves they took Johnny—"

Hastings frowned. "They're too smart for that. It doesn't prove a thing. There's no signature, it's just a plain piece of paper and an ordinary typewriter. We could have forged the whole thing."

"Anyway," said Susan, "the law won't help. You found that out when you visited the sheriff, didn't you Mr. Hastings?"

"Yes. I did, but that leaves us with nothing."

Suuki stretched his small, thin body. "There are always means to an end, John. The trouble now is that you have been considering nothing but this problem ever since it happened, and you've lost all perspective."

"Hell, maybe you have something there," Hastings admitted, smiling in spite of himself. "Still, Johnny's my boy—"

"And we all want to get him back. The first thing you must concede, however, is that your son can take care of himself. It is not quite so urgent as you indicate. Now let's forget it completely, at least for a few minutes. I have something important to tell you, John."

"Go ahead." But, clearly, Hastings wasn't very interested.

"Johnny's visit to the Black Asteroid was the final proof I needed. There is nothing necessary for interstellar travel beyond the Children themselves. Theoretically, we should be able to take a spaceship from space to sub-space, and although the acceleration would kill an ordinary man, it would not harm one of the children, provided he had been put into a deep, hypnotic sleep. We still have your old ship up on the higher slopes, John. I should like your permission to convert it to the first interstellar spaceship."

Hastings almost jumped from his chair. "Why didn't you tell me? Of course you have my permission! Star-travel, that's what we've wanted all along. If we could find the race of pre-humans who put that Chalice out there, and—"

"There's still Johnny," Ellen reminded him.

"Yes," Hastings sobered quickly. "Well, I could take this above the sheriff's head and go to higher authorities."

Susan shook her head. "It wouldn't do any good."

And Suuki: "The young lady is right."

"Okay. Then we can mass ourselves in force and attack the valley. We can pay them back in kind and see what happens—"

"No." Suuki was quite firm. "If you did that and didn't find Johnny, they would kill him. Further, the law would then have an excuse to sanction what those of the valleys desire. . . ."

"I think I have an idea," Susan said. "Look: when I went up by 'copter with the people of the valley, they didn't know I was one of the Children. They still don't. They had casualties up here, we buried three of their dead. I sneaked away and warned you in the darkness, but they didn't know that. Instead, they probably think it was four dead, not three. Okay so far?"

"You bet. Let's hear more."

"Well, there isn't much. I can go down into the valley and see if I can find Johnny, that's all. They won't suspect me, they will suspect anyone else. I'll leave in the morning."

"We can't ask you to do something like that. There'd be danger, and Johnny isn't your responsibility. No—"

"That's ridiculous. He's one of the Children, so am I. If we don't help each other. . . ."

Susan stood there, hands on hips. She didn't look like she'd take no for an answer.

Suuki grinned. "Let her go, John. I think she can help."

Ellen came to Susan, took her hand and squeezed it. "I

don't want anything to happen to you," she said. "But if you can help Johnny—"

"I can help him, Mrs. Hastings. I *want* to help him."

And Suuki chuckled, "Maybe by the time Johnny comes back, I'll have that interstellar ship ready. It's a long way to the stars, John, but we can make it."

Five thousand feet below *Paseo Diablo*—the Walk of the Devil—lay the town which received its name from the pass high above it. And now Susan Bentley walked boldly down Paseo Diablo's main street, looking for a familiar face. She was tired and her clothes were in tatters, for although the Children had seen her down as far as the mountain pass, she had gone on from there alone and on foot. She looked the part of a wanderer now, she looked as if she had been lost and had struggled down the steep slopes to the valley.

No one stared at her twice in the bright sunshine. Her beauty would have set her apart, but the dirt and the grime covered it, and her identity as one of the Children was, at least for the moment, perfectly concealed.

Bart Timmins saw her before she saw him. Coming out of the general store with a sack of supplies, he squinted down the street and started running. "Susie!" he cried. "You're Susan Bentley."

Susan smiled weakly. "Hello, Mr. Timmins. I—I never thought I'd make it down to the valley."

"*You* didn't think so? *We* thought you were dead. And I held myself personally responsible. I never should have allowed a delicate thing like you to go up into the hills with us."

"It doesn't matter."

"Umm-mm, yes. You're safe now."

"You see, I got lost in all that fighting, and next thing I knew, I was stuck in—in that city. It was dark and I sneaked out along one of the streets until I came to a mountain trail. I started down, but I guess it took longer than I thought. I—haven't eaten—"

And Susan began to slump forward. In truth, she felt fine. She'd had a hearty meal before leaving the city, and her amazing powers of regeneration had compensated for the wearying trek down the face of the mountain. But she'd never let Bart Timmins know that. She raised a hand half way to her head, moaned a little, and slumped forward.

Timmins reached her in two quick strides and got his hands under her arms as she fell. He lifted her easily and, cradling her in his arms, walked toward his house, two streets away. Walking thus, he looked down at her. A lovely girl,

more beautiful than any in Paseo Diablo, beautiful enough to be one of the Children. But that was ridiculous and he knew it: one of the Children did not faint from over-exertion!

The girl had short-cropped, curly auburn hair. Her skin was clear and white and, despite her exhaustion, he saw a rosy glow in her cheeks. Her lips were sensuous and appealing without lip rouge; Timmons suddenly found himself thinking it would be very nice indeed to kiss her. Well, that could come later. He was pleased too with the up-tilted swell of her breasts under the thin, tattered jumper, and the feel of her legs, cradled over his left arm as he carried her, was pleasant.

Once he leaned down to brush his lips experimentally across her face, but at that moment she stirred restlessly, squirmed, sighed, and half-opened her eyes.

"You take it easy, kid," Timmons said, breathing hard. "Bart will take care of you."

He carried her that way to his house and, inside, deposited her on a sofa. Returning from the bathroom, he bathed her face with a cold wet cloth and presently she was sitting up.

"Where am I?" she said, smiling vaguely. *That pig, if he tries to touch me again. I only hope I can hold my temper. . . .*

"Don't you worry, honey. I brought you home, and first thing I'm going to do is give you some good food. I'll bet you need it."

"I'll say," Susan told him, flashing a smile. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't found me."

"Well, I did, so stop your worrying."

"Did you carry me all the way?"

"Sure."

"My, you must be *strong!*"

"Well, shucks—"

"Yes, you must. Whenever there's something to be done in this town, I'd bet you take it over."

"Well, not everything, Susie. But then, if a man's born a leader, then he's a leader, I always say."

"Like that time we went up the mountain, is that what you mean? You were the leader then. Oh, I'm sure you did a good job."

"Well, we accomplished what we set out for."

"Me, I never did find out what that was. I had to get lost. I hope I didn't get in the way up there or anything."

"Naw! Not at all Susie. And I'm sure glad you're safe."

"That plan you mentioned when I came into Paseo Diablo

for the first time, were you able to carry it out? My guess is you were: if you start out to do something, Mr. Timmins, then you do it. That's the kind of man you are."

"As a matter of fact, we *were* successful, honey. We got out hostage, and everything's going according to plan."

"Really? What does he look like? He must be horrible, one of those Children."

"It's all according to what you think—say! I can show him to you if you want." Timmins' craggy features were screwed into a little-boy grin. "Do you want to see my hostage, Susie?"

"Oh—I'd be afraid! Unless, unless—"

"What? Go ahead, say it."

"Unless I was sure you could protect me."

"Sure, Susie. I can protect you. I'll be right there. Want to take a look-see?"

Susan stood up, stretched, smoothed out her tattered jumper. She weaved groggily, leaned against Timmins' broad chest and cuddled there for a moment. "That feels good," she said, "because you're so strong."

He stroked her hair, said: "You must be tired. Maybe you'd like to rest first."

"No. No thanks. I am interested, and as long as you're there with me—"

Beaming, Bart Timmins led her from the room and down the flight of steps to the basement.

Johnny had studied his cell until he knew every inch of it by heart. Ten feet long, twelve feet wide, a window high up on one wall, out of his reach. A door locked from the outside. Cement floor and cement walls, a cot, a chair, a wash-stall. Quite an effective prison, without any possibility of escape.

He wondered if the Children had received Timmins' message. It didn't really matter, he told himself over and over again—no matter what happened to him, they would not give up their city. They couldn't, for then they'd have no place else to live. He only hoped they wouldn't try anything foolish. Even a small-scale raid on Paseo Diablo by the Children would be a valid excuse for the law to step in, and then there'd be no telling what might happen. . . .

Suddenly, so suddenly that it startled him, Johnny heard a key grating in the lock. An instant later, the door swung in, and as he stood up to face it Johnny saw Bart Timmins, a blaster in his hands. But behind him was the girl who had

warned them—what was her name? Susan Bentley. Then had she, after all, been a Judas? But no, that didn't make sense, and now he could see her cautioning him to silence from behind Timmins' shoulder. Probably she did not want him to show any recognition. Well, until he found out what was happening, he'd play the game her way.

"Visitor for you," Timmins leered. "Just sit right where you are, Hastings. I don't want you to scare her, see?"

"Okay, I'm not moving."

"She almost got killed in your lousy city, Hastings. Got lost up in the mountains, had to find her way down all by herself."

"He doesn't look so terrible," Susan said. "Can I go closer and look?"

Timmins shrugged. "Okay, but be careful. You never know what one of them is liable to do. Heck, you won't see anything so strange, anyway—they look human, the Children do."

"Well, I want to see for myself." And moving slowly, Susan came toward Johnny. Finally, she stood not a yard away from him, facing him directly so that Timmins could not see her face.

"Careful," Timmins warned. "Careful."

Then Susan's lips were moving, and Johnny watched. At first he didn't get it, but he knew she was forming two words again and again, silently, using on her lips. Finally, it made sense.

Grab me. Grab me.

Johnny did, in one darting motion. He grasped her shoulders, spun her around, circled her neck with his arm. She began to whimper, struggling futilely against his hold.

"Damn you!" Timmins screamed. "Leave her alone."

Susan gurgled.

"I won't hurt her," Johnny said. "But I'm walking out of here with her in front of me. You won't dare shoot. You go first, Timmins. Come on, move. We'll follow you up the stairs."

Timmins made a lewd gesture. "I'm not budging. I know you, Hastings, you won't stand there and strangle the girl. Sort of an impasse, hunh?"

It was, and Johnny knew it. Timmins had called his bluff, and he stood there, helplessly. An impasse for the moment, but unless Johnny could think of something, Timmins wouldn't leave it that way long.

Timmins took a step toward them, the blaster raised. "I'm

coming for you, Hastings. Why don't you just leave the girl alone and sit down? I'll forget all about what you tried." Timmins took another step forward.

Backing away, Johnny pulled Susan with him. Now what?

Closer came Timmins, and Johnny found himself backed into a corner. His hold on Susan was a loose one, although he hoped it looked like he was half-strangling the girl. One way or the other, it didn't matter. Timmins would have him again in a moment. Then the girl had made a game try, he realized hopelessly, but it had come to nothing.

And then Timmins had reached them, wrapping his free arm around the girl's waist and tugging at her. She screamed, "Let me go! Someone let me go. You'll rip me in half—"

Johnny got the idea. It was meant for him. *Let her go. . . .*

Abruptly he released her, but Timmins continued pulling. She leaped from Johnny's arms like an arrow from a bow-string, plummeting across the room. Timmins was in front of her, facing her, and stumbling backward before her hurtling form—she was screaming and clawing at him all the time, as if she were hysterical—he collided with the far wall and landed in a heap on the floor.

Susan fell on top of him, but she heard Johnny below, and wisely she got out of the way, rolling over and over. She stopped rolling and turned in time to see Johnny cuffing Timmins quite soundly. It wasn't much of a fight. Soon Johnny climbed to his feet, the blaster in his hand. "We're getting out of here," he said.

"Damn you," Timmins cried. "Escape, go ahead, escape! But leave that girl alone."

Johnny found a coil of rope off in a darkened section of the basement. With this he bound Timmins hands and foot, stuffing a handkerchief in the man's mouth for a gag. Without saying anything, he ushered Susan from the room.

And, once they were outside: "My gosh Susan, he still thinks you were on his side."

"Sure," she smiled. "I couldn't help it if when you let me go I happened to fall all over him. But let's get out of here."

"Yeah," Johnny said. "It's a long way up the mountain."

4

"THIS is the ship," Suuki told them proudly.

They stood shivering on the higher slopes above the Chal-ice City, where now, even in summer, snow and ice clung to

the permanent zones of shadow between upthrust crags and pinnacles.

"I still don't see how you got away," John Hastings told his son. "It was a week ago, but no one really told me."

"I guess we didn't feel much like talking," Susan admitted.

"She fooled them, pop. You know that part. Afterwards, well, it was a long way up the mountain, and for a time it looked like we wouldn't make it, especially when we had to spend hours in hiding because a fleet of 'copters came looking for us." Johnny shook his head. "They have a lot of power down there in the valley. And I don't think we've seen the last of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Bart Timmins is going to be good and angry. I mean that he's going to yell and holler until he brings the townspeople back up into the mountains, and then there's going to be hell to pay."

Suuki chuckled. "Well, you won't be here then."

