

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET stories

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Out of the dark waters of anonymity stormed

THE LOST TRIBES of VENUS

Novelet by
Erik Fennel

**SIXTY-YEAR
EXTENSION**

He died twice — once
for himself and once
for the stars.

Novelet by
Alan E. Nourse



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SIXTY-YEAR EXTENSION

By ALAN E. NOURSE

They told only half the story to Daniel Carter Griffin when he volunteered to die. They told him of the glories of life re-born; youth re-captured; love re-won; of Free Agenting around the cosmos. Of many things, they spoke about . . . but never once did they mention the lurid second death.

IT OCCURRED to Griffin as he sat waiting in the office that he had forgotten what day it was.

It was a silly thing, and it upset him all

out of proportion to its importance. At first it had been no more than a disturbing flicker in the back of his mind, an uneasy half-thought, not even consciously formed. He



EMSH



had been waiting for Cranstead for a quarter of an hour, and he hadn't been thinking very coherently about much of anything. His right arm was still a bit sore, but mostly he was aware of a curious feeling of strength and exhilaration as he eyed the cool gray walls of the office. But something bothered him, nibbling away deep in his mind; he crossed and uncrossed his legs, feeling a trifle impatient. And then, with a shiver, he realized that he didn't even know what the date was!

He pulled out his wallet with a frown, and searched for the pocket calendar he carried. He glanced at it, and then put it back with a grunt. It didn't help him a bit. He didn't even know what month it was, or even year, for sure. He leaned back, trying to remember what day it was, and his mind was abruptly flooded with the implications of the staggering thing he had done—

That they had done—

He stood up and threw open the door into the reception room. A girl sat typing at the desk. She typed on for a moment, then paused and looked up.

"How soon will he be ready?" Griffin asked, trying hard to keep the panic out of his voice.

The girl smiled professionally. "I'm sorry, Mr. Griffin. He won't keep you waiting long. Can I get you something to read?"

He shook his head. "No—I'll just wait. I'll tell you what you can do, though. You can tell me what date it is." Suddenly he felt very foolish.

"Certainly. This is the seventeenth of July."

He nodded, feeling slightly numb as he returned to his seat. The seventeenth of July! It had been December when he had come here. Or had it been a year ago last December. Or ten years ago? He couldn't remember. His broad forehead wrinkled into a frown as he tried to think. They had told him that his memory would be somewhat incoherent over the period that he was there, but he hadn't realized how helpless he would feel to have eight months of his life suddenly reduced to a jumbled series of unconnected events. And how could he straighten them out? He shook his head, the chill deepening in his chest. Maybe they never would be straightened out—

He stared at himself in the mirror that

hung on the wall, more in the spirit of appraisal than curiosity. That first shock of looking at himself was behind him now; not that he could ever forget it as long as he lived, but he was no longer jolted by the face that peered out at him from the mirror, the short dark hair without trace of gray, the broad forehead, the heavy face—not a bad face, really, a curious, young-old face that looked like that of a twenty-year-old until one examined it closely, and then utterly defied age-identification with an infuriating complacency. His face, beyond doubt, but not the face he had seen in the mirror eight months ago. More like the face that had looked out at him from the mirror some thirty years before.

THE office door banged open, and a tall, gray-haired man walked in, dropping a pile of papers on the desk. "Hello, Griff! Sorry to keep you waiting. Never can tell when you'll get stalled in a place like this." John Cranstead dropped easily into his chair behind the desk and eyed Griffin quizzically. "Feeling excited? Or just scared out of your shirt?"

"A little of both," said Griffin, uneasily. "I don't know quite how I feel."

Cranstead grinned, and popped his glasses out of his pocket. "Ah, well. Don't worry about it. Martha says you wondered what day it was."

Griffin flushed. "I couldn't remember it."

"You'd have been remarkable if you could," Cranstead chuckled. "It went pretty well with you. Eight months is almost dead minimum for a complete job. But then they told me you cooperated very well."

Griffin shrugged. "Naturally."

"Well, it's over now. As of—" he peered at his wrist watch for an instant, then jotted the time down on the top sheet of paper—"3:15 P.M., 17 July, 2173, I can no longer call you Dan Griffin. You're a Free Agent now. Or you will be." He picked up the paper, glanced at it, and handed it across the desk to Griffin. "Don't let it throw you," he said.

Griffin glanced down at the paper, with a terrifying feeling of unreality, as if this were all part of a very bad dream. They had told him, of course. They had explained it all very carefully. But then, they had told

him so many things. At the top of the paper he saw the Hoffman Medical Center seal, and just below it, in heavy Gothic letters, he read:

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

His eyes ran down the page to his own name. Daniel Carter Griffin, male, aged 53. Cause of death: Subtotal Prosthesis, Voluntary. And below that, somewhere near the bottom, a line marked "signature."

Griffin looked up at Cranstead's smiling face. "I'm supposed to sign this?"

"That's right. There are a few other forms to sign—legal claims papers for the Metropolitan Death Insurance Company, a few other customary papers—" He broke off with a smile. "Don't look so horrified. It's really not as paradoxical as it seems. After all, Dan Griffin *is* quite dead. You'll certainly agree to that."

Griffin nodded, signing the papers rapidly. "When do I get my name back?"

"At the end of your Free Agent period, if you want it back. Or any other name you choose. That's up to you." Cranstead smiled. "And of course, as a Free Agent you can use any name you like."

"I can't see what's wrong with the old one. I was quite happy with it."

Cranstead shrugged. "You may find yourself quite a different man now."

"Well, I don't feel any different." Griffin's voice had a sharp defensive edge, and his eyes were suddenly bright with anger. "I feel fine; just the same as I always felt. Why all this ridiculous rigmarole?"

Cranstead sighed. "Take it easy, Griff. How do you know how you feel? You haven't been outside the hospital walls since the prosthesis started. You haven't met anyone or reacted to anything other than carefully controlled hospital conditions. Don't be impatient. You don't know yet what you'll want because you're literally a new man. You've turned in your old worn out body for a new one. Give it a try before you get excited."

Griffin scowled. "But why this insinuation that things will be different? I remember my old life perfectly well. I liked it. I want to go back. Why make it so difficult?"

Cranstead tossed him a cigarette. "Look

at it this way," he said. "If you hadn't come here to the Center for prosthesis, in about five years, give or take a little, that death certificate would have been valid in a very, very final sense. You'd have been gone and there'd have been no bringing you back. But you did come here to the Center, under your own steam, and submitted to a very thorough repair job; a repair job that will last you another sixty to eighty years, starting now—"

"All right, I know that," snapped Griffin. "I still don't see—"

Cranstead held up his hand. "Wait a minute—you don't quite realize that you may indeed be very dead to the world you knew before. The doctors can't predict the personality changes you may have undergone. Except for certain very broad limits, they can't predict how you'll act. So we have to protect you, as well as the world you left when you came here. The prosthesis is almost a total job—replaced organs, replaced vascular system, replaced glandular system, even some repaired nervous tissue. Some men come out almost exactly as they were before. But some come out vastly different—"

Griffin blinked and stared at the death certificate. "And this," he said slowly, "protects me."

"It makes the old Dan Griffin with the leaky heart and the bad kidneys legally dead. Just as the death insurance protects your wife and family. You can't be forced back into the old mold if you don't fit, so you're cut loose as completely as possible. You have a year to adjust; a year as a Free Agent, to go anywhere you wish and do anything you like. You no longer exist in the eyes of the law. If you go back to your old life, that's fine. And if you don't go back, and find yourself a new life, that's fine too. It's up to you."

Dan Griffin stood up, a coldness growing in his mind like nothing he had ever experienced; a sense of utter aloneness and total helplessness. "It's hard to get used to," he said softly. "I don't know what to think." He walked to the window and stared out at the city that spread out for miles, and saw the shadows of the tall Upper Level apartments falling across the busy curves of the thoroughways. "I just don't know—"

"We'll help you in any way we can," said Cranstead. "But nobody but yourself can influence your ultimate decision. You're a Free Agent. The decision must be yours."

"It's frightening," said Griffin.

John Cranstead gave him a long look. "It may be the most frightening thing in the world," he said.

CHAPTER II

HE DID not go home immediately.

He wasn't entirely sure why he didn't. He knew that he wanted to go home more than anything else. To go back to the house he had known for so long, back to the soft comfort of the old, heavy, carved furniture, back to the rows of books, and the neat paintings on the walls. And back to Marian, who would be waiting there for him. Oh, he wanted to go back, but somehow something held him, some cold, unreasoning core of apprehension that lay in his mind, whispering in his ear as he walked down the steps of the Hoffman Medical Center into the crush of traffic on the street below. His wrist still tingled from the needles that had stamped the small green bar there, indelibly. The mark was his passport, and he shivered as his mind echoed Cranstead's words back in the office. "You're free in every sense of the word. Go wherever you like, do anything you want to do. Deliberate criminality won't occur to you, and you'll be incapable of it if it does. We've seen to that. But otherwise, the ultimate decision is up to you—"

A cab skidded by and he hailed it. He settled back in the seat as the little car swept up into the heavy elevated traffic that moved down through the miles of curves and straightways into the center of the City. It was huge, this beehive that had spread down from Boston and up from Washington to engulf the entire Atlantic Seaboard, a place where he could lose himself for a little while, and maybe think things through before he went back to his home and to Marian. He stared from the window at the bright lights below—the Lower Level commercial traffic, speeding with its never-ending hum—the tattered sections of the Old City that lay below, half-hidden ruins of an age that few men could remember, or would want to remem-

ber if they could. The driver's voice broke in on his reverie, and he gave a little start.

"I said, where you goin', Mister?"

"Oh. Anywhere. I don't care." He hesitated for a moment. "I'm a Free Agent."

The driver nodded. "Mind if I pick up fares?"

"Not in the least." Griffin shrugged himself back in the seat, staring out the window. Frightening, he'd said! It was paralyzing. He moved his arms, first one, then the other, feeling the remnants of the painful tightness under the smoothly-molded skin. Then his mind drifted back, and he tried to remember the days of sickness, trying to visualize physically how it had felt to be sick. He found that he couldn't remember. He was no longer sick, and the pain and fright and desperation were unpleasant memories, the first to be dulled, and hidden from sight, and larded over with the frosting of forgetfulness.

And yet he knew that he had been sick. He had been older then, just past fifty, and though he could not recreate those days in his mind, he knew that he had known he was sick for a long time, a growing awareness that health and youngness had somehow been left behind. There had been the gasping rests at the top of the stairs while he had waited for breath and energy to return; and the leaden tiredness at the end of the day that had made the evenings a gauntlet to be endured. And there had been those terrifying nights when he had awakened in a cold sweat, strangling in the darkness, with hardly the strength left to drag himself up into a sitting position; and then Marian, wide-eyed with fright, barely able to hold back the tears, packing pillows behind him as he sat gasping by the open window, wondering if this really might be the end. And then, later, the stabbing, excruciating pain that cut through his chest and down his arm, the vice-like wrenching pain that tore the breath from him, and almost life itself. Angina, the doctor had called it. Congestive failure. And he had sat there, by the window, and known that he was staring death in the face.