"I don't like it, Suuki. I don't like leaving all of you like this, when anything is likely to happen. I'll be gone a long time, we can't tell how long, but if I stayed I might be able to help."

"Anyone can do your work here," Suuki told him. "But what's one fighting man more or less? You'll be doing more important things."

Susan squeezed his hand impulsively. "Yes, Johnny. Think of it—you'll be the first man to leave the Solar System behind you and head out for the stars!"

"Actually," Suuki continued, "it might turn out to be a hopeless quest. Whoever the first humans were who planted the seed for us here in the Solar System, now they could be anywhere. Provided they still exist. It's as sensible to assume that some place in the long passage of time they faded away—or else went so far you'll never be able to find them."

"As it is—" this was the elder John Hastings—"you'll have a mighty hard job on your hands, son. The sky is full of stars—I know it sounds foolish saying it that way—but the sky is full. We don't know which one. We have no way to find out. It could be any one of them, or the whole thing might turn out to be the greatest wild goose chase a man ever went on; you may find nothing out there but a lot of empty space and a lot of bright stars."

"It is our hope," Suuki went on for him, "that it won't be as bad as all that. If the old race planted the seed for us

here, it is logical to assume that they planted the same seed elsewhere. Theory has it that many stars—perhaps one in three—are gifted with planetary families. Very well, a good number of those might have planets suitable for human habitation. It is our hope that on some of them the seed has been planted, as it has been planted in our own Solar System. That way, you may have a trail to follow.”

“The first man to leave the Solar System,” Susan mused. “I envy you, Johnny. How I wish I could go along—”

Suuki smiled at her. “Many people do. But no, child. Only one will go. It works in theory, but it may not work in fact at all, and we will try it with one first. If Johnny can accelerate to faster than light speed, if he can find what we seek, if he can come back with his report, then there will be time to think of others going. But not until then.”

The elder John Hastings frowned. “Are you trying to say it might be dangerous, Suuki? I would want Johnny blasting off like this, not if the odds are stacked against him. . . .”

“I don’t know. I simply do not know. In theory, it should not be dangerous. But one never knows how the theory fits the fact.”

“Granted. But why Johnny? Why must he be the one?”

“Because I want to go, that’s why! I’m your son, and you were the finder of the Chalice. It’s only right that I go—”

“That’s childish,” Suuki said. “Nevertheless, there is a good reason, John, although it is not what Johnny says. He has recently returned from the Chalice. He has seen it firsthand within the last few weeks, and that’s more than can be said for anyone else here. He must take that knowledge of the Chalice out to the stars with him. No, there is no need for debate here: I would say Johnny is the man for the job.”

And so it was agreed, but after a time John Hastings grinned ruefully. “You know, I kind of pictured the first interstellar ship as a huge, sleek thing which would make the modern planetary liners look like grubby midgets. Here it’s the other way around.”

The ship was a hundred-footer, a twenty-five-year-old vessel, the hull of which was liberally sprinkled with vacuum-patches. It wasn’t very imposing and it looked like it might be able to bumble its way along through the void perhaps as far as Mars, provided full thrust were not employed. Instead, it would try to reach the stars. . . .

“I admit it is no beauty,” declared Suuki. “But it will run better than the appearance indicates. We couldn’t afford a new ship, but we could afford a new engine: she has power,

John. She should be able to reach light speed in a day, and then there are arrangements for Johnny to sleep, for, with the passing of light speed, the ship should automatically shift into sub-space and then the acceleration will be tremendous. I don't think Johnny will particularly enjoy his ride, but the ship should take him where he wants to go."

John Hastings nodded. "Then it is tomorrow. Tomorrow at dawn. Well, son, you'd better get along home and have a good meal and a night's sleep. I have a hunch you'll need both."

Johnny stood in the airlock as the first rose-tints of dawn caressed the eastern peaks, promising a fine day. During the night they had crammed the small ship with supplies, with food, with clothing for all types of climate, with records describing man's achievements here in the Solar System, with an arsenal of weapons and ammunition—"just in case", as Suuki had explained.

"Well—" Johnny said, clearing his throat. He felt an unfamiliar thumping in his chest, a wild beating of his heart. He was on the brink of infinity and he knew it.

"Good luck," someone said, and then the whole crowd of them were roaring, "Good luck, good luck. . . ."

Suuki took his hand and pumped it up and down vigorously, and then his mother came and kissed him soundly on the cheek. "Johnny," she said softly, "be careful." Like that, only like that, like she might have said it when he was a kid and when he was going out into the rain and did not want to wear his overshoes. But tears threatened to overflow the corners of her eyes.

His father was last. "You're going out there for the Children, Johnny. They'll be waiting and hoping and—hell, I never was any good at speeches. Find what we're looking for, son. Find it because we need it more than anyone ever needed anything." And then they were shaking hands, and John Hastings thumped his son's back and stepped away.

Still Johnny stood there in the airlock, unmoving.

"What's the matter?" Suuki demanded. "You do understand the piloting instructions I gave you—"

"It isn't anything like that. I thought Susan would be here to say goodbye, that's all."

Ellen Hastings turned to her husband, laughing. "I believe Johnny has a crush on that girl."

"Maybe. Can't say I blame him. She's brave and she's beautiful. If I were twenty years younger—"

"Oh, you!"

"Seriously, Ellen, if she's not here, she's not. Every minute Johnny waits gives the villagers more time to get organized. If they come busting up here and spot the starship, maybe it won't take off at all."

He hadn't spoken in any whisper, and Johnny heard him. "All right. I thought I'd wait a minute, but I'll go. Tell Susan goodbye for me. Tell her I'll bring back some souvenirs from the stars."

And the lock clanged shut behind him.

Less than five minutes later, the ship soared skyward on a fiery, incandescent pillar. Once it cleared the highest peaks, it vanished in less time than it takes a man to blink his eyes.

Fascinated, Johnny watched the speed indicator. Acceleration gripped and held him, but it wasn't too painful. It would become intolerable, if and when the ship reached light-speed, but by then a harmless sleeping-gas would fill the cabin and put him into a deep sleep until all acceleration had ceased.

He watched the needle climb. Ten thousand miles per second, then twenty, which was as fast as a human had ever before travelled. Thirty thousand miles per second. Like a bloated white snowball, the moon slipped by off to his left. Forty thousand miles per second. . . .

"Johnny! Johnny, it's beginning to hurt a little—"

Startled, he turned around. Susan Bentley stumbled toward him from the entrance to the pile-chamber. Acceleration tried to hold her back, but she plodded grimly forward and soon she sat down at his feet.

"Hello, Johnny."

"Susan! How on Earth—"

"Not on Earth, Johnny. In space. I'm here."

"I can see that. You crazy kid! This could be dangerous, because if Suuki's wrong we'll never live to see translight speed."

"They said it was dangerous when I went down into Paseo Diablo to rescue you. But I made it and I got you, Johnny. I wanted to come with you this time—I had to come with you."

Johnny shook his head. "Nuts to that. This is no place for a woman, Susan. So I'm going to turn this crate around and set you down at the city before it's too late." Tight-lipped, he began fiddling the controls.

Quite suddenly, Susan was upon him, clawing at his hands, pulling him away from the control board. "I want to go, Johnny!"

Momentarily surprised by her onslaught, he was thrown to

the floor, and Susan came down with him. She landed on top and he tried to squirm away and back to the controls, for he knew the ship neared light-speed now and once they reached it Suuki's gas would put them to sleep and there would be no turning back. But the girl held him there because she fought with acceleration on her side, pinning him to the floor with her weight. Since the ship rocketed straight up, acceleration pulled everything to the floor, and with four gravities tugging at them, Susan's hundred and ten pounds became more like half a ton.

"Get off me, you crazy fool! In a minute or two it'll be too late."

"That's what I want. Hah—try and stop me. I said I'm going with you, Johnny."

"Listen—"

"Don't argue with me. I'm going, that's all."

"Okay. Okay, I can't do anything about it now, but after we pass translight, you're going to get the spanking of your—"

"Very funny. Look who's talking!" Susan straddled him and her hands were planted firmly on his shoulders. Actually, that was so much theatrics and she probably knew it: she didn't have to wrestle with him, for the dead weight alone was sufficient to hold him down. A sack of grain, under four gravities, would have been equally effective. "Look who's talking," she said again. "Careful I don't do the spanking!"

Rage boiled up in Johnny. "You gawky little pip-squeak—"

"Temper. . . ." Susan was laughing.

"So you think it's funny? You think—"

And then he said no more. Something clicked loudly above them, and a sweetish odor assailed their nostrils. "That must mean we're reaching light-speed," Susan told him cheerfully. She yawned broadly. "Umm-mm. Getting sleepy."

"That's the gas."

"Very sleepy. Johnny? Johnny, I'm afraid."

And that, he knew, was just like a girl. She had hidden aboard ship, fought for her right to stay. Now, all at once, she was afraid. She craved protection because he was a man and she was a woman. Almost, it was funny. He had tried to picture what it would be like, crossing the translight barrier. Alone at the controls, with acceleration racking every fibre of his body, watching the needle climb slowly, slowly. . . . only it didn't turn out that way at all. He lay stretched out on the

floor with a girl who temporarily weighed half a ton holding him down, whimpering for his protection.

"Nuts," Johnny said in a very small voice. And then the sweet odor increased. In another moment, he was fast asleep.

Some time later, he got to his feet. Susan had managed to roll over on the floor, and she was stretched out, still sleeping, a yard away. He checked her pulse, found it normal, then staggered to the controls. He was tired, infinitely tired, and that probably confirmed Suuki's theory. All the way down to the atomic level, the cells of his body had been crushed, but—again on the atomic level—they had been recreated instantly, each atom as an individual unit. Hence the Chalice loomed larger than ever before: it healed men and it maintained their health, it made women beautiful and men handsome, but it was also a round-trip ticket to the stars.

The sub-light needle strained meaninglessly at the right side of its dial, but the second speed-gauge was functioning, its needle hovering near the number eighty.

Eighty! In a sense, it was meaningless. Eighty—eighty times faster than nature's laggard light! Or—the figures swam in his head—eighty times 186,000 miles per second. That meant they hurtled through the void at a speed approaching fifteen million miles a second. In ordinary space, of course, that would have been impossible. Einstein was no dodo, Einstein knew what he was talking about. But his universal field theory was not so universal after all; he had neglected sub-space altogether. No, it wasn't impossible to surpass the speed of light short of attaining infinite mass, you merely switched, quite automatically, from space to sub-space. And there, in a universe which contained neither stars nor space as we know it, the old laws did not apply.

"I'm hungry, Johnny."

"Huh? Oh, you're awake. Me, I guess I'm hungry too, but when you're busy with something else, it takes a woman to remind you of that."

"Well, aren't you going to do something about it?"

Johnny smiled. "The hell I will. It was your idea to tag along, and now that you're here I'd like to get some use out of you."

"So?"

"So scurry on back to the galley and fix something. Come on, scat."

Susan departed.

And soon afterwards, a pleasant odor drifted into the

control room. A loud metallic clanging followed it as Susan banged lustily on a pot. "Soup's on," she cried.

Although he knew his way in the ship's cramped interior, Johnny's nose led him to the galley. Susan had done wonders. From the ship's frozen stores she had whipped together a cocktail, soup, steak and all the trimmings. Johnny said nothing. He sat down and was busy eating for the next twenty minutes.

Finally he stood up, patting his stomach gratefully. "Delectable," he said.

"You really liked it? I'm glad." "You're all right, Susan."

"Hah'. I might have known. Put a good meal inside him and a man will be your friend for life. A while ago, you wanted to spank me."

"You deserved it. But I figure now that we're in this together, we might as well cooperate."

"I might as well cook, you mean. Johnny Hastings, you're nothing but a—a gourmet! And I don't mean that as a compliment. Tell you what, though. I'm willing to bury the hatchet. Shake?" And Susan stuck out her hand.

"*You're willing?* I like that." He ignored her hand. "Well, okay, but we'll do it my way."

"How's that?"

He stepped inside the out-thrust arm and pushed it down at her side. He kissed her. He'd only meant it to be a friendly little peck, and he thought they'd both get a laugh out of it, but he found himself pulling her close, letting his lips linger on her warm red ones. Then on her cheek, her throat. . . .

"Johnny—"

"I'm sorry," he said. He pulled away, stood off at a distance regarding her. "I shouldn't have done that."

"I didn't say I minded."

"No, that's not it. Listen, kid. We're alone. God knows we're more alone than two people ever were. Maybe the odds against ever getting back are tremendous, I don't know. But we'll have to act like we expect to return, and—well, we might find ourselves doing something we'll regret later."

Susan scowled. "Not only are you a gourmet, you're—you're a Victorian too. You're the most exasperating—"

"Stop it. Don't you see, I liked that kiss. I liked it too much, that's the trouble. I would have liked—"

"Is there any law against it?"

"No. But I—Susan, I think I'm falling in love with you. . . ." His voice trailed off lamely.

"My gosh! Don't say it like you're apologizing. Johnny, Johnny, don't you see, just because we're stuck out here doesn't mean we can't act like an ordinary man and an ordinary woman. There's no reason to cheat ourselves, especially since we may never get back."

"We can't be sure. Maybe it's the situation we're in. Maybe—we hardly know each other."