The pain he could not remember now, but the fear was sharp in his memory. And then there had been the day when old Doctor Barnez had come in to see him, and

settled back in the chair, smiling at him, and said, "Griff, I think it's time you considered a repair job. A real repair job. Because you won't be with us long if you don't—"

He had grasped at it with the desperation that can be born only of staring death in the face, grasped at it as he stood literally in the valley of shadows. Oh, he had heard of prosthesis. He could even remember the bitter political battles that had raged. He could remember the attacks on it from the pulpit, and the rabble-rousing speeches of the men who used it as a football to carry them to power. But the laws were passed in spite of them, and many people had taken the step. And always Griffin had watched with desultory interest, and thought it a thing of the remote future, never applicable to a strong, active man like himself.

He stared out at the buildings, tall and proud in the gathering darkness. When the chips were finally down, he had agreed, Life was sweet. If it was within the power of medical techniques to restore it, could he scorn such a chance? Could anyone? For after all, it was the goal of hundreds of years of medical study. Gradually, over the years, medicine had leaped the low hurdles of disease, of microbes, and viruses, and creeping malignancies, and these had been the easy steps. At the end, they had moved against the real last enemies of man: old age, degeneration, the multitude of death's helpers which had held man to a hundred years of life. And then those hurdles had been crossed—

Griffin shook his head as the cab took another turn and sped deeper into the city. He had wanted a healthy body again. And they had promised him a healthy body. The prosthesis was almost total, the remodelling he could never have understood, the probing and repairing, the replacing and regrowing and relearning. And he had come forth with a healthy body, with his past life's full measure of memory and experience, and another sixty years in which to use it. He had thought that a healthy, whole body once more was all he could ever desire—

And now he wondered.

HE KNEW now that he was going to see Dr. Barnez first, before he went any-

where else. He leaned over and gave the driver the address, and then settled back, waiting as the car reached the upper-level strips of the New City. He found the doctor's house, and waited in the small ante-room for a few moments. Then he saw the familiar, stooped figure, beaming at him from the door of the inner office. "Come in, Griff, come in!" he boomed. "Lord, man, what a change! You look like you never looked before. They treated you well over there—" The old doctor tossed him a cigar, and settled back, regarding him over silver-rimmed glasses. "Any regret, Griff? Even cigars you can have again now!"

Griffin shook his head, feeling the uneasiness nibbling again at his mind. "No—no regrets, nothing I can put my finger on—" He nipped the cigar, feeling suddenly foolish to take such relish in contemplating the acrid smoke of a dried-up weed.

"But a multitude of things you can't quite put your finger on, eh?" The old man was smiling.

Griffin nodded slowly.

"You'll find the readjustment troublesome at times. But as a Free Agent, it's infinitely easier." The old man paused. "You've seen Marian?"

Griffin flushed. "No. I haven't been home. I'm—I'm a little afraid to go."

"Don't be. Marian will be there."

"Oh, I don't mean that. It's just—I've been waiting so long, and hoping so much. I don't know what to expect of Marian, I'm afraid she'll be different, somehow—"

"She won't be changed."

Griffin's eyes caught the old man's. "I know it. But what about me? I don't feel any different—"

Dr. Barnez held up a wrinkled, blue-veined hand. "It's to be expected, isn't it? You're not the same man you were. Your mind is intact, but there are many more things that make a man what he is than his mind, Griff. You've been changed in many ways—physical changes, chemical changes, endocrine changes. That's why you're a Free Agent. They've learned the hard way that they can't force the new form into the old mold. It just didn't work."

Griffin sat forward, his eyes burning on the old man's face. "What's happened to the others, doctor? I want it straight."

Doctor Barnez shook his head. "Why torture yourself, Griff? Go home to Marian, see how you feel—"

"I want it straight."

The doctor shrugged. "All right. Some have gone back and stayed. But many haven't stayed. A great many."

"Where have they gone?"

"Who knows? They're dead as far as the world they left is concerned. Who knows where they've gone?"

"But I don't want to change! Can't you see that? I love Marian. She's been my life. For years she's been more to me than anything else. I wouldn't change that for life itself—"

The old doctor stood up, shaking his head. "You mustn't worry," he said gently. "Ultimately, the choice is yours. It will be you who stays, or leaves, in the end. Not Marian."

HE OPENED the door of his house, and walked in, and found himself face to face with a total stranger.

She looked the same, of course. The same dark, beautiful eyes, the same finely molded face, the same tiny figure, kept amazingly slender and youthful over the years. Her hair was graying more than he had remembered, but it was the same Marian he had left, eight months before. And yet, he knew the moment that he saw her that something was gone, and could never be replaced, not in a thousand years of life.

Her lips trembled as she searched his face, and she said, "I'm glad you're back, Griff—" and he walked into the room like a ghost, moving about as though he were not really here at all, but seeing things in a strange, subtly distorted dream. The desk, with its perpetual litter just as he had left it; the honey barrel full of pipes, charred and scratched from years of use, still slightly fragrant from the last smoking. And there were the soft chairs, the worn carpet, the pictures on the walls. The same, fine, smooth architectural lines that had pleased him so when the house was built five years before; scientifically fitted to their personalities in a thousand subtle ways, as any house should be. He sat down gingerly, as though expecting to fall through into the dust beneath the house, and looked again at Marian,

his lovely, wonderful Marian—for the house which had fit so well was a nightmare to his sensibilities now, garish and impossible—and a Marian he didn't know was waiting eagerly for him to speak.

And then he knew it was only a dream, his memories of the life before. He waited for the surge of excitement, waited for the eager words to come into his throat, the words telling her how very much he had missed her, what plans he had made for them—and his throat was dry, and no words came. He waited for the joy of returning to sweep through him, and it did not come. It was dead, as dead as the ashes in that last-smoked pipe.

He didn't say a word. He didn't have to, because he saw it in her eyes, wide heart-broken eyes. He looked at her, and all he felt was pity. He didn't even feel shame, though he felt he should. And he knew that words would only make it harder, would be whiplashes to make the wounds deeper and more vicious.

He picked up his hat, and brushed her cheek with his lips, and without a word he walked out through the door.