"So, all right. Will it help if I blush every night? Why don't you use your head? Why do you think I went down to Paseo Diablo like I did? Partly for an ideal, sure. I'll admit that. Only there was more, Johnny. There was you."

"We only saw each other for a few moments before that, but, well, you hear of things like that happening. And there were those days at the Chalice City, before we took this ship up."

"Stop trying to rationalize it or you'll spoil everything. Please."

"Okay. But let me think." Without waiting for an answer, he crossed to the port and looked outside. There was nothing. Utterly and completely nothing. A complete absence of anything. Just the total blackness, that and nothing more. And because everything outside was dark, perception disappeared. It was almost as if someone had painted the port.

Soon, they fell into a routine. They ate three times during their arbitrary day period, and then they slept—Susan in the small bedroom, Johnny in the control room. He did not try to kiss her again, but at times her nearness made him giddy with desire. Often when she wasn't looking he would follow her every move with his eyes, and he might have felt better had he known she did the same thing with him.

And then one day, some three weeks after they had started, they heard again the loud clicking sound and Johnny thought he even heard Suuki's gas hissing in from some unknown vent. "That means we're decelerating," Johnny explained. "We're nearing our first goal, Susan, which happens to be the star Alpha Centauri. We're about to slow down to light speed and less, and deceleration can be just as bad as acceleration." He yawned. "Hey, I'm getting sleepy."

"Will we find anything, Johnny?"

He shrugged, strapping Susan into one of the acceleration hammocks and climbing into the spare himself. "That's a good question. I wish, well, I wish we clear atmosphere over some nice Centaurian planet and find a civilization of the

first humans waiting for us. I guess that's too much to ask."

"Umm-mm." Susan was drifting off to sleep.

Perhaps, Johnny thought as he eased off into slumber, they've planted humans all over the galaxy. Whoever *they* are. . . .

Alpha Centauri was a star of about the sun's size, but it belonged to a double-star system, and the companion, Proxima Centauri, turned out to be much smaller and fainter. When Johnny awoke he found they were back in normal space again, found that it was wonderful to see the familiar speckled vault of stars outside. And he gave vent to a primitive warwhoop when he saw that Alpha Centauri had a planet!

Only one, or so it seemed, here across an unthinkable gulf from the Solar System. Almost four-and-a-half light years, and still Centuari was the closest star. Johnny looked, saw Susan still slept. Chuckling, he decided to land on the planet before she awakened.

He reached it, circled it in a tight, low orbit—retrograde. That way, the planet's rotation would serve as a brake, and did. Presently Johnny was able to take the ship down through a dense white atmosphere which hid the surface features entirely. They came out of the billowing cloud masses abruptly, and Johnny could hardly suppress a moan. Flat gray rock stretched off to the horizon in all directions, broken only occasionally by bleak, jagged peaks which rose almost straight up and were lost in the lowest layer of clouds. Nothing moved, and there was no green which might indicate plant-life. Wearily, Johnny set the ship down with a slight bump, sufficient to awaken Susan.

"Good morning." She stretched languidly.

"Shh! I'm testing."

"What for?"

"Everything. Gravity, density of atmosphere, gasses present. Temperature. Stuff like that. Be finished in a minute."

He was, too. But all he did after that was scratch his head.

"What's the matter."

"I don't understand it. Gravity is within three percent of Earth-normal. Density of atmosphere, the same. There's a little over twenty-two percent oxygen in the air, which is close enough. For the rest, nitrogen, a little krypton and xenon. There's water vapor, too, but very little carbon dioxide. The temperature's fine, seventy degrees Fahrenheit. I don't understand."

"What? You mean the coincidence, this planet being so like Earth?"

"I don't mean that at all."

"Well, I think it's good. It means we'll find the life we're seeking and—what? You don't mean that? Then what do you mean?"

"I mean that there's no life. Take a look."

She did, and it made her shudder. "I've never seen anything so—so deadlooking."

"Well, we might as well put some life into it, kid. Let's hop outside and stretch our legs, anyway."

They did, and found that there was no wind. The air had a strange, flat smell, but it certainly was breathable. After a few moments, it even began to rain, in big, splattering drops.

"Everything for life is here," Johnny said. "Except life."

"What's so strange about that? If you're religious, you say God created the world, and life on it. Well, from that point of view, He's not going to create life just all over. Or, if you're not religious, you say that a happy combination of accidents is necessary to get life started. I once read someplace that the odds against those accidents' all happening together—even if the climate and everything else is right, like this—are tremendous."

Johnny nodded. "I guess you have something there. Whatever the vital spark was, it missed out here. Maybe some day it will come. Maybe—hey! Maybe we're bringing it. There's bacteria all over us, there always is. If some of them stay here after we leave, and if they can survive by eating one another and then multiply too—maybe we started something. And that could be the answer to what happened on Earth, a billion years ago. If some explorer from the stars came down and left some bacteria behind him as he inevitably would, well, there's your early Earth-life. That's how it began."

Susan started to say something, but Johnny interrupted her: "Wait, I'm not finished. Remember I told you I wanted to think about something?"

"Yes. I remember." She looked glum.

"Well, I thought about it and, hell, this is as good a place for it as any. Maybe it will bring some life to this barren slab of a planet."

"For what? What will?"

"A marriage ceremony."

"What! Oh Johnny, Johnny—"

He took her in his arms and held her that way a long

time, stroking her hair and kissing her. "I love you, kid. I—I want you to marry me."

"Marry you? How can we do that? You said something about a ceremony. . . ."

"Sure did. It's going to be perfectly legal."

"I love you too, Johnny Hastings, but you're crazy."

"Think so? We won't have any witnesses, but we'll have everything else. You know what this place needs, Susan? It needs a politician—something—I know, a mayor. And there's a electorate of two, you and me. I nominate Johnny Hastings."

Susan was giggling. "I—I think I understand. You're goofy. But all right, I second the motion."

"Let's vote. My vote is for Hastings. Good man."

"So is mine." Susan was still giggling.

Johnny cleared his throat, spoke in a deep voice. "As mayor of this this—ah, city, I have the legal right to marry people. Do you two want to be married?" And then, in a normal voice: "Sure do."

"Oh, yes. Yes, yes," said Susan.

"In that case—" Johnny's mayor's voice again—"with the power invested in me by the electorate of this city, with the—oh, hell, Susan, I forget how it goes."

"I never knew."

"Well, then we'll have to cut it short. Do you, Johnny Hastings, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, to have and to hold, to love, honor, and protect, through sickness and in health, till death do you part?" He cleared his throat, then said: "I do."

Another pause. "And do you, Susan Bentley, take this man to be your lawful wedded husband, to have and to hold, to love, honor, and obey, through sickness and in health, till death do you part?"

"Well," Susan laughed, "I don't like that obey part."

Johnny kissed her. "Do you?"

"Oh, yes. I do, I do—"

"With the power invested in me and harumph and so forth, I now pronounce you—us—man and wife."

They kissed.

"Johnny?"

"What?"

"I thought it would be silly. It was a little, maybe, but I liked it like that. We had our ceremony and we're really married. No one can take that away from us. It's much better than if we had—"

"You know," Johnny cut her short, "I think this is one hell of a lousy place for a honeymoon. Why don't we get back inside the ship and start off again? Then, after we reach subspace, we'll celebrate."

Susan grinned. "I obey, oh lord and master, just like the mayor said."

"Then come on." He took her hand and together they entered the spaceship. After blast-off, Johnny felt good. He felt wonderful, and even, very much married. But something kept gnawing at the back of his mind, and he did not like it at all. If Alpha Centauri had been any indication of what they might find, perhaps they had set out upon a wild goose chase after all. And this planet had all the ingredients in perfect proportion—except life.

They *had to* find something! The Children of the Chalice depended on them. They had to find something and return with it, before it was too late. . . . And then the sleeping gas came, and their return to sub-space. After that, Johnny stared out for a moment at the utter blackness. They were alone, more alone than any man and woman ever had been before. Well, that was the way a honeymoon should be. Knifing at unthinkable speed through the deep void of sub-space, Johnny took his new wife into his arms. . . .

5

THE DAYS became weeks, and the weeks sped by and were months. Earth was forgotten; almost, it was as if Earth had never been. They streaked in and out of sub-space—seeking, seeking. Time did not matter, for there was something timeless about the black, shoreless ocean of space with its myriad bright, flashing stars, its spinning, whirling, seething nebulae, its dense black clouds of cosmic dust, its occasional nova pulsing into brief glory.

Nowhere was life. They sought it on the swollen planets of blue-white giant stars, sought it again on the worlds of a triple-star system where the sky had a sun of orange and one of green and one of somber red. But the rocky barrens became legion, the harsh methane atmospheres mocked them, the frozen ice-worlds made them depart, shuddering.

Nowhere was life—until, one day, they found it. A lush green world swam in the port as they cleared sub-space and, trembling, Johnny set their frail ship down upon it. The jungle was dank and steaming with huge, fern-like trees

arching overhead to form an impossible canopy five-hundred feet up in the sultry air. And the air, the air was noisy with the sounds of life. Every faint stirring of wind brought those sounds, sometimes far away and sometimes close.

"Maybe," said Johnny, and "maybe..."

But there was no sentience. A young world and a wild one, the planet would not know intelligent life for another half billion years, if at all. Wearily, they climbed back into their ship and Susan said, "We have each other."

But they had a home, too, back there along the dim, distant startrails, and Johnny told her that. "And our people," he said softly. "They're waiting and hoping. Don't you see, Susan, we can't return empty-handed. Somewhere in the galaxy is what we seek, and we can only keep right on seeking until we find it."

"But there are so many stars! We could spend a lifetime, *ten* lifetimes, looking—and find nothing."

"I know it. I know that, Susan. But look: for a long time we went and we thought there was no life anywhere, except in the Solar System. Today we found life, and tomorrow, who knows?"

"We'll stick to it, of course. I'm sorry I said that, but I guess I'm just depressed—"

"Well, let's consider it logically. Just where have we been?"

"Umm-mm. There's Centauri and Fomalhaut—"

"And Procyon and Deneb and Wolfe's Star—"

"And Antares, Sirius, Capella, Vega and Achernar. So many, Johnny. So many!"

Johnny smiled wanly. "We're still close to the Solar System, although we're a million times further than any man has ever been. There are more stars without names than those—"

"Don't, Johnny! You make it sound impossible."

"I didn't mean it that way. What I meant was this: first we'll have to look at the known stars, and that still leaves us a lot. Let's take out the star charts."

Susan brought the charts forward and spread them out on a table. "Okay," Johnny said, pointing. "We still have to go here, and here—"

Susan copied the names on a piece of scratch paper. Names that the ancient peoples of Earth had given the stars for one reason or another. Fanciful names and romantic. But hopeless names?

"Then here's the way it is, Johnny. Before we start getting worried, we'll have to visit Arcturus and Tau Ceti—"

"Sure, and Rigel, Altair and Betelgeuse. The sky is full of

stars, kid, so stop worrying. There's still Canopus, Spica, Pollux, Regulus—hell, I could go on all day."

"Don't."

"All right, pick some names you like. It's hit or miss, it's got to be that way."

"Well, I like the sound of Regulus."

"Suits me," Johnny said cheerfully, starting to triangulate the position.

"And then Betelgeuse. Hah, I never knew how to pronounce that."

"Don't try. If there are natives, they'll call it something else, anyway. They'd probably call it something that means 'sun' in their own language, just like they'd call their planet something that means 'earth' or 'world' or maybe 'home'—"

"If that isn't just like you. . . . We haven't found anything more intelligent than a crocodile yet, but you're already giving a language to some unknown intelligence!"

"Regulus it is," said Johnny, "and then Betelgeuse. Incidentally, I always pronounced it like the first half of betelnut and the plural of goose, but I wouldn't bet on it. Well, here we go."

"And after those two, try Canopus."

"You bet," said Johnny. "We've got all the time in the world." He was smiling and his words were flip, but when acceleration gripped them, he didn't feel so cheerful. The sky was full of stars, all right, and he learned that more every day. . . .

Regulus had not even bothered giving birth to planets. It hung in space, an exile in the bleak marches of infinity, blue and hot and very much alone. They cleared sub-space long enough to find that out, long enough to see the blue orb spewing its energy out to an empty void. It was a month later. A month gone for nothing.

"Five of them," said Susan. "Five months."

Second on their list, Betelgeuse had a great family of planets, but the star itself was red, old, feeble. None of the sixteen planets could support life. All were too far from the primary, all too cold, all had seen their good years perhaps a billion years before the coming of man. Garbed in their cumbersome spacesuits, they poked around some incredibly ancient ruins on the eleventh planet. But mostly, the ruins had crumbled into dust and what was left told them nothing except that the ancient race had not been human. Everything was built on a scale too small and the air contained thick traces of ammonia gas, anyway.

Back in their ship, Johnny lit a cigarette. They had no worry about food and their air automatically renewed itself, but such luxury items as cigarettes were fast disappearing and now he nursed this one along until it was hardly more than a glowing ember. "And for now," he said, "that leaves us Canopus."

"The names are all running together, Johnny. It's hopeless—"

He went on as if she hadn't spoken. "Canopus is a very unusual star."