Marian had not changed, not in any way. The house was the same, kept in readiness, waiting for him. No, Marian hadn't changed.

It was he who had changed.

III

AT FIRST he felt only anger. The suspicion didn't come until later. It was a cold, amorphous anger, not directed toward anyone or anything, a wrenching, nonspecific sort of anger. He found a small place where he could eat, set down off the Upper Level thoroughway, and he ordered hot coffee and a little food, and then sank his head into his hands—

And the anger grew, as he thought of the horrible house that no longer fit, and of Marian, and himself with the strange young-old face that was not his face at all, but a ghost-face from the past that stared out of the mirror at him. They had warned him, of course. Told him, rather. It had not been a warning, for warning implies evil, and if there had been evil in what they had told him it had been well con-

cealed. They had said that everything would be as he left it, that he could go back to his old life, if that was what he wanted, if that was where he belonged. They had told him all this, and it had had little meaning to him.

But it had meaning now, a thousand meanings that he could not understand. Because he had gone back, and discovered in the horror of a single look that it was wrong, that he no longer belonged. And it was then that he began to suspect that somehow, beyond his control and ken, he had become the victim of a terrible, cosmic joke.

Yet he was alive. He could not deny it. There was nothing wrong with his mind. He could think, he could remember, analyze. Just as they said, he could go back to the desk where he had worked so many years, and take over once again where he had left off.

But the place had repelled him. He shivered, and the suspicion deepened. They had said he could go back, if he wanted to, but he didn't want to. He couldn't even make a pretense of wanting to. There were other things to do, somewhere, more important things that had no part nor connection with the old Dan Griffin.

People were coming into the place now. They sat at tables nearby, and he could feel their eyes drift over him, curiously. How many times before had he watched these strange, drifting creatures with faces that belied their years, when they had chanced to cross his path? How often, before, had he seen the little green bar tattooed on a wrist, and looked at the face above it, and wondered, what is he doing? How does it feel to be a completely new man again, with a new life, and twelve months of freedom, complete freedom of movement, of inquiry, of thought. He wished that he had never wondered these things before.

The coffee came and he gulped it eagerly, realizing that he hadn't eaten for several hours. The suspicion was taking form in his mind now, and he grasped at it greedily. He had seen many Free Agents before. They had become an accepted, harmless facet of a society rather too hurried to be bothered much by introspection. Free Agents? They were—well, they were

around. They didn't do any harm, the news articles had said that only psychologically safe people were accepted for prosthesis, and then they were conditioned against criminal activities in the course of the remodelling. Why worry about them? They were seen here and there, and they bothered no one, and no one bothered them.

But what happened to them? Some went back to their old lives. He knew that. Some came back and took up their old places as if they had merely taken a vacation trip. And others came back, and then left—

Where did they go?

Griffin tried to think. Specifically, whom did he know who had come back permanently?

He ran over names in his mind. Jack Townsend—he'd come back. Fine boy, Jack, and never a whisper of a change. Ted Maroneck? He'd bolted after two weeks back, and Griffin had run into him in the city one day, with a coarse blonde woman, slightly drunk, and very raucous. How about Phil Steinberg? Only a week at home. Couldn't blame him, though. Ellie had been enough to drive anybody back to the woods. They'd never heard from him since. And Bob Whittaker—he'd been gone six months, now. And Joe Meyer—where was Joe?

Griffin took up his coat, preparing to leave, and now suddenly he was afraid. There was something wrong. In his own acquaintance, a couple who had come home and stayed. And a dozen who were gone, like the month of May.

Where?

He wanted to know. And something screamed in his mind that he had better find out where they had gone. And very soon.

THE building said Bureau of Public Records on the facade, and he walked up the marble steps quickly, his mind now hard with suspicion. In the center of the huge lobby he found the Directory, and read down the lines of names and departments. Under R he found "Reading Room, Microfilm Library," with a floor number after it. A few moments later he was stepping off the elevator, walking into the long, narrow room with the reading booths

glassed in against the walls. He found a place, and lifted the order-phone from its hook. "Let me have the documentary file on Robert L. Whittaker of this city," he said.

"I'm sorry, sir." The operator's voice was harsh in his ear. "Personal files are not available without proper authorization—"

"I'm a Free Agent," said Griffin shortly. "I'd like to see that file."

The visiphone screen came to light quite suddenly, and the girl's face appeared. "Identification, please?"

He held up a card from his pocket. There was no name on it. It carried a tri-di photo-impression, and a fingerprint, and said FREE AGENT in large green letters, followed by a code number. The girl watched him stamp his thumb on a duplicator card, and then the screen snapped off. Then, seconds later, a microfilm spool plopped down in the groove before him.

He took it out and threaded it into the reader, his heart pounding wildly in his throat. "Send me the same on Philip C. Steinberg and Joseph B. Meyer," he said. "And any other information you have on their activities—"

The documents were there, of course. Birth certificate, baptismal record, licensing record, application for prosthesis, application approval. He blinked at the last frame on the spool, a chill going down his back.

The death certificate. With Bob Whittaker's signature on it.

He snatched up the order phone again, his hand trembling. "I'd like Robert Whittaker's Free Agent records," he snapped at the operator's smooth voice.

There was a pause. Then the operator said, "There aren't any records, sir."

"WHAT?"

"I'm sorry, there is no record of Robert Whittaker reapplying for his name."

"Well then, what name did he take?"

"I'm sorry, that information is not available."

"I told you I'm a Free Agent."

"I'm sorry. Free Agent records are not available to anyone. Not even Free Agents."

It was the chink in the wall that he had known he would find. He slammed down the receiver with a crash, and threaded the second spool. It had been too good, too

smooth for it to be true. He had known, deep in his mind, that somewhere he would find the flaw in the Free Agent's freedom—and he had found it. And knowing where the flaw was only fed his suspicions and fanned his fears into brighter flame.