"Yes? Why? They're all the same. Oh, the color is different, but they're all the same because none of them have what we're looking for." Susan began to whimper, softly, but each small sob racked her body.

Johnny placed his hand on her shoulder, but she tensed away from it. He tried to kiss her, found her face averted. She was laughing and crying, holding her head in her hands and not looking at him.

"Out of it, Susan! Snap out of it!"

He hit her, a hard slap which left an angry red imprint on her cheek. And after that her crying became normal and she let her head fall against his chest and used his tunic to wipe away her tears.

"I'm sorry—" he said.

"No. You had to do that. It helped, Johnny. I—I guess I was almost hysterical, but we're so alone. . . ."

"Why don't you get some sleep? We can talk about Canopus in the morning."

"No. Every hour counts. Who can say what's happening to the Children now, after half a year? What did you want to say about Canopus?"

He lit one of the scarce cigarettes and gave it to her, watching as she blew smoke gratefully at the ceiling. "Well, for one thing, it's big. It's the brightest star in this entire section of the galaxy. It's even bright from Earth, and that's six hundred and fifty light years away. It's class is four, kid, which means it's a white giant. If there are any planets potentially suitable for life, they'd have to be in the neighborhood of a billion miles or more from their sun."

"What a place to get a sunburn!" Susan said, and laughed. The hysteria which had gripped her moments before was gone completely, and that was one thing Johnny had to learn about his wife: her moods knew more variations than a chameleon. And that did not mean, he also learned, that there was anything shallow about her. She simply had many

facets, and each one, like the facet of a good gem, had its inner depths.

And, weeks later: "There it is, Susan."

For a long time the girl stared from the port, stared into the inky depths of space outside. A star could be bright—it could be the brightest star in this entire sector of the galaxy, as, indeed, Canopus was—and still, space around it seemed very black and very cold.

Canopus shone brilliantly ahead of them as they surged forward on their regular space-drive. And something, a tiny spark, gleamed off to the left.

"Johnny—?"

"Yes," he cried. "Yes, it's a planet."

And they swept in toward it.

But it wasn't a planet, not really. It had a diameter of one thousand miles. It was all a solid white color—not gleaming, not dull—just white. And the surface was flat, utterly devoid of physical features. Like the black asteroid which held the Chalice!

They came down for a landing, heard the atmosphere shrieking around them outside. The world was a thousand times bigger than the black asteroid, but still it was not large enough to hold an atmosphere for long—unless, like the Black Asteroid, the whole thing was artificial....

"The atmosphere is perfect," Johnny said, half an hour after they had landed. "Oh, it's not exactly like Earth's, but it's close enough so you couldn't tell the difference just by breathing it."

Susan was busy with some instruments, too, and she told him: "Ditto on the gravity! The slightest fraction stronger than Earth-norm, but not enough so we'd notice it. The temperature's a little hot, ninety degrees Fahrenheit."

"You can thank Canopus for that."

"What's the difference? We can stand it. But you've been using the bio-scanner, Johnny. Is there any—"

"Life? What do you think? This planet looks like a hunk of chalk. No, the air's clean of spores of bacteria or anything else. No life here, Susan."

"Then, then Canopus is no good either? I really thought this time we'd find something." Susan smiled wanly.

"I didn't say it was no good. I said there's no life here. Maybe it doesn't matter. I'll tell you this, kid: the place is artificial."

"Man-made?"

"I dunno. *Someone* made it. It's too round and too flat

and there'd have to be a force-field holding in the atmosphere and increasing the pull of gravity, too. Now, if it's artificial, someone made it for a reason. Suppose we go outside and find out why."

"Okay, but just you wait. I'm not going out into that ninety-degree oven wearing this jumper." And Susan was busy exploring in their clothing locker. "Hey," she called after a time, "there's nothing in here that a girl can wear."

Johnny laughed. "What did you expect? No one invited you along, honey."

"Oh yeah? Then you asked for it." There was a rustling, and then Susan stepped back into the cabin.

Johnny whistled. "You're going *that* way?"

"Sure. It's hot outside, and you're my husband, aren't you? Let's go."

Smiling, Johnny stripped down to his trousers, buckled a blaster around his waist, put fresh clips of ammunition in all his pockets. "You never know," he said. "We're liable to find anything, and this is just in case."

Susan began to giggle.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Oh, nothing, really. It's only that—well, it's exactly like the old stories you read. You're a man, and you're going outside armed to the teeth, complete with space-boots and leatheroid trousers. Me, I'm a woman, and I've seen a dozen magazine covers—well, maybe the women really *would* go like me!"

Laughing, they joined hands and stepped into the airlock.

6

It was hot, and quite dry. They felt the dryness at once, far worse than the heat. In a matter of hours, Johnny knew, it would parch their skin and crack their lips. Already, his eyes had begun to smart. They maintained a pleasant level of moisture within the ship, synthesizing water from compressed hydrogen and oxygen tanks, but the dry heat which swept over them now would make the Sahara feel like a dank, sultry jungle.

"Well," Susan shrugged doubtfully, "what do we look for? I don't see anything, Johnny."

"No, but if *they* put this artificial planet here, it was for a reason. See? Look at that ground, it's artificial, all right. There's not a fault, a crack—nothing."

"Welcome to Cyberworld!"

"Susan?"

"Hunh? What's Cyberworld?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you. Didn't you say—"

"I didn't say anything. But you said, 'Welcome to Cyberworld.' Though, come to think of it, it didn't sound like your voice. In fact, it didn't sound like any voice. It just made noise kind of inside my head."

"Welcome to Cyberworld. Respond, respond!"

"Johnny, I'm afraid!"

Something was speaking. Not aloud, but within their heads. If Susan hadn't heard it too, Johnny might have thought he was going off his rocker. But the voice which was not a voice at all spoke to both of them. And what had it said—respond. . . .

"Thank you for your welcome," Johnny said aloud, feeling foolish. Susan was trembling despite the heat, and he draped his arm around her bare shoulder. He looked around them, saw nothing but the even, chalky expanse of whiteness. He began to sweat, and it wasn't the heat alone.

"Ask me questions, please." The whisper which came withing his head suddenly was almost plaintive. "Ask me questions. Anything."

"Johnny, I heard it again. . . ."

"Shh! All right, who are you?"

"I am no one."

Silence.

"Then *what* are you?"

"Ahh, that is better." Sibilant, metallic, eager, the voice spoke within his head. Susan's eyes were open wide and she cocked an ear as if she were listening to something. She heard it too, and that made Johnny feel better.

"That is much better, for I am a machine and hence the answer to your first question had to be a negative one. More particularly, I am a cybernetics machine."

"Where are you?" Johnny still felt foolish.

"I am here. Everywhere. I am the world under your feet. I am this planet."

"All of it?"

"Yes, all of it. I am a memory vault and a limited form of sentience which slumbers until human presence is felt."

"Yeah?" Trust Susan to get cocky when she was afraid!

"Then what triggered you off?"

"You did. The human brain emits electro magnetic wave

lengths along a certain frequency. They waken me, and I answer questions."

"How do you speak in our language?" Johnny demanded. "None of our people constructed this place."

"I speak no language. I speak all languages. The medium is telepathy, and your brain does the translating. Although I know enough about you to speak your language aloud if I desired. You are of the planet Earth, of the star Sol. You are John Hastings, Jr., and the female is Susan Bentley."

"Susan Hastings!" Susan waived.

"Bentley-Hastings," the machine compromised. "It does not matter. Ask me questions."

Johnny chuckled softly. After the novelty wore off, it began to grow amusing. The machine had a one track mind, provided machines had minds. Ask it questions....

"Why do you always say that?" Johnny wanted to know.

"Simple. I was constructed to answer questions. My memory vaults fill the interior of this globe completely, and literally, I can answer anything. Try me."

"How old are you?"

"Umm-mm, five millions of your years."

"Five million!"

"Certainly. I'm no youngster." The unheard metallic voice which yet gave the strong suggestion of sibilancy now sounded casual, almost friendly.

It made Susan blush and attempt to cover herself self-consciously with her arms. "Do you think he—he can see me? I mean, the way I am...."

Johnny smiled, enjoying himself. "I didn't tell you to come out that way. But seriously, you can forget about it. Who said anything about a he? It's an *it*."

"Well, I don't like it," Susan persisted. "Ask whatever you want Johnny, but then let's get out of here."

"Suits me. Who put you here—five millions years ago?"

The reply came at once, and Johnny somehow could picture the impossibly vast memory vaults beneath his feet shuffling and reshuffling through a maze of indexed information. "The first humans, naturally. It was after they had developed the powers of regeneration and after they had broken out into deep space. They stopped here first and constructed a planet. This planet. Me. This planet which circles Canopus once in every—"

"Never mind. Why did they build you?"

"Elementary. I am here precisely because such as you

might come. However, you are first. The very first in five million years. An age ago, the first humans journeyed out into space with a plan. Perhaps it was a noble plan, but that is not my province. They were the Lords of Creation and they knew it. Their plan was a dream—to spread their seed across the galaxy. This they did, and returned. Naturally, suitable planets were limited. Your Earth is one, Mars and Venus in your Solar System, others. All told, there are three hundred and seventy-five. Would you like to see some of them?”

“Would we!” Johnny cried. “You bet we would.”

There was a silence and then Johnny—saw. He didn’t know how, but he saw. The picture came in his brain only, for when he shut his eyes he could see it quite clearly. Three-dimensional colored, vibrantly alive.

The metallic voice droned. “This is the planet Glehna of the star Spurl. You will observe that—”

But he paid the voice no attention. It wasn’t necessary. The sun was orange, a deep, mellow orange. The fields were lush, but purple, not green. Men and women worked in them, big, strong men, comely women, naked but for loin cloths.

“They are primitive on Glehna,” said the voice. “Their machine age lies some three thousand years ahead of them, but they are a happy people. Next, you see Lulalim, of the star Li. Here the people are not so happy.”

A somber landscape, thrusting naked crags up at a heavy, black-laden sky. A blue sun, but far away, showing briefly through a rent in the clouds. It was cold. Johnny could almost feel the cold, and because he could see the picture in his head and not in his eyes, he saw also that Susan was shivering. Then she saw it too....

“The environment is not ideal for man,” said the machine. “Man can barely scratch out an existence, and so it is entirely possible that on Lulalim men shall always be barbaric. You will notice, by the name of their planet, the softness of their language. A reaction to the harsh environment—”

The picture wavered, flickered as the voice trailed off. Another took its place. The depths of space—a crude, rocket-driven spaceship in the background, men spewing from its port, helmeted, space-suited, rockets strapped to their shoulders. With the reckless grace of practiced mayhem, they boarded another ship. Of their number, many died, but others there were who reached the second ship, blasted their

way within, fought and died for some nameless cause. Johnny thought he saw a skull and crossbones emblazoned on one man's arm before the arm and the man disappeared in a flare of radioactivity.

"These are the people of Shilot," the machine purred. "A crude form of interplanetary travel is theirs, but they fight senselessly among themselves. They will never reach the stars."

Again the picture wavered, disappeared.

And there were others. After awhile, Johnny lost track of them. The civilizations pictured varied; some were hardly civilizations at all, others had developed to a remarkably high degree. But not one of them had yet reached up for the stars.

"All right," Johnny snapped. He could have watched all day, looking at the great pageant of a humanity which was spread out thinly across the incredible reaches of the galaxy. But the machine had no intention of hurrying, apparently, and Johnny couldn't merely stand there watching. "All right. But it seems peculiar. Are we of Earth the most highly advanced of all the human cultures?"

"No one told you that, John Hastings, Jr. There have been others, according to my records, although none of them have ever come here. Naturally, when they developed startravel they also found their Chalice. One planted, in each case, in some remote part of the particular star system. Observe—"

The world he saw now was dark and dead, but it glowed. There was something unwholesome about that glow, the way it pulsed from horizon to horizon, flickering, brightly and obscuring the red sun. There were cities, or what had been cities—crumbled and fallen into ruin. Not very long ago, it seemed. Nowhere was life.

"They found the Chalice," the voice droned. "And because they could not all use it, war resulted. It was a deadly war, fought with radioactive weapons, and, as you can see, the planet is a radioactive corpse, festering forever in the void.

"Again, the same thing happened over and over." As the voice continued, the picture faded, another one taking its place almost at once. "This is Karnok, of the sun Karnokkay. Here they are a generation behind, but the results will be identical in time."

The city thrummed with activity, a bustling, busy metropolis the size of New York. It had been a great port once, for Johnny could see the massive quays protruding out into an inlet of some nameless ocean. But the waters of that ocean

glowed dully, dangerously. Radioactivity once more? Johnny couldn't tell, but not one ship plied those waters.

Something streaked in over the city from the south, a hurtling thing all silver and glass in the bright sunlight. It hovered over the city, and something else, smaller, winged down from its silvery belly. A few moments later a fiery mushroom erupted from the streets of the city, and when, after what must have been a long time, it was carried away by the winds, the city was dead. . . .

"They fight for their Chalice. One nation has it, the other wants it. The war will engulf both in destruction."

"That couldn't happen on Earth," Susan said. But it sounded more like a question. "After all, we don't have nations. We have one world state, and it's a democratic one."