It was the same with every spool. Phil Steinberg was legally dead. Sorry, but information regarding his Free Agent period is restricted. Ted Maroneck was legally dead. So was Joe Meyer—

So was Dan Griffin—

He sat there trembling, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. He had known there would be a flaw. He wasn't supposed to know it. A marionette wasn't supposed to know that it was only a creature on a string, a lifeless piece of wood until hands drew the strings and made it do its little dance of life. Like the monkey-on-a-stick he had owned as a boy, so many years before, which would climb up, and down, and up, and down, every time he pressed the button.

And somewhere, he had a button now. And somewhere, somebody was pushing it. Something had happened to him quite apart from the physical rebuilding. Neatly hidden behind a careful screen of helpfulness and humanity and a brave new life was something else, something that he had not been told. And he was being manipulated, like a monkey on a stick, and he couldn't do anything about it, because he wouldn't know about it.

But now he did know.

IV

SOMEWHERE to the west of the city a Mars-bound rocket rose on its fiery tail with a roar, higher and higher on its wings of flame until its roar had dwindled to a high, penetrating whine. It flickered in the morning sun, and disappeared.

Griffin awoke with a jolt, and stared out the window of the hotel, watching the rocket move like an arrow across the sky, a sight that he had always loved. Then he rolled back with a groan, the anger and fear of the night before rushing back into his sleep-dulled mind like a nightmare.

He had not found them. When he had

finally taken the room, and fallen down fully clothed on the bed to sleep, he knew he had reached a dead end. He could do nothing but wait now. And knowing what he knew, he was afraid to wait.

And then he heard a sound in the room, and jerked upright, and saw the girl standing in the door. She was watching him as he lay there, her face without expression. She might have been pretty once; her hair had been long and shining black, and there was even a trace of a wave left in it, a pitiful attempt to pin it back in some semblance of order. But her face was hard, and she watched him with sharp dark eyes like an animal's.

He sat up slowly, his feet on the cold floor. "All right," he said. "What do you want? How did you get in here?"

Her lips curled into a sneer. "You can go where you want to. Why can't I?"

His eyes drifted to her wrist. It was blank. "Who are you?"

"You don't recognize me? With all the slinking around and watching through the corner of your eye, you haven't even seen me before?" She sank down in a chair, regarding him as if he were some sort of bug. "I spotted you up in the restaurant last night. I've been following you ever since. You didn't know that?"

He was on his feet now, a snarl of anger in his throat. He started across the room for the telephone, and she said, "You'd better leave that alone."

"I'm going to call the police."

"The police won't help you. You're dead, remember? Or was it somebody else's records you were looking up last night?"

He whirled on her, his eyes blazing. "Get out of here," he said, "before I throw you out."

The girl's face was contemptuous. "Sit down, buddy," she said. "You Retreads really think you're God Almighty, don't you? Walk out all shiny and new, and you think you own the world, with your pretty Free Agent stripe and all the tripe that goes with it."

Comprehension began to seep through now. The girl's voice was bitter. Griffin sat down, watching the girl closely. "What have you got against Free Agents?"

"Plenty, buster."

"Like what, for instance?"

"Like the way the Hoffman Center sets itself up as judge and jury and makes a chosen people out of you. Not out of me. Oh, no, I won't stand a chance when the time comes. Not my old man, either. He tried for a retread, and they turned him down flat. Psychopathic inferior, they called him. He had to die. I'll have to die, too. But sooner or later they're going to find something wrong with the setup, and when they do, all hell is going to break loose, and they'll cut it out altogether, just like they tried to do at the first, and then there won't be any more snakes like you walking around with your pretty green stripes. Just one thing's got to go wrong, that's all." Her face was bitter. "How does it feel to be the Lord Master, buster? What are you so scared of? Or hasn't it been all it cracked up to be?"

Griffin closed his eyes tiredly. "I think we'll get along better if you'll just state your business and get out. What do you want?"

"I want you, buddy."

"What do you know about me?" His eyes snapped open sharply.

She made a bored face. "Mister, I don't know you from Adam's off ox. All I know about you is the little green stripe on your arm."

"So I'm a Free Agent."

"That's all I need. A Free Agent. Any Free Agent will do."

He shook his head. "No dice. I don't get mixed up in any shady deals."

Quite suddenly the bitterness and contempt were gone from the girl's face, and only the fear remained, a craven, hopeless kind of fear. "There's nothing shady about it, Mister. Nothing bad, nothing you can't do, I swear it. Just going aboard a rocket ship for an inspection tour. Is there anything wrong with that? So you take a friend aboard with you. Then you walk off again. Is there anything wrong with that?"

Griffin blinked at her. There was no denying the desperation in her voice, the fear in her eyes. Griffin's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "What rocket are you talking about?"

"The Venus Rocket. It leave tonight. I want on board it."

"Why?"

"Maybe I like Venus. Maybe I don't like it here. Maybe I've got to get away. Take your choice."

"What about the Colonization Board?"

Her eyes were dark with fear. "They'd never let me aboard. I wouldn't dare apply. They'd find out—things—on my record here."

His mouth hardened. "You mean they'd turn you over."

"Well, maybe they would," she snarled. "What are you doing, playing cop or something? Look, I want on that rocket. I've got to get aboard it. You're a Free Agent. You can go wherever you like—and so can anyone who's with you, if you vouch for him. They can't touch you. And you're scared, you've been scared ever since you left the Records Bureau last night. It sticks out all over you—"

"All right, maybe I am!"

"Maybe you want something."

He turned on her sharply. Something in his mind was screaming a protest at the idea that was forming in his mind, but he shrugged it off. So maybe it was illegal, maybe even criminal—was what they had done to him any less criminal? "I want records," he said softly. "I want information and records. I want them very much."

"I can get them for you."

"The records I want are restricted."

"Do tell."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if they're on paper they can be bought."

"I have no money."

"Well, I have." She looked up at him sharply. "I've got enough money to buy passage to Venus. It can buy information if I can get free passage to Venus. It can buy information like nothing."

He sat down, his face very close to hers. "I want to know what's happened to other Free Agents," he said. "I can give you some names. I want their records, everything that's known about them, where they've gone, where they are now. I want them in a hurry."

The girl stared at him for a long minute. "You are scared," she said. She lit a cigarette, and tossed the match on the floor. "Let's get moving," she said.

SHE said her name was Nan Baker, and that was about all she would say. Griffin doubted even that, but he didn't press conversation as they left the surface car at the Lower Level junction, and moved down the roads and alleys into the depths of the Old City. The itinerary itself was more illuminating than any words; her very familiarity with their route offered more lethal insight into the girl's background and motives and trustworthiness than anything she could possibly have told him. She knew her way through this jungle of crowded, dilapidated buildings; without hesitation they threaded their way through a bewildering tangle of dirty streets and darkened alleys.

Some of the buildings were in ruins, but many still showed signs of dismal habitation. This was the Old City, the area of decay and violence and crime where no one in his right mind would think of going, or allow himself to be taken. It was the crumbling ruin of the earlier city that had been here, ignored by advancing architecture and a more savory society, its reputation falling to the level of the dregs who had sunk here. And the girl found her way through the streets with an air of long familiarity.

They moved down a long, dank tunnel, formed of dripping concrete and decaying beams, obviously an old viaduct, long since decaying in disuse. At the far end was a building with a screen across the window. There was the sound of a juke box, and a roar of loud laughter as they stepped inside and shouldered through the crowd of people sitting at the long bar in the half-light.

A woman was dancing on a walkway behind the bar, totally nude, and the crowd were laughing and shouting at her as a sick-looking drummer pounded a cymbal and the juke box whined. Griffin followed the girl through the fringes of the crowd and back along a dark, dripping corridor. They found a room, a frowsy makeshift of a dressing room that reeked of cheap perfume and dead rats. The girl motioned him inside. "You wait here. I'll be back."

Ten minutes later she returned, followed by a short, obese individual who sank down on a chair and regarded Griffin with pale,

dead eyes. "Got yourself a Retread friend, huh?" he said to the girl, jerking a fat thumb at Griffin.

She nodded tensely, and looked at Griffin. "Tell him what you want."

Griffin told him. The fat man listened. Then he said, "Rough. That's Government records. It'll take time."

"We've got no time," the girl snapped.

"Then it'll take money." His pale eyes flicked up to the girl. "You financing?"

"I'm financing."

"All right." He rubbed his chin with a greasy finger. "How much time can you give me?"

"About twelve hours. There's a flight leaving at ten tonight. I've got to be on it."

The fat man hoisted himself out of the chair. "Relax," he said. "You got a long wait." Then he was gone in a breath of stale air.

THEY waited. They didn't relax. They sat in the reeking little room, and the noise from the front drifted back to them, tinny and unreal. There was laughter, and footfalls on the stairs beyond their wall. Then there was a clink of broken glass, and more laughter over their heads somewhere. The girl watched Griffin, and paced the room, her hands so jittery shee could hardly hold them still to light a cigarette. Finally she said, "I'm going up front for a drink."

"You're staying here."

"Who do you think you are, you damn—"

"You leave, I leave," Griffin snapped. "In the opposite direction. Think it over."

She picked up a dusty whiskey bottle and slammed it against the far wall with a snarl. It bounced off, without even breaking. "Go to hell!" she spat. Then she sat down. "You'd think they were robbing the Treasury or something."

He closed his eyes, trying to get his breath in the dead air. His mind screamed with impatience. Why was it taking so long? But then, what good would it do him when he had his information? Whatever the plan had been, he had already upset it. Whoever was pushing the button, manipulating the strings, must be in a fine state by now. The thought gave him a

certain degree of sour pleasure. The button had been pushed, and he had not responded quite properly. And here, he knew he was beyond manipulation, beyond the grasp of whatever agency was making the plans for him. But whoever was directing the show would know now that he knew—

And he didn't doubt for a minute that something was planned for him. A man who was legally dead, a man whose wife would be resigned to his being dead, to her, and never expect to see him again, a man whose family had received the death insurance money that was due them upon his signature on the death certificate—whether he ever returned to his old life or not, that insurance would be paid—and now, a man who was wandering and frightened, a ghostly nonentity, existing in a society where he could not fit in, seeking something that he did not know. Personalities change, they had said. Perhaps.

But there were other changes, carefully controlled changes, he was certain of that now, changes that were made for a purpose, concealed from public inspection and public wrath by a careful groundwork of legal nonsense and humanitarianism. If anything about prosthesis went wrong, the public would fall upon it in an instant. Prosthesis was too touchy a thing, life was too fearful and mysterious and sacred, for halfway measures. The prosthesis had to be perfect. It could not have a price-tag. . . .

But now he knew that the sixty years' extension of life did have a price-tag, somehow. And very soon he would know the price.

V

SOMEONE jabbed him in the ribs, and he awoke with a jerk, blinking in the gloom. His mouth tasted like sweaty leather; he knew he had been sleeping. "What's the matter?"

"Wake up!" The girl was standing over him, her voice a harsh whisper.

He was alert in an instant. "The records—"

She thrust a packet into his hands, "We've got to go," she said. "There isn't much time. They were late."

"Just relax a minute." He ripped open

the packet. A roll of photostats fell out into his lap, still damp. He threw them on the dressing table, and snapped on a dirty yellow light.