"Sure, but there are pressure groups. You saw them for yourself. And what about the way the Children are treated? Civil War could mean the same thing, but—"

Said the voice: "On this next planet, you will see—"

"That's enough! I have another question. Who are those that created you?"

"I have said, the first humans."

"Yes, I know that. But who, and where?"

Silence. Then: "That information is classified. One moment, please."

Johnny and Susan looked at each other hopelessly.

"Classified? What does he mean by classified?"

Johnny grinned wearily. "Not he, it. But search me, kid. I don't know what it means. . . ."

Suddenly, something groaned beneath their feet. Johnny blinked, and when he looked again, a portal had opened in the flat white rock of the planet. One moment there was nothing—the next, a circular pit awaited them.

"Enter," said the machine's voice. And, when they failed to move: "You have nothing to fear, provided your intentions toward the first humans are friendly. I have said enter. Enter."

Johnny shrugged. "What do you think, kid?"

"Don't look at me. But we're not getting anywhere by staying here, that's for sure."

"Well, okay." And Johnny stalked toward the pit.

As it turned out, a flight of stairs awaited them, and it reminded Johnny of the nine steps leading to the Black Chalice. Naturally, he thought, the same builders. . . .

The stairs led around and down, descending in a circular fashion for about a hundred feet. And at the bottom, they

found themselves in a small, square room with a soft, almost spongy floor.

"Lie down."

"Hunh?"

"I said lie down. We will conduct certain psychological tests to determine the frame of reference in which you hold the first humans. If it is a friendly frame, you go from here with the information you seek. If it is hostile, you do not leave here at all. The vault will simply close in upon you. The third alternative is this: you may withdraw now and depart without receiving any information."

Susan frowned. "If we flunk whatever test he has up his sleeve, we're buried alive. All right, *it*. *Its* sleeve! But Johnny, what kind of test. . ."

"That beats heck out of me. How should I know? But look, we've got nothing against these first humans, have we? We came to find them in the first place?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Well, don't get optimistic on me. It's not entirely true. Subconsciously, we're probably both bitter. The first humans planted the Chalice in our Solar System, so, as a result, we're hated, feared, fought with—"

"You mean maybe *it* will interpret that as hostile?"

Johnny shrugged. "A possibility. All I'm trying to say is this: we can't be sure. This machine of a planet will be completely objective, but what it calls hostility might be something we wouldn't think of that way at all. Think it's worth a try?"

"Johnny, you sound almost flip. But—"

"I know. Our lives depend on it. I don't know what the answer is, but it's a cinch we won't find what we're looking for unless the machine tells us. So, I think we ought to give it a whirl."

For answer, Susan turned and faced him, placing her arms around his neck. "I thought so all along, but I wanted to hear you say it."

"Well, I said it."

"Kiss me, stupid. Umm-mm. . ."

And then they had stretched out side by side, on the spongy substance, while the voice repeated again and again, "Lie down, lie down—ahh, that is good!"

A pause. Then: "You are asleep." Simply stated, with no fanfare, no preambles. The ultimate in hypnotism, for Johnny felt one brief instant of vertigo, reached out to clutch Susan's

hand, but didn't make it. He was sound asleep less than a second after the voice commanded it.

He awoke with a headache. Dimly, he half-remembered dreaming, and while he could not remember what he dreamed, the thought of it somehow left him strangely frightened. "Susan?" he whispered. "You all right?" He smiled. There are certain places, certain happenings, which make you want to whisper. This crypt with its dreaming, hypnotic sleep was such a place.

"Yeah, I guess so. I have a headache."

"Me too. Well, I guess we passed the test. At least, I see no indications that we're locked in here."

Then, came the metallic voice: "You are quite right. While your brains display a marked amount of hostility and ambivalence toward the Chalice, they regard the first humans only in reverence. As a result, the classified information is yours for the asking. Ask me questions."

"Where are the first humans?" Johnny demanded.

"They exist in a star-system which has not been named by you."

"Oh. In that case, it's probably hundreds of light years from here. A long trip, but we can make it."

"You do not understand. You have not named the particular star-system because it is remote. Truly remote. It is in the galactic satellite which, in your language, is referred to as the Greater Magellanic Cloud. It is therefore—"

"What!" Johnny gasped. "Magellanic Cloud—that's so far from here that we couldn't reach it in a dozen lifetimes, even with our sub-space drive."

"To be precise, the distance is 26,000 parsecs, or 86,000 light years. Although it is actually within the outer fringes of the Milky Way Galaxy, the Greater Magellanic Cloud is, for all intents and purposes, an exterior galaxy."

Susan pouted. "That's great. Oh, that's just wonderful. Now that we know where the first humans are, we can't do a thing about it."

"Ask me questions," the machine purred in their minds.

"Can we get there?" said Johnny.

"Of course."

"That's ridiculous." Perhaps, he thought, the machine had misinterpreted the question. "How can we get there? Not with our sub-space drive?"

"That is correct. Not with your subspace-subspace-subspacesubspace. . . ."

Quite suddenly, the machine voice which spoke and yet did

not speak sounded like a broken record. The same syllables, over and over again.

"It broke down!" Susan wailed.

"...spacesubspace..."

Johnny couldn't help smiling, in spite of the situation. "Well, after all these millions of years, I guess it kind of needs oil. But that's a hell of a note, when we're getting so close to the answer—"

"...subspacesubspace... ah! I oil myself, you see, but sometimes it takes time until the various units can attain harmony once more. Now, what were you asking?"

Johnny wiped the sweat off his forehead with a trembling hand. "How can we get to the Greater Magellanic Cloud?"

"I can send you. That, also, is why I am here. The first humans planned it this way, for beyond sub-space there is something which, for want of a better term, I call folded space."

"I don't get it," Susan protested.

"Elementary. In sub-space, you can travel far faster than light, but not fast enough when intergalactic distances must be coped with. In folded space, that is precisely what happens—space is folded. You would not understand the science behind it, but is precisely as if space were a sheet of paper and you could somehow fold it, corner to corner. Thus, to get from one corner to the other it would not be necessary to travel across the length of paper. Instead, through folding the sheet the corners are made to coincide. Travel is instantaneous. And such is folded space."

Johnny chuckled grimly. "Okay, I won't argue with you. When can you send us?"

There was a pause. Then: "Now, if you wish."

"We sure do."

"But much has happened on Tawroc since I was created..."

"Tawroc?"

"Tawroc, the home of the first humans. I think you will be sorely disappointed, for, although they created me—"

"Well, just let us decide that."

"Good enough. You will, naturally, need a command of the language of Tawroc. So—"

Johnny was aware of an unfamiliar rustling with his head, and the suggestion of pain with it. Looking at Susan, he saw her face was strained, twisted, distorted. Then, did the pain affect her more strongly? He reached out to comfort her, but

abruptly, the strangeness within his head subsided, and his wife relaxed visibly.

"It is done," the machine told them. "You will speak Tawroc when you have to. But, because I do not believe you will find on Tawroc what you seek, I will await your return here. Now, are you prepared to leave?"

"Yes," said Johnny.

"No!" This was Susan, indignantly. "If you think I'm going anywhere where there are people, dressed the way I am—"

"Undressed, you mean," Johnny laughed.

Together, they climbed the stairs, returned to their ship, got clothing for Susan and more arms for both of them. In the crypt once more, the machine's voice was impatient.

"Vain," it mused. "Humans are so vain. But I perceive you are ready. Goodbye, good luck, but I think you will be a lot wiser when we meet again."

Johnny looked around uneasily. "I don't understand," he admitted. "What can that mean, we'll be disappointed with Tawroc? The birthplace of humanity, kid—can you imagine what that means? It was there, millions of years ago that the seed was spawned. Now it's spread out over the length of the galaxy. But Tawroc, Tawroc should be as close to heaven as a man can ever get and still live."

"Eighty six thousand light years," was all that Susan said. "Can it be done . . . ?"

Johnny did not know, nor did he have a chance to ponder it. Something seemed to grip him and twist, and he felt, impossibly, that he was being turned inside out! It failed to last long. He knew, dimly, that it could not. Even the Children would not long survive the exquisite pain which lanced through every atom of his being. He heard Susan screaming, saw her as through a dense fog, far, far away. He tried to reach her, but she floated away on that unreal sea of fog, the wraiths of it swirling and billowing between them. He called her name, heard it rebound at him from all sides, "*Susan, Susan, Susan . . .*"

The fog caressed him, brought with it a brief awareness of utter cold. Tumbling headlong into a pit of that cold, Johnny remembered nothing more. . . .

7

THEY WERE on a beach, a wide, sandy beach which sloped down gradually until it met the sea. The water had a

strangely reddish cast and Johnny thought first of plankton until he looked up and saw the sky, too, was a glowing crimson. Clouds obscured the sun, but he knew, if he could see it, the day-star would be somber red. A hundred yards down the slope, the waves shattered themselves to red-spray, billowing and roaring and tumbling back upon the waves behind them. Fury lashed those waters and it might have been a hurricane. But the air was quiet. Then the sun was close, and over on the night side of the planet, one or more big satellites must have whipped the nameless ocean to a frenzy.

"Where are we?" Susan asked, propping herself up on one elbow and brushing the sand from her hair. And, when Johnny laughed: "I know it's a stereotyped question, but where *are* we?"

"Tawroc, I guess. Wherever Tawroc is. That machine wasn't kidding."

"That's fine," Susan said. "That's just fine. He—*it*—only neglected to tell us one thing."

"What's that?"

"How the hell are we going to get back from here?"

It was a good question. Canopus and their ship lay across the length of the galaxy from them, and Canopus was a thousand times brighter than Sol. Even Canopus, at this distance, would be nothing but a tiny mote, lost in the deep, far away clouds which formed the Milky Way.

"Later," Johnny said. "Ask me that later. Right now—hold on, what's that?"

Someone was coming up the beach toward them. At this distance he wasn't much more than a tiny dot, but soon he came closer and they could see it was a man. He hailed a greeting at them and it was in some strange, alien tongue. "*Kortu!*" he cried, and again: "*Kortu!*"

"That means hello," Johnny found himself saying, and then, startled, he raised a hand to his mouth. He'd said: "*Chora ben kila tok.*" They were nonsense syllables, they could have utterly no meaning for him or for Susan. Yet, saying them, he understood.

"My gosh," said Susan. She didn't say it in English, but Johnny comprehended.

"I think I understand," he mused, again in the perfectly understandable alien tongue. "That machine wasn't fooling, he gave us the language of Tawroc, but it remained dormant in our brains until a word in the language triggered it off. Now we know it, and speak it."

They couldn't doubt this one final improbability. The machine, indeed, had seemed capable of anything, and one minor miracle more or less wouldn't matter.

By now, the man who had hailed them was approaching, and Johnny watched him trudging along through the sand. He was middle-aged, with a long, careless shock of iron-gray hair, an intelligent face and a short, stocky figure.

"Kortul!" Johnny cried. "Greetings!"

"Greetings yourself. What are you two doing down here on the beach?"

"We just arrived," said Johnny.

"Fine weather we've been having, if you go in for admiring the weather. Personally, I don't. Some primitives still do, and I thought the way you were dressed, and all—"

The man wore a sort of coverall, but if there were any seams, Johnny failed to see them. The outfit was of some metallic material, and it seemed to flow fluidly with every motion the man made.

"We're strangers here," Johnny told him. He was beginning to enjoy himself. He could picture the man's face when he was told that the two before him had come from the stars. A culture-dream realized, after how many millions of years?

"Strangers? I don't understand." Then, suspicion crossed the man's face. He came close to Johnny, stood on tiptoe, peered into his eyes. He relaxed. "Oh, you're blue eyes, all right. Is the woman yours?"

"Yes, my wife. We have come—"

"Haven't seen any brown eyes in days. Guess we chased them off this continent. If we keep winning the way we are, the sides will have to be changed, of course. Too bad, for I really learned to hate brown eyes."

"We have something to tell you. We—we're not of Tawroc."

"Hah-hah. Not of Tawroc. That's good. Hah-hah."

"I'm not joking."

"Well, then explain yourself. How can that be?"

"We are from the stars. Wait—don't laugh. You see the Milky Way Galaxy in the sky at night, don't you?"

"See it? It practically covers the entire sky! Of course I see it. So what?"

"So that's where we come from. A planet called Earth, circling a star called Sol. A generation ago, we found the Chalice you left, and—"

"That's interesting." The man clucked his tongue once or

twice, nodded. "That's interesting. You plan to stay long? Look me up some time in Chandros City if you do. Meanwhile, guess I have to go on down the beach and look for brown eyes. Never know where they're liable to pop up, the rats."

Johnny felt something was wrong. He couldn't tell what, but it was something. Perhaps the man hadn't understood.

"My name is John Hastings," he said. "This is my wife, Susan. We're not native to Tawroc. We come from the Milky Way Galaxy, thanks to the Chalice your people planted in our Solar System, an eon ago."

The man yawned, stretched, watched the tides come booming in. "You already told me that. Have a nice trip?"

"Man, don't you realize we've come across eighty six thousand light years to see you? You planted our seed on Earth, and we spawned. We found your Chalice—"

"You already told me that, too. And don't you think I know my history? Too bad you didn't arrive a bit earlier, you could have taken part in the brown-eyes blue-eyes war. Almost over, I think. Say, wait a minute! I thought there was something fishy here!"