"You can't read them now—"

He didn't even hear her. He stared at the names on the papers before him. Names he had never seen before. Not all new, though. Bob Whittaker had kept his old name. But the others—changed, just as their faces had changed. He read the entries under Whittaker's name. Job after job on Earth, months of drifting, observing, then drifting again. A run on the Mars-Earth line as a crew-hand. Imagine Whittaker a crew-hand on a space liner! Work in the mines on Mars. Back to Earth, and married to a girl he had never heard of.

And then, at the end of the page, a number, and a letter, and a date, and the words: CHECKED THROUGH.

There was nothing else.

Griffin stared at the paper, his heart pounding in his throat. The next was shorter. But at the bottom, the same story. Joe Meyer's picture, with a name Griffin had never seen before—

CHECKED THROUGH.

Phil Steinberg—*Checked through.*

It was like a trail in the snow that led one way out into the bright moonlight, into the middle of a field, and then stopped dead, without sign or struggle. Impossible. But the papers were there before him. *Checked through.*

Nobody to suspect, nobody to worry about tracing them down. Because they were dead. Free Agents. Beyond the law, beyond search and tracing. Dropped from sight.

The girl was shaking his arm, begging him to hurry. He rolled up the papers, thrust them into his inside pocket. He could not find his hat, and he swore under his breath, and they went out without it. Then they were on a surface car, curving up through the twilight into the New City again, until they spotted a street where cabs were passing. They hailed one, and the girl leaned back in the seat, trembling, as Griffin said, "Rocket Landing. Hurry."

And then he leaned back, a thousand phantoms flickering through his agitated mind.

HE HAD to get rid of her before he could do anything. He glared at the girl as they made their way across the Landing Building pavilion toward the endless rows of loading platforms, wishing he had never agreed to help her. Instinct told him to run, to leave her there and let her get aboard her ship as best she could, but he followed her grimly. The entrance guard passed them without argument when Griffin showed him his green stripe. "Venus ship? Platforms are down to the right—"

They moved down the rows of silent ships, and then she pointed. It was a huge ship, with a single light swinging on top of the gantry. "That's the one."

He glanced up at the ship. The gantry stood tall by her side, and her airlock was standing open. He pushed the crane buzzer; up above, the machinery began to squeak and groan as the platform started down.

"Who's down there?" The voice from above was harsh, and Griffin saw a head appear over the edge of the crane. "What do you want?"

"Free Agent," said Griffin. "I'd like to come abroad and take a look around."

"Not supposed to start loading for two hours," the voice grumbled.

"We're not shipping, we're just looking."

"All right. Come along."

The crane rumbled down and squeaked to a stop. Griffin and the girl stepped on the platform, and it started up again. At the top the guard peered at them suspiciously, hand on his gun belt. He fluoresced the green stencil on Griffin's arm, grunting. "Who's she?" he said.

"Free loader," said Griffin, tense. "Friend of mine."

The guard didn't like it. It was written a yard wide across his face. "Going to be long?"

"Not long. Just want to look around."

"Better keep forward, Free Agent. The pile's active."

"We won't go aft." Griffin moved through the lock, and the girl followed him. He heard a sound, then, a soft, swishing sound that sounded wrong. He whirled too late as the guard moved toward him. Powerful arms trapped him, held him tightly, and a hand clamped unceremoniously across his mouth. Something sharp bit

his arm, and he let out a little scream. And then, like pieces in a puzzle the whole grotesque picture slammed into place in his mind, and he fought like a wild man to break loose from the arms that held him.

After a while, he stopped struggling.

THE first sound he heard was not a sound at all, but a vibration, low, deep seated, swallowing his whole body as he lay there. He tried to sit up, and felt the leather bands catch his arms and legs and chest. He let out a little cry, and fumbled to unbuckle them, and then he rolled and spun crazily through the air until his boots struck metal, and caught him tight to the floor. A pang of nausea shot through him; he stared wide-eyed at the empty cabin, the dozen slanted acceleration cots, all empty. He struggled to the closed hatchway in front, and fought it open, his mind screaming. And then he was in the control room, staring at the empty seats in front of the panel, and above the rows of glittering keys, the curved plexiglass giving out to the black expanse of space with its millions of bright pinpoints.

He gave a strangled cry, and pushed up against the glass, staring down at the still-dwindling discs below him, one pale greenish-blue, the other, much smaller, dead white against the blackness. And then he was clawing the glass, screaming and sobbing and cursing like a madman. He stared out the glass, and down at the panel, and slowly, like a malignant poison seeping into his mind, he began to realize what it meant.

He knew now where he was going. He knew now the price-tag. Not to Venus, not to Mars—it would be too easy to return from there, it would be idiotic to shanghai a person aboard a ship to take him to Mars or Venus—he could simply turn around and come back home. Not to Venus, not to Mars. Not anywhere in the Solar System—

He saw it clearly, as bits of evidence fell into place. Man had been aiming at the stars for centuries. It was sure to come; the frontier had expanded year by year—across Africa, across Asia, across Antarctica—to the moon, to the planets. Always the expanding frontier, until now, when it had expanded beyond man's reach. For man

could not go to the stars. There was no light-speed drive to carry him there, the journey would take too long. Once a man had grown to maturity, and been educated, and reached an age where he could move out on the long journey, he would be too old. The journey could never take less than twenty-five or thirty years, with the rocket drive man had, and man would be too old to be useful when he arrived at his destination. A man aged 25 at the start of the journey would spend his prime years in transit; he would be fifty, or sixty, or seventy or more before he arrived. There could be no round trips, there could be no exploration, or colonization, or anything else. Man would be too old—

Unless he be born again—

But Griffin had been born again. He had a new body, and now, in the barest infancy of his new life, with sixty or seventy or eighty years of life left before him, he was on the first lap of the journey—to the stars. This was the price-tag, this was how the government was using the techniques which gave men new lives—in order to carry Earth to the stars.