Wordless now, the man peered intently at Susan's face. "Ah-hah!" he cried triumphantly. "Brown eyes, I might have known." Before Johnny could stop him, he had reached into a pocket of his coverall—the pocket seemed invisible, but it was there, for when he thrust his hand laterally across his chest, it disappeared within the garment. He came up with a small, slender tube, pointed it at Susan. Something glowed briefly and she did an abrupt flip-flop in mid-air, then fell on her face in the sand.

"Susan!" Johnny cried. He kneeled by her still form, turned her over tenderly, felt for the heartbeat. It was there—but faint. He stood up, rage contorting his features. "Damn you—"

The man clucked softly, returned the weapon to its invisible sheath. "Are you sure *your* eyes are blue?" he demanded.

Johnny hit him, felt his knuckles crunch on the man's thin jaw, watched him fall and land on his back.

Wiping blood from his lips, he looked up at Johnny. He seemed very confused. "Why did you do that?" He shook his head sadly. "Why?"

"Damn you—"

"Oh, don't worry about your wife." The man didn't wipe his mouth any longer, for the bleeding had stopped. "She'll

be up and around any minute now. Of course, she'll have to go to Casualty Island for the duration. But I have a suspicion this war won't last much longer, anyway."

Susan stirred. Her eyelids fluttered, and, in a moment, she got to her feet groggily. "What hap—"

"Don't talk!" the man protested. "It's against regulations. I got you fair and square, there's no denying that. There'll be a boat leaving for Casualty Island this afternoon and, naturally, you'll be on it."

Susan frowned. "What's he talking about?"

"I don't know. I think he's crazy. He must be crazy."

"Now, listen, young woman. You've got to follow the war-ethics. There wouldn't be much sense to warfare if you didn't. Although, I must admit some people are growing bored with it, anyway. Say, maybe you'll have some suggestions. What do you do on your world for diversion?"

"Well," Susan began, "we—"

"Skip it," Johnny told her. "He's a first-class nut. Uh—Mr.—"

"Nabish, name's Nabish."

"Nabish, where's the nearest city?"

"Right back of the beach that way, two or three miles. Depends on whether you mean the metropolitan area or the city itself. I always say—"

"Thanks," Johnny told him, leading Susan away. Nabish clucked his tongue in sad confusion as they departed.

The city was quite beautiful. They saw it first from a rocky highland overlooking both it and the beach. It spread out below them, circular, the avenues radiating from a central plaza like spokes from the hub of a wheel. Flat-roofed and square, all the buildings were low, graceful structures.

"Want to go down there now?" Susan asked.

Johnny nodded. He couldn't get the man named Nabish out of his thoughts. He'd seemed intelligent, even perfectly rational, if you could disregard that business about a brown-eyes—blue eyes war. He even seemed to understand when they said they'd come from a far world, from the Milky Way Galaxy, which certainly should be the predominant feature of the night sky here. But—if he understood—he didn't care. It failed to stir him. And Johnny, for his part, had expected the people of Tawroc to receive Susan and himself as a father might receive his long-lost son. Racially, that was the relationship, but Nabish's attitude, assuming the man were sane, could foster only confusion.

A broad avenue swept around the outer fringes of the

city's radiating streets. This was the rim of the wheel, Johnny thought idly. He'd have been interested if they hadn't met Nabish first but, with Nabish gnawing at the back of his mind, architectural beauty left him cold.

The avenue was crowded with vehicles, but so fast did they streak by that Johnny could hardly see their design. Vaguely, they were tear-drop-shaped, hugging the ground and zooming over it as if they somehow did away with friction. There were pedestrians, too, waiting to cross on either side of the avenue. Every now and then, one would dart out into the street and hurtle, dodging and weaving, to the other side. There was no screeching of brakes as the vehicles sped on by, and not one of the pedestrians had an easy time of it.

"People can get killed that way," Susan said, and laughed nervously.

"Not Chalice people," Johnny reminded her. "Oh, they can be maimed, but they'll heal."

"Still, you'd think they'd develop some kind of traffic control. The accident rate must be awful high. . . ."

Johnny whirled around then. Someone was screaming. He caught a brief glimpse of a woman darting out across the street, saw one of the zooming vehicles bear down on her. She tried to avoid it, but the vehicle bore on, swerving neither to left nor to right. There was a crunching sound, and more screaming as the woman was borne along for a score of yards under the vehicle. A moment later, her broken, bloody form remained on the highway, while more cars streaked past.

"How awful!" And Susan averted her face.

A bell clanged somewhere, and a portal opened in one of the square buildings. Out came four men, carrying a stretcher. They waited several seconds, then ran out across the road with it, scooping the woman up and carrying her back to the building. In a moment, the portal shut.

Two men stood a few feet off at Johnny's left, and he heard them talking. "Shame about Lidun," one said.

"Yes. There was to be a party at her house tonight. But it will be two days before she's herself again."

"Umm-mm. Yes. She got mashed pretty badly, so I guess they'll have to give her new features. Well, she never was very pretty."

"Her husband's going to be furious. Hah, poor Skandar. That's the third time this month his wife has met with an

accident. I always said Lidun wasn't the most graceful woman in the world."

"What you forget is that Skandar is brown-eyes, and a casualty, too. He won't know anything about this till after the war is over. Lidun's suing for divorce anyway—can't blame her, not while this war is being fought."

Johnny cleared his throat. "Hello," he said, smiling.

"Eh? Hi, neighbor. Don't think I know you."

"My name's Hastings."

"An odd name. You from Syloph or one of the mountain cities?"

"No. Some place else. Does this sort of thing happen all the time?"

"What sort of thing?" The two men looked at each other queerly.

"This accident. I mean, I should think you'd have a way of regulating traffic—"

"Where *are* you from?"

"A long way off. What I mean is—"

"He must be one of those mountain yokels," the second man said. "Only thing they have to worry about there is the animals. But then, that can be pretty rough. Yes, friend, this sort of thing happens all the time. Why shouldn't it?"

"Why shouldn't it? Well. . ."

"It's perfectly harmless. Lidun will be dodging cars again in two days. Unless they call her number on the lottery and decide she's to be un-Chaliced."

"Don't tell me that can be done?" Johnny demanded.

"Why, naturally. Where did you say you were from?"

"I didn't."

"Well, wherever it is, you certainly must know about the lottery. It's just to keep life interesting, friend, and the Almighty knows we need something to keep life interesting, eh? One each month out of every hundred thousand people is un-Chaliced. Poor things, a lot of them commit suicide. But then, you can't blame them. Funny thing about the rest of them, they go off to live in the mountains some place—"

"No," his companion corrected him, "in the desert. They go off into the desert."

"The mountains!"

"Desert."

"Mountains."

"Des—"

The first man took one of the tubes from his coverall, pointed it at his companion, who glowed briefly, then fell. A

bell clanged again, and the stretcher-bearers shuffled out of their building, retrieved the body, returned inside with it.

"As I was saying," the first man went on, "they hide off in the mountains some place, and—I'll be un-Chaliced! He was right. Jor was right. It's the desert, I remember reading something about that. Well, I'll have to apologize to Jor when he's up and about again. Anyway, what were we talking about?"

"Forget it," Johnny told him. "Listen, who's your civic leader here? I'd like to see him."

"Civic leader? What's that?"

"An official. A mayor, or president or city-planner. Something—"

"There's no such man."

"Your government, then. Where's your government building?"

"Government? Oh, a body that governs. Why, there's no such thing. Be an awful lot of waste, wouldn't it? What do we need a government for?"

"Isn't there anyone with authority?"

"Of course. Each man's his own authority. The Almighty knows life is boring enough, without someone having to restrict your behavior. Say, how come you're so naive?"

"Forget it," Johnny said again. "How about a scientist? I'd like to see a scientist."

"Well, every man to his own opinion, I always said. But what do you want to see one of those idiotic hobbyists for?"

"Hobbyist? Don't you have any professional scientists?"

"What do we need them for? We've got everything we want. But, as I've said, there are some who dabble in science. Hobbyists. Want to see one, eh? Well, umm-mm, let's see. Yes, Condan would be your man. Condan." Here the man paused, took what looked like a sheet of paper from his invisible pocket, wrote on it. "This is Condan's address, my friend. What did you say your name was?"

"Hastings."

"Right, Hastings. See you some time, but then, if you meet with an accident between now and then, I might not recognize you. Keep interested."

Condan's house was like all the rest, and Johnny paused before running his hand in front of the electric eye on the door-frame.

"I don't like this place," Susan said, shaking her head.

"I don't understand it. Well, maybe this Condan—" And

he heard chimings within the place when he ran his hand across the electric eye.

In a few moments, a woman came to the door, tall, angular, unpretty. "Yes?"

"We'd like to see Condan?"

"What for?"

"Hunh?"

"I work here, so I have to see the horrible old man, but why anyone else would want to see him I cannot understand."

"Still, we want to see him."

"Hmph! I'll tell him he has callers."

And the woman plodded back through a foyer, muttering to herself.

Condan followed her when she returned to them a few moments later. Condan was short, bent, quite thoroughly bald, with beady little eyes that darted furtively first from Johnny to Susan and then back again. "Yes?" he demanded, his voice squeaking effortlessly over two octaves while it uttered that single word.

"You're a scientist," Johnny said. "We'd like to speak with you about—"

"Very well, young man. Whatever it is, very well. But first allow me to apologize for my hobby. Yes, I am a scientist, but not out of direct choice. I tried arson as a hobby first, but I'm too clumsy, and I burned myself up pretty badly after three tries. Assassination, next, but it's a thankless labor, for no matter how well you do your job, your victim is up and around within a few days. Next I tried... but I'm boring you, and we can't have that.

"In short, I tried everything. Science alone remained, and so I dabbled. Actually, it does have its rewards, for I have heard of someone who met with an accident while using acid, and—"

"I see," Johnny told him wearily. "What science do you specialize in?"

"Why, none in particular. All of them. I'm the word's foremost scientist, I'm sorry to say, but then, remember it wasn't out of direct choice. I just had nothing to do with my spare time, you see."

"I still don't like this place," Susan whispered.

But Johnny said: "We don't come from Tawroc."

"Umm-mm. That's nice. Perhaps I can write a paper. But sadly, few will read it. What precisely do you mean, you don't come from Tawroc?" Mild curiosity showed on Condan's features. He scratched his bald head.

"Well, do you know any legends of your ancestors, ages ago?"

"Oh, yes," Condan answered brightly. "I know of many such legends. There is, for example, one which tells of our people before they had the Chalice. It must have been terrible, because people are bored unless there are accidents, and without the Chalice accidents too often would prove fatal."

"I don't mean quite that far back," Johnny persisted. Part of his mind by now realized that their quest was a hopeless one here on Tawroc. But, doggedly, he stuck with it. "I mean soon after your people developed the Chalice."

"Oh, yes! That legend has always been one of my favorites. We went out to the stars—some say even across the great gulf of peace to the Milky Way Galaxy. And there we set the seed for mankind. It is very interesting, although, if you dwell upon it too long, it becomes boring, like everything else."

"We're from the Milky Way Galaxy," Johnny told him. "We are the fruit of that seed. And we've come a long way."

"I believe you. I do. I really do. And let me tell you that's very nice, young man. Yes, I certainly must write a paper, although I doubt if I have the funds to publish it. Well, perhaps next year."

"Darn it!" Susan finally had lost her temper, and now she raged at the little scientist, who did not quite know what to make of the situation. "Darn it! You might at least congratulate us. You should all feel like a—like a God, almost. But you just stand there and say that's nice! Darn it—"

"She must be bored, poor thing," Condan decided. "Did you ever think of taking her away to the mountains for a few months? Some of the animals are quite ferocious, and it's usually a stimulating vacation. I would—my word, it's three o'clock."

Inside, something had clicked loudly, three times.

"I'm the lottery man this month, you know. Three o'clock. That makes you two the winners. You'll be un-Chaliced, of course. May I be the first to offer my sympathies?"

"Keep your hands off me!" Susan cried. Condan had been shaking his head sadly, stroking her shoulder.

Johnny spoke, jabbing his finger against the scientist's frail chest with every word. "We're not going to be un-anythinged. We're getting out of here."

"Where will we go? I appreciate your feelings, young man. But it is now known all over the planet that two people answering to your descriptions have been selected for the

lottery this month. If you resist, you'll be taken in time. But, naturally, resistance could be amusing. Have fun."

Johnny's head was swimming. He knew now that he'd expected a veritable godhood in the men of Tawroc. Instead, he'd found—this. But still, he wasn't ready to give up. He said, "Listen. We came here for help. We have a Chalice which you planted in our Solar System, but it breeds trouble. Few can use it, the rest are jealous. If you can let us know how to build another one, many other ones, our trouble will end, and—"

"I'm not so sure, Johnny," Susan told him. "Maybe then our troubles would just begin."

Shrugging, Johnny ignored her. "Can you do that? Can you teach us to construct another Chalice?"

"Naturally, young man." Condan nodded. "But it won't do you any good, you realize."

"Why not?"

"You're for the lottery, remember. You'll be un-Chaliced. Then, if I remember my history correctly, you won't be able to travel between the stars."