VI

AND then he decided that they weren't going to get away with it. His despair was giving way to a burning rage. He was trapped, and he knew it, and the very helplessness infuriated him. He had never been on a ship before, he knew nothing about controls, or lifeboats, or navigation, but he knew a little about engines. Properly treated, they would drive a space ship. Improperly treated, they could explode.

He knew it would mean his life, and he didn't care any more. He started back through the cabin to the hatchway at the rear. It was closed. He fell upon it savagely, struggling to throw it open.

"That won't do any good," a voice said behind him. "It's locked."

He whirled, staring at the black-haired girl as if she were a ghost. And then he began kicking at the hatch again. "I'll break it open, then," he snarled, "and if you don't like it, that's too bad—"

"Stop it!" The girl was upon him now,

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wrenching at his wrist. "Stop it, you silly fool, and listen to me for a minute—"

"I listened to you before, and you sold me out." He struggled to break away from her. "I don't know where you were hiding, but you sold me out. It was a great act, but it's over now, and now you can go with me—"

Then she said: "The ship will touch on Titan for an hour or more. You can leave it then, if you like."

His jaw sagged, and he stared at her, the fear and bitterness and despair giving way to confusion. "On—Titan?"

"That's what I said. You didn't think you'd be awake and able to move about now if the ship were headed out, did you? You'd be under deep-sleep for two weeks. Use your head."

He gaped at her. His thinking began tumbling down around his ears, and he grasped at it wildly. "But it's going out—"

"Oh, yes. It's going out—from Titan. With a full load. Men and women aboard, voluntarily aboard. Men and women just like you."

"Then it is true. We grow old and start to die, and they take us to the Center and make us new again, so we can be shanghaied aboard ships and driven out to the stars, whether we like it or not. What's the matter—is the government afraid of us? Or is it just greedy to hand the people Centauri on a silver platter?"

"I said you could get off on Titan if you want," the girl snapped.

"Sure," she sneered. "I believe you. Anything you say now, I believe it. Go ahead, say something more. Say something about the rest of the suckers that are coming through now, the ones who think they can have a new life without a price-tag on it. How about them? Can they get off on Titan too?"

"You've got it wrong, Griffin," the girl said sadly. "You've got it backwards. Right facts, wrong conclusion. Your cause and effect are backwards."

"I don't get you." Griffin's voice was leaden.

"You weren't made new again so you could be placed on this ship. You were placed on this ship because you'd been made new again."

Griffin stared at her. "You mean because I'm different now? Because there's something wrong with me?"

She hesitated. "In a sense—"

"*In a sense!* I'm either a whole, complete human being or I'm not! *Now which is it?*"

"Oh, no, no," cried the girl wearily. "Can't you see that's just the idea we've been fighting against for so long? Look, Griffin. *You're alive.* You've got sixty more years of life. A long, useful life. But if it's not a useful life in the society where you lived before, does that make it wrong? They have skill and techniques to give perfectly good new bodies to men and women who would die without them. Could it ever be right to deny that life to the people who wanted it? Could they turn them back, and say 'No, we can give you life, but we've decided not to use it.' Could they do that?"

Griffin shook his head. "What happened? Back when it first started. What went wrong?"

The girl sat down, facing him. "Some didn't change at all. Some went back, just as they were before. Others tried it, and went insane. Some committed suicide. Others lived out lives of utter misery trying to fit a pattern they could never be part of. They were a kind of human being which had never existed before—an infant personality superimposed on a grown, mature body, thrust out into a highly organized, rigid society. They couldn't survive." She looked up at Griffin. "The government got the Free Agent legislation through, finally. It helped some, but not enough. Most of them were looking for something that just didn't exist. They searched, and floundered, and tried one thing and another, and in the end they were bitter, and confused, and utterly helpless. So they went to the stars."

The girl walked out into the control room, and stared out at the bright pinpoints of light in the blackness. Griffin followed her, his body and mind both numb. "What about Mars, or Venus?" he said.

"No good. They were just the old Earth society in a different setting, trying like crazy to duplicate things back on Earth. But on a new planet, in a new solar system, a new society would have a chance. On a dozen planets a dozen societies could be

created." She laughed wryly. "You and your price-tag! You can go back to Earth, Griffin. But you'll die there. You'd never have believed that if we'd told you at the start. You remembered your old life too well. You thought it would be so easy to go back to it. We had to let you try, and you tried. Maybe now you can believe it. You can go back to Earth, if you want to, or you can ship out and make your own world to live in. You're a Free Agent. It's up to you."

He heard them coming aboard. He lay still on the acceleration couch, his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep, but his ears strained for the familiar sounds, and he heard the crane moving up the side of the ship, and the people coming aboard.

There was little talking. They moved quietly, and they paid practically no attention to him. He felt sure that they knew he was awake, but they came aboard, and took their places, and began to strap themselves in without a word.

The girl with the black hair was gone. She had work to do, back on Earth—the same work she had done with him, another flounderer to bring in, perhaps in a slightly different fashion, but essentially the same. And someday she, too, would be on the way out—

He waited in silence, and he could not have put into words the thoughts that flooded his mind. He waited, and his body grew tight; he heard the sounds coming from below, an occasional shout, the screeching of machinery, the hiss of airlocks closing. And then the ship was silent. Still he waited—

A whirl started, somewhere in the depths of the ship. It grew to a growl, then to a roar. In a peal of thunder he felt himself crushed to the cot, felt his eyelids pressed tight over his eyes, felt his face muscles sag under the crush of the powerful acceleration, and he knew the ship was rising in earnest this time.

A thought crossed his mind as he sank into the blackness of the deep-sleep that would carry him through the acceleration. He would have smiled, if he could have. They'd told him the truth. A Free Agent could go anywhere he wanted to go—

Even to the stars.