"What do you mean, history? Don't you have space travel?"

"Whatever for? It's boring enough on the surface of Tawroc, but can you imagine how bad it would be with a lot of nothing all around you. There hasn't been a spaceship built here in a hundred thousand years. Well—ah, that would be the Lottery Committee."

The door-chimes had sounded, spilling their musical notes up and down the range of two scales. Johnny heard the angular housekeeper opening the door, saw four men enter.

"Where are they?" said one.

"Here." Condan pointed.

"Well, are you two ready?"

Susan smiled wanly. "Johnny, honey? Oh, Johnny, do you mind if I cuss?"

"N-no."

She turned to the Lottery Committee. "Go to hell."

And then she was giggling. The let-down had been tremendous—for now Johnny knew that Tawroc and its first humans could offer them no help. They'd come across the length of a galaxy and beyond for nothing, and now they must go back to their people and say they had lost. But for Susan it was worse. Her high-strung nature had plunged up and down like a wayward rocket, and her rage fringed on hysteria.

"Kill them, Johnny! I don't care how, I don't care—but kill them. . . ." And then her head was against his shoulder and she was sobbing. "Kill them, kill them. . . . Johnny, oo-ooo. . . ."

Johnny wanted to comfort her, knew she'd need a lot of it. But there wasn't time. Condan knew what he was talking about, and if they were un-Chaliced, there'd be no returning, ever. . . .

On the other hand—and suddenly Johnny's heart bobbed up into his throat and remained there—the machine had never told them how they could leave Tawroc!

Had, in fact, never told them they could leave at all.

The machine was only that—a machine. A thinking machine, perhaps, but completely objective, impartial. This world of Tawroc was different. Trouble was, *it didn't care*. Its people cared about nothing. The Chalice had made their ancestors too perfect, and the result was ennui. The whole world of Tawroc, almost, had a personality, if a negative one. It didn't care. It cared about nothing but its fantastic rules and regulations, grown monstrous through boredom.

Except for the lottery. The lottery mattered. The lottery said that Susan and Johnny must be un-Chaliced, hence exiled unwillingly on Tawroc. Johnny's head whirled hopelessly. There was no escape—nothing could be done. In his mind he called over and over again to the machine. *Help us, help us, help us. . . .*

Unconcerned, indifferent, the four men of the Lottery Committee stalked forward. Johnny backed off into a corner, leading Susan by her hand. He wondered dimly if the machine, circling Canopus almost a hundred thousand light years away, somehow could see what was happening.

He wondered—and something seemed to chuckle within his head!

Raging, he ran forward, caught the first member of the Lottery Committee and hurled him dazed, against the wall. He plowed into the second, his fists flailing. Shaking his head, the third man removed one of the tubes from his coverall, pointed it.

Johnny felt a moment of pain almost too brief to register on his brain. He pitched forward on his face.

Susan followed him down, fell across him. The two injured members of the Committee shook themselves, and, together with their companions, lifted their unconscious burdens and stepped out into the street with them.

Condan waved goodbye and went back to his primitive laboratory.

The Lottery Committee had to wait half an hour before they found an opportunity to cross the street.

8

"ARE YOU all right, Johnny? Johnny? No, don't try to sit up."

"Stop worrying. We don't break easy. But I'm a little fuzzy on the details. What happened?"

"Probably, it was the same weapon that man Nabish used on the beach, only the effects lasted longer this time. We seem to be in some kind of a—a hospital."

There were two beds, one empty now. Johnny lay on the other, Susan bending over him anxiously. Aside from that, the room was empty, but it had that antiseptic look you associate with hospitals. There was one window of translucent glass, and dimly through it Johnny could see a metal grill-work on the outside, as effective as any bars. The door? Johnny looked at it and Susan tried it. By the time she was convinced it was locked, after much rattling and banging, Johnny sat up and smiled ruefully. "How would you like to be un-Chaliced?"

"Huh? How's that?"

"Un-Chaliced. That's what the Committee's for, remember? It's one hell of a lottery. Whoever happened to be with that man Condan—poof! He's it. So we win, kid. But I guess it really means we lose."

"That's ridiculous," said Susan, and stamped her foot. "If you think I'm going to wait here while they un-Chalice me—"

"I didn't say we'd just let them do it. Only right now we don't know what's going on. Maybe there's a quarantine period or something; anyway, we're all alone right now. Trouble is, this place is a pretty good prison."

"You still sound like you're ready to go to the slaughter without a fight. Do you realize what it will mean? If they do that, if they un-Chalice us, there'll be no leaving this place—ever. We won't be able to travel faster than light, and—"

"Sh! Let me think, will you?"

"Oh, you're just like that man, that Suuki!"

But Johnny paid no attention. There was a way out, there had to be a way out. The machine had deposited them here, almost instantaneously. It had mouthed some gibberish about hyper-space or folded space or some such thing, but

whatever it was, it couldn't be regarded merely as physical travel. In sub-space a man could accelerate faster than light, yes—but his speed still was something you could measure.

The machine, however, had another means of travel altogether. And, as far as Johnny knew, the only form of energy which moved without encountering the time-dimension at all was thought. Fine!

"We'll have to think our way out of here," he said.

"Ah, that's better. We'll have to think of a way out of here."

"I didn't say that. Not think of a way, just *think out*. Maybe if we concentrate hard enough, the machine will hear us."

"Across eighty-six thousand light years?"

"Yeah, I know it sounds impossible. But they say thought doesn't diminish with distance, so all we have to hope is that the machine has a receiver."

"Okay. I'll grant that. But how do we know he—it—wants to help us?"

Johnny shrugged. "We can find out. I thought the machine was laughing at us before, when the Committee came for us. If I'm right, at least it means she knows what's going on."

"How do we think?"

"We just—think. We think, over and over again, *get us out of here*. Now."

And Johnny thought. He filled his mind with that thought alone, tried to squeeze everything else out of it. He felt the unheard words whirling inside his head, felt them banging, almost physically, against his skull. *Get us out of here . . . out of here . . . out!*

"It's silly," Susan told him, after a time. "How can we hope it will hear us? All that did was leave me with a headache."

"Well, keep right on trying."

Susan shook her head petulantly. There was a clicking sound, and then the door swung in toward them.

Two members of the Committee entered the room, followed by two young women garbed in pale lavender uniforms. Nurses, probably.

"It's only a minor operation," one of the men confided. "Nothing to worry about."

"Sure," said the other. "Tomorrow, you'll be as good as new. Minus your Chalice powers, naturally."

Silently, persistently, Johnny kept thinking his message at the machine. Hopeless? He wondered. Actually, it did not matter. This was their only hope, for they couldn't help themselves in any other way. They could not fight clear of the situation, not when the whole planet knew they had been picked in the lottery. Then, this alone remained. More than anything, Johnny knew they needed time.

"What kind of an operation is it?" he demanded.

"Minor, only minor, as I said. Merely a pre-frontal lobotomy. Surprising, isn't it, that the Chalice-powers have their seat in the unused front portion of the brain."

"Surprising? You understand it, don't you?"

"By the Almighty, no! The Chalice was invented so many millions of years ago that we've forgotten. Naturally, we don't have to use it any more, since everyone now has the power, and it breeds true. I suppose there is much we have forgotten over the eons, but then, with the Chalice, what does it matter?"

One of the nurses said: "Must I remind you that we're needed for other things in an hour? You'll have to operate now if you want us to help at all."

Shrugging, the man said that he would. The other nurse stepped forward, opened a satchel on Susan's unoccupied bed, began to remove some surgical instruments. She held a hypodermic needle up to the light, tested the plunger. "Shall I administer the anesthetic?"

"If you will."

Nodding, the nurse approached Johnny. "Your left forearm, please."

Johnny sat there.

"Your left forearm. You heard we were in a hurry! Please."

Johnny extended his arm, suddenly flexed it. The elbow struck hard at the hypodermic needle and the nurse dropped it, then watched as it shattered on the floor.

"Umm-mm," Johnny shook his head. "That was clumsy of me."

Get us out of here . . . out . . . out . . . out!

The nurse smiled vapidly. "Fortunately, we have another one."

Susan sighed. "That's swell. Oh, that's swell."

"Now," cautioned the nurse, "extend your arm slowly. Yes—that's the way."

Johnny waited until the last possible moment, then struck out. This time it was obvious, for the same accident couldn't

happen twice. He watched the second vial shatter, then stood up. "There won't be any operation," he said quietly.

One of the Committee members frowned at him. "What do you mean?" frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"We're not submitting, that's all. Susan—watch those nurses!"

Hurling himself headlong from the bed, Johnny leaped upon the first Committee man. He felt his shoulder sink into the man's soft middle, and then they were down on the floor while the second man tugged at Johnny's back, trying to dislodge him. He had no opportunity to watch Susan, but he heard clearly the angry sounds of feminine battle, and the way Susan cursed lustily, in English, she didn't seem to bet getting the worst of it.

The man below him was senseless, and Johnny rolled off him in one quick motion, bringing his feet up and catching the second man's thighs with them. Yelling, the man stumbled across the room.

Johnny got to his feet, cat-like. He saw that one of the nurses was stretched out in a sobbing heap on the bed while the other one backed away from Susan. Smiling grimly now, Johnny, stalked forward, backing his adversary off into a corner.

The smile froze on his lips. The man held one of the tube-weapons, pointed it at him.

"This is as good as the hypo, anyway!" he cried, and fired.

The floor came up and slapped Johnny's head soundly. It was like the last time all over again, for as consciousness left him, he felt Susan tumbling down across his legs.

Something chuckled inside his head, and his last thought screamed inside his brain. *Get us out...*

Only, as consciousness left him completely, he knew it was hopeless.

The room did not look quite as he remembered it. For one thing, there weren't any beds. For another—

"I'll be damned!" he said.

And Susan laughed, "That's just what I thought when I awoke. Do you realize where we are?"

"Well, I'd be willing to bet that if we looked outside we'd see old Canopus flashing fire up in the sky."

"You're right, of course." Sibilant, metallic, the voice spoke with his head. The machine voice.

"You took us back?"

"No. I merely left this avenue of escape open for you. You brought yourself back, however. You see, I was not constructed so I could intervene in such matters. Your assumption was correct: it is mental energy which can fold space, provided a channel is open."

"I guess we go home now," Johnny said, dully. "We've failed. We found the first humans, sure—but they can't give us any help. They don't even understand the Chalice themselves!"

The machine voice purred laughter. "You certainly realize what that means?"

"I don't."

"And you have learned nothing?"

"I'm confused."

"Perhaps the female, then—"

But Susan said: "Don't look at me."

"Well, I was no built to supply the answer, although, naturally, I know the answer."

"What do you mean?" Johnny demanded.

"I mean you'll have to change your entire orientation toward the problem. But I cannot supply the missing data."

"Who can?"

"You."

"Me? I don't know! I told you I was confused."

"Remember my function, John Hastings? You can ask me questions. Anything."

It was eerie. They stood in a small room, on a spongy floor which yielded beneath their feet. A voice spoke to them within their heads. A sentient machine hovered all around them—on all sides, above, below. And what went on there could determine the fate of humanity.

Johnny pursed his lips, whistled softly. "Have you any ideas, honey?"

"My head feels just like a vacuum. You'd better do the thinking for us."

"In what way will we have to change our orientation?" said Johnny, addressing the machine again.

"Elementary. You sought the first humans, for you felt they could help you with your problem. You now are aware that they cannot."

"That's what I thought. But who can?"

"No one. No one can."

"But you said—"

"I am aware of what I said."

"But if no one can help us—wait a minute! Can we help ourselves?"

"Yes."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Then you mean we can find a way to produce another Chalice? Many of them..."

"No."

"Huh?" Johnny had been off on the wrong track, and suddenly, he knew it. But it left him with nothing. "If we can't be helped from the outside, and if we can't help ourselves—"

"I did not say that."

"You certainly did!" Susan cried. "You just now said it."

"I said you cannot construct another Chalice."

"Maybe he means we can do something else instead," said Susan.

"Maybe," Johnny agreed. "Maybe. All right, we'll try. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, that is what I, that is what I, that is what, is what, is what, is what—"

"What's the matter now?" Susan wanted to know, as the voice droned on and on.

"He oils himself," Johnny told her, confidently. "He'll be back to normal in a minute."

As it turned out, half an hour passed before the machine returned to normal. Normal? No, not quite, for the unheard voice which still could give the suggestion of sound, was scratchy, hoarse, low.

"I near termination," it said.

"What does that mean?"

"I thought I was eternal. The thought is wrong, all wrong. Definitely, I am mortal. Were I flesh and blood, I would be on my death bed."

"You're dying?"

"Yes—*awk!* I perish."

"But you still haven't given us the answer."

"And, indeed, it is a shame, for I was created to serve man, yet it seems my time will come before I can help you."

"How long?" Johnny wanted time—with time he might solve the problem.

"I—*awk!*—find it difficult to speak. In time, hours perhaps. But in questions four."

"What does *that* mean?"

"I can answer four questions, and four only. I—*awk!*—will subside after that. And there was your first question..."

"*Awk, awk, awk...*"

"Three more questions," Susan said wearily. "We can't waste words, Johnny. We've got to scoot on back to Earth with the answer."

A dying machine—if machines could die—holding the solution in its grasp. But as its gears and cogs slowed to a rasping stop, Earth's hope faded. For, if it ever came to open war between the Children and humanity, the forces unleashed would leave nothing but scorched, radioactive memories. . . .

And war seemed inevitable, unless something—

"I know!" Susan screamed. "Ask him for the solution. Just ask that, what's the solution."

"He said he couldn't answer that."

"Did he? I don't remember. I'm going to ask."

"Don't."

She ignored him. "Give us the solution. What is the solution?"

"Awk, awk—I cannot answer that. Your questions must be more specific. Two—awk—questions remain."

Something shuddered beneath their feet. A dull, booming sound echoed and re-echoed in nameless meaningless caverns below them. The spongy floor heaved then plunged like the back of a submerging whale. Something rattled outside, then fell with a loud clattering.

Johnny hurtled up the stairs, peered out. "Hey! This whole world's falling apart."

It was true. Great fissures had opened in the smooth surface, huge boulders had been belched up and out of them, tumbling and crashing together on the now-uneven ground. The air was thick with the sharp, acrid odor of ozone. Off to the right, Johnny could see their ship. Two or three boulders had come down atop it but, aside from some dents, it appeared undamaged.

"We don't have much time," he said, returning to the room.

"He's—he's really *dying*, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"A machine—dying?"

"If a machine can live—and this baby does—then it can die. But I told you not to ask that question. Heck, forge it, kid—you meant well."

"I'm sorry." Susan puckered. "I guess I don't use my head any more than those idiots on Tawroc did. Funny, how a civilization can degenerate—"

Yes, funny how a civilization can degenerate. Of course,

Johnny thought, human culture thrives on challenge. Successful response to adversity carry humanity up another step along the long path of civilization, and—

"Of course! We've been fools, Susan."

There was a rumbling and screeching below them. Johnny could picture great gears grinding and stripping one another, their giant teeth flaking off and spilling away like confetti.

"Awk, awk, awk. . ."

The walls shook. Dust sifted down, filled the air, made them cough. A fissure crawled down one wall, widened. The smell of ozone again, pungent, stronger this time. Sparks flashed in the fissure.

"Two questions, *awk!* Quickly. I perish."

Susan dodged, stumbled, fell. A rock dug its way into the spongy floor, inches from her. "We're liable to perish with him if we don't hurry."

"I have it now, kid. I think I have it. Listen," Johnny addressed the dying machine, "you've said we have to reorient ourselves. We can't build another Chalice, let alone several of them. Point is, you don't think we ought to. Wait—that's not a question."

"Awk!"

"Johnny, something's burning down there."

Smoke poured through the fissure, slowly at first, but soon great billowing clouds of it puffed angrily into the room. "That smoke's hot," Johnny said, coughing and choking. "Cover your face and get down on the floor. It will rise toward the ceiling—I hope."

He took out a handkerchief, tied it around his neck, brought it up to cover his nose and mouth. He crouched, his eyes stinging, tears streaming from them.

"If you think you know the answer, Johnny, then let's get out of here before it's too late."

"Now, we've got to be sure!"

"Two questions. *Awk awk*, two."

"Here's how I figure it. Remember, the machines showed us other human worlds. There were two kinds. Some hadn't found the Chalice yet, and although their civilizations weren't tremendous, they looked happy. Others found the Chalice—and they had either destroyed themselves with war, or—"

"Or they were like Tawroc! But I don't get it."

"I do. The Chalice caused trouble, caused war. Naturally, everyone wanted it, and few could get it. Or, if there were enough of them, it was just as bad. On Tawroc, the first humans had everything too easy, thanks to the Chalice.

"They couldn't get hurt, they never were sick. Result: they were bored, remember? Life held nothing for them, and a whole cockeyed setup developed. Thanks to the Chalice, civilization went backward, not forward. In short, honey, the Chalice stinks!"

"But we—we're supermen! Look, we can—"

"I know what we can do. But I also know what we can't do, for the future. We can't survive as long as the Chalice is in our way. It'll either mean war and doom, or degeneration. Am I right?" He squinted through the smoke at the cracking, crumbling walls.

"Awk! Yes, yes, yes. You must destroy the Chalice. That way lies the salvation of your people. One question remains—"

Silence.

The floor heaved. When it subsided for the moment, it was suspended, lop-sided, between the walls. The vault was black with smoke, the walls still trembled. Louder was the rumbling beneath their feet, and the metallic grinding shot up the scale until it bordered on the supersonic. And that was worse—for now it screamed inside their heads, as the voice had spoken there.

"The pain, *awk*—the pain!"

"One more question," Johnny said, coughing. "If we destroy the Chalice, will that take its powers from those who already have them? If it doesn't do that, it won't help us. I mean, is there something in the Chalice which must maintain its power in people? If there is, and—"

"*Awk, awk, awk!*"

"That's my question. When we destroy the Chalice, does that put an end to all supermen in the Solar System? Will they be normal again?"

"The answer—*awk!*—to your question is, to your question is, to your question, question, question *awk, awk, aaaawwkkk!*"

Silence.

Except for the steady crashing of rock and metal—and the high-pitched shrieking.

Except for the crackling hiss of electricity, as sparks flashed from the fissures.

Except for the voice which Johnny thought he heard feebly within his brain. "I perish, but my metal smiles on your venture. . . ."

"He'd dead," Susan said.

It seemed the natural thing to say—he's dead. Not it's

broken, but he's dead. For the machine had had a personality, and now the machine was dead.

Dead—with one question unanswered.

9

HAND IN hand, they struggled up the rock-littered steps. Once a fissure opened beneath their feet, and for a long, agonizing moment, Susan clung to Johnny while his feet swung out over a deep pit. They dangled there until Johnny swung his legs and gathered momentum, then clawed his way clear to the other side, Susan perched on his back, whispering endearments in his ear because she thought this might be the last time for that—or for anything.

But, somehow, they made it to the ship, entered, got the engine going. By then the ground was tumbling and pitching chaotically, and angry flames licked up out of the fissures.

Smoke engulfed them, hiding their view of the world outside. But they knew the world was on the way out, and as they thundered off it, acceleration slamming them down, they saw the globe, splitting and spewing out huge chunks of twisted, broken machinery. The whole thing had been a giant brain and now the brain was dead. The world perished with it.

Months later, they cleared sub-space several million miles solar-north of the flat spatial disk of the Solar System. For the hundredth time, Johnny said:

"We don't know. We just can't tell. Destroying the Chalice won't help at all, maybe. It's got to destroy what we've got, too."

"It's funny how something can look like a blessing for so long and then wind up being a blight instead. I mean, we had such high hopes for the Chalice, for what it could do. Johnny, I'm afraid. What if we're wrong? We could be wrong."

"No. The machine couldn't lie. You heard what—*he* said."

"All right. If you say so. Still—"

"Still nothing. We've still got a man-size job ahead of us. We have a baby atomic here on the ship, sure, but we've got to plant it on the asteroid and make sure it goes off. It's a question of coming through fast, because the guardians can't stand the acceleration we can. So—here, watch."

Johnny flipped the regular space-drive lever all the way

back, and they streaked down toward the asteroid belt. The sun gleamed brightly far off to the right, not a very large star, not very spectacular, But it was beautiful.

They weren't spotted until their ship had plunged into the zone of asteroids, until the alarm buzzer was shrilling its warning every few seconds, keeping Johnny busy at the controls dodging meteors.

And then their radio squawked: "Hallo, out there. You're in an unauthorized region, Solar 170, north 22-0-5. Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Johnny didn't answer. Susan sat there, looking very grim.

"Reply! We'll fire on you if you don't."

Johnny turned the ship, slowly—for at their speed each turn was a torment of pain, acceleration slamming them back against the cushions like a huge sledge-hammer. But as he gritted his teeth, Johnny realized, triumphantly, the guardian ship couldn't follow. Unable to execute the turn, it would go off on a tangent, and by the time it returned for them, their job would be concluded.

Something left a fiery trail in the void behind them, plowing through the meteoric debris swift as light.

"They're firing!" Susan cried.

Johnny shrugged. They wouldn't have the chance for another shot, not off in the direction they were heading. He turned, looked through the rear port, saw the guardian ship streaking away, a full thirty degrees off course. "See?" he smiled. "Stop your worrying."

And then they neared the Black Asteroid, a lone, solitary, perfectly round globe. "Rig up that baby atomic," Johnny called over his shoulder as he began deceleration. "Landing in three minutes."

The surface of the sphere was as he had remembered it, black as space, glossy, a ball of jet hanging in the void.

This time, he hardly looked at the murals. They were wonderful works of art, and they'd been almost eternal, lasting the way they did through the eons. But it didn't mean much; the race which had created them had left its glory behind it, lost forever on the ancient startrails. What was left out on far Tawroc was not pretty, and it didn't do much good to look behind you, anyway.

You had to look ahead. And if the Chalice resulted only in evil, you forgot the Chalice. You destroyed it. You started from scratch.

Susan hadn't quite understood that on the long journey through subspace. She'd said, "But if we destroy the Chal-

ice, it means mankind will never be able to reach the stars."

And Johnny'd told her: "Maybe. Maybe not. No, we won't reach the stars this way, because they wouldn't be worth the price we'd have to pay. Perhaps man's a lazy creature if you make things too easy for him. Treat him rough, though, and he can do some mighty potent things."

"Well, what about the stars?"

"They don't matter, not for now. Humanity's got to be ready for them first. Last time, they tried—and failed. The result is Tawroc. A pretty noble attempt, I guess—but it led up a blind alley. The first humans got to the stars, sure; but they sacrificed their civilization for it. We won't do the same thing. No, we'll destroy the Chalice because now we know that it has to be destroyed. Maybe in some distant tomorrow, man will climb back to the stars again. But I'll tell you this, kid: he'll do it a different way, he'll do it with the sweat of his brow, not because he happens to have a device which makes him almost like a god. Trouble is, that godhood's only skin deep."

And now, in the vault below the asteroid's surface, the murals were just—murals. They told of no hidden glories and triumphs in some distant, unknown corner of space. The corner was Tawroc—and there was nothing glorious or triumphant about it at all.

"You got it ready?" Johnny demanded.

Susan nodded, pointing to the small metal sphere she'd placed in the Chalice itself. "This asteroid's only half a mile in diameter, isn't it? Yes? Well, that should destroy it completely. Only—I'm nervous, Johnny. This is the end of—of everything they dreamed of on Tawroc, an age ago. It doesn't seem right..."

"It is right. It's the only way. And don't be nervous about a little thing like that. Wait till we tell the Children what we did to their Chalice. Wait till they find out for themselves—if our plan works."

They ran upstairs—up the nine stairs for the last time. The last time, ever, for the nine stairs which had waited patiently five millions of years for human feet to use them...

Moments later, they blasted off. The baby-atomic was radio-controlled, and Johnny waited until they had streaked clear of the asteroid belt entirely. Once a ship came up behind them and gave them chase, but Johnny cut off sharply at an angle, and acceleration remained on their side.

Now they were clear, and Mars' ruddy light streamed in through the fore-ports. Beyond it was the bright green

Earth-star and, near it, the small, pale speck of the moon.

"We'll be losing our powers," Susan said. "We won't be supermen any longer."

"No, and we won't be chased and hounded and fought with, either. But don't get me wrong. This isn't like giving up at all. Remember, we were only supermen skin deep. Oh, you couldn't see it yet, for sufficient time hadn't passed. It showed on Tawroc, though. Don't you forget this, kid: man has got to climb to heaven the hard way. With work. He grows soft if things are handed to him on a silver platter.

"We'll have to explain that to Pop, to Suuki, to all the rest. It won't be easy, but we can do it. Only, I want you on my side, damn it!"

"I—I'll always be on your side, Johnny."

He kissed her, then pressed the radio-control button.

Something flared briefly in space behind them, a quick, mushrooming explosion that momentarily dimmed the stars. Johnny didn't say a word, reached into his pocket instead, withdrawing a pen-knife, flicking it open with his thumb.

Still wordless, he ran the keen edge across his index finger. Blood welled up in the cut, ran down the finger to his palm. He tried to staunch the flow with his handkerchief, but nature took its own time about such things, and the blood did not stop flowing until a scab began to form.

"See?" Johnny held his hand aloft, waving it furiously. "There was something which had to be maintained by the Chalice all along. None of us are supermen any more—not since that explosion."

"So it's the end of everything."

"Sure, the end. But the beginning, also. No five-million-year-old gift is going to make supermen out of us, Susan, not in a way that will last. We'll have to do it ourselves, together. The whole race can become supermen someday—together. Working for it."

Frowning, Susan took the knife, jabbed it against her palm. "Look! Look, see? Me too! I'm normal. I'm—"

Johnny cut off the rest of it with a kiss. But it was a loud kiss, the kind a man might give his wife, half-affectionately, half from force of habit, after a dozen years of marriage.

"Uh-uh," said Susan. "Not that way at all." And she lodged her arms firmly behind his neck, bringing her lips close.

"Say it," said Johnny, and laughed.

"Say what?"

"It's not the end, darn it!"

"It isn't, Johnny. Oh, it isn't. It's the beginning. . . ."

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